

Dougie Scarfe, CEO of Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra (BSO) – An interview with Ian Lace

1. Please could you outline a little bit about your background, your career path, your musical interests and management experience?

As a musician I played the French Horn. I was a member of the National Youth Orchestra for five years and Principal Horn for two. I went to the Royal Northern College of Music where I studied French Horn and attained my degrees. In my final year at the RNCM I managed to get a trial for the Orchestra of Opera North. I landed the job and went straight there from college. I was in the orchestra for 11 years and then an injury to my jaw, caused by playing, forced me to stop performing. I can't play at all anymore. I had been chairman of the orchestral committee during my time in the Orchestra; and over a period of years I transferred initially to working with the Chief Executive of Opera North and then worked for six years as the Chorus, Orchestra and Concerts Director of Opera North. I have therefore about 17 years management experience now. I was head-hunted and asked to apply for the role here at the BSO back in 2012, so I'm delighted to have been here for five years.

2. Orchestras all over the world are suffering financially. The Arts Council and Local Government must have been particularly severe and unwelcome? The Musicians' Union (MU) must have felt aggrieved too; how do the BSO's management and the unions fare together in these difficult times?

I think all cultural organisations, all charities and all businesses have to live within the real world, so in a sense 'unwelcome' doesn't really come into it – it is just the way it is. At the BSO we are still the 13th largest recipient of central government funding in the country. We are extremely grateful for the fantastic support we receive from central government and also from our local authorities all of whom are living in extremely challenging times. I think our responsibility is to respond to, and understand the positions of our funders; and our role, as this generation of the BSO, is to deal with the challenges we meet. You only have to look back over the 124 year history of this amazing orchestra to know that whether it's through World Wars or extreme financial challenges, the Orchestra has had to overcome so many different obstacles. Our responsibility in this generation is to ensure that we deal with the ones we meet. Regarding the Musicians' Union and the players, I take responsibility to ensure that we have a clear vision of how we deal with the issues and challenges that we have and to maintain the key priority which is to play well, deliver great concerts and engagement across a very large region. I think the company is buying into that; we have a good company spirit and therefore we also have a good relationship with the Musicians' Union. I believe the MU understands what we've done is in order to make the company more resilient and the Union appreciates the progress that we're making towards that achievement.

3. How do the BSO musicians feel about Brexit in as much as potential employment opportunities/restrictions across Europe, Health & Safety and workers' rights etc.?

Well I think – I can't speak for everyone – but I think the majority of musicians and the majority of people who work in the company see one of the reasons we're in this business is because we see music as a universal language. In the season we've just finished, we programmed the music of Elgar in the context of a wider European Romantic tradition, because I believe that Elgar's music is very much rooted in the European Romantic tradition, so of course with music being universal, we see

our relationships with European neighbours as important. Our incredible Chief Conductor Kirill Karabits is Ukrainian and lives in Paris. We bring artists from 23 countries across the world to Poole every year and that obviously includes European nations and we have members of the Orchestra - and in our wider BSO team - from many different European nations. That brings great strength to us as a company, so clearly everyone here would want that to be protected as much as possible.

4. Other major English orchestras in, for instance, Birmingham and Manchester are fortunate in their locations with big catchment areas and huge surrounding populations. The BSO with just the sea southwards necessitates servicing a relatively large catchment area stretching from Cornwall to Portsmouth and beyond. Would you like to comment on this situation from a short and long term point of view?

The assessment is broadly correct. For us, it is what the BSO is – a world-class orchestra that is servicing a geographical region. We are the only orchestra not based in a metropolitan city, although if you put Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch together it has the same population as Bristol, so it's not as if we're in the middle of nowhere. We have a lot of advantages here in the region of the South West, and it is a fantastic place to live - and it is a very culturally engaged and aware region. I think that what we have is a great advantage; we do something that no-one else does and that's a great privilege. And when you go and see a sell-out audience in Yeovil or Barnstaple or Truro, or go to 50 different schools across Cornwall, actually no-one in the company thinks "Why are we here?" On the contrary, everyone in the company thinks, "Isn't it fantastic that we're able to engage with this large number and variety of people."

5. The BSO is to be congratulated on its incredibly ambitious and varied activities. In total these extra-concert activities must be very demanding on the players? Are you employing a deputy system to allow performers to rest and to cover all eventualities?

One of the great things about the BSO is that we are a full-time contract orchestra. I think so much of our success is down to that sense of belonging that we all share. Clearly there will be periods in the year when people might be off, or might be sick, or maybe they're engaged in other activities - sometimes for the BSO and sometimes engaged in other things. As much as we can, we want to support and encourage people when they do other things as well as working for us. So we do employ deputies sometimes. Our musicians when they go out to coach amateur musicians or students, or working in schools or working in care homes, hugely enjoy that work and find it rewarding. In addition, we also employ six specialist community musicians who you don't see on the concert platform, but who deliver, facilitate and create a lot of our work across the region as well. One of the exciting things over the last couple of years has been seeing our musicians in the Orchestra, who play on the concert hall platform, beginning to work more closely with these specialist community musicians.

