



Ben Goldscheider

BHS Festival 2020 Lead Artist

Photo by Kaupo Kikkas

Richard Steggall meets the young soloist to discuss his new CD, honouring Dennis Brain's legacy and why we should all give contemporary music our time

One of the first things that strikes you about Ben Goldscheider is how humble he is, which is remarkable considering his achievements at the tender age of 22. "Please don't say that I think I'm the next Dennis Brain", he politely asks, but for a young British player who has a voracious appetite for new solo material, a tenacious work ethic to match and complete awareness of Brain's legacy, comparisons will surely be made. Ben, however, is unique in choosing to be a horn soloist without first gaining his orchestral spurs – the career path of Barry Tuckwell, Michael Thompson and Richard Watkins, for example. But with a solo recital series lined up in Europe's finest concert halls, and recordings and concerts with some of the world's greatest musicians and orchestras, that choice is surely paying off.

Recently graduated from the Barenboim-Said Akademie in Berlin, he now splits his time between England (where he is a fellow at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama) and Berlin (where Daniel Barenboim has made him a guest student to enable him continue studying with Radek Baborák). At the BHS, we are delighted that Ben will be headlining

our festival on 1st November. He'll premiere two works by British composers that he has recently commissioned for a new album to be released later this year. I started by asking him about this new project.

I realised, almost by accident, that next year is Dennis Brain's centenary. During the lockdown period I had a lot of time to think about various projects and wanted to find a way to celebrate him as a musician and what he did for horn playing. The title of the CD will be *Legacy: A Tribute to Dennis Brain*, so I picked six pieces that I think honour his legacy. I've picked two pieces by composers he worked closely with: Malcolm Arnold (the *Fantasy for Horn*, although this piece wasn't actually written for Brain) and Benjamin Britten's *Canticle III: Still Falls the Rain*, of which Brain performed the premiere in 1955 at the Wigmore Hall. I then chose two pieces by composers that wrote in his memory: Poulenc's *Elégie* and Peter Maxwell Davies's *Fanfare-Salute to Dennis Brain*, which was premiered by Michael Thompson in 2007 at the East Midlands Horn Festival and commemorated the 50th anniversary of his death.

Such a big part of what Dennis Brain did for the horn was to

commission new pieces to push the instrument forwards, so I was really grateful to raise some money to be able to commission Huw Watkins, who's written a new piece for horn and piano called *Lament*, and Roxanna Panufnik who wrote *Sonnets Without Words*. I recorded the album in Henry Wood Hall in August with Huw Watkins on piano and the tenor James Gilchrist in the Britten.

How do you approach connecting Dennis Brain's legacy with the work you are now doing?

There's a fine line between it being incredibly arrogant and being a humble gesture, which it is. I want to continue his legacy in the way that he did something amazing for the horn and I think it should be the responsibility of musicians to keep doing that, to keep pushing it, to keep getting new music written for the instrument. That's the essence of this disc – to embody the same message as he did.

Similarly to your debut album, there's a mix of well known and less familiar pieces (or not at all known in the case of the new works!) Are you looking to showcase slightly more obscure repertoire?

I'm at a stage in my career where it makes no sense for me to put the Strauss or Mozart concerti down on disc. It's one thing to play them in a concert but it's another thing to say this is my definitive second Strauss concerto at the age of 22. But what I think is interesting is to play these kind of fringe pieces – that's not quite the right phrase – let's say not totally mainstream repertoire. Repertoire that's interesting, that some people know but don't play every day, and the goal of my career is to have a library – an archive – of a huge amount of horn repertoire. Many of us have got a large amount of music in our shelves that never really gets played. There's only so many times I can play *Adagio and Allegro* and the Beethoven sonata.

It must be great to have the confidence to approach some of Europe's top composers and ask them to write for you.

It's amazing - it's the thing I want to do most in my career. I've got at least 15 commissions planned over the next five years, so I'm really excited to be adding to the horn repertoire. It's something I'm so passionate about.

I knew Huw Watkins because I'd played his *Horn Trio* a few times, and I'd always wanted to play it either with him or to him, so that I could get his take on it. I called him up saying I've got six weeks and I'm going to record a CD. I've got x amount of money, do you want to write something for me and play the piano for the rest of the disc - and he jumped at it. The piece is absolutely amazing, I really think it's going to be part of the repertoire in the same way that *Adagio and Allegro* is part of the repertoire - I really believe that. I'm so excited about it. I think every music college student will want to put it in a recital, it's that good.

It's quite touching, and Huw only told me at the beginning of the recording, but the main theme of the piece is four slurred notes. The first pair are D and B (for Dennis Brain) and the second pair are B and G (my initials). I didn't realise that, but Huw asked me in the rehearsal, "Have you worked out what

FACT FILE

Name: Ben Goldscheider
Age started horn: 9
Teachers: Sue Dent, Radek Baborák
First instrument: Holton 378
Current instrument: Alexander 103
Favourite composer for horn: Gustav Mahler
Favourite composer to listen to: Joseph Haydn
Horn hero: Radek Baborák
Favourite collaborator so far: Martha Argerich
Hobbies: Reading, running and tennis
Job, if not a musician: Tennis player
Fun fact: I once threw my horn down the stairs when I didn't want to practise!

the theme is yet?", so that was quite nice. I'm now trying to convince him to write a horn concerto.

