



Expanding Horizons

Guy Johnston draws the spotlight as soloist with the St Petersburg Symphony Orchestra and advocate for new cello repertoire

A broken cello string and its smooth replacement helped define Guy Johnston as one of the coolest of all winners of the BBC Young Musician of the Year. Here was a fine young performer with the technical and musical resources required to craft an ear-catching interpretation of Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto and the composure necessary to deal with the unexpected. Assured musicianship and personal poise have become hallmarks of Johnston's progress since securing first place in the 2000 Young Musician competition.

The 28-year old, whose impressive schedule this season reflects his developing maturity as a soloist, retraces the course of his artistic journey and looks ahead to future challenges. "I think the process of development is about being confident in and enthused by what you're searching for as a musician," Johnston observes. "I feel you should not be daunted by the search but simply embrace it. This grows out of the demanding transition from being a student to becoming a full-time soloist, which delivers a real sense of direction to what you're doing."

Johnston's Young Musician victory arrived near the end of his first year as a student at the Eastman College of Music in Rochester. "It presented opportunities overnight, which came as a shock to the system! One had to take those on and also be prepared to make big sacrifices. I'm grateful for the chances and the amazing focus that winning the competition provided. But it was tough to live with the expectations at such a young age."

As the son of a musical family (his parents run a music school in Harpenden and his grandfather was principal clarinet in the BBC Northern Ireland Orchestra), Guy Johnston's natural talents were nurtured during boyhood days as a chorister in the Choir of King's College, Cambridge. He went on to study at Chetham's School of Music in Manchester before deciding to continue his cello studies overseas. Johnston attended the Tanglewood Music Center at the age of 16 and, with full parental support and encouragement, returned to the United States to enrol at Eastman College. "It was such an exciting thing to take your instrument to study somewhere totally different from anywhere I'd been before," he explains, adding that his American conservatoire's work ethic and broad-based academic curriculum deepened and complemented his cello studies with Steven Doane. "It was a busy time!"

Johnston took private lessons with Ralph Kirshbaum after he returned to the UK. In recent years he has studied with Steven Isserlis at the International Musicians Seminar Prussia Cove, David Waterman and Bernard Greenhouse, a founder member of the Beaux Arts Trio. "I've also started teaching at the Royal College of Music and love the creative energy and ideas that come back to me from the students."

The cellist's particular blend of studies and performing experiences has directly informed his determination to explore fresh perspectives on making music and uncover new repertoire. "It's about developing a sense of where you want to go as a performer," he observes. "The challenge is to make interesting new projects happen, which is something I'm determined to do. As a young artist, you have hopes, dreams and desires – it's about having the mix of patience and drive to realise them."

Two new recordings, set for release next year respectively on Orchid Classics and Cello Classics, demonstrate Guy Johnston's commitment to repertoire exploration. The first CD couples the sonatas by Frank Bridge and his pupil Benjamin Britten with Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Sleep On* and *Milo*. "These are works I fully believe in and have now reached the time to record," he notes. "I worked on the Britten Sonata in Aldeburgh and plan to record his Suites in preparation for the composer's centenary year in 2013. Mark-Anthony Turnage has always been in my musical life, from the days I played in the National Youth Orchestra. I played *Sleep On* to him then. Years later he and his wife asked me to be godfather to their son. When Mark asked me to play something at the christening, I suggested he write something for the occasion. *Milo*, for unaccompanied cello, was the beautiful result."

For his Cello Classics album Johnston has recorded *Hymnus* by Julius Klengel for cello ensemble and is set to record the composer's fearsomely difficult *Caprice* for release next year. "I think there's an element of responsibility for the soloist to find new works, as well as playing the pillars of the repertoire," comments Guy Johnston. "Programming has to be something that evolves from knowing the kind of music that really clicks with you." The cellist's advocacy of the new recently earned a Gramophone Award nomination for his recording of David Matthews' *Concerto in Azzurro* with the BBC Philharmonic and Rumon Gamba on the Chandos label. He is due to record Edward Gregson's Cello Concerto next year, also for Chandos.

When it comes to performing repertoire pillars, Guy Johnston is preparing for a prolonged period in company with three essential cello works, Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*, Saint-Saëns' richly romantic First Cello Concerto and Elgar's Cello Concerto. The Tchaikovsky and Saint-Saëns appear on the programme for the St Petersburg Symphony Orchestra's 12-date UK tour (1 - 24 October 2009). Johnston will also play the *Rococo Variations* with the Osaka Philharmonic Orchestra in Kobe and Wakayama (6 and 8 November), before joining the Sapporo Symphony Orchestra and its music director Tadaaki Otaka to perform Elgar's Concerto in Kitara and Tokyo (13, 14 and 17 November). Future dates include Matthews' *Concerto in Azzurro* with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales (27 January 2010), Schumann's Cello Concerto on tour with the Northern Sinfonia (2-7 February) and Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote* with the Sao Paulo Symphony Orchestra and Yan Pascal Tortelier (11-13 March).

Dealing with the demands of touring, says Guy Johnston, has been part of his life since his chorister boyhood at King's College, Cambridge. "The structured disciplines of turning up for early morning rehearsals, being given the music and preparing for services and concerts were such an important part of my musical upbringing," he recalls. "From a very early age, international travel was a given of musical life for me. I was so fortunate to have had those experiences at King's, which included recording the solo part at the opening of *Once in Royal David's City* for Decca, and also those that came thanks to the BBC Young Musician of the Year. The work I'm doing now really fires me up and is sustaining. I simply want to keep growing, learning and deepening as a musician."

GUY JOHNSTON, selected UK performances 2009-2010:

St Petersburg Symphony Orchestra / Vladimir Altschuler

Tchaikovsky: Variations on theme Rococo

Middlesbrough Town Hall (4 October 2009), The Sands Centre – Carlisle (10 October 2009), Venue Cymru – Llandudno (11 October 2009), The Hexagon – Reading (13 October 2009), City Hall – Hull (15 October 2009), Cliffs Pavilion Southend – London (19 October 2009)

St Petersburg Symphony Orchestra / Alexander Dimitriev

Saint-Saëns: Cello Concerto No.1

Colston Hall – Bristol (1 October 2009), Cambridge Corn Exchange (6 October 2009), Nottingham Royal Concert Hall (14 October 2009), Warwick Arts Centre (16 October 2009), Brangwyn Hall – Swansea (17 October 2009), Canterbury Cathedral (21 October 2009)

BBC National Orchestra of Wales / Jac Van Steen

David Matthews: Concerto in Azzurro

Hoddinot Hall, Cardiff (27 January 2010)

Northern Sinfonia / Garry Walker

Schumann: Cello Concerto in A minor Op.129

Dewsbury Town Hall (4 February 2010), The Sage Gateshead (5 February 2010), Kendal Town Hall (6 February 2010)

Orchid Classics CD Release with Kathryn Stott

Bridge, Britten, Turnage

March 2010

RTE National Symphony Orchestra

Shostakovich: Cello Concerto No.2

National Concert Hall, Dublin (9 April 2010)

Recital with Kathryn Stott

Mendelssohn, Brahms, Chopin, Schumann

Kings College Chapel, Cambridge (1 May 2010), Cadogan Hall (14 May 2010)

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