

The classical star landing a blow for brass

Thanks to the glamorous Alison Balsom, trumpet playing is shedding its stereotype as a fusty male domain

By Jessica Duchon

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Dressed by Armani and dripping with diamonds, Alison Balsom sizzled with her trumpet across this year's Classic Brit Awards and on the ITV broadcast of the ceremony last night where she was named its Female Artist of the Year for her album of Italian Concertos.

Balsom, 32, is hardly a typical trumpet virtuoso – it's an instrument more often associated with lads down the pub after band practice. But her mixture of glamour, charisma and unaffected, genuine-spirited musicianship has won the public's heart and in the process begun to transform the image of the trumpet itself.

Broadening her instrument's appeal beyond its macho associations is part of her mission, Balsom affirms, while scooping her 14-month-old son, Charlie, safely away from the coffee machine (she separated from Charlie's father, the conductor Edward Gardner, a few months ago). "I don't think I've changed the trumpet's stereotype singlehandedly, but I feel proud that it is changing," she says. "At my concerts I often meet little girls of eight or nine whose parents say they started playing the trumpet because they heard one of my CDs. As many girls as boys love the trumpet when they're very young – but later grown-ups put the stereotypes on them and it can deter them. It's a shame, because the trumpet is very extrovert and very physical, and so are many girls."

Balsom comes from Royston, Hertfordshire, where she says she was lucky to attend "a tiny primary school in which I had the chance to play lots of different instruments. I just fell in love with the trumpet." As part of a town centre redevelopment scheme, Royston is about to put up a statue of her, much to her astonishment: "I was up against King James I and the town cryer!"

Her first big break was winning the brass section of the BBC Young Musician of the Year in 1998. "That was absolutely terrifying," she laughs, "and showed me what it would be like to be a soloist rather than an orchestral player." It was only when she went to study at the Paris Conservatoire, though, that her eyes were opened to what hard work it would be. "The French training treats the trumpet as a solo instrument much more seriously than the UK's does. My lessons in Paris were brutal. They

lasted for six hours, you had to play in front of all the other students, and you knew they were hoping you'd just drop dead..."

The violinist virtuoso Maxim Vengerov – an ex-boyfriend of hers – is another influence: "He's an extraordinary artist. Every time I go on stage I think about his musical persona and try to put something of that into my playing."

The glamorous images on her CD covers, though, are only part of the picture. Her next recording will be altogether grittier, including trumpet concertos from 1950 to the present day by Jolivet, Arutiunyan, Zimmermann and, not least, James MacMillan – the world premiere of his new Trumpet Concerto. The opposite end of the spectrum from the Classic Brits? "This is what I do every day," Balsom declares. "I love to show the versatility of the instrument: we don't have as big a repertoire as other instruments, but we do have as wide a scope."

Balsom's own scope extends to being a patron of the new Mayor's Fund that Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, has launched to provide music scholarships for hundreds of London schoolchildren. It's a cause about which she is absolutely passionate. "Since I've had Charlie it's become even clearer to me that even very young children have an instinctive response to music," she says. "It's like a fast track into their brains. It's so obvious. How can we ignore that? To lose that connection would be a dangerous thing for our culture." Helpfully, Charlie toddles by, singing to himself.

It will take figureheads like Balsom to bring the cause to the fore – and at least she is there to try. "I want to get that message across," she says. "But often people are more interested in the Armani dresses and the diamonds. And the fact that I'm a female trumpet player."

'Italian Concertos' is out now on EMI Classics