

What a turn-up!

By Philip Purser

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What a turn-up indeed, the night we won the World Symphony Championship back in '79. André took us out on the town afterwards, and I don't mind admitting some of the boys were carried away by it all, what with the police cars having to clear a way through the crowds and the fans cheering and chanting and mobbing the coach.

We finished up in some dive back of the Tottenham Court Road with the woodwinds mixing it with a bunch of kraut supporters, a pair of symphos trying to tear the clothes off the violas and yours truly nursing a split lip, which is no joke if you're booked for the Mozart No. 4 with the Bournemouth the following Tuesday, never mind a Crosse and Blackwell's soup commercial for the telly.

As the music writers kept on reminding one and all, we were on home ground, supposing you can call the Great Hall at Alexandra Palace anyone's home. As they also pointed out, though, we hadn't been in too good form lately in the LSO. In fact we'd been dead lucky to qualify in the national finals. If Jimmy Loughran and the Hallé hadn't had some dodgy chicken and chips at a motorway caff on the way down, so that half the bloody strings were heaving up in the middle of the Brahms D Major, they'd have walked it.

No wonder Joe Coral was offering seven to two against us when the betting opened, compared with even money on von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonic. I only wished I'd been smart enough to put a couple of hundred on ourselves, but I was salting away every spare quid at the time with a view to buying a launderette along the Balls Pond Road.

You have some good times in this orchestral game, but you're only as good as your last performance and for some reason horn players are right in the firing line, living off their nerves. I've seen more horn players carried away laughing and crying than a Yugoslav counterfeiter has handled hot dinars. You've got to think of your future.

Anyway, there we were, England's Hope against some of the ugliest outfits in music – as well as von K. and his Prussians, Solti and the Chicago, the Leningrad under Gennadi Rozhdestvensky and, from Down Under, the Sydney Symphony with Willem van Otterloo out front. 'Come the four corners of the World,' quipped André, 'and we'll sock 'em;' and to be fair to ourselves we were shaping up nicely to the set piece for the first round of the tourney which, as a little compliment to the host city, was Haydn's Symphony No. 104, the London.

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Next would be the unseen test piece, on which the word was that it was going to be something by Berio or Penderecki or one of those geezers; finally the free choice. André had rummaged through his collection of Neglected English Masters, lingered long over Vaughan Williams, but eventually came up with Tippett's Second. 'It's dramatic, it's tricky and it's short,' he explained 'which might just go down well if the others unwind an hour and a half of Mahler. Also' – he winked – 'the first man ever to conduct it was Sir Adrian, and he's one of the judges.'

Kick-off was on the Friday afternoon, which meant a lot of our fans were still at work, or whatever villainy they get up to by day, though it also reduced the chances of aggravation from the Women's Libbers who, as another little encouragement to our hopes of success, were threatening to demonstrate every time we took the platform. The LSO, in case you don't know, had always been an all-male ensemble, which was how the boys liked it.

A couple of drinks after the show with some well-heeled feminine music-lover who tootles up in a Lancia, okay; if you're not too particular, a little bit of hanky-panky with the groupies, or sympho-nymphos as we call them – did I ever tell you about the time old Fred opened his double bass case and out pops this little chick as bare as the day she was born? But having women around all the time, sniffing at the language when the rehearsal isn't going so well, or getting in the way when the coach pulls off the road for us to have a slash . . . no thanks!

So far we'd been able to avoid any serious confrontation with the movement. They would hang around outside the Festival Hall sometimes, waving placards and shrieking slogans in those shrill little voices of theirs. 'Lib and let Lib,' André would say to us soothingly. The temptation now was the bloody great television audience the Championship would get all over the world, same as for the advertisers who were paying out a small fortune to hang streamers for Newcastle Brown and Gitanes where the cameras couldn't help picking them up.

Meanwhile our competitors were in receipt of unstinted support from such as had accompanied them. There was a regiment of well-drilled krauts, a troupe of cheer-leaders rooting away for the Chicago, even a couple of Jumboloads of Aussies in Bondi Beach shirts up in the gallery, bombing the poor bastards below with empty lager cans and screwed-up crisp packets. The Russkies were maybe less cheered by their supporters, who consisted of about 200 rather grim-faced comrades in black suits, square black boots and lumps of sticking plaster all over their bristly heads. 'KGB,' old Leo of the second fiddles told us, who'd come from Russia or somewhere like that himself. 'They are here to make sure no vun defects.'

