

Double Acts

Inside views on relationships in the string world

Conductor John Wilson and concertmaster Andrew Haveron talk about bonding over breakfast recitals and recreating a classic movie-orchestra sound

JOHN WILSON

I KNEW ABOUT ANDREW before I met him. When we were students at the Royal College of Music in London, people kept telling me that he'd be perfect for the kind of light music I was doing. I set up an orchestra that got some gigs playing for shoppers at a Christmas fair in the Earl's Court exhibition centre in London, and Andrew came along and sat on the third desk of the first violins. We got chatting, and he asked me back to his flat for a drink. He didn't have any booze, but they were selling a kind of Bailey's substitute at the fair, so we got a couple of bottles of it and tried to get drunk, but we just ended up feeling ill. He played me some Michael Rabin, and I remember thinking that this guy was on my wavelength – he was only 18 and I was 21, but we were clearly into the same things.

A COUPLE OF MONTHS

LATER I got a job organising violin-and-piano duets at the Grosvenor House hotel in London, playing in the restaurant. That was when we cemented out friendship and our musical relationship. I remember watching Andrew closely, and listening to him cultivating a beautifully singing line.

I THINK HE WAS MORE

INTERESTED in listening to Frank Sinatra than classical music at that time. We discovered a lot of that kind of music together. He felt, as I did, that a lot of string playing has become bland – he revered Heifetz and Rabin, and I loved Louis Kaufman, so it was our idea to form an orchestra where there was an ardour and sweep to the playing that you just don't get any more. When it came to setting up the John Wilson Orchestra, he was the obvious choice as concertmaster.

NOW WE SEE EACH OTHER very often in the orchestra. If we're on tour, we'll spend time socialising. We're both foodies – he's a marvellous cook. I love cooking as well, but the last thing I made for him was a plate of sausages – he came round to work on some bowings, and we were still doing it at 3am. I was also his best man when he got married. I've never had as much trouble as I had when writing the best man's speech – I just couldn't get anything on him because he's so bloody virtuous!

ANDREW HAVERON

WE MET AT THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF MUSIC – there seemed to be rumours about this guy everybody needed to know, because his gigs were well paid. I saw him walking in the corridors, and he was always wearing a suit – I thought he was a member of staff. It turned out he was in the third year.

I WAS A REGULAR PLAYER in a lot of John's concerts. When he was invited to play at the Grosvenor House hotel, he asked me to play with him. It started off as music for breakfast, so for a period I was getting up at 5am and putting on evening tails to get on the bus to Park Lane. We began with Kreisler and things like that, but he brought these books with thousands

of popular tunes – just the melody lines – and he'd improvise accompaniments. We had a whale of a time. I'm sure nobody noticed, though. I remember one day Boris Becker walked into the restaurant and specifically asked for a table as far away from us as possible.

I'VE WATCHED JOHN'S

CONDUCTING grow from when he'd never had a lesson through to his position as a highly sought-after conductor today. His technique and abilities have developed enormously. Knowing him so well, I feel I know exactly what he means by his various gestures, and sometimes I sit and listen to him explaining to my

colleagues something we discovered together years previously. When we're in the John Wilson Orchestra, we know we're definitely trying to imitate something – that's the point. That type of playing takes as much knowledge of style as any period performance.

OUR PATHS CROSS FREQUENTLY NOW. Our work collides enough that we still get to see a lot of each other, and we're forever texting each other. Our lives have been based around eating and drinking, and that's still important to us. I remember once, back at the Grosvenor House hotel, when we were playing one of those Viennese waltzes where there's a kind of lift off the second beat followed by a delayed down-beat, we actually stopped and had breakfast in one of those pauses. ■

INTERVIEWS BY DAVID KETTLE



'One day Boris Becker walked into the restaurant and specifically asked for a table as far away from us as possible'

ANDREW HAVERON (RIGHT)