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Profile of an innovator: Torbjörn Hultmark

Peter Rudnick, Senior Lecturer in Music at LCM, reviews an LCMLive celebrity recital given by Torbjörn Hultmark at the Lawrence Hall, London College of Music, University of West London, Ealing W5

On Wednesday 6th April, I went to an electrifying (pun intended) LCMLive lunchtime concert and masterclass given by trumpeter Torbjörn Hultmark in the Lawrence Hall of the University of West London. He was supported by drummer Rufus Duits (aka Grofus), pianist Kate Ryder and the composer and lecturer Tim Ewers. Afterwards, I had the pleasure of meeting Torbjörn, along with the other performers, and speaking to him about his work.

Born in Stockholm in 1957, Torbjörn is now a naturalised British citizen and has been based in the UK since 1984**.** He studied trumpet and composition at Gothenburg College of Music and the National Centre for Orchestral Studies at Goldsmith's College, London, his main trumpet teachers being Bengt Eklund and John Wallace. Since then, he has enjoyed a rich and diverse career performing a remarkably wide spectrum of music as an orchestral and chamber music player, as well as being in demand as a soloist. He has performed with the London Sinfonietta, Philharmonia Orchestra and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe and appeared as a soloist with the Northern Sinfonia and BBC Philharmonic, to name but a few. He has toured extensively. He teaches trumpet in the junior department of the RCM and is an associate lecturer at the University of Kent**.** He is also a published composer of works for orchestra, choir and chamber ensembles and his music has been performed and broadcast extensively in the UK and worldwide. He has received commissions from, for example, BBC Radio 3, Lysis and Chaconne Brass.

THE SOPRANO TROMBONE PROJECT

One of the really interesting features of the concert, especially for the brass players in the audience, was Torbjörn's performance on the rarely-encountered soprano trombone. He has a love affair with this instrument, which began in 2011 when he took part as a soprano trombonist in a performance of Brian Ferneyhough's '*Plötzlichkeit*' at the Barbican Centre in London with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. From that time he has been 'bowled over by its vocal and expressive potential' He has an evident passion for the instrument and the desire to establish it firmly in contemporary musical life: 'it seemed to me a paradox that, although the instrument clearly had unique characteristics as well as the potential for creating a great sound, it was nevertheless so little used'. So he went to the German manufacturers Thein in Bremen (who, according to their website, make instruments 'with the power of fire and with the sun in their hearts') and commissioned, at a significant cost, a fully professional chromatic instrument with an F valve, wide bore and large bell and an extended low range. The aim was to create an instrument capable of producing a beautiful sonorous trombone sound that would blend easily as an upper voice in a large trombone ensemble, whilst avoiding any trumpet-like brightness of tone.

His belief is that an instrument possessed of such unique tone qualities deserves its own music and to that end, he has commissioned and premiered a considerable body of new pieces for the instrument including solo pieces, combinations with electronics and trombone quartet, by such composers as Oded Ben-Tal, Roger Dean, Tim Ewers, Rob Keeley and Mike Searby. The young composer, Scott Lygate, has also been commissioned by James MacMillan's *Cumnock Tryst Festival*

in Scotland to write an SATB trombone quartet, due to be premiered in September 2016 by Torbjörn and the Pandora's Box trombone trio: John Kenny, Emily White and Miguel Tantos.

A key part of the project is educational. Because of its smaller size, Torbjörn believes it is particularly suitable for young beginner players as a starter instrument and his ambition is to create the next generation of trombonists via educational music hubs in Tower Hamlets and Kingston who have both agreed to run pilot projects (subject to funding applications). With the backing of a major brass instruments manufacturer, he hopes to have an affordable starter model instrument made according to his specifications. He is also planning with the MTB examination board to introduce graded soprano trombone examinations 1-8 (initially grades 1-3).

CONCERT REVIEW

At *LCMLive* Torbjörn performed with Rufus Duits (aka Grofus), Kate Ryder and Tim Ewers making up a varied ensemble and instrumentation comprising trumpet, soprano trombone, drumkit, theremin, piano, electric keyboard, live sampling and extreme effects processing. This is an ensemble some four years old, of varying constituency, with Torbjörn as the central figure.

The programme was made up of a variety of pieces composed by members of the ensemble including two by Torbjörn himself. The intention, according to the programme, was to create 'a seamless transformation of sound', a seamless flow of music, multi sectional, but offering one experience. What was fresh, unusual and perhaps challenging for some members of the audience was the eclectic mix of styles which embraced avant-garde classical, jazz and contemporary styles such as drum n' bass, contrasting strictly notated music with improvisation, acoustic sound with electronic. This wide-ranging and unusual mix was welded into an emotionally coherent whole within which the listener was most definitely taken on an absorbing musical journey – a journey through opposites, a clash of cultural influences. However, whilst one understands the desire for a seamless continuity, I think a spoken introduction to the pieces or programme notes might have helped orientate some members of the audience less familiar with this kind of music.

