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## ORCHESTRAL LIFE: WHAT IT'S REALLY LIKE

My husband, Tom Eisner, doesn't have a job. He has a vocation. He spends his working life making a noise on a wooden contraption in the London Philharmonic Orchestra's first violin section. In a week when it has been revealed that the government's planned changes to National Insurance payments could bankrupt most of the UK's orchestras, Tom, like his vastly talented colleagues, is determined to keep on making that wonderful noise, come what may.

Orchestral players have greeted this development with a certain ennui. British orchestras are political footballs: falling down the crack between the floorboards of European subsidy and American, tax-broken sponsorship, they benefit a little from both yet substantially from neither. Many have breathed a sigh of relief since the Stabilisation Programme moved them on to an apparently secure footing for the first time in over a decade; the possibility of that progress being wiped out in one swoop is deeply depressing. Still, they're accustomed to lurching from crisis to cock-up.

They're as subject to the latest government whim as nurses or teachers; they're underpaid and undervalued, given the extensive training and expertise demanded by their jobs; worst, they are often misunderstood by a public who sometimes ask them, "What's your real job?" But the focus, the excitement, the team spirit and the thrill of making music with up to 99 other people in front of an audience can prove utterly addictive. "Playing in an orchestra is a vocation," stresses the LPO second violinist Fiona Higham. "If you thought of it simply as a job, you wouldn't do it."

Given lousy pay, antisocial hours, extremely hard work, huge stress (performance nerves reduces some to beta-blocker dependence), it's not surprising if they find peculiar ways to let off steam. My first taste of an orchestra's combination of closeness, mutual pocket-dwelling and nutty humour arrived the Christmas I was engaged to Tom. The band gave me a calendar bearing a photograph of my intended, rather the worse for wear in a pub, rising to a challenge of unzipping some crucial pieces of clothing and exposing what lay below. Everyone had signed the back of the calendar with comments like: "Where is it?" That was before I knew that the same practical joker who'd planned this had also initiated an orchestra-wide sweepstake about how long our relationship would last. He's since left.

It's far from easy to get into an orchestra. British orchestras have a unique system for appointing new members. In continental Europe and the US, the candidate who plays best on the day of the auditions gets the job. Here, after auditioning, several prospective appointees are taken 'on trial' for a few concerts, sometimes many. The process can take a year or more. While the LPO's co-leader, the South African violinist Pieter Schoemann, was on 'trial', he lodged in our loft for an excruciating seven months of vacillating decision-making, comfort-eating Singapore noodles to the eternal refrain, "You've almost got the job..." Luckily for everyone's sanity, he did get the job. "I'm sure the noodles helped," declares Pieter. He was lucky. The No.3 position has not been filled in eight years.

Still, most musicians are convinced that this system works. Annie Oakley, principal percussionist of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, points out, "I'm always astonished that other jobs, like teaching, can be filled after only a spoken interview, which doesn't tell you anything about how someone will do a job. Ours is a nerve-racking system, but very fair."

Once a player is in, the pressure is on. The French violinist Philippe Honore recently joined the Philharmonia as principal second violin, a half-time post in that orchestra. A long-time member of the Vellinger Quartet, he hasn't been in a symphony orchestra before. "I'd never thought I would enjoy being part of such a big noise so much," he laughs. "I'm enjoying the social aspect and the repertoire. But we have very little rehearsal for a demanding schedule and difficult programmes. British orchestras work two or three times faster than any in continental Europe - and the amazing thing is they are better, too! Working under such pressure gives the concerts a real 'edge'; the downside is that there isn't time to explore the music in more depth."

That's the musical side, but life outside is equally pressured. Orchestral players are finding it increasingly hard to make ends meet. A "rank-and-file" (in orchestral slang, "wank-and-smile") player can earn up to £40,000 per annum in the London Symphony Orchestra, but the equivalent post in the London Philharmonic and Philharmonia orchestras is unlikely to bring in more than £30,000, while in the north it's more like £25,000. Musicians in the self-governing orchestras are on Schedule D: there's plenty of flexibility, but if they don't work, they don't earn. These orchestras offer their members no pension schemes, no health insurance beyond in-house benevolent funds and, in some cases, no fixed retirement age either. Players in salaried organisations like the CBSO, Halle and BBC Orchestras have increased stability, but less flexibility and less ready cash. Money was more plentiful in the 1980s - today there are fewer recording sessions, less sponsorship, more competition for commercial work such as film scores and advertising.

