



THE RPS CONVERSATION – ORCHESTRAS

with

Janet Fulton Principal Percussionist, Manchester Camerata

Su-a Lee Co-Principal Cello, Scottish Chamber Orchestra

Greg Topping Bassoonist, Ulster Orchestra

Daniel Trodden Principal Tuba, BBC National Orchestra of Wales

and **James Murphy** Chief Executive, Royal Philharmonic Society

transcribed by Lois Heslop

James: Welcome to the RPS Conversation. I'm James Murphy, Chief Executive of the Royal Philharmonic Society. This is the fourth of our conversations that we're presenting especially for classical music lovers, aiming to cut through some of the noise and the swirl and the uncertainty of the pandemic, and give you a candid and human impression of how music makers are faring through all this.

Today we're talking about orchestras. The UK has a proud orchestral heritage with many professional ensembles across the country playing a valued, vibrant part in their communities, and of course being communities in themselves. What happens then when those players, so used to playing together and seeing their audience regularly, suddenly find themselves separated from their musical soulmates in isolation? Can an orchestra still be an orchestra in such circumstances? How do they adapt and what do they find themselves doing that they may not have imagined before?

To ponder such things and more, I'm joined today by players from orchestras based in Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales: a warm welcome to Co-Principal Cello of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra Su-a Lee, Bassoonist with the Ulster Orchestra Greg Topping, Principal Percussionist of Manchester Camerata Janet Fulton, and Principal Tuba of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Daniel Trodden.

I wanted to ask you first about the challenge of being apart from your fellow players in isolation. Have you been missing them? (I hope the answer's yes.) How do you cope with that? And have you felt incomplete?

Su-a: We just had a meeting with the orchestra for the first time, but I'd say right at the very beginning of lockdown, on the day we locked down and were told that we weren't going to work that day, our Second Trumpet Shaun set up a WhatsApp group for the whole orchestra, for the players. So we had this players group which

was very active at the beginning – it still is – and it really helped everyone who had questions and concerns and feelings. When things were changing, you'd hear it before you'd read the news, as someone had read it already. I'd say that WhatsApp group was a real lifeline to feeling still part of something – otherwise it felt like a complete No Man's Land, so I was very grateful for that.

Greg: It's a similar story for us. We set up weekly little Zoom meetings, so everyone can just have a day where they reconnect for about an hour or 45 minutes. You forget how much of a social thing an orchestra is, especially when you're all in the room rehearsing, all next to each other, all conversing. When that's suddenly gone, you realise 'oh, I don't see 70 or so people' suddenly, from nowhere. It's been really good, everyone has been really proactive in contacting each other, letting each other know what's going on, especially at the beginning when it was all up in the air and we didn't know if we were coming back or if it was going to be a long-term thing. In the beginning it was very important that we kept in touch, just quickly updating, again keeping that social side of the orchestra going whilst we couldn't keep the musical side going unfortunately.

Janet: Camerata have been great because management – the people who've not been on furlough – have had an open door policy, ring at any time about anything, and there's been a lot of support for that. They've organised get-togethers, weekly, social ones as well as letting us know what's going on behind the scenes, and there has still been some work going on, both for planning and some things going ahead like we did a virtual 'Hacienda Classical' event and we did a couple of recordings in our own homes. Personally I couldn't join the social groups at first, it was too distressing for me. Maybe we'll come to this later but I've actually been working full time as a service advisor for NHS 111 which started the very first week of lockdown and we were working six days a week. For me it was a really frightening responsibility and I was so far away from my musical self that I found it too difficult to socialise at that point. I'm better now, I've got spare energy, and I'm not as frightened now as well. For me personally it was really difficult at first to talk to fellow musicians because I was in such a different headspace because of what I was then doing.

James: We'd love to hear more about that shortly. Dan, how about for you?

