



Chris Larkin - A Musical Life

This year, **Chris Larkin** is to be awarded an honorary membership of the British Horn Society. Here, he talks to **Richard Steggall** about his life in the music profession, including over 36 years in the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

NEW PODCAST

The full interview with Chris is available to download as a two-part podcast.

Find it at:

BritishHornSociety.podbean.com

You were born in Wigan on 1st September 1947. Tell us about your early musical memories.

There's one interesting fact that only dawned on me relatively recently. I was born precisely ten years to the date before Dennis Brain was killed.

Wow, you heard it here first!

I was brought up Roman Catholic and then you had to get through an 11+ exam when you finished at primary school. I ended up in Bolton, in a grammar school run by the Salesian order, who had a fantastic music teacher, Fr. Jock McGovern. He was a priest with a broad Glaswegian accent, who used to put the fear of God in us. He had a fantastic 70-piece brass band that was known all over Lancashire. I picked up music from my dad, who was a pretty confident pianist, so I knew that music was my thing. The school music room projected out into the playground and I couldn't believe the sound that was coming out. So I spent most of my first term with my nose hard pressed against the window and eventually Jock, as he was known, said, "Right, hands up those boys who want to play a brass instrument", so my hands shot up and he said, "Go in the band room and get yourself a cornet." So I grabbed a cornet and put it to my chops but all that came out was air. I couldn't work out what the secret was until a six former came by and rather disdainfully said, "No. You've got to vibrate your lips, ye daft puddin'. Do it like you are shooting a pea out of a pea gun."

The next step was Fr. McGovern who came over and said, "Larkin, come here." So I thought, *oh God, what have I done?* He said, "This is a French horn. I'd like ye tae tak' it awa' and try it in junior orchestra next week." I said, "Yes, Father", so I got hold of this old Boosey and Hawkes piston horn. Something must have stuck because I really enjoyed it and it wasn't long before

I was plaguing a senior boy to borrow his Amati compensator. I then joined the orchestra of the Wigan Gilbert and Sullivan Society where I had my first half of bitter (the road to ruin) and in 1962 I joined the Lancashire Youth Orchestra - great fun and where I met many future colleagues including John Butterworth (BBCSO 1977-1981). Happy days.

Growing up in that area, I suppose you had the Hallé to inspire you. Were your family concertgoers?

Yes, very much so. During the time when I was at school, I had many memorable experiences with the Hallé. I never forget going to the Free Trade Hall to see my first Sibelius *Symphony No. 5* with Sir John Barbirolli. He was probably quite drunk but I've never heard the final chords played so electrically ever since. Probably because he didn't know where he was going to put the beat down. It's far better like that! Yes, memorable experiences with the Hallé.



In the Wigan British Legion band, aged 15

Fact File

Name: Chris Larkin

Age started horn: 12

Teachers: Peter Rider (BBC Northern SO), Julian Baker (Hallé Orchestra), Jim Brown (RPO)

Favourite composers to play: Bruckner, Beethoven, Berlioz, Poulenc, Shostakovich

Favourite composers to listen to: Giovanni Gabrieli, Claudio Monteverdi – all really, except Frederick Delius.

Horn hero: The Marquis Marc-Antoine de Dampierre

Hobbies: Research into horn history

Job if you hadn't been a horn player: Doctor

That stoked your enthusiasm as a young man and then you came down to London?

Yes, I had a choice: either medicine at Sheffield or the Royal Academy of Music. I was passionate about music and I wasn't sure if I wanted to spend seven years doing dissections, so the RAM it was. I'll never forget my first term, wandering into the Duke's Hall to hear the first orchestra playing *Ein Heldenleben*, under Maurice Handford. The first horn was John Pigneguy, and in the section were Jeff Bryant and David Cripps - the place was stuffed with quite good horn players!

I was taught by Jim Brown who was a wonderful, wonderful teacher. He was one of those teachers who if he said, "I think you could probably improve your upper register if you were all to take a dive off a cliff", we'd all have gone like lemmings because we had so much belief in him.

And on leaving the Academy, you became a freelance horn player?