With house prices impossibly high and instrument prices soaring too (a fine Italian violin can cost the same as a flat) players are increasingly turning to alternative sources of income: teaching, property development, massage and more. Bringing up a family becomes a logistical nightmare. One LPO violinist, a father of two, found an orchestral job in Germany, where life is duller but more practical. Another dad has departed in favour of installing bathrooms.

Some couples go as far as deciding not to have children at all. Miranda Davis, a freelance orchestral viola player, is among them: "I couldn't think how I could do it," she says. "You can only earn enough money if you work extremely hard; if you don't, the money isn't enough to support a family. Besides, kids can feel absolutely bereaved if their mother just vanishes on tour for several weeks." Orchestral work places enough strain on a marriage to begin with: "When my husband was teaching in a school, he had to be up by 8.30 and crashed out at 9.30pm, but I often wasn't home until nearly midnight," Miranda says. "And if you go away on tour constantly, the danger is that you may start leading separate lives." Add to that the pressures of a musician practising in a flat while their spouse watches TV, and love's young dream could quickly sour.

That is, if love's young dream can be found. Daniel Meyer, now a second violin in the BBC Symphony Orchestra, started his career in the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. "I remember being shocked at how impossible it was to meet anyone outside the orchestra. We worked so many evenings that social life didn't exist. I remember several of us going to a disco in Boscombe out of sheer desperation. We met some Catholic nurses."

Daniel, now a father of two (he married an orchestra librarian), is also bothered by the lack of career structure: "At the equivalent professional level, if I was a doctor I'd be a consultant, and if I was a lawyer I might be a QC. But the rewards don't match up in terms of career building or status." Or, of course, income. "Most of my colleagues now do something else as well. There's nothing wrong with that, but the trouble is that people aren't doing it from choice. It's wonderful to play in an orchestra and do what you love doing, but you often find yourself effectively subsidising your own job."

Performance stress, stage fright, sheer nerves, can take a tremendous toll, especially for a principal player whose personal sound is constantly exposed. Annie, about to retire after 40 years with her orchestra, exclaims, "It can be terrifying. We had ten years of difficult 20th-century repertoire under Simon Rattle, which was hard for the percussion - and you're on your own at the top of the orchestra!" That's one reason healthy living plays a bigger part in orchestral life than it used to. The old drinking culture, "the group of players in the pub by 11 am," as Tom describes it, has vanished, while the number of players jogging or going to the gym has risen. Increased competition for jobs in orchestras and jobs for orchestras means that nobody can afford to rest on their laurels.

Wild parties on tour also aren't what they used to be. Tom remembers a 'towel party' in a hotel room in Italy in 1986 to which the police was summoned by the businessman in the room next door. "These just don't happen any more," he says. "People have grown up a bit; they no longer think the world owes them a job."

That doesn't mean there's no fun on tour. Sue Thomas, the LPO's second flute, says, "If you're in a gorgeous place and you've done a wonderful concert where everyone feels electrified, you can't imagine that everyone will just go to sleep - that's when we wake up!" Electrification was the order

of the day when Wynton Marsalis and his Lincoln Center Jazz Band recently joined forces with the LPO for a UK tour. Fiona was one of a group "following the jazzers around to the jazz clubs after the concerts while they let their hair down, improvising for half the night!"

Tom, during a stressful German tour, once livened things up by playing a trick on his friend Robert Pool, another violinist. He phoned his hotel room at 3am and announced, "The coaches are leaving in ten minutes!" Robert leapt out of bed and grabbed a glass of water from his table, draining it in one go. Unfortunately, the water contained his contact lenses. He got his revenge the next night: Tom returned after dinner to find that all his possessions had been cleared out of his room.

"The concert hangs over you all day," says Tom, "and afterwards, you feel as if you've been released from prison! When it goes well, you feel fantastic; when it doesn't, you're really pissed off. The old saying that 'you're only as good as your last concert' is still true." Tony Byrne, LPO co-principal viola, adds, "What annoys me the most is the press! When you've done a concert that you know was fantastic and then you read an indifferent review, you think, 'was this guy actually there?'"

The most unpopular face tends to be the one facing the band from the podium. Tony recounts, "When I first joined the orchestra, an old-timer took me to one side and said, 'Laddy, one thing you have to learn: the conductor is your natural enemy,' as if it was a blood sport!". The cliché of the autocratic maestro, stamping and screaming at his cowering band, is sadly based on fact. I witnessed a rehearsal when an eminence gris yelled "Terrible!" at a tired-out touring band after just a few bars, and a moment later added that the few lines they'd just played "smelled". Several years earlier, I saw a conductor unnerve a fine soprano to such an extent during a rehearsal that in the concert she suffered a memory lapse.