Dan: Wow, thanks Janet, that's amazing to hear, and I can see how somebody might feel that way. Very similar to everyone else at this end, WhatsApp groups, lots of sub-WhatsApp groups, there's a brass one, a lower brass one which has a slightly different flavour to them all! Being a managed orchestra, I have to say our management have been fantastic in getting us all together. It was more regular at the beginning of lockdown, fortnightly, to give us updates on how the BBC was dealing with things, how they were dealing with things, and they were really interesting meetings. Of course – I probably shouldn't say this – the WhatsApp groups were very busy while all those staff meetings were happening on Zoom!

Everything's calmed down, both social WhatsApps and the official-ish Zoom calls which have become more spaced out, but it's still really nice to see everyone. It's just wondering whether we'll be able to see everyone and their entire bodies (rather than from the chest up) any time soon! It's been tough: it's the shrinking of our world, and forgetting how much going to work and those little interactions – they call them 'water

cooler moments', don't they – how much a load of them over a day can contribute to feeling connected. While Zoom and other associated conference call technology is amazing, it's a bit of a palaver setting it all up, it's not the same as seeing someone in the queue getting a coffee or whatever. 'Oh hi, how are you doing? How are your folks?' – it's stuff like that. It's been tough but everyone has done their best.

Su-a: I have actually found that we've connected more with some of the management team. For instance, our management team have set up things like the pub quizzes we've been having maybe once a month, a big pub quiz which involves the management, the orchestra and the chorus – we have a chorus, the SCO Chorus. Actually that thing where there are 100 people on the screen, we go into breakout rooms with the people in our teams, and in many ways that's been really fun to connect with people you don't normally see – as you say, at the water cooler – so there's certainly plusses to the fact we're having to meet in the comfort in our own homes but on this weird platform of Zoom.

For me, I've been in the SCO for 26 years, so the whole thing of the family feeling and missing your mates, it's like proper family, we see each other every week, so I'd say this is the longest in its history or even personally I've never been in the same place for more than maybe six weeks in my life, so everything's changed and it's not just at work, fundamentally everything is very, very different. It's having to adjust to seeing people as you say, head and shoulders, having to deal with the technology. I don't know about you lot but I found the technology so hard at first, really all the bits you've got to click – I felt like such a luddite, just knowing the simplest things I couldn't do, I had to get help to do that. In the first week I was asked to do this performance online and oh my god, the technology that I realised I did not know, literally just to set up, before you'd even said or played a note, I found it really challenging, properly challenging, and I found that everything took at least ten times longer than it would to have a normal conversation or to play. It would take a day to do something that would normally take you maybe ten minutes. Did anyone else have to do things online?

Greg: Absolutely, yes, the learning curve is not something I expected. Our learning and community team, we usually do lots of stuff out of town, in old people's homes and SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) schools, and bits and bobs like that, and now we're confined to our rooms trying to record pieces to camera with your instrument. I found that extremely tough at the beginning, having had no experience recording myself talk or as a whole piece to camera. I found myself trying to remember a line and then speak and then try not to lose track because I noticed I would suddenly freeze and go 'oh no, I can't remember the English language' then you'd have to edit and start all over again.

Su-a: You can even forget your own name...

Greg: Yes exactly. So I had to do little chunks of recordings and stick them together. But then that meant I had to become really good at video editing which I had never ever done before. The orchestra has been really good at adapting but that includes us as well and I feel I've got to step the game up, digitally, online a little bit, just to keep engaged with our paying public and the community around us. It's been tough but I think it's paying off really well, we've had really lovely responses from some of

the schools and the old people's homes and other places around Belfast. It's been very positive even if it was a bit painful at the beginning.

Dan: Same, we've been doing a lot online. We're salaried and I'm very grateful to say that we've been kept on full pay throughout lockdown, but we've been working hard for it, creating online content. A mixture of stuff, some of it serious-ish, orchestral montages of us playing, some of it workshops in special schools and mainstream schools as well, and then we've been going into care homes, same as Greg was saying, as an orchestra. Same as Su-a said, I'm lucky I live with someone who's technologically gifted and without her being there I think I would have had a very different lockdown and don't think I would have been able to contribute as much to the orchestra's working schedule. I like to think I would have been able to get my Zoom game together but it would have taken a while because I'm not tech-minded.