Needless to say, we'd drawn first to play, which meant warming up the hall and

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its inhabitants from cold. As André said, only the Greenland icecap would have been tougher. However, the organisers had done their best to make the venue look relatively cosy, with potted palms everywhere and about a million daffs.

The Yanks had a team of drum-majorettes prancing up and down the centre aisle and we had the Dagenham Girl Pipers. Lord Harewood, Ted Heath and the Chairman of the Greater London Council all made speeches. The judges were wheeled on: Sir Adrian Boult, bless him, some professor from Russia, the music critic of *The Sun*, a French expert and this little Jap we never did know much about because he didn't seem to speak any English and just smiled and hissed and bowed.

Finally trumpeters from Kneller Hall tootled a fanfare run-up for the occasion by Ben Britten, one of the last things he wrote before he passed on, the green light winked, André raised his baton, and we were away.

Though I say it as shouldn't, we did well by Josef; one of those times you know you've got it all together. Not a peep from the Women's Libbers, a nice round of applause – what would the judges give us? Up in their box they fumbled for the big cards they had to hold up in each hand: a 5.5 from the Russki, 5.6 from Sir Adrian, 5.8 each from expert and critic, and a laugh from the audience for the Jap, who'd got his numbers upside down.

Sir Adrian put him right, to renewed hissing and flashing of his choppers, and it turned out to be a 5.7. Some of the boys thought that Sir Adrian himself might have been a mite more generous to his own lot, but we were off to a very respectable 28.4.

Leningrad went next, 28.2. After the teabreak, with the Great Hall beginning to fill up at last, it was the Aussies' turn ("Which one of you is Sydney?" yelled the wags). They got 27.9. Chicago notched up an impressive 28.5. Last on were the Berlin Philharmonic with a big surprise for the crowd: they were without von Karajan, who was busy recording the whole of Bruckner or buying Austria or something, and wouldn't be along until the next day. Till then they were airily making do with Claudio Abado as substitute; they fetched up with a 28.4, the same as us. Well, we were in with a chance. On the late night telly, when I got home, Humphrey Burton and Joan Bakewell and the former world champ Leonard Bernstein were saying it was anyone's contest.

The unseens were all to be played Saturday morning – which was a clue that the piece couldn't be much more than half an hour. Who'd want more, if it was what we all expected? For this round everyone moved up a couple of places in the batting order, so the Chicago had to lead off. The rest of us were herded into a side exhibition hall that was supposed to be out of earshot. It didn't stop the Aussies climbing on each other's shoulders until a skinny little piccolo player called Trevor could get his lughole up against a ventilator grille.

. . . security blokes trying to reach the silly bints and old Ted Heath with a face like fury up in the President's Box . . .

'Sounds like a trombo,' he called down. 'Now the timpa's having a go.'

'Ist Stockhausen,' declared one of the krauts smugly. 'Vot you bet it ist Stockhausen?' His mates were pawing the ground to go next, and Claudio looking at his watch and chewing his lip because he was booked to play Cincinnati that night and had a plane to catch.

To tell the truth we were beginning to get a bit impatient ourselves, and not only from the nervous tension. With three full symphony orchestras still cooped up, not to mention assorted managers, agents, orchestra librarians, physiotherapists, instrument repair crews and a squad of the Leningrad heavy mob, the Black Hole of Muswell Hill – as André called it – was beginning to niff like rush hour on the Bakerloo line.

At last we got the buzz. As we trooped on to the platform kids from the Royal College were waiting with the sealed envelopes. Each band got fresh parts, lest the previous lot had marked theirs or kept them as souvenirs – though who'd want to keep the load of cobblers we were busy discovering I can't imagine.

You had fifteen minutes for a read through and the conductor's option to rehearse any bits even more obscure than the rest. On a quick shufti there didn't seem a lot for the horns to do. What there was which threw some of the bands into a tizzy, we learned later, was a biggish piano part.

It was no problem for André, who used regularly to play the Mozart Piano Concerto with us, and in some of the boys' estimation was a better conductor from the keyboard than when doing the full windmill bit up front. He sat himself down at the joanna, took us through maybe half a dozen passages, a couple of them twice, and said, 'Okay, fellas. Shall we give it a whirl?'

