

Peter Roberts



Peter Roberts is a contented man. As twice British Open Solo Champion and winner of Champion of Champions in New Zealand, to name but two of the many top prizes he's won, he feels he's pretty much achieved everything he could ever want for during his long and prestigious career. But there was, to use his words, just one "last great playing position I wanted to fill in my career," and the opportunity to fulfil that ambition came last October when he left the Yorkshire Building Society Band to join Black Dyke.

"The last 12 months have been fantastic," he tells me. "The thing about Black Dyke is that more often than not they play to full houses and that's probably the biggest thrill. "When you're stood in front of Black Dyke doing a solo with a full house, it's really something special."

"There's several of us go back a long way", he adds. "Nicholas Childs and I played at Grimethorpe about 20 years ago and Roger Webster - he played at Grimethorpe when I was there, so you get a sort of sense of family, because they're old friends."

That said, Peter will certainly never forget the seven or so years he spent with YBS, during which time the Band enjoyed enormous success, winning six consecutive European titles between 1999 and 2004. Joining YBS was, he says, perhaps the most important turning point in his career, coming at exactly the right moment when he found himself facing redundancy from work. He even became something of a lucky mascot, affectionately referred to as 'the old man of the band'. "Actually, we did a gala concert after the European

competition in Switzerland and they introduced me as 'the grandfather of the band' But I didn't mind that because they were trying to make a play on the fact that I'd actually played at the first European back in 1978."

It was 18 years before that, though, that Peter began his career as principal cornet with Grimethorpe Junior Band. He admits that these days he hardly picks up the Bb cornet. "It sounds really awful when I play," he laughs, "like a Corncrake!" (That's a bird with a harsh, grating call, by the way, for anyone who's never heard one!). But while the Bb cornet may have fallen by the wayside, Peter is always keen to expand his repertoire for soprano, especially as he's now just starting to put together some ideas for his next solo CD.

"I would like to see some new works done. The repertoire now is becoming a bit dated. I suppose I'm a melody man; I like melodies. When I went up to Black Dyke, I'd always thought about performing the *Lord's Prayer* because I'd always liked the melody. So I got Professor Wilby (Black Dyke's composer in residence) to arrange it for me and wherever I do it, the audience always seem delighted. So I'm looking around all the time for new music and if I can't arrange it, I know people that can."

And when he's not playing or arranging, of course, Peter is kept busy as an adjudicator; something which he hopes will keep him fully occupied long after his playing days are over – as I write, he's preparing to judge the 3rd Section National Finals. Not that he has any plans to retire from the playing scene just yet, mind you. And with another busy year with Black Dyke ahead, Peter's making sure that wherever he turns up, everyone will see him coming in his brand new Mazda 6 Sport bought especially to go with a number plate that he just had to have when he spotted it for sale on the internet: N1 SOP – Number One Sop!

Centre Story

Photography: Philip Biggs

Bert Van Thienen

At just 26 years old, Bert Van Thienen has already established an impressive reputation for himself as one of Belgium's top trumpet players and a glance at his CV makes impressive reading: he's played with a list of orchestras as long as your arm and attended masterclasses with top players from all over the world. But if he had his way, the music world would know him first and foremost not as a trumpeter but as a soprano cornet player.

"I'm playing in a professional wind band (the Royal Symphonic Band of the Belgian Guides) for a living", he tells me over the phone from Belgium on a rare quiet moment in his busy daily schedule, "and then for a hobby I play in the Willebroek Brass Band. But if I could choose, I'd quit playing trumpet and play soprano all the time! When people speak of me, I'd like them to think of soprano and not of trumpet. I like playing solo and this year and last it was good because I had lots of solo concerts. But it's difficult because you have to be invited."

His passion for soprano cornet comes over very strongly during our conversation, and yet Bert's first encounter with the instrument came just three years ago in 2002. As he explained to me, at the time, he was already an experienced flugelhorn and Bb cornet player, although his relationship with the cornet was never really a very happy one.

"The first time I played soprano was at the





Joanna Pinnock of BBC Radio 4 and Television talks to three virtuoso Soprano Cornet players

European (Championships) in 2002 in Brussels with Willebroek. I actually started in the Band in '95, and played flugel there for some years. Then I moved to another Belgian band where I was principal cornet. I had to play it because the conductor was my trumpet teacher in the conservatory, so it was difficult to say no! I played Bb cornet for three or four years but never really liked it and I never wanted to play the Bb cornet again. Then the conductor (of Willebroek) Frans Violet, phoned me and he asked me if I'd like to play soprano and after a few weeks I joined the band and then played at the European."

