

Breaking ranks

Taking on a position as a principal in a leading orchestra at the age of 21 was a steep learning curve for flautist Katherine Bryan. Ten years down the line, she has found a perfect balance between orchestral, teaching and solo commitments, writes **David Kettle**

Katherine Bryan is on a mission. ‘The flute can be a bit of a box, and you’ve got to break out of it – I say the same to my students. One of the nicest things people tell me after a concert is that they’ve forgotten they’re listening to a flute – that’s one of the best compliments you can get.’

Counterintuitive? Maybe. Surprising, certainly – especially when it comes from the principal flautist at the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, someone who is also a respected soloist with two successful discs to her name, and a teacher at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) to boot. But it is typical of Bryan’s candid, disarmingly straightforward appraisal of her instrument – and of her eagerness to take its music to as wide an audience as she can.

‘I don’t like to succumb to the limitations of the flute, because there are many,’ she continues. ‘The range is small, the repertoire is small. People think it’s quite limited, but I try to do everything in my power

to disprove that.’ And in her crusade for flute recognition she’s having a busy time, juggling her orchestral work – both at the RSNO and elsewhere – with increasing demands for solo performances, and her important teaching responsibilities. ‘Next month, for example,’ she says, ‘I’ve got two weeks when I go to London on a Sunday morning, play on a Sunday afternoon, do a recital on the Sunday evening, play as guest principal at the Philharmonia all day Monday, then take the sleeper back to Glasgow that night, play with the RSNO the next day, and then teach afterwards.’

With such drive and commitment – not to mention stamina – it’s hardly surprising that it was at the age of just 21 that Bryan took on the RSNO principal position in 2003. ‘Looking back, I realise I was ridiculously young,’ she admits. ‘I was so green – I didn’t even know which pieces were difficult.’ She’d first heard about the job from a family member, who phoned her during her second year at New York’s Juil-

liard School to alert her to it. ‘It took about a year from applying to hear that I’d got the job. It was a very steep learning curve, but I’m lucky that the RSNO wind section were so supportive. In running the section and as a principal you’re involved in a lot of decision-making within the orchestra, but I just drew on common sense and my musical knowledge.’

Bryan accepts that she had been trained primarily as a soloist – at Manchester’s Chetham’s School before Juilliard – and as a high-flying young prize-winner at the Audi Music Competition, the Royal Over-Seas League and the Young Concert Artists International Competition, not to mention as a three-time finalist in the BBC Young Musician contest. Wasn’t it tough funnelling all that solo experience into an orchestral role? ‘For the first few years, the orchestra was challenging, simply because I hadn’t done it before,’ she says. ‘I did every single day of work with the orchestra, because with everything that came up, I thought: I want to do that – I want to learn from that. But being in an orchestra has changed my playing, and changed the way I listen. My musicianship is different now – perhaps I think about playing the flute in a slightly different way. You have to listen to yourself much less, and to everyone else much more.’

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Flute crusader:
Katherine Bryan



Principal at 21: 'It was a very steep learning curve'

picture as Bryan turning her back on a solo career, or being frustrated at any lack of solo opportunities. She never gave up her solo playing – although she accepts that it has increased since her first disc in 2010, for which she stepped out from the RSNO ranks to perform Nielsen's concerto and the lesser-known one by US composer Lowell Liebermann with the orchestra.

Her most recent disc, released in May this year and also with the RSNO, takes a similar format, coupling Ibert's sparkling concerto with one less familiar by Christopher Rouse, a hugely moving piece from 1993 informed by the murder of toddler James Bulger. 'The Rouse is really powerful,' agrees Bryan. 'But I was almost afraid to tackle it – maybe because my teacher at Juilliard, Carol Wincenc, had premiered it. But the more I thought about it, and about its links with Celtic music, it made complete sense to do it with the RSNO.'

Which raises another issue concerning flute repertoire: with a piece as engaging and rewarding, yet as little-known, as the Rouse concerto, how does Bryan convince concert audiences or CD buyers to give it a go? It's not easy – yet it is all part of her mission. 'It's a battle for wind players generally,' she accepts, 'because we don't have Beethoven or Brahms concertos. But you want to get to the stage where people trust in you and your playing, and trust that what you're going to present is interesting and worthwhile.'

Even in her teaching, Bryan is keen to

push boundaries. After examining for several years at the RCS, she was approached to teach there, and now takes on six or seven students a year. But in her own private courses, she combines flute and other instruments – notably with RSNO principal clarinettist John Cushing. 'We both coached both instruments, which was really interesting,' she says. 'If I hear a flute player, I'm thinking about flute things all the time, but if I'm working with a clarinet player, I'm just listening to the music. I'd love to build on that in the future – to do a course for flute and violin, or flute and voice.'

And what's essential, Bryan says, is that her range of different activities feed into one another. 'When you teach, of course you're drawing on your own playing experiences. And likewise, I get inspiration for my playing from all kinds of different places – from a bassoon solo in the orchestra, say, or from what a student plays in a lesson.'

There is a third disc in the pipeline, but it will be rather a different beast. 'The first two CDs were in a similar format, so I might do something different next – maybe something to do with transcriptions,' she says. 'In terms of repertoire, I'm

on the look-out for things that might work. I'm doing some work on the Brahms third violin sonata at the moment, and I think it could be quite interesting as a flute piece.'

Has she ever considered expanding the flute's repertoire by being involved in commissioning new works herself? 'It's definitely on my wishlist,' Bryan says. 'I'm quite keen to think about working with Scottish composers while I'm in Scotland – I feel a certain commitment to being part of that musical community.' And she would not rule out exploring other genres, either. 'As long as you feel what you do has integrity, that you enjoy doing it and that people will respond and enjoy it, I don't have a problem with crossover. I'd love to work with some traditional musicians, which we do already in the RSNO – if it was a project I felt I could bring something to, I'd definitely give it a go.'

She might be under no illusions that the flute has its limitations, but Bryan's grand ambitions are indicative of her determination to break the instrument out of its box and provoke a wider appreciation of its power and beauty. CM

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