Again I have to say we were right on top of the so-called music. André hadn't worked in Hollywood all those years without learning to find his way round a score in a hurry and, after all, we were professionals to a man – which was exactly why trouble with a capital T now hit us. The lousy Women's Libbers! There were about fifteen of them in a block of seats over the right hand side. They'd unfurled a bloody great banner saying – LSO - LAST SEXIST OUTPOST – and were screeching slogans in their horrible shrill voices and one of them blowing a raspberry blower.

Frankly, it didn't sound a lot worse than the stuff we had to play, but in the hall it was panic stations everywhere. There were people hissing *sssh*, television cameras being trundled round to get a view, security blokes trying to reach the silly bints and old Ted Heath with a face like fury up in the President's Box. Meanwhile André continued plonking at the piano and giving us the nod as cool as a cucumber.

. . . Herbert von Karajan . . . somewhere over Luton, in his private jet . . . with a London A – Z . . .

They got the demonstrators out in the end, we played the last page and a half in peace and everyone cheered and clapped like mad. I reckoned we were due a bonus mark for steadfastness. As it was we got a 5.7 all along the line, including one from the little Jap. He was giving this mark all the time, we heard, rather than risk losing face by getting something else wrong way up. It looked to us like every other judge was demonstrating that he wasn't going to be influenced either way by the interruption, and left us in third place at the end of the round, one point behind Solti and the Chicago.

The krauts were in the lead by a clear four points over them and five over us, and piled into their coaches to go off and stuff themselves with sausages, looking as pleased as if they'd just overrun the Low Countries. They weren't to know the Dunkirk spirit wasn't quite dead in little England, and there was a bit of bother in store for them as well.

The first inkling we had of it was when my gaffer Barry and me stepped out into the park for a cough and a spit before the afternoon start and there was Claudio about to get into his taxi for the airport, and a couple of blokes in dark suits and high white collars barking at him in Deutsch, and Claudio shaking his head and pointing at his watch, whereupon he got into the cab and it effed off.

Later, after the Leningrad had opened the free choice section with Shostakovich, the same two *herrenvolk* were jammed into the phone booth outside the Palm Court shouting the odds to someone at the other end.

Later still, when the players came back full of beer and knackerwurst, they were waiting for them like a couple of undertaker's men. Old Herman, the veteran bassoonist, was in the middle of a story, slapping his thigh and going *yok, yok, yok*. Talk about collapse of stout party! 'Gott in Himmel!' he cried when the news was broken to them.

In point of fact it was Herbert von Karajan who was in Himmel, to be precise that portion of it somewhere over Luton, in his private jet. He'd been held up by engine trouble and to save time had made a beeline for Ally Pally with a London A – Z propped open on top of his navigation charts, trying to work out the handiest place to land. Elstree, *nicht war* ?

But Elstree had radioed back not on your nelly, they were only a little grass field. They'd diverted him to Luton, where at the time of the last message he was stacked up behind three jets full of returning holidaymakers. By this time the Russians had finished and the Sydney boys were dug into Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*. Only the Chicago to follow, then it was Berlin's turn, so someone had to get a move on.

What happened next we gleaned from the television crews. The BBC and London Weekend had both jumped at the story and sent reporters to the airport. Karajan had landed all right, but then found himself in the queue to get through Customs and Immigration behind about eight hundred Brits in funny hats clutching basketwork lampshades and bottles of Spanish brandy. He was going spare, and so was the Cultural Attaché from the West German Embassy who had a bloody great Mercedes ticking over outside the terminal; even if they bust through straight away it was still three-quarters of an hour down the motorway.

André called us together. ‘It’s been put to me,’ he said, ‘that we could offer to go on in the Berlin’s stead.’

‘And let them have our place, right at the end? I should cocoa,’ said my gaffer Barry, who was chairman of the players that year.

‘It’s the favourite place out of the whole lot,’ chipped in Sid from the trumpets. ‘We’d be raving mad to give it up.’

Old Solti, about to go on, was pricking up his Mr Spock ears with interest. ‘What does Sir George think?’ asked our leader, John.