I think we've all found ourselves, as well as the musicians we were before, being studio techs, we've been engineers, we've been producers, we've been presenters, we've been kids' TV presenters. A lot of that stuff didn't come particularly naturally and still doesn't come particularly naturally to me. I have a hard enough job playing the tuba, I'll be honest with you! I think everyone has done what they feel comfortable doing and people have pushed themselves to contribute in whatever way they can, as has been said, to remain connected to paying audiences because it's been so weird not to be able to do that in ways we would normally do. I think the industry as a whole has responded really well.

Janet: Camerata is a freelance orchestra so a lot of us have received grants from the government for self-employed people for which we've been really grateful, the Arts Council has given grants for the orchestra which of course we're really grateful for too. During lockdown there've been new grants and we got one for 'Music in Mind' which is the work we do with people living with dementia, so we're working on resources that could be used all over the world, and that's paying for that. I've not been personally involved, I can't be involved in any playing – there has been some playing together but socially distant, but I can't do that because my husband's in his 80s so we're actually already living socially distant at home. We're living in different bedrooms and using two bathrooms and not being in the same room apart from at the far ends from each other, which means that I can't, say, go to Manchester at the moment from where I live in North Yorkshire, it's just too dangerous and the risk of meeting other people and working in an office environment, I do need to keep separate.

Other people have been working hard playing and so on. The thing is, with music, people say it's a gift, and sometimes musicians don't like you saying that because well I worked jolly hard to be able to keep this gift going! But it is a gift, and it's a gift to be given and shared. That communication between each other and with the audience, through the community work we're all still able to do, we've got that feeling of enabling people through music and that's part of our *raison d'être*. I'm very thankful that through all this interminable 'how do you do this?', at least it's for a really good reason in the end.

Su-a: I've actually found with the whole digital element, the fact that we're meeting people digitally, there are some real plusses to while there's no real way that we can

meet with our audience in person. In that effort to still connect, one of the things I had planned, because I'm part of the Benedetti Foundation, Nicola Benedetti did a thing where instead of going to Northern Ireland to run a course, almost overnight with the team she made it online virtual sessions for a three-week period, and the output and content that those three weeks threw up was incredible. We were working pretty much all the time trying to create content. For example, I was coaching the advanced orchestra, and normally when I take a sectional it would be maximum of ten players in the section. In the first Zoom sectional I took, there were over 140.

Of course the thing is because you're no longer having to be physically in one room, so much more is possible – there were people from all over the world as well who could be part of that. In some ways, even though the physical contact is compromised, I did feel the incredible opportunity to connect with more people on the digital platform and I felt very grateful for that. I just wonder whether certain things about the lockdown, being in your home and having to reach out through a screen, although playing with people isn't possible because of the delay, just that thing of still being in proper contact, I think some of that is probably going to carry on beyond lockdown, and I wonder whether there's going to be a lot more digital content needed in tandem with the live stuff.

Dan: I think we'll be moving towards, certainly for the next few months, a hybrid sort of thing. It makes you realise how much it takes to keep a social media channel going: it takes a lot, doesn't it? I was thinking about the people who've had to put together our montages. We did something a few weeks back for Bastille Day because we've got a partnership going with a Breton orchestra. *March to the Scaffold* from Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. It was really weird doing that to a 'click track' and we forget how much of the music we play is so organic... we don't forget, but it sounds like it's in tempo but it's not actually that metronomic, so that was really weird. It's a big orchestra, *Symphonie fantastique*, and our sound engineers here in Cardiff have been working I'm guessing 24/7 to put these montages together, because some people have pretty snazzy gear at home and other people are recording it onto a smartphone, so to mix and master that and put it all together is one hell of a job, so huge credit to them.