How do players cope with such bile? "I shut my eyes and look the other way," exclaims Fiona. "Fortunately there aren't many of them left: nobody will tolerate it any more." Sue says, "I find it quite amusing. One conductor sang along out loud with a soprano in a concert and the people in the front row must have thought they were getting two for the price of one!"

"We want to do what the conductor wants," says Daniel. "But sometimes they're so bad at conveying what they want that we end up having to guess. My worst experience was with the late Gunther Wand. He stopped us and said, 'Don't play so "muurr" - play more "muurr". We had no idea what he was getting at. We tried again and he still wasn't pleased. Eventually he said, "Yes, that's better!" - but to me it sounded the same and I had no idea how to reproduce this supposed effect. That was deeply frustrating. But people still talk about him as if he's God."

A top-notch conductor makes the world of difference: "It's been incredible to have the chance to play with people like Wolfgang Sawallisch, Daniel Barenboim and Klaus Tennstedt," says Fiona, "and now I think that our principal guest conductor, Vladimir Jurowski, is something special. I think he has the potential to become as great as anybody."

So much for conductors - what about soloists? The ones who join the fun are always the most popular and the younger orchestral players sometimes go out clubbing after a concert with young soloists like Sarah Chang. Less welcome are stars who send a thank-you card afterwards addressed to the section principals by name, ignoring the existence of rank-and-file players. For a soloist, touring with an orchestra can produce some surprises, as the pianist Lucy Parham discovered in America with the BBC Concert Orchestra: "I didn't know the orchestra's conventions, so had no idea when I first got on the tour bus that the seat I chose would be mine for the next 30 days! We played sweepstakes on the coach - everyone put in \$5, the person who won would buy all the drink for the coach the next day and we dreamed up some zany things for people to guess. I had to guess someone's favourite flavour of condom. Because I made the effort to fit in, I quickly felt as if I'd been taken 'to the bosom of their family'."

Nothing cheers up an orchestra more than the words FILM SESSIONS. The LSO landed Harry Potter, while the LPO was employed for Lord of the Rings. Film sessions are good news, but a potential roller-coaster. Matthew Gibson, a double bass player with the LSO, explains: "A week of film sessions can add £2000 to your income. But a director can suddenly postpone the sessions by two weeks, which means that it doesn't fit into the orchestra's schedule any longer." That can be

taken as a huge disappointment at best, a near-insult at worst - players cancel family holidays for such events, only to find them, and the pay, snatched away at the last moment. "We depend very much on their whims," says Matthew. "But that's the commercial world."

In the end, the words 'kitchen', 'heat' and 'out' come to mind. Miranda left a full-time orchestral job after seven years, "feeling I was almost on the verge of a breakdown. The life was too 'fast' for me. I was physically exhausted, my playing was deteriorating and I desperately needed to see some different faces. I wanted to give up altogether." But she didn't. "I love playing my instrument and you can't give it up easily when you've invested most of your life in it. Besides, what could be better than giving people pleasure? Classical music is one of the most positive and beautiful creations of mankind. And when I've worked, everyone claps! How many people have that appreciation at work?"

Maybe that's also why, despite the politics, the gossiping, the practical jokes, the financial vacillations, the long absences and the constant sound of the violin in the front room, I've never regretted marrying an orchestral musician. I will only be worried the day he stops whistling the tunes on his way home.

## CASE HISTORIES

### FIONA HIGHAM

Second violin, London Philharmonic Orchestra

I grew up in London and studied at the Royal Academy of Music, but was launched into the profession accidentally, when I was offered work touring with an excellent chamber orchestra. The Academy wouldn't let me go, so I left, knowing this wasn't a chance I should pass up. I freelanced in London for ten years, mostly with chamber orchestras. But when I had my first taste of playing with a symphony orchestra, there was no turning back: I landed some 'extra' work with the LPO, playing Mahler and Strauss, and fell completely under its spell.

For the past 13 years I've been a single mother to two daughters. This is a hard profession even if you have a spouse who can cover the antisocial hours when you're working; my children have been with au pairs most of the time. They've been virtually orchestra mascots! Their father used to be a leader of the orchestra, they've toured with me and they know everybody in the orchestra. They both play instruments, but they don't want to become musicians, because they can see the hours I work and the way I've been struggling financially in the past few years.

