

Brass Appeal

It's a rare talent that can get millions to sit up and take notice of the trumpet. But popularity, Alison Balsom tells *Jeremy Pound*, is a little pointless if the music itself doesn't take the lead

..... PHOTOGRAPHY JAMES CHEADLE

Alison Balsom and I are in conversation in the admin offices of Winchester Cathedral, a short walk from her home. Just a couple of minutes into our chat, she drops something of a bombshell. Did I know, she asks, that this is the longest medieval cathedral in Europe? I didn't until now but, delighted to recognise a fellow cathedral anorak, I'm all ears. And then another revelation: that little gem of a fact came courtesy of the pack of English Cathedrals Top Trumps that she was given for Christmas last year. I'm impressed, and just a little jealous.

Her enviable knowledge of cathedral stats aside, Balsom is a marketing department's dream. She looks the part, talks a good game, flashes a winning smile for the cameras and is easy-going and affable company. One can almost see the pound signs lighting up, as crossover projects galore are hatched. Or not, as it turns out. As our conversation turns to music, Balsom is at pains to outline where her priorities lie, and it's not there. It's when she describes how she spent seven years as a teenager playing scarcely a single piece but simply working on her sound, that her point is really driven home – this talent hasn't been carefully honed just to be wasted on frivolities, however lucrative they might be. ▶



‘EVEN IF SOMETHING IS going to sell well, I have to really like it and believe in it musically, or what is the point?’ she says. ‘If I don’t feel like I’m keeping my integrity, or that I believe in the music I’m playing, it’s never going to be as good. I don’t think that people can always put their finger on why they enjoy an artist, but they know they enjoy them. You can give what is still an accomplished performance but if you’re not feeling happy with how it’s going or you feel uncomfortable, the audience won’t know why, but they’ll feel uncomfortable too. On the positive side, it’s the same. If you feel fantastic and think “This is my favourite piece ever”, people will pick up that vibe – that is really important.’

This isn’t just talk. Balsom’s discography doesn’t exactly bear the stamp of an artist who has sold out. To date, Haydn and Hummel have rubbed shoulders with JS Bach, Purcell, Messiaen, Debussy, Thalben-Ball and

‘The fam’d Italian Masters’ (Melani and Grossi, anyone?). But then came the Last Night of the Proms in September last year when, following the Haydn Concerto and Piazzolla’s *Libertango*, Balsom joined mezzo Sarah Connolly for a little Gershwin in front of a global TV audience of 200 million. The performance went down a storm and people unsurprisingly started to ask when we might get to hear more of the same on disc. So, goodbye Thalben-Ball, hello mainstream? Sure enough, soon after, Balsom headed into the studio to record... you’ve got it... rarely heard Italian concertos.

‘I recorded the disc in November 2009, but it had been in the pipeline much longer,’ she explains. ‘I do a lot of transcriptions, and I thought it would be good to record some of the things I do in recital. I decided that since I’m going to be doing the album on a piccolo trumpet, I should really exploit the

instrument and not just stick to the stuff that just sounds fantastic on a natural trumpet – I can leave that for another occasion. But I thought it would be good to include Vivaldi – an obvious Italian composer from that period – and then there’s the Albinoni D minor Concerto, to which I was first introduced by Maurice André’s fantastic recording. Then, after that, it was a case of exploring the repertoire and seeing what works in balance with the programme.’

As you may have guessed, the works on the new disc, which is released this month on EMI, weren’t initially written for the trumpet. The Vivaldi in question is the Violin Concerto in A minor RV356, while the recording also includes transcriptions

of oboe concertos by Marcello and Albinoni and even a transcription of Benjamin’s Concerto for Oboe and Strings which itself is an adaptation of piano sonatas by Cimarosa.

Plundering the repertoire of other instruments is nothing new to a trumpeter, but how does a comparatively awkward beast such as the trumpet – albeit it the more agile, higher-pitched younger brother of the familiar B flat model – cope with the twists, turns and leaps written for the violin? This question is directed not just at Alison Balsom, trumpeter, but also at Alison Balsom, transcriber and arranger. ‘There are moments such as double stopping and where Vivaldi makes huge jumps that can’t be done on a piccolo trumpet,’ she replies. ‘If you have to adjust the piece to the extent that it becomes something completely different, then you have to question why you’re doing it, but if you can keep the essence, the harmonic structure and reduce the range to something that is closer together but has exactly the same feel, then you’re allowed. But I try to be quite strict with myself in terms of not messing up the piece.’



