

# INTERVIURI

## Un dialog cu Barrie Webb<sup>1</sup>

Andra Apostu



*Barrie Webb, trombonist, dirijor și profesor britanic de renume internațional este cunoscut pentru promovarea muzicii contemporane, fiind considerat o figură centrală în dezvoltarea repertoriului modern pentru trombon, cu peste 100 de lucrări în portofoliu, dintre care multe au fost scrise special pentru el. Barrie Webb este o prezență frecventă pe scenele românești și un fin cunoscător al muzicii autohtone contemporane. Interpretările sale pline de har pun trombonul într-o lumină foarte atractivă*

*pentru cei mai puțin familiarizați cu acest instrument, sunetul lui este fermecător și plin de profunzime. Mulți compozitori români i-au dedicat lucrări iar vizitele sale în țara noastră sunt o bucurie pentru muzicieni și pentru toți iubitorii de muzică contemporană.*

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<sup>1</sup> Interviuul a fost consemnat și este publicat în limba engleză.

- **Andra Apostu:** Please describe to us your relationship with Romania. The relationship you have with Romanian music, musicians and the country itself because you have developed quite a long friendship with this place and with us, the Romanians. I was thinking to start this conversation from your study period, your youth, when you studied conducting with maestro Constantin Bugeanu or maybe earlier, if you like. When did the `Romanian story` start for you?

**Barrie Webb:** Well... as a starting point, shall I go back a little before any kind of Romanian connection... Shortly after finishing my studies at Cambridge, I'd taken up a teaching position. My ambition had been to play trombone in an orchestra, but there were almost no playing positions available at that time, and I considered the teaching job to be more secure. Eventually, I started playing some contemporary music. One of my colleagues, Phil Ellis, wrote me a wonderful piece called *In Time*, which inspired me to start giving recitals of contemporary music during the 1980s.

At the same time, I tried to advance both playing trombone and conducting by following some courses. In 1981, I followed a course on contemporary techniques in Switzerland, with Vinko Globokar... The programme was in two parts, with two months in between, allowing time to put into practice what was learned in the first part. The course was crucially important for my development, and we've maintained our friendship ever since, collaborating on various projects from time to time. The next year I went to the Darmstadt International Summer Course for New Music for the first time. It was quite an experience! You have all these people together with the same interest, you live and breathe contemporary music, you socialize together...

In 1983 I enrolled on a course based on the works of Berio, in Provence, France, with Berio himself present, and with a trombone class taken by Stuart Dempster. Dempster and Globokar were the principal protagonists in the evolution of trombone technique and repertoire at this time, and both played a significant role in the creation and popularisation of Berio's *Sequenza V*. I consider myself very fortunate to have studied with them and been able to 'touch' this important period

in the history of the trombone. Over the years, they've always been generous with their advice and encouragement. Priceless!

In 1984 I was back in Darmstadt, where this time I had a role on faculty. There was quite a significant Romanian contingent in Darmstadt – among the composers were Călin Ioachimescu, Doina Rotaru, Anatol Vieru, Horațiu Rădulescu. Then, I think in 1986, Trio Syrinx from Bacău was there. I don't remember exactly when Emil Sein and Trio Contraste came to Darmstadt, perhaps in '88.

The first time I came to Romania was in 1986, to perform Călin's *Concerto for Trombone, Double-bass and Orchestra*, along with a new work by Iancu Dumitrescu. It turned out to be quite an adventure... After a 36-hour delay in London, I arrived to seriously deep snow on the ground in Bucharest – you could barely make out the shapes of cars hidden underneath. The event itself was something unusual for me – a concert-debate ('Concert-Dezbatere').

I was back here in 1987 for the Bacău Contemporary Music Days, where I performed some solo pieces, gave a second performance of Călin's *Concerto*, and conducted Liviu Dănceanu's *Quasiopera* with Archaeus. Then the following year I was in Cluj to conduct the Cluj Philharmonic in a classical programme, before going to Bucharest for a concert at the Radio as a guest performer with Archaeus.

In 1989, Richard Steinitz, director of the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, was planning an Eastern European theme for the 1990 edition. I acted as a go-between, meeting with a group of Romanian composers in the summer of 1989. Among the composers represented in the 1990 festival, were Călin Ioachimescu, Doina Rotaru, Adrian Iorgulescu, Liviu Dănceanu and Ștefan Niculescu, with Archaeus and Trio Syrinx present as performers. At the opening concert I conducted performances of Călin's *Oratio II*, Doina's *Flute Concerto No.1* and *Symphony No.2* with our student New Music Ensemble and Symphony Orchestra, and also wrote an introductory note about new Romanian music for the festival programme.

➤ **A.A.:** So, you actually fell in love with Romanian music...

**B.W.:** Actually yes. It was a gradual process, getting to know different composers and their music and embracing the culture.