One huge reason why orchestras struggle is because conductors' fees are so high - I think people often don't realise that a conductor can earn up to Â£15,000 for one concert, while we're paid around Â£100. As a rank-and-file player it's difficult to earn more than around Â£30,000 per annum. The only way I've survived is by doing some fairly astute property deals, which have effectively subsidised my life as a musician. Generally I'm very happy in the orchestra, though. I've had some amazing experiences playing with the world's greatest conductors and soloists. I think we're all very fulfilled people.

### EMMA RINGROSE

Sub-principal oboe, BBC Philharmonic

I come from Gloucestershire and I've been playing the oboe since I was nine. By the time I was 15 I hoped I might be able to play in an orchestra, but it seemed like a distant dream! I studied at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, graduated in 1995, then freelanced for six years before joining the BBC Philharmonic as sub-principal oboe. My favourite concerts are the Proms: I love the wonderful hall and the enthusiasm of the audience.

My twin boys are just over a year old now. I took a year off when I had them, the maximum time that I could, to get some sanity back into my life. It's tricky to manage the schedule, but we're incredibly lucky to have a flexible part-time nanny - without her, we'd struggle, because two nursery places would cost more than my salary. I don't tour at the moment as I can't travel with the boys; the orchestra allows me unpaid leave. Fortunately my partner is an accountant and is very understanding and supportive. It would be much more difficult if we were both musicians.

I do feel secure in my job in terms of the warmth and emotional support among my colleagues, but with any orchestra in the current climate you can't be certain where it's going to go in the future - with all the movement and rethinking in the BBC, you're never sure what's going to happen next. The whole orchestral scene is like that: we love it, but sometime other people don't see the necessity for it.

As I'm a sub-principal, often playing first oboe, some concerts are more stressful than others. But I enjoy that. If you're mentally with it, you take a deep breath, give a good blow and go for it!

## MATTHEW GIBSON

Double bass, London Symphony Orchestra

I've been playing with the LSO since 1990 and have been a full member since 1992. I studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London and originally I came from Shropshire. I started the cello aged eight and was so bad at it that my teacher said I should try the double bass! There were very few bassists in Shropshire, so I soon found I was in demand for all kinds of gigs. Once I started playing in groups with other people, I caught the bug. After music college, playing in an orchestra was the natural thing to do.

One of my most memorable moments was when our education and rehearsal centre at St Luke's opened - it took years of planning, fundraising and setbacks, but now it's a wonderful, atmospheric space. I'm involved in the LSO's education programme, Discovery, which is very wide-ranging; 60-70 per cent of the orchestra participates in it in one way or another. I think orchestras have become much more flexible in what we can offer the community - it justifies our existence and I think we have to do that.

I feel proudest when we've played really well, during that moment between the end of the music and the start of the applause, when you can feel the emotion hitting home. The sheer talent of all the musicians, hearing what we can do together on a daily basis - that's very inspiring. If you're on a rough tour, but then you sit down and play something like Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony and you hear the sounds and the ability around you - audiences sometimes think that it happens of its own accord, but everyone's effort and dedication and concentration is amazing. Everyone wants to do their best all the time, for the sake of the orchestra.

## MIKE HALL

Second violin, Halle Orchestra

I'm a northerner from Lancashire, I studied at the Royal Northern College from 1974 to 1978 and I've been in the Halle ever since. Manchester is a fantastic city at the moment - we're resident orchestra at the Bridgewater Hall, which is wonderful, and the city has changed tremendously over the past ten years or so. New buildings, new people - it's a very exciting place.

Mark Elder is our principal conductor: I'm very happy that he's here. I think that Mark and the Halle came together at the optimum moment for both parties. We work hard, we do a huge range of music and we always seem to do it well, which I find very satisfying. A few years ago we had a financial 'wobble', which wasn't easy - but having been here such a long time, I've seen definite progress over that time as a whole, which is heartening. Today we're reaping the rewards of all the hard work.

I've been very involved in our educational programme since its inauguration. It's quite an international undertaking; I once went to Indonesia for two weeks as part of it and the Gamelan players I visited then came to Manchester to do workshops. We've done educational projects in places as diverse as Buenos Aires and Brussels.

We do have a lot of fun generally - it's a warm, friendly band. In 1996 when we had a residency at the Salzburg Festival, our football team took on the Vienna Philharmonic's team and beat them. They didn't like that! One less positive experience was the time we did Malcolm Arnold's A Grand, Grand Overture, scored for orchestra with three Hoovers and a floor polisher, and just as we were about to bring on three volunteers from the audience, one of the Hoovers blew up!