‘If you can’t do it live there’s not really any point in doing it’

GOLDEN SOUND: Alison Balsom brandishes her Schilke C trumpet, a gift from the company itself



Other factors to be borne in mind when borrowing music from the violin include the problem of when to breathe – not something that concerns the fiddler, of course. And then there's the issue of sheer stamina. 'Sometimes, the violinist would play all the solo sections and then also in all the tutti passages,' Balsom explains. 'That's physically not really possible as a trumpeter – OK, you could do it on a recording, but if you can't do it live there's not really any point in doing it.'

Balsom's participation in her new disc doesn't stop at playing and arranging the music. She also directs the Scottish Ensemble, something she says helps to create a more involved and intimate feel. 'I really wanted to go for a feel of chamber music. Once you can start interweaving with the other players that makes it a lot more interesting music. And when you don't have a conductor who everyone can just watch, you are forced to use your ears much more to keep it all together and so that everyone has the same idea as to how we want it to go. Of course, as we didn't have a conductor, we spent longer rehearsing so everyone had already discussed and played through quite a lot what we were after. By the time we had got to the sessions, you can just sit down and you're all reading from the same page.'

So, let's be frank, here. Conductors are a bit of a waste of space, aren't they? 'I have to say that conductors really do have a very valuable place in music!' comes the very instant reply to what was, admittedly, a slightly cheeky question – Balsom's partner is Edward Gardner, music director of English National Opera and the recently appointed principal guest conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. The two have been together since early 2009, having previously shared the stage on a number of occasions, not least Balsom's *Caprice* CD in 2006, when Gardner conducted the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. Charlie, their son, completed the family in March this year.

Balsom is acutely aware of the dangers of the press turning her and her equally famous partner into some sort of classical music Posh and Becks. 'Yes, I think they probably would quite like to do that,' she says matter-of-factly. 'But I think we've got quite enough on our plate with learning and performing our music.' I can't help but feel that she can't get off this subject quickly enough. I don't press particularly hard, but suspect my Top Trump revelation is about as far as I'm going to get when it comes to gleaning snippets of Balsom-related gossip. As for using their relationship as a selling-point in terms of appearing on stage together, ►

this, she says, is something they are also both wary of and largely keen to avoid. The diary bears this out. As she makes her way back from the briefest of maternity breaks, tours near and far are already on the agenda. Germany, with her own Balsom Ensemble, Brazil and the US will all have been visited before 2010 is out. Charlie will be coming with her, leaving her other half to stay at home in England, looking after the opera company.

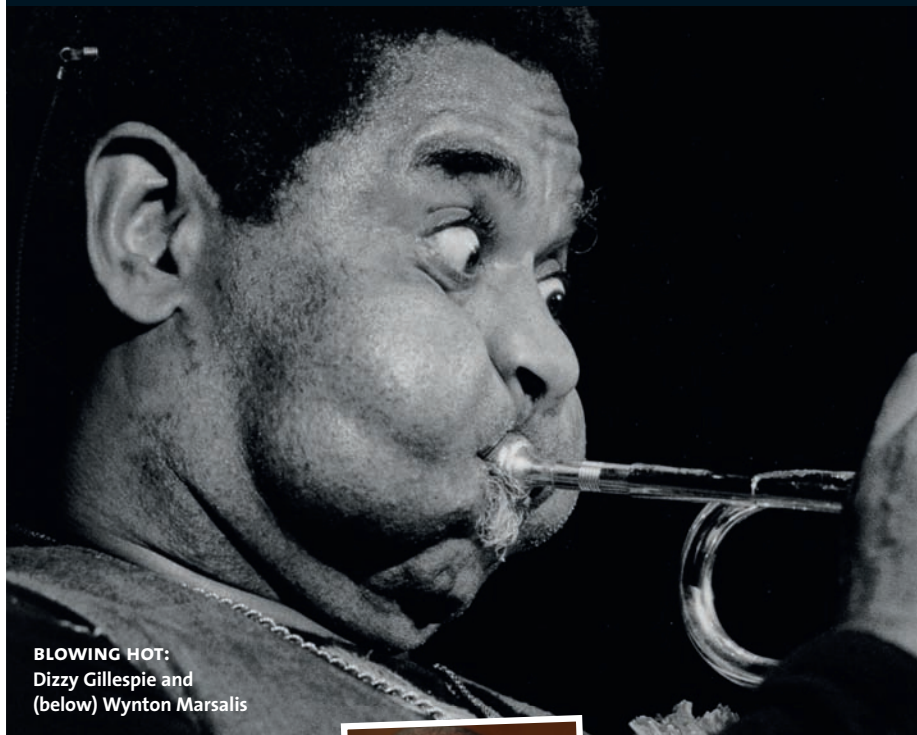
Balsom's relationship with her trumpet provides a much more fertile ground for conversation. She herself took up the instrument as an eight year-old, an age when, as she rightly points out, children tend to be at their most open-minded and adventurous. By the time that the teenage years of self-consciousness arrived, when a girl might start to think about whether or not playing a trumpet was actually, like, that cool or whatever, she was already hooked. Studies at the Guildhall and with Håkan Hardenberger, a place in the National Youth Orchestra and an appearance in the final of the BBC Young Musician all followed, as did two years on the Radio 3 New Generation Artist scheme for young artists – though, in the final instance, acceptance to the scheme came only after Balsom herself had stuck a portfolio of trumpet works right under the nose of its founder Adam Gatehouse to persuade him that there was enough there to keep her busy for those two years.