Since picking up the soprano for the first time, Bert reckons he's worked his way through almost every solo written for the instrument and is constantly scouring the internet for news of any new solos about to be released by publishers. Thanks to players like Peter Roberts, he says, some composers are writing more now, but the variety of the repertoire still can't compare with, say, that of the B flat cornet, something he sees as a real problem. Still, that doesn't stop him dreaming of soon recording his first CD, something that he hopes will happen sooner rather than later.

"I'd like to record something like the piece I played in Glasgow at the European Solos Competition by Bertrand Moren because it's a bigger piece. It's almost sixteen or seventeen minutes so you can't play it in a concert, it's too big. And I'd like to perform music with some other great friends and musicians like Raf Van Looveren and maybe even a duet for two sopranos with Peter Roberts!"

In the meantime, with another season of competitions and concerts on the horizon, including the Flemish Open in Belgium and preparation for the Nationals, not to mention his daily commitments as First Trumpet with the Royal Symphonic Band of the Belgian Guides and his other rapidly growing career as a conductor, Bert's other great ambition is to see the world. He wants to travel with great bands like Willebroek, performing in contests and concerts with other great musicians and conductors. "Just because", he adds, "in my little country of Belgium it is not possible".

Alan Wycherley

According to Alan Wycherley, you have to be a certain type of person to play soprano cornet. "You live or die on soprano," he says. "If you play second cornet with a band, you can have a really bad night and only you know about it. But you have a bad night on soprano and everybody knows about it!"

Not that Alan has many bad nights (although being his own toughest critic, he may disagree). As one of the country's best-known and respected players, Alan is constantly in demand as a soloist. But for him, one of the best parts of being "top of the trade", as he calls it, is the opportunity to play alongside other top soloists: Peter Roberts, Kevin Crockford and the man into whose revered shoes he stepped when he joined the Fairey Engineering Band – the late Brian Evans.

"Brian Evans was just 'god' on the instrument, both as person and as a player. He just oozed music. Coming across him in massed bands when I was playing for Fairey's, I sat next to him on numerous occasions, learned from him and listened to recordings. With all due respect, you can get a trumpet player from an orchestra, pay him to play in a competition with you and he'll bang all the notes out, he won't split any and they'll all be in tune. But I think it takes a different type of person like Brian Evans to actually make it into music. Music is an emotion."

And all that listening and learning has obviously paid off. Since joining Fairey's at just fifteen years old, before moving on to Desford, Leyland and finally Foden's which he joined back in March 2000, Alan's lyrical playing has turned him into something of a legend in brass band world. But he's very much aware that over the past 30 years or so, his playing has changed. And says he'd really like to reflect those changes in a solo CD, if he ever gets the chance to record it.

"What I'd like to do is use my whole career, in other words use solos and pieces that I've performed over the years, rather than just go to a studio and record fourteen solos. I play differently now than I did, say, 30 years ago – not better or worse, just different. The more of life that you experience, the more you can draw on those experiences while you're playing a solo. In

1973, *Cavalleria Rusticana* was the first piece I ever recorded with Fairey's. What I'd like to do is to put that recording on a CD and also record it now, so have the same solo on twice. I'm convinced I'd play it differently now than I played it then. The sound hasn't changed that much but the emotion has."

That solo CD may have to wait for a while. In the meantime, Alan has another busy year lined up with Foden's and, these days, banding has become something of a family affair now that his son David plays percussion with the band. Would Alan have preferred it if he'd followed in dad's footsteps and taken up soprano instead?

"Without sounding conceited, it's always difficult to follow a 'name'. My father played with Cresswell Colliery Band years and years ago and whenever I used to go to a contest with him, I was always known as 'Alvin's lad'. I always wanted the day to come when someone would walk up to us and say to him, 'Oh, you're Alan's Dad'. I think if David had taken up soprano then there may have been problems. Luckily, though," he adds with a grin, "he got out of music altogether and took up percussion!"

As for what the future holds, well after a hugely successful musical career spanning more than 30 years so far, this 48 year-old self-confessed Peter Pan is still going strong and believes the best may still be yet to come. "I remember being asked twenty years ago what I thought had been the highlight of my career. That was when I'd just gone to Leyland and I said then, well, who's to say the highlight of my career has been and gone? It may still be to come, you just don't know."