I was going to ask people, just apropos of what Su-a said there about connecting to people, I wonder whether we have in a way connected to more people? We have a fantastic new Marketing Manager, a lady called Sassy Hicks and, on these fortnightly Zoom calls that we all attend, she gives us updates on stats and it seems like our social media engagement is going through the roof which is a great thing. It's not going to replace that buzz people get from giving a live concert and people hopefully get from coming to a live concert, but I do wonder whether this hybrid approach is going to be a thing that we concentrate on for the first few months, and possibly forever now. I just wanted to know everybody else's thoughts on that: whether that's welcome and you're accepting of it?

Greg: We've got a very similar thing happening here. We've just done a big montage of *The Marriage of Figaro*, the overture to that, which is due out any time, so yes you do realise the amount of effort the engineers have editing 70 or so musicians together, recording in different rooms, spaces, audio equipment, it couldn't be more variable. Looking forward, our first concert – well, it's like a recording slash rehearsal

– is next week, and we'll be doing it as a woodwind sectional chamber piece, the next day it will be a string piece, I think there's a Strauss Serenade one day, and we'll be doing Stravinsky's Octet another day while the strings are doing their own thing. It's more to get us back together performing, we've had to change venue unfortunately because our normal venue the Ulster Hall is a bit small to do the distancing, so we're using the Waterfront Hall for these sessions. What with the woodwind thing and the brass, it's an even greater distance for us, we have to really splay out, so that will be another learning curve, with kind of antiphonal woodwind from either side of the room when we're usually really confined. I think these will be recorded and I'm not sure what they're specifically going to be used for, but I expect it's an online thing as the shift towards the online stuff has been sped up by the pandemic more than anything else really. I think orchestras now have realised that the potential is there for a big output.

Su-a: I'm curious to ask the woodwind and brass players about this, as the distancing remains a question mark. We just did this project in the last couple of days where the string players had to be 2.5m away from each other but the woodwind and brass had to be 3.5m away. It's a really huge distance and I saw this lovely example of a trumpeter from one of the London orchestras trying to blow out a candle or being in front of a candle – I don't know if anyone else saw that? It just seems so strange to me that everyone immediately assumes that because you play a woodwind or a brass instrument that you're literally throwing germs out the end of your trumpet or trombone when in actual fact that doesn't feel absolutely scientific truth. I was just wondering how you guys feel about that?

Dan: The BBC have actually commissioned some research so we can get to the bottom of this, because at the moment it's all conjecture, isn't it. For now, it's great to hear that the SCO is erring on the side of caution. I'm one of the health and safety reps here in Cardiff for my sins, and a lot of the conversations revolve around 'is it 3 metres? is it 3.5 metres?' and until we know for sure, it's difficult to say so best to err on the side of caution, so I'm really heartened to hear that. What the Musicians' Union has been saying is... there's these fantastic bits of social media content that have been done in Germany and there was a great one in Japan and they all look very snazzy – I'm not knocking this step and I'm sure it will turn out that a lot of it is true, but it's not peer-reviewed science, not that I'd know anything about that. We need that stuff that's been really thoroughly experimented if that's the right word, because up until that is released, it's pure conjecture, isn't it. I know some people that think that yes, there will be more germs spread out, but some people theorise that because it's channelled down an instrument it could be less bad for germs for aerosol. I don't know if Greg you have any thoughts on that at all?

Greg: Yes. The other variable is the different woodwind instruments. In the trumpet you've got the bell in front of the player but on the bassoon we've got the bell pointing upwards and only the little holes are facing people in front, so there's even differences there. There was talk about the flute, maybe that's a difficult one because some of the air goes this way, straight from the mouth and into the instrument, and it's all up in the air at the moment...

Dan: No pun intended!

Su-a: I'm glad you said it Dan!

James: Janet if we could come to you for a moment. You have long been a hero of ours at the RPS, balancing your work at the Manchester Camerata with being a Community First Responder for the Ambulance Service. As you mentioned already, you've taken that to another level. Do tell us more about that.