Roxanna Panufnik's piece is reworking of some songs that she had previously written. It's not a note-for-note transcription - she has made some alterations and they work extremely well on the horn. They are three short songs, probably four minutes each and, again, they work really beautifully as a recital piece. I was delighted that she was up for that.

When you first see these pieces, what are you looking for?

I'm not really looking for anything. The way I approach music, and this is true for Roxanna Panufnik or Beethoven, is that I try to be like an X-ray machine. I look at the score from a totally neutral point of view. I try to work out what is there, using all the knowledge I have on that day from my education. I try to work out what the composer is trying to say. I have to find out where the climax is and work out what the harmonic language is trying to say. It's totally meaningless to identify "this is a subdominant", "this is a dominant seventh", "this is a perfect cadence" etc., if you really don't know what that means and why it's like that. So I try to extract as much information as I can from it. Once I've got the idea in my head of what the composer's trying to say, I try and say it as clearly as I can through my own playing.

Do you think about whether or not you like a new piece? I suppose it's best to put that right at the back of your mind.

Definitely. If I know that I have to play it, either for a concert or a recording, whether I like it or not is irrelevant. Of course, I like some things more than others, but I think the best way of approaching music is that the moment you're playing something, especially in a concert, it has to be your favourite piece for the duration of that work, otherwise you are never going to convince the audience. There have been cases where pieces have been so poorly written that I've actually said that I can't do it and either you have to change it or I simply can't play it. Someone once sent me a horn sonata - 15 minutes without a rest, not even a quaver rest. It was like a Paganini exercise, and in that situation, you have to say this is not right, but if you approach a respectable composer like Panufnik or Watkins, whether you

like it or not doesn't matter. And who's to say you might like it six months later or you might start hating it six months down the line!

With contemporary music, we just have to be so open to it because we don't understand so much of what's actually been written. Even with the Beethoven horn sonata, students can play the notes but understanding what there is is so difficult despite our whole education in Western classical music - tonality, harmony, we're all brought up on that yet we still can't really work it out. I think many musicians, and I include myself in this a lot of the time, really couldn't tell you what's going on. So in contemporary music where it's 50 times more difficult anyway, to have a snap judgement at the beginning that you don't like it because it doesn't sound good, is really wrong. I think there must be at least a period of time where you try and engage with it, for what it is. Sometimes try and approach it on an intellectual level, sometimes on a much more visceral

level and work out what the sound world is going to be, but the snap judgements, like "this doesn't have a nice tune", have to go. There's that attitude that it would sound the same if you turned the music upside down, and I really want to get rid of this because it's our duty to play new music otherwise the art form will die.

And surely contemporary music is more accessible now than it was in the 1960s, for example?

Especially in Britain. Most British composers now are writing, I wouldn't say tonal music, but music that's not really pushing at the boundaries of questioning what music is. It's not the avant-garde of Stockhausen. That still exists, in fact there's quite a big scene in Berlin, but if you look at British composers of the last few years like Thomas Adès, Mark Simpson, Huw Watkins, Gavin Higgins - they're all writing really beautiful music that we can identify with in an easier way than Boulez, for example.



"With contemporary music, we just have to be so open to it... It's our duty to play new music otherwise the art form will die."

Many horn players will be aware of Huw Watkins's music through his wonderful *Trio* for horn, violin and piano (2008), commissioned by the Nash Ensemble. Huw has given numerous performances of this work with Richard Watkins (no relation) and has also performed it with Marie-Luise Neunecker. It can be found on Richard Watkins's album, *Sea Eagle*, with Huw on piano and Laura Samuel on violin.

Huw Watkins on his *Lament*

When Ben told me of the concept of the disc, looking at the pieces that Dennis Brain had inspired somehow, I first thought about the Poulenc *Elégie*. It's a piece that I love and I wanted to do something similar, combining elements of anger and also having very beautiful lyrical moments, in a fairly short space.

Lament starts off quite gently with very slow horn lines and a web of piano harmony but builds up to quite powerful climaxes with much more anguished writing. I came up with the little idea of a personal motif D(ennis) B(rain) B(en) G(oldscheider). It's not a big thing but it's nice for me, as a composer, to have a little something like that to start you off. I can then develop those notes and develop some harmony around it, and then, if I'm lucky, things happen...

It's almost as if there's no excuses any more.

Definitely. And if you go out of your comfort zone constantly, your comfort zone constantly gets bigger, and that's a good situation to be in. I think if we stay in what we feel we're comfortable with, it's limiting for the arts and for us horn players.

