

High Baroque

By Tom Higgins

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One of Britain's most praised baroque oboists, Anthony Robson, seems mildly surprised by his own success. Tom Higgins went to meet him.

For someone who was due to become one of Britain's leading exponents of the baroque oboe, Anthony Robson, by his own admission, must have seemed like unpromising material.

The son of a north Yorkshire steelworker ("a steelworker's son who plays the oboe must be a boy in a million"), he became a student at the Royal Academy of Music ("they didn't know what to do with me, they tried to throw me out at least twice").

If any of this sounds like a sob story, it could not be further from his intention. A combination of humble beginnings, raw talent, hard work and gradual self-awareness has placed Robson at the forefront of Britain's early music scene. The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment's principal oboe, he is also a major recording artist.

Virgin Veritas have recently released his recording of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Oboe*

Concertos on which he plays oboe and oboe d'amore with OAE, directed by Elizabeth Wallfisch. Chandos issued his recording of Tomaso Albinoni's complete oboe concertos with Simon Standage directing Collegium Musicum 90, of which the *Gramophone* reviewer wrote, "the recording bids strongly for a place on every shelf". His recording (with Elizabeth Wallfisch) of Bach oboe and violin concertos for Virgin Veritas was nominated for a Gramophone Award in 1995.

He appears regularly throughout Britain and at European festivals. Last year he was at the Edinburgh Festival with the Hanover Band and Charles Mackerras and he performed in Berlin's Philharmonie at the close of the city's celebrated Bach Tage. It is a remarkable achievement for someone who only entered the early music scene just over a decade ago. Compared to some in this field, he is a late starter.

Born in 1955, in Middlesbrough, then in the north riding of Yorkshire, he started to learn the oboe in his state secondary school. He remains extremely grateful to the school's instrumental teaching scheme. "If it hadn't been for that, I wouldn't be where I am now." He made very quick progress — within a month he was playing a solo with the school orchestra.

"There was never any doubt I would go to music college, although we didn't know much about such things out in the sticks," he says. He applied and was accepted for the RAM. His aim was to do first-study oboe and second-study recorder. But following his audition for Janet Craxton, she suggested joint first-study oboe and recorder because David Munrow, founder of the Early Music Consort, was still teaching at the Academy then. As matters turned out, he never did become a student of Munrow's. Munrow left the RAM as Robson arrived.

He became an oboe student of Lady Barbirolli. "I was probably the worst, laziest pupil she ever had," he recalls. "I never turned up for lessons. She must have had a terrible time with me." Nevertheless, he emphasizes, Lady Barbirolli recognized his gifts telling him he was "terribly talented", while urging him to mend his ways. Analyzing his then problems, he reckons that although he had a "natural ability",

he had never been taught how to practice. He says that before arriving at the Academy he had never had a lesson from a professional player, consequently he found working methodically at technique “rather hard going.” It was Lady Barbirolli who finally taught him how to practice.

Eventually, Robson’s abilities won through. “The turn around in my Academy career came with a performance of Bach’s *Magnificat*. The beauty of his oboe d’amore playing produced admiring remarks from the institution’s top brass. Another distinction arrived when he became the first student to be awarded the recital diploma on the recorder.

Thereafter, he says, “it seemed rather natural that I’d want to play the baroque oboe”. Final evidence that the instrument had been coming to him all his life emerges with the remark, “It was the sound of the baroque oboe which made me want to play it.” He is unreserved in his belief that compared to the modern version, “these instruments sound a damned sight nicer”. The oboe’s post-baroque evolution, he claims, lost something. “I really don’t want to play Bach on a modern instrument,” he says firmly.

Entry into the early music scene came within a handful of years after leaving the Academy in 1979. He bought a baroque oboe for £60 (“a wretched instrument”) and got going. But first he stayed alive by teaching the violin for the Inner London Education Authority. Meanwhile, as a player of the modern oboe, he started freelancing around the orchestras. At one point he was a regular dep with the old D’Oyly Carte Opera Company. Soon he was into London’s West End, spending all four years at the Palace Theatre. For a year he did *Les Misérables*.

Meanwhile, his baroque oboe skills were quickened by working for conductors like the late Paul Steinitz. Over a two-year period he played second oboe to David Reichenberg, a noted exponent at the time. “I learnt a lot working next to David,” says Robson. “That was my training in baroque playing.” Soon Robson himself was a familiar figure around period orchestras. Within a few years he consolidated his position by joining John Eliot Gardner’s English Baroque Soloists as principal oboe — a position he held for eight years. Currently he is principal oboe with the OAE and CM 90.