Janet: When the lockdown started the Community First Responders for the Yorkshire Ambulance Service were an ideal resource because we had all the safeguarding done, we've got our 'Safeguarding Level 2s' and we'd been used to turning up to red calls for the ambulance, because that's what we do as volunteers. So I'm driving 100 miles a day when I'm working to the Wakefield headquarters and we were trained really quickly so it was like learning on the job, and instead of attending to people I was actually sending ambulances out as part of what I was then doing, and as I say it was really frightening at first because obviously at that point virtually all the calls were people with symptoms of Coronavirus.

It's calmed down now, we're only working four days a week and we've been trained to accept dental calls, we talk to paramedics and various other things, and they've kept us on because we're just useful to ease the backlog with the 111 service which has been really heavily hit. Obviously it's a privilege to be able to do something for a start, like we're all saying that's what we all miss – doing things for others – so I was really grateful to feel as if I was doing something. I didn't have the same experience of staying in the house because I was going out six days a week at first for the first three months I suppose. The other thing of course is that at first I wasn't able to do anything other than the work then I would come home and log on as a volunteer so at one point I was working virtually 20 hours a day for the NHS, either paid or unpaid, so I had no energy at all really for virtually anything else.

However, now my musical side, my creative side has started to come back. I'm in talks with Yorkshire Ambulance and what I'm hoping to do is some kind of rhythmic, not Samba, but Latin-type rhythms, using pots and pans because the thing is that the NHS is realising how important music and the arts are and the big thing to come now – as well as people's physical health – will be their mental health. Music is a language, it speaks to your innermost being right inside each individual. It's also a communicator tool right the way across the world, it's an instant language for everybody, wherever they come from across the world. I think this is our role now, as orchestral members, as musicians, it's going to be to help healing, to be there for people.

At the Association of British Orchestras conference in February, I was on a panel for health and wellbeing with James Sanderson who is the Director of Personalised Care for the NHS, and he's saying now that even the most hardened cynics from within the medical profession are turning to music and the arts to help with their own mental health and wellbeing. So now is the time for us to move forward, enabling as many people as possible to use music for their own personal wellbeing and also for communities to help bring people back together. I think that's going to be so important for all of us. I'm going to try and do it through work, through the Ambulance Service. I'm meeting with the Health and Wellbeing team shortly and hopefully with the volunteers as well, then maybe try to roll that idea out in the future, but start with

the Yorkshire Ambulance Service, doing some music with them. I just feel now we have a big part to play in recovery and ongoing living.

James: It seems to me that this has cracked open something that we all knew was evident, that music is this incredible vital giving force in this country. Just as lockdown started, it was so amazing to see musicians like yourselves, you could not help but fling yourselves head-first into the thicket of technological challenges because you had to keep giving. We could see the appetite for that, and everyone has really cherished what you have given us as musicians. This ecology, this circle of giving has always existed but suddenly it seems more manifest...

Su-a: This reminds me of a folk musician called Duncan Chisholm, who plays folk fiddle. He did a thing called the 'Covid Ceilidh' every single day of lockdown, he played a tune and sometimes invited friends like myself, my partner Hamish Napier, we did various things where we collaborated on screen. Essentially he provided that every single day of lockdown and the number of responses that came flooding in from people all over the world – in excess of 30,000 people watching daily – commented on how much calm or joy or just how much help he gave to a lot of people in their isolation. For sure it's the generosity of a lot of these musicians, we all want to do things, and that possibility has been wonderful in terms of reaching out.

Dan: What a lot of us wanted to do was do a Joe Wicks type daily workshop, warm-up or something along those lines. But of course as Janet mentioned with various GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) and safeguarding issues it's never as simple as that, certainly not for the BBC for lots of good reasons. What we ended up doing was going to specific schools that had signed up for what they call *Connecting the Dots* which is a BBC-wide education and outreach service. I haven't got the exact numbers, but we must have been able to go to more schools as a result because we could run concurrent workshops which wasn't always possible pre-pandemic because of the schedule: would there actually be musicians free when was convenient for the school, as we might be doing rehearsals or concerts ourselves, and also there are certain contractual things which I won't get into now which make it difficult sometimes for us to get into as many schools as we like.