- **A.A.:** Does this culture have some specifics that particularly resonate with you?

**B.W.:** Well, the music certainly has some special qualities, especially in the relationship with traditional Romanian music. But of course, all composers have their individual personalities and style traits.

- **A.A.:** Is there another country that resonates with you like Romania and its music?

**B.W.:** Yes, there are a few. My connection with Australia also arose from Darmstadt. I'd met composer Brenton Broadstock there in 1984 and later commissioned a piece from him which I premiered in Australia in 1986. Other Australian connections evolved out of that visit... and since 2001 I've collaborated on several occasions with the Melbourne Composers' League and the University of Melbourne. Actually, the Composers' League connection dates from meeting their then president, composer Eve Duncan, at the 2000 edition of Sorin Lerescu's Meetings of New Music in Brăila, Romania!

Apart from that, there are also ongoing collaborations with Italy, Korea and Japan. But none of them has quite such a long and continuous history as my involvement with Romania.

- **A.A.:** The connections that you make are so different, Japan, Australia, Italy, the `colors` of these countries, the musical colors that you have inside you.

**B.W.:** Perhaps so – but I've always been open to the music of other countries and cultures, and these really do resonate with me.

- **A.A.:** How did you get to study with maestro Bugeanu?

**B.W.:** People here had told me about his reputation. For a few years, I'd been conducting the orchestra at the university where I was teaching – a good orchestra, capable of tackling ambitious repertoire – and for some time, I'd felt the need for further study. I'd considered courses and potential teachers... In one case, sadly, the conductor passed away shortly before the course began.

In 1992, I attended a concert at the Athenaeum. Maestro Bugeanu was in attendance, so I introduced myself to him and invited him to attend a concert of mine, due to take place a few days later at the Radio. He came to greet me after the concert, and we agreed to meet the following day at his studio. He told me about his forthcoming course, to be held in Saumur, France, during the summer of 1992.

The course was an excellent introduction to his teaching – a theoretical week, followed by a practical week with orchestra, with rehearsal sessions followed by immediate feedback to the conductors. I continued to study with him, albeit irregularly, from 1992 to 1998, when he sadly passed away.

➤ **A.A.:** So, the connection with the Romanian goes back a while...

**B.W.:** Yes indeed! I admired Maestro Bugeanu's care and dedication to his work. And I learned much from him – analytical, technical, musical. After studying with Bugeanu, I devised and taught conducting courses at Huddersfield, while some years later I had the opportunity to write a little about his work.

➤ **A.A.:** Do you think that conducting without classes or technique is not possible, not even in contemporary music? There are some that believe that contemporary music is very easy to conduct, perhaps the general perception, the young students.

**B.W.:** Well, it can seem easy if the conductor simply beats time – a 'taktschläger' as Bugeanu would say, disparagingly. Sure, it's important to keep time, and there can be a need for the conductor to prioritize this aspect, not only in contemporary music but also in some works going back to the beginning of the last century, thinking of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* or *L'Histoire du Soldat*.

Regarding the question about conducting without classes or technique, there will be (as with many other activities) those who display some natural aptitude. But there's really no substitute for studying technique, the sooner the better to avoid acquiring bad habits.

- **A.A.:** How was your conducting experience in Romania, did you have any?

**B.W.:** I've had some nice opportunities with different orchestras in Romania and also in Moldova. In Moldova I've conducted many contemporary Romanian works, including a Portrait-Concert of Anatol Vieru's music, and also contemporary British and Australian works. In Romania I've conducted all kinds of repertoire – eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century symphonic works, some performances of British music, and programmes of Romanian works, including premieres and recordings. In terms of relationships with the musicians, there is often the chance to mix and talk with them, which is really nice.

- **A.A.:** Do you also write music?

**B.W.:** Not much. When I was in Huddersfield, I taught composition among other things, and I've been motivated to write for specific occasions – music for theatre productions: Thomas Middleton's tragedy *Women Beware Women*; George Etherege's comedy *The Man of Mode, or, Sir Fopling Flutter*; and *Of Poor B.B.*, a dramatization of the life and work of Bertolt Brecht; plus some music for brass, and a few pieces for the didgeridoo... But as a composer I don't really have much of interest to say. My students usually had much better ideas.

- **A.A.:** Do you consider yourself more a performer than a conductor or a composer?

**B.W.:** It's interesting that you separate performance from conducting. Anyway, to answer your question, I was quite a late starter with conducting. The way that the balance between performing and conducting evolved thereafter has been quite circumstantial, with more opportunity to develop my potential as a 'performer' than anything else.

- **A.A.:** Your public usually connects your name on a poster with your instrument, the trombone. You are pretty famous for the way you handle your instrument and the way you approach the musical sound, the way you 'attack' the sound, your personal sound techniques.

What makes your sound so special? Do you study something in particular to be able to approach the sound like that, or is it maybe the connection you may have with the musical work itself?