You first came to prominence in this country in the BBC Young Musician competition. That was four years ago and you've moved on hugely since then. Does it bother you that the Young Musician tag still follows you?

I couldn't be more grateful for that competition; it changed my life. So I absolutely don't mind people mentioning it. In Germany I'm known mainly for my connection with Barenboim. However, my next big news is that I can now announce that I'm an ECHO (European Concert Hall Organisation) "rising star". ECHO is made of 22 halls in Europe including the Barbican Centre, Philharmonie de Paris, Musikverein in Vienna, Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. Every year they get to nominate one artist each and then all of the halls meet to talk about which artists they want to have as an ECHO rising star and five or six are selected. The Barbican nominated me and I was accepted, so for the 2021-22 season I'm going to make my recital debut in all of these 22 venues. That will be a huge thing, I think. Mark Simpson has been commissioned by the Barbican to write me a piece for that series.

Wow, that's fantastic! Can you tell us of any more upcoming projects?

I'm going to record horn concertos by Ruth Gipps and Malcolm

Roxanna Panufnik on her *Sonnets Without Words*

When Ben Goldscheider asked me if I had anything he could programme for a CD, I saw an opportunity to do what I'd longed to, for some years. I have set many Shakespeare sonnets for voice and piano but have always felt that the long, languorous vocal lines could work well as purely instrumental - especially with Ben's beautiful and lyrical timbre.

1. "Mine Eye" (1999) for mezzo-soprano and piano was written as a Valentine's gift for JS, the boyfriend of that time. JS was/is a great lover of visual art and this sonnet's words conjure up a painterly portrayal of love - how the artist sees the emotion but still may not be able to fathom what is felt behind a beautiful face.

2. "Music to Hear" was commissioned for baritone Oliver Dunn and pianist Emma Abbate, by Peninsula Arts (Plymouth University), celebrating Shakespeare's 450th birthday. Its sentiments are bittersweet like my harmonic language. The poem is about a young man saddened by the cheerful beauty of music, because harmony and concord remind him of his obligation to marry and procreate.

3. "Sweet Love Remember'd" was a private commission - from Dora Black to her husband Jack, on the occasion of their 50th wedding anniversary. Originally written for alto voice, the accompaniment can be performed on harpsichord or piano. The words seem full of grief and desolation at the start but they end with a positive statement that tells us however low we have become, the memory of Sweet Love "...such wealth brings. That then I scorn to change my state with kings."

Arnold (second concerto), and a new concerto that's being written for me by Christoph Schönberger, with the Philharmonia over three days between March and May 2021. I'm also recording the Ligeti *Trio for Violin, Horn and Piano* live in Berlin in December with Michael Barenboim and Giuseppe Mentuccia which will be released on Peral Music, which is Daniel Barenboim's own label. I'm also particularly looking forward to a return to the Wigmore Hall for a recital in April 2021.

How much of your own organising do you do for your projects?

I must spend at least one hour a day organising projects: writing to people, talking to people or my agent, thinking of important projects to do. Thinking of what can I plan, who can I collaborate with next - that's really exciting to me because then all these concerts become like little missions. Because, on paper, I have a completely insane and stressful life, I like to think of it a bit like a game and the first level is making a connection with someone. Then, on the second level, we have to organise what's going to happen, then the third level the agents gets involved and you book the flight and hotel and the fourth level is going and playing the concert. You see each one as a little mission and you suddenly care so much about what you're doing because you're involved in the entire creation process. The concert is not just going there and playing on stage, it's been being organised



Photo by Kaupo Kikkas

for maybe the last two years and most concerts I think about for a few fleeting seconds every single day. I'll probably think about the Ruth Gipps, that I'm going to record on 23rd May 2021, every single day until then and it will be the same for every concert I do. And that's really nice. You feel so attached to what you're doing.

Have you always had an entrepreneurial mind?

You learn. I've had thousands and thousands of emails from people telling me "no". "We don't have the money", "we can't do this", "we prefer violin" but for every thousand I probably organise five projects. OK, I don't know if it's really a thousand but you learn, and you learn what to say to people in order to get

results. You realise that you really have to give something, you can't expect to be constantly given stuff for nothing, so you have to work out what you are as an artist, what you could give a concert series or an orchestra and work with what you have. And that constantly changes.

That must keep you pretty busy!

I don't really do anything else. I wake up and normally I'll practise and work for most of the day, and then spend my free time with my girlfriend and friends. But Monday to Sunday I spend the whole day doing this. I couldn't think of a better way to live my life. If somebody loves to play football all day, so be it, just do what you enjoy doing, and what I enjoy doing, thankfully, is bearing fruit at the moment, so I'm just going to keep going.

At least for now I have the possibility of doing something that is genuinely new. While I have the opportunity to do so much with new music, play at these venues as a soloist and do things which will be of the benefit to the horn in general, then I want to just go for it for as long as I can. **RS**

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Ben Goldscheider, BBC Young Musician 2016 Finalist

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