

Strings attached

When Jessica Duchen married a violinist, she felt as if she'd also married his workmates - the other 99 members of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. This is a year in their life

Friday September 15, 2000

[The Guardian](#)

June 30, 1999

I'd seen my husband hundreds of times before I met him - but only in profile. Tom plays in the first violin section of the London Philharmonic Orchestra. His job is depressingly known as "rank and file", but most musicians prefer to call it "wank and smile". Other London orchestras usually spend the summer touring abroad; luckily for me, the LPO simply removes itself to Sussex from May to August, to be Glyndebourne Festival Opera's orchestra in residence. Today is the dress rehearsal of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*. These are for family and friends only and there's a party atmosphere.

During the long interval I chat to Tom's colleagues in what is effectively my orchestra-in-law - it's taken me three years to learn around 99 names, plus noxious nicknames like "Jesus", "Argos", "Bleachy Head" and other, less printable, epithets.

August 31, 1999

The end of the Glyndebourne season, and Tom and I take a holiday. Unpaid, of course. The LPO is reasonably secure these days, Tom says: audience figures are up, sponsorship levels are good and now that Kurt Masur has been appointed principal conductor, starting in September 2000, the mood among the players is relatively optimistic.

It's not always like that. The orchestra's permanent members are self-employed and those with mortgages and families seem to live in a constant state of anxiety. If there's no work for the orchestra, then there's no pay, it's as simple as that.

Pay is per three-hour "call" and varies widely. For example, light-music recordings: £100 per call; LPO own promotions, £55 per call; a "Classical Spectacular" concert, £72 total for a three-hour rehearsal plus concert. Glyndebourne pay alone rises each year with inflation.

A crack orchestra is like a crack football team; there's the same combination of individual virtuosity and team spirit. But while footballers and operatic stars can earn millions every year, most orchestral musicians, after years of intensive training, see none of the cash or the glory.

September 18, 1999

The orchestra's autumn season at the Festival Hall is opening tomorrow. Masur is conducting Brahms's *German Requiem*, and the entire orchestra has PMT (Pre-Masur Tension). Masur, a formidable, white-bearded septuagenarian, inspires devotion in some and terror in others. But most respect him, not only because he's a great musician, but also because after rehearsals he never presumes to jump the coffee queue.

We currently have a house-guest, a German violinist named Martin who is on trial for a job with the orchestra. Both he and Tom are practising and the place sounds like an aviary. The

Germans - who still enjoy long, high-quality, free training - seem the most frequently shortlisted candidates for orchestral jobs. The band has a wry maxim: "If in doubt, appoint a Kraut".

Martin is up against a lengthy process. In most other countries, positions are awarded by audition followed by a year's probation. Whoever plays best at the audition on the day gets the job. But while that system proves someone can play solo, it doesn't prove that he or she can do equally well as a section member.

In London, a shortlist is drawn up after the auditions and several players are tried out for several weeks each, during which time they have to sit next to everyone in the section, each of whom has a say in the decision process. It's democratic, but given the wide range of opinions within a 16-member violin section, it's a wonder that anyone is appointed at all.

February 15, 2000

We are in the aftermath of a whistle-stop tour of Spain. Typical tour schedule: morning - travel; afternoon - rehearsal; evening - concert; midnight - food and beer; 2am - crash out; 7am - start again. The intensity never lets up.

There are no rules about scheduling; it is cheaper for the orchestra to travel and perform on the same day than for them to have a night's rest after a long flight. This time the band comes home on Wednesday after travel and concerts on Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, with the prospect of now travelling to Cardiff (Thursday), Birmingham (Friday) and finally trying to produce top-quality goods at the Festival Hall, London, on Saturday.

April 15, 2000

An almighty rumpus breaks out at Glyndebourne. Normally, everyone in the orchestra sorts out their Glyndebourne schedules in November. Those with nerves of steel draw lots for some well-paid but exposed solos in off-stage bands in Janacek's *Jenufa* and Britten's *Peter Grimes*, and 11 on-stage parts in *Don Giovanni*. Back in the autumn, Tom had drawn a *Jenufa* solo. Now, all of a sudden, the producer of *Don Giovanni* lets it be known that he doesn't want any women in his on-stage bands, citing the fact that there wouldn't have been any in Mozart's day.

Confusion is caused by the production being partly in modern dress. Delicate negotiations take place and a compromise is reached: some of the furious women are allowed to stay - in rather androgynous costumes - but some have to swap solo spots with men in other operas. Tom gives fellow violinist Cathy Craig his *Jenufa* slot and finds himself in *Don Giovanni* with the prospect of walking on to a stage in a costume for the first time ever. For just one minute on stage he will get paid nearly double his normal evening fee.

July 8, 2000

Martin, at long last, has been given the job in the first violin section, starting in September. Now he and his girlfriend, Imke, arrive to stay with us while they house hunt. Imke has no job as yet and they are determined to live in Islington. We fear they're in for a shock here, arriving from a spacious pad in central Berlin, within cycling distance of all the necessary venues. After wandering about London in the pouring rain for a few days, they find a flat they can afford - in Crystal Palace.

July 12, 2000

Don Giovanni dress rehearsal. I've been warned that Tom looks like a vampire, in 18th-century frock coat, powdered wig and white make-up with huge black rings around his eyes, but when he appears from behind a mound of earth in the act one party scene I nearly scream. He comes right to the front and everyone can hear him clear as a bell. I'm more frightened than he is; he's having fun up there, accompanying the Morris dancers (why are there Morris dancers in *Don Giovanni*?). Meanwhile, I get the hots for Giovanni himself: an Italian baritone named Natale de Carolis, gorgeous enough in his leather trousers to make the whole plot vaguely plausible.

August 18, 2000

Tom has played nothing but Mozart for a month, but the slog is about to begin again: when Glyndebourne is over, they're off to Germany to open the Berlin festival with Mahler's Ninth under Masur. Tom's started practising. It's one of the hardest pieces in the repertoire for the first violins: the slow, quiet, exposed passages in the last movement terrify them more than anything fast and flashy.

In the band itself, there is more drama ahead: the leader, Joakim Svenheden, is moving back to his native Sweden after eight years here. Everyone will miss Joakim, but the lifestyle he's offered in Stockholm - a nicer home for less money, a secure salary, lower stress levels and good schooling for his son Emil - was an opportunity too good to miss.

From the autumn season Masur is principal conductor proper. The first concert of the season isn't what you might expect, however. It's an afternoon and evening bonanza of different styles: world music (with Youssou N'Dour), jazz, Rimsky-Korsakov, you name it. Some players love it; "what, no Mahler?" is the reaction from one. Some cynics mutter that such events are planned to please New Labour, Chris Smith and the fund-raising department.

- The LPO celebrates its new season tomorrow from 1pm at the South Bank, London SE1. Box office: 020-7840 4201.