

Commissioning a New Work: *3 Duets for Solo Horn*

In 2022, professional horn player **Richard Wainwright** asked composer **Andrew Melvin** to write him a piece for a horn recital, which was programmed as part of the Octagon Music Society's concert series in Watford. The piece, called *3 Duets for Solo Horn*, was premiered in November after months of creative collaboration. After the event, both musicians decided to interview each other about their respective experiences. In the first of this pair of interviews, Andrew quizzes Richard about his experience of commissioning and playing this new work. Part 2, Richard interviewing Andrew, can be found in the "Articles" section of the BHS website.

AM: Why did you ask me to write a piece for you and do you remember the circumstances?

RW: Well, I heard on the grapevine that you were a PhD in composition, and we're good friends as well as professional colleagues. The whole point of it was to be able to liaise with you and share ideas, and it certainly was a nice experience!

It's always great to find something new; being a brass player, we're short of repertoire, so I suddenly thought, "Ah – Andrew's a composer and a brilliant musician..."

In our initial meeting about the pieces, instead of handing you musical notes on a page, I read you a written script describing the piece in words – do you remember how you felt about that?

I have to be honest, I was quite shocked. I wasn't expecting a written script, but it was interesting – I kept an open mind, kept positive. I went with it and knew it'd be fine in the end.

When we started rehearsing, the piece was far from finished. From week to week you got more pages of music from me, sometimes with quite substantial changes. Can you describe your experience as a performer through this rehearsal process and how did it feel different from rehearsing a finished piece?

When I asked you to write a piece I thought it would be a nice little melody, something two or three minutes long, so when you first presented me with a copy of the dots it was much more than I thought it would be – much more virtuosic. When I started practising it, I couldn't help but think, "where is this going to fit in the programme?", and "am I going to be able to play this?" I was slightly fearful of it but tried to remain positive.



Richard Wainwright with a rather large score!

Was there a point in the rehearsal process when you thought "I've got enough notes now – please don't give me any more!", and if so, did I respect that wish?

There certainly was a point when we tried to condense it – I thought this was getting a bit too long. On several occasions we'd come back with changes or additions but not taking away anything – so the piece got bigger and bigger and yes, to be completely frank, I thought we're going the wrong way with it. I knew that you had an idea and I wanted to go with that rather than cut the narrative short; I knew it wasn't as simple as just taking bits away.

The first movement, "His Master's Voice" quotes numerous extracts from the horn orchestral repertoire. How did you feel playing these familiar tunes in a new piece?

In some ways it felt like I was being challenged with orchestral excerpts – the favourite bits from the huge works by Strauss,

Wagner and Mahler. I felt like you'd chosen the excerpts you might get in an audition, for example; the bits that we know. It felt a bit like an audition!

In the last section of the movement "The Alien Variations", the so-called alien character orders you to put your horn aside and play a cowbell instead. Did that produce any particular reaction in you as a horn player?

I just saw that as a lot of fun and I thought I'd rather do that at the end of a piece when my embouchure might be a bit tired. I thought that was cleverly put together with the horn player in mind, without having to be fearful of lots of high and fast playing right at the end of the piece which, of course, is something lots of composers do.

The movement "Alien Variations" ends with a kind of march. Knowing your experience as a horn player in the army, I was initially keen to write marching music for you while you played the horn, but you seemed reluctant about this idea. Why was this?

Well, I was in a band in the light division of the army which was known for marching particularly fast. A standard march is 120 beats per minute but in my regiment we used to march at 130-140 BPM. My memories of that are just a nightmare really... You'd walk off to parade square and your lip was bruised and sometimes even bleeding. We talk a lot about posture and being able to relax and breathe properly – you can't do any of those things when you're marching, so the idea of marching at the end just put the fear of God into me!

Do you think the piece shows any understanding of horn technique? Is there any way it pushes the technique to interesting, unusual or even problematic areas?

It's all idiomatic, it's all well written and very playable, from a high student level in a conservatoire to professional level. It requires a good player to do it, and a lot of effort – you'd need to be in good shape and match-fit to be able to play it.

It's stamina that was the issue really for me – having a little bit of time after playing a very loud high note or a very long passage just to relieve your chops a little bit and allow yourself that recuperation time.

The unusual techniques were hand-stopping and playing "random" notes. When you're told to play things that aren't on the paper, it's a difficult one for most of us; we're so highly trained to play exactly what's written! When we're told to play what we like, and with hand-stopping as well, if you just aim for anything, it doesn't work. I think eventually we decided on "randomly selected specific notes."

The piece mixes together different horn techniques in unorthodox ways. Can you

describe the challenges arising from this?

The alternation between open/hand-stopped/open/hand-stopped will always be trying for horn players because we have to transpose fingering and hand-stop as well, and certain parts of the horn register can be difficult. I know that for me, the low register for hand-stopping has always been a challenge.

Despite its title *3 Duets*, most of the piece is for solo horn without accompaniment. What are the challenges in playing solo for an extended period?

Of course, solos are more challenging because it's just you – you've got to make it even more special. But you do the work and you pace yourself. It's like running a marathon, I suppose, certainly with this 15-minute work that you wrote. I remember the bits you allowed me to take a bit more time out, and the bits where you said, "no time off here – go straight through that bit", so I had to work hard at that.

I think putting it into the programme was hard as well – initially we were going to place it at the end of the first half because we thought we've got to have a break, and it was only a couple of days before the actual recital. I said "Andrew I'm getting cold feet about this – can we do it at the end?"

And you said "absolutely" and I said "I can really go for it at the end physically and if I've got nothing left at the end it doesn't matter, I've got nothing else to play afterwards". It worked really well at the end, theatrically as well. I mean we marched offstage – the audience certainly loved it. I think in many ways it was the highlight of the whole programme.

If you were to sum up the experience of playing *3 Duets* in three words, what would they be?

Fun, challenging, rewarding. **AM**

French Horn (F)

3 Duets for Horn

Andrew Melvin

1. His Master's Voice

Senza Misura - freely poco rit. accel. rit.

f confident *mp*

Tempo comodo

mp *f* *mp*

Senza Misura - freely rapid trem. norm. rit. Allegro Steady Quiet

f confident *f* *mp*

Meno mosso accel.