One of the most striking features of the concert was the treatment of the trumpet with extreme effects processing **r**esulting in echoing ambient sounds and pitch-shifting where the listener was confronted with unexpectedly high and low trumpet sounds. To achieve all this, Torbjörn uses Ableton Live and Logic Mainstage combined with the programming languages Super Collider and Max/MSP for real-time audio synthesis. **T**he electronics are operated via a midi controller, foot pedals and ipad. He performs, as always, on Smith Watkins trumpets and uses a specially made mute mike.

The concert began with *Face the Music* for trumpet and tape written in 1977 by the Swedish composer Tommy Zwedberg (b.1946). Featuring muted and unmuted trumpet, Torbjörn performed with great energy, creating a fascinating interaction with the tape and taking us on a journey through varied textural landscapes and building to a frenzy at the end, as if in a jungle of snarling electronic beasts. The programme also included Torbjörn's *A Brief Note* and *Chaconne for Duncan* (2012), Tim Ewer's *From the Deep* (2015) and Rufus Duits' *The Invalid*, *Geisha* and *Steady*. All the works featured in the concert were engaging, but the stand out ones for this listener were *A Brief Note, From the Deep* and *Steady* which closed the programme. *A Brief Note* was a very moving tribute to the poet Brian Nisbet who died from MSA in 2015 and featured the soprano trombone combined with piano and the processed voice of the poet. The work, sparse and still, allowed the

unique tone of the soprano trombone to come through, the lyrical phrases forming an affecting musical commentary on the poet's recitation.

From the Deep followed. Dr. Tim Ewers is a strong supporter of the soprano trombone project and this eight-minute work was specially written for Torbjörn. It is a trio featuring the soprano trombone combined with piano and keyboard synthesiser (with warm pad sound). According to the composer, the music is based on the chorale from J.S. Bach's Cantata BWV38 ('*Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*' - 'Out of deep anguish I call to You'), a work which features a choir of trombones (SATB) to support the voices. Not long after it was written (1724), the soprano trombone fell into disuse 'so this music is in one sense picking up from where the instrument left off and at the same time referencing some ghostly echoes of its past'. The idea of the deep and of ghostly echoes is very well conveyed in the composition with gently dissonant and mysterious cluster harmonies, tolling bell-like sounds, descending melodic lines and glissandi in the trombone. Altogether, this is a wonderfully expressive piece which admirably exploits the tonal qualities of the soprano trombone in the upper and lower registers. In performance, the trombone line, lyrical and contemplative in the outer sections and demonstrative with dramatic leaps in the middle, was beautifully shaped by Torbjörn, including the expressive glissandi. It was sensitively accompanied by Kate Ryder on piano and Tim himself on keyboard.

The concert climaxed with the dynamic *Steady* featuring electronic trumpet, drum kit and live sampling. This was a wonderfully shaped performance which started in the depths, ascended to an extreme register and back again. The use of electronics enhanced this via the effects processing, pitch-shifting the trumpet's registers higher and lower than would acoustically be possible and producing some very novel timbres. In this piece, Torbjörn's performance was by turns extravert and virtuosic, lugubrious and soulful, the muted trumpet and modal phrases suggesting a point of contact with Miles Davis of the *Decoy* period. A great and exciting conclusion to the concert!

Overall, there was an extraordinary range of means and stylistic references included in a single programme. Torbjörn and his ensemble took us into a different world for an hour. If you're interested in the interaction of live performance with electronics or enjoy an eclectic mix of styles, I can thoroughly recommend this exciting group. There are links to Torbjörn's website and youtube performances below, but I recommend hearing them live if you get the chance.

ABOUT THE LONDON COLLEGE OF MUSIC

London College of Music, part of the University of West London, is the largest school of music in the UK. Throughout the year, LCM holds a diverse and impressive range of concerts, recitals, masterclasses and productions, known collectively as LCMLive, ranging from classical, jazz, popular music, avant garde, music theatre and drama. Events are mainly run throughout the academic year from September to May and feature performances given by established professional musicians as well as those of students. LCM offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in performance and composition (in classical, jazz and pop styles), as well as in film music composition, musical theatre, acting, theatre production, music technology, music management, live sound and recording. New courses to be offered in 2016-17 include: BMus Composition and Recording, BA Voice in Performance and a range of foundation years across all courses.

TORBJÖRN HULTMARK LINKS

website: www.hultmark.me
soundcloud: https://soundcloud.com/torbjorn-hultmark
youtube: www.youtube.com/user/Thultmark/videos

LCMLive LINKS

If you would like to be kept up-to-date with LCM Live events, you can join our mailing list at

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Peter Rudnick