In fact, of the 70-plus musicians to have been enrolled on the New Generation Artists scheme over its 11 years, Balsom remains not just its only ever trumpeter, but also its only brass player full stop. So, I ask, why are there few top classical trumpeters around? 'Because it's *sooo* difficult!' she grins in reply. 'Obviously, the repertoire is a factor because we have a few brilliant pieces but not that many. We don't have a Brahms concerto or anything like that. And many brass players' training, including mine, is through the brass band tradition. It's a good training because you really develop your technique and learn to listen, but if you're playing in a brass band you're not exposed to all the different types of classical music. So, I think you have to be pretty passionate about classical music away from the trumpet, and then the trumpet just happens to be your instrument. If you come at it the other way, then it can be a bit daunting in terms of knowing where to go with repertoire choices, who to collaborate with and so on.'

So, it's not because parents are worried about assaulting, and upsetting, the neighbours with assorted honks and parps while their progeny comes to terms with

The trumpet shall sound

Five influential players of the modern era



BLOWING HOT:
Dizzy Gillespie and
(below) Wynton Marsalis

Håkan Hardenberger

(Swedish; b1961)

A former teacher of Alison Balsom and, alongside Dizzy Gillespie (see below), one of the players who first inspired her as a youngster, Hardenberger has led the way as a performer and commissioner of contemporary repertoire – Harrison Birtwistle's concerto *Endless Parade* was one of many works written for him. Never afraid to push the instrument to its limits, his amazing technical ability is coupled with a beautiful sound.

Dizzy Gillespie (US; 1917-93)

One of the greatest jazz trumpeters of all time and, given the influence that jazz technique itself has had on modern classical trumpet playing and composition, a significant figure there too. Hugely important in the development of bebop and Afro-Cuban jazz, Dizzy Gillespie's bright, fast, virtuosic and largely clean sound contrasted with the darker hues of jazz greats such as Miles Davis who followed soon after.

Maurice André (French; b1933)

Specialising in Baroque music, André significantly expanded the trumpet repertoire by researching and performing works that had previously been gathering dust, arranging and transcribing where necessary. He almost single-handedly brought the piccolo trumpet to popularity and, over the course

of his career, made a very large number of recordings, mainly on the French Erato label.

Wynton Marsalis

(American; b1961)

Described as 'potentially the greatest trumpeter of all time' by Maurice André, Wynton Marsalis holds the unique

distinction of having won Grammy awards in both classical and jazz categories. His playing, in whatever genre, is marked by dazzling technique and sumptuous beauty of tone and, as a composer and improviser, he is rarely short of inventive brilliance.

Sergei Nakariakov (Russian; b1977)

A year older than Alison Balsom, Nakariakov first made his mark on the classical music world with an acclaimed recording of Waxman's *Carmen Fantasy* at the age of 17. The technique which earned him the slightly burdensome tag of 'Paganini of the Trumpet' in those early years is founded not just on nimble finger work, but also a circular breathing system that allows him to manage the longest phrases with apparently minimal effort.