Solti cocked his bonce on one side and smiled his bright-eyed smile. ‘You are under no obligation, no obligation at all. On the other hand’ – sometimes he can look as cunning as a fight manager down Hackney Baths – ‘it would give you a certain moral advantage.’

‘With the judges, you mean?’

Solti nodded.

‘It would go down well with Sir Adrian,’ said André. ‘Your British sense of fair play and all that.’ He pondered. It was no secret that he felt a particular rivalry with von Karajan, who had been batting away in Berlin when André was a refugee boy having to get the hell out of the same town. On the other hand there was a fraternity among conductors, they stood by each other when there was trouble. ‘What you say we do the sporting thing?’ he said finally.

We waited till Solti and the Chicago had done their *New World* which they did very nicely, but got marked rather low, we thought. Even outside you could smell the expectancy seething away in the Great Hall. It was the biggest cliff-hanger ever.

‘Okay,’ said André. He marched off flanked by John on one side and Barry on the other. Only these three were allowed on to the platform by the security blokes, officious bastards – they would have better employed keeping an eye on everyone’s gear, if that’s not jumping ahead. The rest of us crowded round the door, trying to see. We heard old Ted Heath’s deep gruff voice, without being able to pick out the words, then a great roar of applause. I could just see Barry giving us a thumbs up.

So at this very moment, like Pedro the Fishermen barging into the church just as his girl is going to marry the rich gink in *The Lisbon Story* (from which, I don’t mind saying, I used to earn many a useful quid in younger days) – at this very moment who should march in through the great rear doors of the place but Maestro von Karajan.

‘I’ll murder that cow if my reeds are gone,’ screamed Tommy from the clarinets . . .

We couldn’t see him, jammed outside the player’s entrance, but it was on the telly 15 times the rest of that weekend. He was in full evening dress, white tie as crisp as a prawn cracker, not a silver hair out of place. No messing, straight on to the podium, little bow to the judges, little bow to the nobs, little bow to the crowd and big bow to the orchestra, who were going bananas with glee, and eyes down for Beethoven’s Fifth.

It was a bit of a cheek, our V for Victory tune in the war, but you have to hand it to the Berlin, those boys can really handle Beethoven. With no conductor at all they would have outclassed most. With von Karajan and all the relief and excitement, they soared. Despite ourselves we stayed jammed together there in the corridor, listening. It was only when the magic of the moment started to wear off, around the slow movement, that you noticed a few ragged edges. I saw Barry frown in surprise when one of the horns hung on a fraction of a beat too long. It wasn’t quite the precision you expected from von K, and it didn’t escape the judges.

There were two sets of marks for this section – first for the technical accomplishment, then artistry and feeling. On the technical the Russian was particularly hard, giving only a 5.5. On the artistry and feeling there were a couple of possibles, 6.0, and if the little Jap hadn’t stuck to his 5.7 they would have been home and dry. As it was, the punters among our lot were busy working out that we needed a straight 5.9 down the line on both scores to equalise, an extra decimal point to win and that was just about at the limit of possibility.

We were on in ten minutes, it struck home all of a sudden. We hurried back and ran slap into these security blokes looking as if they just let a load of diamonds fall off a lorry, plus a worried policeman and old Jack, our baggage hand, who was trying to say something and couldn’t – his mouth was just opening and shutting.

Outside the band room another policemen was holding one of the Women’s Libbers. She was just a young girl, I noticed, trying to act defiant but mostly looking scared.

‘The others got away,’ said the copper apologetically. ‘Lucky they didn’t have time to do more than they did.’

Did *what*? Inside the place could have been hit by a bomb. There were music stands overturned, the Tippet scores scattered everywhere, one of their stupid slogans daubed in smeary red letters on the skin of the bass drum, ADMIT WOMEN TO LSO. Players were fighting to reach their instruments.

‘I’ll murder that cow if my reeds are gone,’ screamed Tommy from the clarinets. In a moment the wails started to turn to sighs of relief – except from old Bert the timpanist, still goggling at his bass drum, and little me, struck dumb, unable to believe what my eyes saw.

. . . with the red streaks on my shirt and face and cuffs I could have been Jack the Ripper after a busy night . . .