One thing that has come out of the pandemic is that we've been able to go in either individually, or both my partner and I are in the orchestra so we've been doing them as a pair. Going into special needs schools and mainstream schools all across the country and in some quite rural areas has felt fantastic, just seeing what difference that makes to the students, obviously, but also to the teachers, giving them a bit of a rest, because that's a full on job being a teacher. Also, I'm hoping that some of the parents that were home-schooling, some of the online content we've provided, some of the educational stuff, build your own instrument and recycled instruments and stuff like that, that's given home schooling a focus.

I agree that yes, we all knew how important music is, and I hope that the public know how important music and the arts in general are, to education but also to a well-rounded existence. It would sometimes be nice if that was more recognised by the government because it's all good and well saying that the arts are important and that we all contribute to the overall economy of the country, but sometimes having that

backed up, money being put where mouths are, hopefully that will be something that comes out of the pandemic.

Also I've got to say, just seeing how the general public have responded creatively, there's been some amazing stuff put up online, musical offerings, comedy things through TikTok, I think everyone's got their creative side out during lockdown. I've really enjoyed Grayson Perry's Art Club on Channel 4 and just seeing, with a bit more time on their hands perhaps or a different headspace, what people have been able to create. I'm hoping that going forward, the nation and the whole world really will see that the arts and the creative industries, we can all contribute to it and it's a really important thing to bring us together, to connect us, for our individual wellbeing. I think there's a creative side within everyone, whether it's music or visual arts or comedy or acting – I don't know, some of the little sketches that came out during the early lockdown stages, I think that people are more creative than they realise. I would love to see loads more of that going forward, and as I say I would love to see it recognised in a more official capacity by the government, in the curriculum, and also in the amount of money that's given towards the creative industries.

Greg: Absolutely. I think it's also put the emphasis on that music isn't a privilege for when things are going well, it's essential for when things aren't going well. It's really the combination of contributors from the general public: I've noticed lots of people who aren't professional musicians posting videos of them playing. In the Clap for Carers, near me, because I live very close to the Harland and Wolff shipyard with the big Samson and Goliath cranes in Belfast, they were sounding the ships horn when they launch ships which hasn't sounded in about 25 years, so everyone from every walk of life has been contributing and it's a wonderful thing to see. I ended up meeting neighbours on balconies when we would all go outside who I would never have met, had it not occurred.

The thing is, as Dan said, we managed to reach lots of schools, which we would never have been able to reach because it's a difficult thing to actually get to these places. We've done a lot of Zoom calls, we did even ones where each parent had their kid on their lap on their sofas, where we did a little *Peter and the Wolf* play-through, and held cards up guessing which instrument is which character. Things like that, it's really heartening to see, and the kids really lap that stuff up. They tend to be more tech-savvy than I am anyway so they know what's going on onscreen. The mixture of the slightly more serious content, what we do day-in and day-out, the more straight performance, then you've got the more comedic stuff too. We did a funny one where I taught our Managing Director: he used to be a bassoonist 20 years ago and I gave him a contra bassoon lesson through Zoom and at the end he did a performance of the Mozart duo with our principal double bass.

James: I almost feel like there's been a reframing or a reclaiming of orchestras. I think a lot of people still have a 19th Century impression of an orchestra and imagine you over there, on the stage, behind your music stands, in your penguin suits. I know this because I've run an orchestra in the past and you know this, we're seeing the personalities of the orchestra, the likes of you, and seeing that they're the same people with the same impulses and the same heartbeat as anyone else, which seems to be a useful thing to take forward...

Su-a: Our management have really tried to focus on exactly that. We do a thing called 'Live from the Living Room' so you go round the orchestra and have people in their own living rooms playing to our usual audience. Because we're a chamber orchestra, similar to Manchester Camerata, we're self employed as such, but the outfit is maybe more manageable, manoeuvrable, so we've been discussing how we can get back out performing live, certainly beyond the digital, as lockdown eases, in smaller groups. We're very much planning what we can do, from duos to trios and upwards, and that's obviously venue-dependent, because there are so many venues that are not allowing us to be in our socially distant way.