6. What are your current thoughts on sponsorship? Is sponsorship becoming more difficult in these uncertain times? What do you consider are the risks and benefits of sponsoring either the Orchestra or specific concerts? Do sponsors tend to dictate concert programmes?

UK cultural organisations live within a mixed economy and we should not forget we are in an advantageous position in terms of still having support from central government and local government. Income from corporate sponsorship, trust and foundation support, and other earned

revenue sources is clearly increasingly important and over the last four years we've built our income from those sources from 6% of turnover to 15% of turnover. So we view that as very important and that's something that we work absolutely tirelessly to achieve. I am delighted that we have developed amazing relationships with a range of corporate, trust and individual supporters and I think what's exciting for us is the enthusiastic positive engagement we have from everyone who supports us, which I think is demonstrated by our incredibly high retention rates. So when people do understand our work, and that's the work beyond the concert hall as well as the high quality work on the stage, they're becoming involved for the long-term not just the short-term.

7. Is it clear that the audiences for the BSO's concerts are principally senior citizens and is this a concern for you? What initiatives are you contemplating to draw in younger people, especially those in middle age and generations unfamiliar with classical music?

We engage thousands of young people every year, about a third of our audiences are under 55. Children can come and see many concerts by the BSO for just £1; we work very closely with schools, programming works in GCSE and A-Level programmes within our series. Our concerts of film music are very much designed to engage with younger people as well. I have no concerns regarding our audiences as most importantly they come to watch our concerts because they love the Orchestra and the music, and we give them a great experience. There is some evidence that suggests our audience demographic does continue to refresh, obviously that's our role to ensure that it does. I think wider concerns are the dropping of arts subjects from schools, the lack of arts subjects in the EBacc etc., and so one of our great focuses at the moment is trying to work with teachers to give them more confidence to provide music in their schools. Clearly we can't teach music in every school across the region but what we can do is offer opportunities and support for teachers to be more confident in their work. I think that is the role that we can play and then also advocate on a national and international level, it's communicating the importance of music and its role in cultural industries and to actually get our politicians to have a greater understanding about the impact of our work.

8. You are about to publicise the BSO's 2017/18 programme. How do you go about selecting works to be performed? Who determines the choices and what factors influence those choices? How are guest conductors selected and appointed?

That's an enormous question of which there is no entirely straightforward answer. We have a very strong artistic team with Kirill Karabits, our Chief Conductor, Heather Duncan, our Head of Concerts and Programming, and myself. As a group, we work through all of the different decisions that need to be made in order to create the season and Heather Duncan does a marvellous job in leading that whole process. Clearly Kirill is central in that; his work as Chief Conductor, his great musical interests and how we over a period of time – it isn't just one year - cover those, is key to that achievement. So for example, there was the Beethoven cycle he did over three seasons, or the Prokofiev symphony cycle we did over two to three seasons with recordings. So those form great building blocks in a season. Added to that we have very strong working relationships with a group of conductors, including former Chief Conductors such as Andrew Litton, former Guest Conductors such as Kees Bakels, David Hill and others with whom we have an ongoing long-term relationship. We work with them on music that they are very passionate about - and that's how it all evolves into a coherent season. Heather and I share a real passion for developing new artistic relationships with the company and in the past four years there have been 18 conductors making their debuts with the

Orchestra; and now a number of them are making their second or third visits. Again, with them, you understand the balance of their repertoire interests and then you try to have the right group of conductors to ensure that the programme as a whole makes sense. We have to plan the budget and have to ensure that we have a programme that will sell and that we continue to engage our audiences. In Poole last season we've had a 12% increase in people buying the full subscription; that's because we're trying to create a sense of buying into the whole season. Outside of Poole we also have to create coherent seasons in our other venues such as Portsmouth, Bristol and Exeter and servicing all of the many other places we perform.

9. The BSO is involving itself in so many community activities lately, for example the family orchestras as part of the recent Cornwall residency and the Poole Sea Music sculpture and concert project. Would you like to comment?

I don't necessarily always call ourselves an 'orchestra' – we are a cultural organisation with a world class symphony orchestra at the heart of it. Going back to the audience development question, how do you get people interested in what you do? - it's about engaging the wider community. If someone engages with the BSO through a family orchestra on the Isles of Scilly, for instance, and that's their only interaction with the BSO, then that's great, they've had a good time and their lives have been impacted by our work. In essence our strategy is 'womb to tomb'; we work with people from the very earliest days to people towards the end of their lives in hospitals and care home settings, so I think that's absolutely what we should do.

10. Another interesting BSO initiative is Kokoro, the contemporary music ensemble of Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. They supported the recent Arts University Bournemouth production of Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. What was the experience like for the ensemble? Could you tell us a little bit about the selection of players and management of the ensemble plus details of future performances? Would they support local amateur productions for example?

Kokoro is our dedicated contemporary music ensemble; they're fantastic, brilliantly led by Mark Forkgen with a group of players which is expandable, large and small depending on the needs of the production or the concert, but with a core group of players at the heart. They're as passionate about that work as we are about any aspect of what we do and I know that they really enjoyed *Into The Woods*. We don't really have the opportunity and the time to support many local amateur productions. However, our last estimate highlighted an additional 200 concerts a year across our South West region that benefit from the impact of BSO musicians taking part.