THE BRASS PAGANINI?:
Russian trumpeter
Sergei Nakariakov





THE GENUINE ARTICLE:

'If you have to adjust a piece so that it becomes completely different, you have to question why you're doing it'

handling the basics? 'No. I totally disagree with that! The violin is very difficult to get started on and sounds awful for a while, whereas you can make quite a nice sound on the trumpet or cornet right from the beginning if you've got the right embouchure set up. And if you don't make a nice sound as a kid, you probably never will! It's something that comes almost immediately. And you don't have to play really loud. The much more interesting thing is to learn to be able to control it and play it quietly. Also, it's very tiring to play. You don't play for as many hours a day as a violinist or pianist does, so the neighbours are only going to have a short amount of torture anyway!'

As Britain's brass band culture falls into rapid decline, one could reason that a potentially aspirational figure like Balsom needs to make her profile as high as possible if doing so helps to inspire a generation of keen young trumpeters. Wouldn't it be worth opting for an occasional crossover project, just to keep her instrument in the limelight? The trouble is that doing so would clearly go against the grain, in terms of that musical integrity. Moreover, she would doubtless be crucified by some in the media.

How she is perceived by the weightier press is clearly something that weighs on Balsom's mind a little. She tells me that she was worried that the *Sunday Times's* Hugh Canning would 'destroy' her when they met for an interview

'The interesting thing
is to learn to play the
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last year – though ironically, Canning himself admitted in his piece that *he* was nervous about the prospect of meeting *her*, expecting to be greeted by a posse of pushy PR types. In fact, neither's fears were realised and, judging from the article, the two got on very well.

So what exactly caused those misgivings? Dare I suggest that simply being young and blonde has something to do with it? It's certainly an asset that carries its own pitfalls. Just imagine the glee at the *Daily Mail's* subs'

desk when, before last year's Last Night of the Proms, they twigged that 'trumpet' rhymed with 'crumpet'. And then there are those preposterous, but surprisingly regular, comparisons with a certain Welsh mezzo (I have 'Don't mention Katherine Jenkins!' written in red at the foot of my interview notes...) Short of turning up to concerts and awards ceremonies dressed in a tatty bag tied with string, Balsom will just have to live with all this, though the heavy irony that accompanies a brief aside speaks volumes: 'That's why my career's been so successful: because I'm a girl trumpeter.'

But enough gloomy self-reflection. As our 45 minutes come to an end, I feel I can't let Alison Balsom's Winchester fact go without some sort of display of cathedral knowledge of my own. 'Did you know,' I begin, 'that Lincoln used to have the tallest spires of any cathedral in the whole of England?' Ah. I think I may have lost her attention... ■

And now try...

Trumpeter *Tine Thing Helseth* recommends five works to explore next



NORSE EXPLORER: Tine Thing Helseth

THE ESTONIAN *Eino Tamberg's* First Trumpet Concerto (1972), which I first heard played by Håkan Hardenberger, is wonderful. It's very theatrical and you can really imagine episodes and surroundings when you hear it. It's modern, but tonal.

Then there's *Marcel Bitsch's Quatre Variations sur un thème de D Scarlatti*, which he wrote for the Paris Conservatoire Concours in 1950. He starts with just the theme followed by some fun variations, the first and second of which are like a conversation between the trumpet and piano. There's one slow one variation which is very, very beautiful.

I found *Stanley Friedman's* Sonatine for trumpet and harp (1977) when I formed a

*The second movement of
Tomasi's concerto must be one
of the most beautiful ever*

very angel-like duo with a friend at the age of about 15. Friedman is a trumpet player himself and really knows the instrument. About five minutes long, the Sonatine is very dramatic and the first movement is quite scary. It's modern, but exciting.

I really love the Swedish composer *Britta Byström's* world. She has her unique language. Her *Delusions* for trumpet and orchestra (2005) is based on a novel. It's about a guy – that's the soloist – who is wandering around Stockholm meeting various situations, represented by the orchestra. It's great to play.

And finally, *Henri Tomasi's* Trumpet Concerto (1949) is like a mix between Debussy and *film noir*. The second movement must be one of the most beautiful ever written, and he uses different mutes – straight and cup – to produce different sounds. And the third movement is just pure joy. I love it as a player, and think it must also be very entertaining to listen to.