As soon as that lifts we're priming ourselves for that and we've got now a planning committee from the orchestra players, planning what we can do, maybe some regional things, and in essence we're getting ready to go out to people and I think the future probably sees us going into more local areas when it comes to actually physically giving concerts. We're thinking about going out into people's gardens, going to the people rather than getting people to come to us. We're thinking of ourselves as small satellite things that we can just send out. Hopefully in that way people can start to feel a bit more connected to music and just have a bit more encouragement that going out to concerts is just around the corner. We need to have hope that things are moving forward because at the moment everything feels still uncertain, our futures feel very uncertain, we don't know how long this is going to go on. I suspect it will be several months yet, and maybe years before we really feel things are settled into feeling safe in concert halls.

The incongruity of people being in bars where people really are quite close to each other and yet I feel that the concert hall is way in the distance, but I we just need some hope. The sense of planning some things together in smaller groups is certainly our way forward. The whole management and player team working together is really exciting to see and I think that's a massive positive from being in this situation that we've never been in before. Everyone is thinking on their feet – we've always been encouraged to go to management with ideas but now everyone's doing it and it's sparking lots of conversations so I'm really excited about that element.

Dan: I think a lot of people have got back in touch with their creative side, whether they're a professional musician or a graphic designer because people have had a bit more space perhaps, no one's been commuting everywhere, it's freed up a bit of time perhaps. Our orchestra's no different. There have been people who have come forward with really creative ideas for social media so I'm hoping that's going to carry on into the future – like you say, Su-a, there's even more of a team vibe when it comes to the creative side of things. We've worked well as a team for lots of the nitty gritty organisational stuff but creativity is one of those things that moving forward is hopefully going to be more of a democratic thing.

Next week, similar to yourselves, we're starting to get together in smaller groups as well. For now, separated into our musical families so strings, brass, wind families. Until this BB- commissioned research from Keele University and I think Bristol University, we won't know what the deal is with aerosols, so until that comes out with something a bit more concrete, we'll be separated into our musical families. But just to be in the same room as people, even if it is over 3.5 metres away, is going to be great because while I've loved doing these orchestral montages to click tracks, and

it's been great to still be connecting with our audience, it's not the same as being in a room with other people, that's something we're all agreed on. It's something that I've thought, amazing as all this technology is and 99% of the world would have been really done for if it hadn't been for these conference call technologies that we've got, just something really old-fashioned like getting together in the same room and playing some music or having a conversation... it's great to do these things across Skype and Zoom, but a conversation is so much better in the same room and music's no different. It's so much better doing it in the same room as people, so I am really looking forward to that.

Su-a: Everyone at SCO was a little bit nervous of how it would be to be in the same room, and I was nervous about getting too emotional and yes I was emotional even before I saw anyone, but I guess because we were doing a recording – it was for the Edinburgh Festival – we weren't sure what it would feel like and whether there would be any magic in the room because we were in a very dry, massive theatre, and to see the bassoons and the horns at the back of the hall, 20 metres away, a long way away. So, that feeling of whether there would be any electricity in the room? All I can say is it's magic, there's no replacing it, there just is not. Even if there's no one applauding, just the feeling of being absolutely in the moment is very exciting.

Dan: Sorry to get technical here, but what was it like ensemble-wise, Su-a? Was it difficult for people at the back of the ensemble to match up to people at the front? We're quite used to it in the lower brass because we're always a way back in the naughty corner, as I call it, and pre-pandemic we were dealing with health and safety surrounding noise. I'm sure Janet will feel what I'm saying here being a percussionist. For people who are more used to being at the front of an ensemble, like strings – I guess bassoons are a half-way house – but how have you guys felt in the strings being so spread out? Has it been difficult ensemble-wise?