A trail of red splashes showed which way the operator with the paint had gone when she had to scarper. It led to where we'd parked the brass instruments. The empty paint pot lay on its side. My horn was propped against a radiator, bell up. It was full of paint.

'It was new from Paxman's,' was all I could say. 'Only last year.'

The others fell silent one by one. Just a few incredulous curses, that was all. Then the policemen, the first one who'd come hurrying along, said, "If it makes any difference it's only emulsion, actually".

'What?' The words didn't mean anything.

'Emulsion paint. You could try water.'

I was into the Gents and had both taps running into the nearest washbasin within five seconds flat. The stuff had got everywhere, including the valves. Someone found me a mangy old nail brush. But the flunkey from the hall was already banging on the door and yelling, 'Ready when you are, gentlemen.'

Somehow we got the pieces together again, Barry and the others helping as best they could. 'Gawd, look at you,' said Barry. I took a peep in the mirror over the wash-basin. My evening suit didn't show the mess too badly, but with the red streaks on my shirt and face and cuffs I could have been Jack the Ripper after a busy night. The flunkey was saying, 'Gentlemen, *please*, we are waiting.'

Inside the Great Hall the atmosphere was a cross between the Cup Final and the Last Night of the Proms. Every seat was taken, and every square inch of standing room was being stood on. All you could see was this vast blur of faces and waving banners and flags. The Germans were singing *Deutschland über Alles* and our fans countering with *Land of Hope and Glory*. Then everything was drowned out in a roar of applause for John the leader, followed by your veritable Alamein barrage for André.

Under its cover I tried an experimental tootle. It was a bit foggy but not totally impossible, which was just as well, because the Tippett No. 2 starts with the horns blazing away like 25-pounders over open sights.

So far, so good – and it was good, very good indeed. Worried to hell as I was about my instrument, I knew I was hearing the piece as I'd never heard it before. But towards the end of the first movement I could tell that the fogginess on my horn was getting slowly worse – One valve was sticking.

Sir Adrian reached for a . . . a . . .

Half-way into the second movement it seized up altogether. There was nothing for it but to strip the thing down again. I caught a glimpse of André's astonished gaze as I started laying out the bits on the floor in front of me and got busy with my hanky.

A few more bits of paint came off but mainly it was some smeary stuff the paint had left behind. The trouble was the coda for four horns at the end of the movement, in which yours truly was truly indispensable, and it was drawing ever closer, while spread out all around were enough valves and tubing to make a working model of Stephenson's sodding Rocket.

I knew André was trying to catch my eye. I heard fiddles sawing away. The mouthpiece last of all and – Strewth! It slipped from my fingers and shot under Barry's chair. I went down on my knees and groped around. There it was! I heaved myself blindly back on to my seat as I pushed the mouthpiece home and drew breath. André cued us. Something told me it was going to be all right. In fact it was out of this world, the four horns singing like bloody brass angels.

Cream cakes all the way from then. At the end the applause was unstoppable.

People were yelling and jumping and cheering. Someone said afterwards that even old von Karajan was clapping judiciously. André came round grasping hands. 'You cut that a bit fine, didn't you?' he said to me.

'Oh, I dunno,' I said. 'I was there, wasn't I?'

Now it was up to the judges. On technical proficiency, first, we had a possible from *The Sun*, a French goodie, 5.9 from Sir Adrian, 5.8 from the Russki and 5.7, as usual from the representative of Nippon. Without my bubbly horn in the first movement we might have got more, I couldn't help thinking. We waited a million years for them to shuffle their cards back into the boxes and pick again! Artistry and Feeling, and now it had to be two better than par to win. If the little Nip stuck to his rotten seven, we'd had it.

The Russian gave us a maximum, so did France. Sir Adrian reached for a . . . a 5.8, fair-minded old git. *The Sun* gave us 5.9, could have done better. We had to have a – what was it? Another 5.8 to equalise, 5.9 to win, but there was only the little Jap to come. He was dredging around in his box. Sir Adrian leaned over and they put their heads together. The little Jap smiled a smile that filled his face with teeth and brandished a five . . . point . . . NINE!

Well, you could have heard the noise in Stevenage. What a turn-up. Sir Adrian was wheeled round to congratulate us after. 'Don't thank me,' he said cheerily. 'Thank our little friend from the Orient. I *think* it was a nine he wanted.'