The question of how early music sounds is never far below the surface. Robson has been listening to it long enough to be able to say that instrumental tone has changed dramatically “even since I came on the scene 12 years ago.

When I listen to some of the earlier recordings, there’s no doubt that the sound was fresher, cleaner. There was less vibrato. It’s crept back in probably because nowadays we play much later music as well. I’m not saying it sounds wrong, it just sounds different.” Nevertheless, he feels that the early music movement should remain vigilant about its ideals.

The judgment is one he is happy to apply to himself. He quotes a critic who recently said that there was a “shimmer” on his oboe tone “that would have done credit to the Berlin Philharmonic.” When a colleague later suggested, almost jokingly to Robson, that he was possibly using too much vibrato, he was astute enough to take the remark on board.

“I probably did use too much vibrato,” he says reflectively, “but then I don’t believe players in the old days played entirely without it.” As he irrefutably points out, they were human after all. “People say that I might use a little more vibrato than I should, but we’re not talking modern-oboe Berlin-Philharmonic here.” What Robson is talking about is something a touch more subtle. “It’s a warming of the tone,” he says in a phrase which cannot be bettered.

Helping Robson stay faithful to the movement is his large collection of instruments. A couple of years ago it tallied just over twenty. Nowadays, it has crept up to thirty. Broadly, it encompasses all the different pitches, periods and styles from Bach to Elgar. The lowest pitch is A:392, rising to a couple of vibrations below A:440. Robson’s fidelity to detail is easy to admire. Harder to appreciate is the amount of time he spends making reeds. Players of modern instruments know that they spend more time on this one activity than they care to calculate. But Robson has around 20 non-compatible instruments to service.

Among the collection are four baroque oboes, two early classical and two late classical, one of which is an original made by Johann Friedrich Floth in 1807. The Floth is one of nine surviving originals. Representing other members of the oboe family are various oboes d’amore, oboes da caccia and cors anglais. Many of his reproduction baroque instruments were manufactured for him by Richard Earle, the OAE’s second oboe. Two years ago seven instruments were stolen from the collection. Due largely to his own efforts (he actually tracked down the burglar himself), Robson recovered all but one — a copy of a Grensner on which he had played *Figaro* at Glyndebourne.

Robson is too aware of early music’s

achievements not to take the conductor factor into account. At the time I spoke to him he was rehearsing with Christopher Hogwood. He paid tribute to Hogwood's depth of knowledge ("it continually astounds me") and his awareness of how period instruments work. Mackerras is rated as "magnificent. He's open to everything we do." On Simon Rattle he says, "Simon is very appreciative—he trusts us. There were some marvellous performances of Schubert's *Ninth Symphony* with him which I will simply never forget. During the rehearsal period he gave us insights into Schubert's personality and despair at the time he wrote the symphony. It made us play in a way we never could have, had he not been there."

In January he gave a recital at the Wigmore Hall with the counter-tenor James Bowman. Solo performances later in the year included the Bach *Violin and Oboe Double Concerto* with Monica Huggett and the OAE. His most recent recording is that of the complete Albinoni *Concertos for Two Oboes* with Catherine Latham and CM 90 on Chandos. Meanwhile, he is hoping a company will take up his ambition to record the Mozart, Haydn and Krommer concertos.

A point worth bearing in mind is that Robson, like other baroque oboe specialists, started life

as a player of the modern instrument. Part of his value to the early music scene is how completely he has attuned himself to it. "I'm happy in my niche," he says. "In this scene we're very lucky. We get the chance to play some of the best music there is, in some of the best venues with some of the most wonderful singers."

Musicians are often encouraged to pontificate on their profession. That they sensibly rein themselves in, is because they know that whatever they say the world still goes on judging them by their last performance. By nature uncomplicated, Robson has a passion for music. He is modest about his scholarship, the essential accessory for every baroque exponent. He chose, for example, to record the Bach *Concerto BWV 1053a* on the oboe d'amore rather than on the oboe, claiming that this must have been Bach's original intention. "It's the only instrument which has all the notes," he says.

As the world knows, it is a performer's personality that really counts, which in Robson's case is born out by what others report of him. "People say that whatever instrument I play I still sound like Tony Robson." ♦