Su-a: What we decided at the start of the project – it was a two-day project – we had a day of separate strings and separate wind and brass just to play through some repertoire because it felt a bit unreasonable to put the pressure on ourselves of going straight into a recording. We had a day to play together, we played through some Bach chorales, fugues, Schubert, Haydn, just to feel what it was like to do some really slow practice, just getting back into the groove of being totally in tune with each other. Tuning in fourths and fifths, we even did scales, and the wind and brass had a separate session at the same time – socially distanced.

The test for us in the strings was just getting used to not sharing a desk, so everyone had their own stands. All I can say is that the fact that we were in a very dry theatre, which I guess is very different to being in a normal generous acoustic theatre, it actually helped. It takes a little while to adjust but when you do adjust, I really enjoyed the element of having clarity, real clarity, and you have to get used to the fact that you hear yourself a lot. When the two teams joined together the next day, it was actually very heart-warming to know that some things sounded absolutely brilliant, really well together, and there were just a few things, maybe where there's a more conversational thing, where maybe you have to pre-empt a little bit more. There was some banter going on about being late! I was just overwhelmed really with the feeling of all being together again. I can't wait for the moment when you all do it too. The sad thing is that yesterday when we all parted, we have nothing in the

diary for when we're next going to meet, so it feels like it could be months! Of course we're really hopeful that all of this will move forward quickly.

James: We're already running out of time I'm afraid but I just wanted to ask each of you if you had one personal resolution coming out of this, musical or possibly even not musical, what might that be?

Dan: I'm really inspired by Janet and her work with the NHS, I've got to be honest. I'm really interested to hear how your percussion workshops go Janet, just out of interest, will they be delivered in person or online?

Janet: The idea is we could do them outside so they could be in person, that's the idea. I suppose the one thing, it's healing, it's using music for healing, and as I say this communication for me is the uppermost thing now, to use music as a way of communicating, as we've always done but really especially now.

Su-a: It's about enabling people, isn't it, with a new focus.

James: And to be confident in saying that's what it can do. I think sometimes we as the proprietors of classical music can be a bit too bashful or modest about what it can do or imply it might require special pleading or special intellect and no, come on, this force, it's so important.

Greg: Absolutely, it's almost like orchestras don't need to be shy about the great stuff they're doing. The more people hear the better, and there's no time to be shy. The audiences they come and they enjoy and I've realised how much of a loyal audience we have. And bringing in new people, there's a certain element I've noticed where sometimes we're hesitant that everyone will like it, but everyone does and it's really heartening to see the responses from our audiences around the country during lockdown. It's been heartening for everyone.

Dan: I agree. I almost think that there's a lot of people in this country, if they're not in a care home or a child in a school, they maybe wouldn't get a chance to experience some of the outreach work we do. The people in the middle, the way we connect with them is through concerts which at the moment aren't happening too much. But maybe when they are happening a bit more, we can be loud and proud about it. You don't have to dress up in anything fancy. If you're worried about when you need to clap, don't stress, follow other people's lead, a concert is a pretty relaxed affair. A resolution would be to shout a bit more loudly and proudly about the outreach work we do as well as what we do in the concert hall, and that yes we're not just people in penguin suits, we go out into the community: it's a living, breathing thing, an orchestra.

James: There it is. We are now out of time, I'm sorry to say, but I hope you at home have enjoyed this chance to get to know some of the dedicated, passionate personalities who drive our nation's orchestras, and their real desire to give all that they can of themselves to all of us.

If there's an orchestra near you – amateur or professional – please do take a moment to visit their website and find out if there's any way you can help them to

keep brightening your locality, and do venture out to hear them perform as any opportunity arises again. They can't wait to see you.

Meanwhile, you might like to consider becoming an RPS Member and join us as we explore and celebrate more of what makes Britain 'philharmonic'. For now, a big thank you and our very best wishes to today's guests: Su-a Lee, Greg Topping, Daniel Trodden and Janet Fulton.