No, not quite. I joined the BBC Training Orchestra in Bristol, which was a post-graduate paid job - £20 a week! We'd do one recording a week, but unless it was a heavy brass programme we'd all get rather bored.

I eventually made it back to London and started working in the West End, firstly in *Company* through to *Jesus Christ Superstar* from 1975 until 1979. Luckily, most of the London orchestras wanted extras, so I worked with the RPO, LSO and Philharmonia amongst others.

1979 was the point that you joined the BBC Symphony Orchestra. How did that come about? Did you audition?

No, it was a very different BBC in those days. I never did an audition for the job - can you imagine that now? I'd met Alan [Civil, Principal Horn] around the scene, so he knew who I was; I don't think I'd met Derek [Taylor, Principal Horn] by that stage. My old friend John

Butterworth, who was third horn in the BBCSO, kept nagging Alan and Derek saying, "Why don't you get Chris in? Why don't you get Chris in? He's quite good on fourth. Quite good." The fourth job had become vacant when Peter Smith moved from the Beeb to the Garden [Royal Opera House orchestra].

I'll never forget the call from the fixer. "Oh, hello. Mr Larkin? Would you be free next week? We'd like you to come and bump up Mr Civil in Bruckner's Sixth Symphony." So along I went, bumped Alan up and then got called in for a meeting with the manager, who offered me the job.

And that was it. I suppose in those days what Alan Civil said was law, with Derek's approval, of course.

You were in the BBCSO for 36-and-a-half years. You would have seen first horn players of astounding ability. Conductors of mixed abilities (!) but ones which you must have admired. Who were your favourite ones to work with?

I felt privileged to be fourth horn to both Alan and Derek. Both wonderful, wonderful horn players in the Alexander mould, especially Alan. He was known worldwide and we followed along in his wake which felt rather special. Whenever we were on those interminable German tours and we got to Frankfurt, Anton Alexander would turn up and take us out for beer and sandwiches. And I remember telling him once that I was taking his beer under false pretences as I played a Kruspe, because frankly I couldn't get enough air through an Alex 103!

When I joined the orchestra the chief was Gennady Rozhdestvensky. What an amazing conductor - he could conduct with



BBCSO horn section (L to R) Chris, John Butterworth, Jim Handy, Alan Civil

CHRIS LARKIN

his eyebrows! He never made any gestures that didn't have a meaning. Sadly, I only had a year and a half of him. The guest conductor was Sir John Pritchard, who then became Principal Conductor – a delightful, charming man and a very fine conductor and musician. Perhaps a bit on the lazy side, but he did love his gourmet food and fine wines and on more than one occasion, when I was on the players committee, we got treated to both!

The one superb conductor that we had through all the 1980s and into the 1990s, as Chief Guest Conductor, was Günter Wand. If you're a horn player and love Bruckner's music (Bruckner was his speciality), it was like being in heaven. He was a rather difficult man to please and he insisted on, and got, humongous amounts of rehearsal. But it was to a purpose, and some of his performances were stunning, memorably a prom of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony. So he was someone very special.

The conductors I would have given my left arm for were Gennady [Rozhdestvensky], Günter [Wand], Pierre Boulez (who I adored) and Bernard Haitink, amongst others.

Here's a question. It's the day of your retirement from the BBC. You are allowed any piece of music you want, any conductor and any first horn. What would you choose?

My favourite Bruckner symphony is the ninth, as it was the first one I discovered and I'd have Günter conducting. Unfortunately Alan had misbehaved rather badly on a Brahms Second Symphony with Günter so was then banned from playing for him. Therefore all his shows were done by Derek. So it would have to be Bruckner's *Symphony No. 9*, Günter Wand conducting and Derek Taylor on first horn.

You're also well known for running the London Gabrieli Brass Ensemble. Tell me about that.



**London Gabrieli Brass Ensemble in Egypt, 1984
(L to R) Chris, Steve Wick, Crispian Steele-Perkins,
Bruce Nockles, Pete Harvey**

I joined in 1973 when the group was run by John Simcock, whose chief interest at the time was running a fishing boat out of Herne Bay. Unfortunately, he would be out fishing all night so wanted to sleep during the day, which is when I would need to speak to him. Eventually Crispian [Steele-Perkins] and I made him an offer and we took ownership in 1975. We had a pretty full diary, touring Canada in 1976 and going to the Istanbul Festival a year later, our first work for the British Council. We must have kept our copybook fairly unblemished because many tours followed.

