

Bass instinct

With a debut recording under his belt, Toby Hughes's career as a solo double bass player is taking off. He caught up with **Lucy Thraves**



The double bass rarely gets much time in the limelight. More commonly found towards the back of orchestras and jazz groups, the instrument's repertoire is considerably less recognisable than that of its smaller string family cousins. 'It's a bit of an uphill battle trying to convince people that they want to hear a double bass recital,' admits Toby Hughes. 'The repertoire isn't going to get people in, so I often throw in the odd sonata that they might recognise, something to bite on to.'

But the virtuoso performer is managing alright so far, with performance opportunities in prestigious venues coming thick and fast – thanks in part to support from young artist charity City Music Foundation (CMF), with whom Hughes is enjoying his second year. 'They've offered me lots of amazing opportunities like recitals at St Martin in the Fields, and the Wallace Collection, and I've got a recital coming up in January at St John's Smith Square,' he says. For Hughes, as with all artists at the start of their careers, it's all about exposure and building audiences, and it helps to have the weight of an organisation like City Music Foundation behind them. In addition, the charity has offered him opportunities to attend workshops, as well as a course of sessions with a professional coach, all of which contribute to his wider career development.

Hughes's education has placed him at the vanguard of what he calls the 'solo double bass movement'. He started having lessons with

“As soon as I tried one of High's instruments I knew that it was one I really liked”

Corin Long, former principal of the RPO, and 'the first teacher who told me that I could play anything, who gave me the confidence to try everything. He passed away quite suddenly and I went on to one of his best friends who was also very well respected: Graham Mitchell, guest principal in a lot of London orchestras.' From here he went to Božo Paradžik for two years, one of the leading proponents of solo double bass playing: 'It did wonders for my technique,' he says, 'and set me up with the right tools to conquer the more challenging bass repertoire and to move on to cello sonatas and such; really demanding stuff.'

Since finishing his studies in Manchester, Hughes has been working his way up the ladder to gain more performance opportunities and to give more challenging recitals. And to help with taking this step, he's recently had a double bass made for him by Derek High, who also made instruments for Paradžik. 'As soon as I tried one of [High's] instruments I knew that it was one I really liked,' he explains. 'The thing with double basses is that because orchestral playing and solo playing require quite contrasting techniques which don't really overlap, the set-up and size of the instrument has to be very varying. I knew I could spend years looking for the perfect instrument and it could end up being not great for solo playing or vice versa. So it was great to work with Derek and to know the instrument would be the whole package.'

Furthermore, the bespoke instrument has allowed Hughes to overcome problems he had been experiencing with shoulder pain. 'My previous instrument wasn't set up for playing solo,' he explains, 'so now that I've got this one it's opened up a world of opportunities in terms of repertoire and the length of recitals I can put on. It makes me feel a lot freer when I'm playing; you feel like you're getting around the instrument a lot more.'

With more performances under his belt has come a debut recording. 'I did a recital at Champs Hill [in West Sussex] in the summer; it was one of those dream situations where Mary [Bowerman, trustee of the venue] gave me a shot.' Following the recital, Hughes had lunch with Bowerman and with his CMF artist manager Latana Phoung, who helped him to broker a recording deal. Initially, Hughes was practising the Brahms E Minor Sonata for this first disc, but a series of noise complaints from his next door neighbour put a spanner in the works: 'It became apparent that there was a neighbour who was getting more and more furious with my playing, eventually coming round and exploding at the door,' he recalls. 'After that, whenever I started playing she would accompany me by banging on the walls as hard as she could... it somewhat disturbed my preparation!' An alternative to the Brahms was one of the mainstays of the double bass repertoire, Mišek's Second Sonata. 'So I suggested this to Mary and she came back saying that she didn't like it. And I asked her to trust me, saying, "You'll really like it, it's a brilliant piece". That ended up being the one she said that we must record.'

2020 is looking to be busy for Hughes, with many projects on the horizon: 'The first is a concerto with my friend Leo Geyer [composer and conductor], with the London Wimbledon Symphony Orchestra,' he says. 'The concerto repertoire is a bit limited with the bass, and Leo has had this idea to explore a range of different instruments and transcribe them for the bass – stuff for saxophone, short Ravel pieces, and so on. That's happening earlier in the year. And then I'm returning to Champs Hill later in the year to do a chamber version of the Bottesini Concerto No 2, one of the main bass concertos.' Plus, there's the concert at St John's Smith Square this month, and on top of this, readers will be relieved to hear, Hughes has recently moved flat, so we can only hope that from now on he'll be able to practice in peace. 

Toby Hughes will perform at St John's Smith Square on 16 January.
www.sjs.org.uk

'It makes me feel a lot freer when I'm playing': Toby Hughes

