

Philippe Tondre:

10 years since IDRS Birmingham

In 2009, Philippe Tondre won the prestigious Gillet-Fox Competition, during the International Double Reed Society's Conference in Birmingham. Last year DRN asked him to look back over the intervening decade and provide an account of how his career has developed since.



P/photo: Graham Salter

Philippe Tondre rehearsing with Clive Fairbairn and the New Mozart Orchestra in Birmingham Town Hall for the Grand Finale Concert of the IDRS Conference

I can remember vividly the last notes of the Vaughan Williams *Oboe Concerto* in Birmingham Town Hall with Clive Fairbairn's New Mozart Orchestra, and the warm applause that followed: this IDRS Conference was very special to me. I had prepared with all my heart for this competition, as England is my mum's country. This competition was one of

many I subsequently took part in because I love challenges, and these experiences brought me strength, built up my repertoire and made me become a better oboe player.

It has been over ten years since that competition and of course many things have happened since, yet to me it feels

like it was yesterday. Birmingham was a key point in the development of my career for many reasons.

After the IDRS Conference, I flew straight back home to prepare for the Sony International Competition in Japan. That summer was a tough one in terms of preparation. I was 20 years of age and still a student in my final year at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris. On top of that, I was officially starting my first season as tenured Principal Oboe in the Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra. It was very hard to combine 'soloistic' activities and orchestral projects at the same time, because they require completely different skills. But the confidence I gained in Birmingham helped me win a prize in the Sony Competition Japan, and was the perfect build-up to the Geneva International Competition a year later and the ARD International Competition in Munich in 2011. Retrospectively I can say that that period of my life showed me it is possible to be a very active oboe player in all branches of the profession. In fact, the IDRS period was the introduction to my life as it is today: an oboist with solo concerts, chamber music, a teaching position and being a member of orchestras. This was, and still is, my ultimate goal as a musician, to embrace all aspects you can possibly explore with the instrument and the music.

The ARD Competition in 2011 was my last one. 2008 to 2011 had been a period of intense preparation during which time I devoted all my efforts to becoming a better oboe player, a better musician and hopefully a better person. This period propelled me into 'real life' in the best way. During those international competitions I had to confront many obstacles, tough challengers, and I had to push myself to the limit.

From 2011 until 2015 life was also intense, with many solo and chamber music concerts. My orchestra in Stuttgart was very active touring and recording, and I was lucky enough to become a member also of Seiji Ozawa's Mito Chamber Orchestra and the Saito Kinen Orchestra. Since then Japan has remained a very important part of my musical adventure. One of the solo

concert highlights was my debut concert in the Berlin Philharmonie with the Deutsche Symphonie Orchester. The 'Beethoven Ring' Prize was also another very exciting moment in my musical life. This Prize was given by the City of Bonn in Germany and the contact I have with the entire community there is precious to me.

Then the year 2015 marked a major change and started a new chapter in my life. I was appointed professor at the Conservatory of Saarbrücken in Germany. It is a demanding position requiring a lot of energy, and is a huge responsibility. The music world is highly competitive and I try to share my knowledge and experience with my students to prepare them as well as possible for the tough professional world outside.

From the orchestral point of view, I also developed a special connection with the Budapest Festival Orchestra and was very happy to join them as a member from there on. I have great admiration for Ivan Fischer; being able to play many tours with him and the BFO definitely opened up my orchestral knowledge.

Slowly but surely, I was making my mark as a teacher but was still able to continue my other activities. Things were setting up quite well, but somehow I needed a new challenge; I wanted to go as far as I could, learn more, discover new horizons. The Gewandhaus Leipzig had a job opening as Principal Oboe at the end of 2015; I thought this could be it, the new challenge. I was very interested in trying for this position because the Gewandhaus is one of the oldest houses in the world, its history is extraordinary. The audition was very hard. After hours of sweating, the result was successful and I could start my new experience in Leipzig.

Honestly, it was an amazing time for me there, and I was challenged every day. It was hard to play opera, symphonies and cantatas simultaneously as the Gewandhaus has an extremely full schedule. It is present in three institutions: the Leipzig Opera, the Gewandhaus Symphony Hall and the Thomas Church. I learned a great deal during my year in Leipzig, but the heavy schedule meant sacrificing everything else I had worked so hard for. I loved Leipzig as a city, I loved the colleagues and friends I met there, but I had to make a choice. I decided to return to Stuttgart at the end of the 2016/17 season and continue my musical life from there.

Many solo performances came up at that time, and I had the opportunity to play back home in France, as well as continue my Japanese adventure with some exciting concerts. The teaching and masterclasses got more and more intensive as well as chamber music projects. Stuttgart, Budapest, Mito and Saito Kinen Orchestras had full seasons; it was a flourishing time for me and I enjoyed it a lot.

At the end of 2017, I was also invited to play one project with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. The COE is one of the very best ensembles in the world. I grew up with the Harmoncourt recording of Beethoven; fantastic oboists played there, so to be invited was incredible news for me. The experience with this orchestra was extraordinary, you just wanted to play all day long. As soon as you get a taste of this level and this atmosphere you cannot let go. I was lucky enough to be re-invited and the relationship started blooming in a very positive way. Eventually, last year in February, they asked me if I was willing to join as a member. This was one of the greatest moments in my life, joining my

dream orchestra and becoming a member of the family.

Almost at the same time, the Philadelphia Orchestra asked me if I would like to play a project in America. I was a little anxious at first but could not refuse this new experience, this new challenge. After playing several sessions with the Philadelphia Orchestra during 2018/19, I was invited to take part in the audition for the position of Principal Oboe. At the end of a gruelling week, when I was actually offered the job, I was stunned. It took a few moments to sink in as this represents a huge change in my career and is no doubt one of the most important moments in my life. I can't wait to begin!

I have many people to thank for so much support over the years – my family and friends, my managers (Klarthe in France and Kojima in Japan) – and Marigaux: I am currently playing on my old M2 which 15 years old.