Which came first: the Gabrieli Brass Ensemble or your interest in historical documents and finding new pieces?

Well, Crispian was one of the first to take an interest in period instruments; he'd started doing a lot of Baroque trumpet at the end of the 1970s. We decided to do a spot in our concerts on period instruments. Crispian was pretty good on his gas stove, he got set to with some solder, making some fairly rough Baroque trumpets which we all played (with Steve Wick burbling below on his serpent!)

The road we wanted to go down was not like Philip [Jones Brass Ensemble] who had Elgar Howarth doing



**Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique in Verizon Hall, Philadelphia, 2013
(L to R) Chris, Jorge Renteria, Joe Walters, Anneke Scott**

flashier and more wonderful arrangements of non-brass music. We thought, if we put our minds to it, we could find enough original music for an interesting programme, especially as we could incorporate a swap for period instruments. People were discovering more original 19th-century stuff for brass, so that got me interested in the historical side of it. I started researching, trawling through catalogues, then eventually going to places like the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the German collections in Berlin.

What is your proudest achievement of that time?

Well, the second disc we did for Hyperion, *Original 19th-Century Music for Brass* used the correct brass band instruments to record the early Sibelius pieces, and I had a lot of fun with the Sibelius museum, getting copies of those. By 1989, I did the *Antique Brasses* CD and by that point the period instruments movement was sufficiently established and I had dug out a lot more stuff from various libraries. I managed to persuade various friends, such as Ralph Dudgeon, probably the world's best keyed bugle player, to play on that. So yes, I'm proud of that CD.

Throughout your travels, a lot of roads seem to lead to France. When did your love of France start?

In 1961, I went to Saint-Dizier in the Haute-Marne province, near the Champagne area, on a school French exchange. The family of Jean-Pierre, my pen friend, asked me the inevitable question, "Do you 'ave an 'obby?". "Oui, Madame. Je joue du cor." And it turned out that the father of Jean-Pierre's best friend at school was a trompes de chasse fanatic. He ran the local printing shop and under every single square inch of their benches was a trompe de chasse. Some of them were black with age, and I copied down the make and address on the bell of one of these horns — "Périnet, rue Copernic, Paris". We had a weekend in Paris on the way back home, so off I marched to the 16th arrondissement and was looking in the rue Copernic. Could I find this shop? No. What hadn't quite dawned on me was that this was made in the middle of the 19th century, and had probably moved several times since then. [It actually moved in 1904, so it was only missed by 57 years!]



Final "Last Night of the Proms": Chris with his wife, Tricia



60th birthday with a member of Rallye Trompes-de-chasse de Bergerac

Then, years later, when our kids had finished university, we had the chance to buy a property. So my darling wife [Chris celebrated his golden wedding anniversary this year] gave me *carte blanche* to go to the Dordogne. I lined up a dozen properties, and one I fell in love with and bought on the spot. That was 17 years ago. Trisha hadn't seen it until we had bought it, but she loves it more than I do!

It's a fantastic way of solidifying one's French; it's given me insights into French history and the way of life. It's very useful for the book I'm writing.

Tell us about that.

Well, a lot of the history of the horn has been wonderfully set out and we've got scholars who go over every detail these days. So rather than do another of those, with my slight specialist knowledge, especially of the trompes de chasse, it would make sense to concentrate specifically on France. So rather than do a complete history of every jot and tittle, it's a series of essays on specific areas. So I'll be looking at all of the medieval hunting manuals, especially where they talk about how to sound the horn, then a chapter on the two great makers, Crétien in the 17th century and Raoux in the 18th and 19th century, and there is still a lot to be set out in English on the key figure, the Marquis de Dampierre.

I'm sure there're many of us that are looking forward to reading the fruits of your labour. Thank you so much for talking to us today Chris. You really have had the most amazing career.

I've been incredibly lucky — let's not forget I scraped in [to the BBCSO], not having auditioned, and then 36 and a half years later I got chucked out! **RS**