**B.W.:** It's an interesting question, with many elements to consider, and thank you for the kind comments! Actually, everything feels quite natural to me, but maybe it is more methodical than I realize. First, what attracted me to the trombone was the sound. I know what I consider to be a good sound on the instrument, and it's always in my mind how to shape it. The way you create the sound depends on how you control the air, and when practicing or performing I always remind myself of this. This is nothing special and is the same kind of advice I give to my students, making sure they know *how* to create the sound. It's important to have an aural concept of the sound you want to produce, but not only this, you need to apply your musical imagination and consider how to develop a presence in delivery which keeps the listener engaged. 'Musicality' is a familiar term for musicians; we tend to recognize this quality in a general way, but to achieve it necessitates (for most of us) detailed work in the preparation. I think you make an excellent point when you speak of the 'connection with the musical work itself', because this informs everything about an interpretation.

I'd like to follow up your comment about 'attacking the sound.' Articulation is very important in music as it is in speech, and, whilst we need to consider the degree of articulation, it always needs sufficient projection, and I am always conscious of the need to deliver.

With brass instruments, people often associate articulation with tonguing; but for me the most important aspect is how the air is used, thereby reducing dependence on the tongue in order that the best sound quality can be maintained. So the *way* to 'attack' the sound is very important.

Perhaps the sound is 'special' or individual, but there are aspects of musical expression which apply more to solo playing than, for example, orchestral playing. As the solo playing has evolved, I think I've added more individual elements. Perhaps this is true of anyone who performs as a soloist. But above all I think of how to convey the expressive intent of the music, and how to engage the listener in the

most persuasive way to give the best possible presentation of the music I am performing.

➤ **A.A.:** Are we talking about different types of sound?

**B.W.:** Not really... In an orchestra, as a trombone player, you are seldom the main event, and what you play (and how you play it) is in the context of a global collaborative intention. In a solo performance you are responsible for everything, for all decisions regarding interpretation and delivery, so you are putting the shape into everything. I don't mean you are reinventing the composition, rather that you make sure you always have a presence and clear intention in the performance. I remember the first time I came to Romania, for Ioachimescu's *Concerto* and my co-soloist, double bass player Fernando Grillo said about my playing 'sempre presente' – always present. If you just play the notes, this doesn't necessarily carry to the audience. It is the same when you speak; if you don't project and engage the audience in front of you, the impact is minimized. It's about being able to communicate to the person at the back of the hall you are playing in.

➤ **A.A.:** Is it something different in the communication method in contemporary music? A music which may be harder to understand?

**B.W.:** For me, the general approach is the same. Contemporary music has more extremes, and yes, some modern music is more difficult to understand, including experimental and highly complex works from the last century. But such problems can usually be solved as part of the performer's preparation. A good example from the trombone repertoire would be Berio's *Sequenza V*. The proportional notation in this piece might seem to encourage a very free, random approach, whereas closer analysis can uncover very convincing indicators to guide the interpreter in a more structured way. In case anyone is interested, I wrote an article about this entitled 'Performing Berio's *Sequenza V*' (published in the *Contemporary Music Review*, Volume 26 Part 2, 2007, entitled *Contemporary Performance*). But the point I'm making is that it's important to go through this process, especially in preparing works that are 'harder to understand'.

- **A.A.:** Sometimes it is hard to reach out to young musicians for them to choose wind instruments like trombone, horn, bassoon etc. How can we make them want to play an instrument like this? Everyone wants to play piano, violin, flute...

**B.W.:** Difficult I think, as so many circumstances can come into play. If there's an opportunity for young musicians to attend live performances, or if schools provide instrumental demonstrations, these can be inspirational. Failing that, live video recordings are readily available. Young musicians might need some guidance as to the potential of different instruments. For example, they might not be aware that the trombone in particular has some special qualities as a solo instrument, qualities which should surely appeal to some.

- **A.A.:** How do you feel about the Romanian composers, their music, maybe some favorites, maybe some of them that you are more comfortable to perform...?

**B.W.:** How do I feel about the composers? Well, speaking about composers with whom I've collaborated, this is always a very positive experience. You are likely to have an appreciation of their music already and a good personal interaction. When you are in the process that is where your focus is, 100 per cent, and afterwards there is a special memory, a special connection which remains, perhaps forever.

Singling out 'favorites' is somewhat difficult. I would prefer not to name composers, because then I cannot justify leaving out many others. I enjoy working closely with composers, exchanging views and advice during the composing and performing process. I have great respect and affection for all Romanian composers with whom I have collaborated. I feel very privileged to be accepted as an integral part of the Romanian music scene and count many composers among my friends. It's been rewarding to create together a substantial body of new works for trombone, some documented through recordings, many of which can be found in the library of the Music University. It could be worthwhile to write a separate article about this subject.

About works which are 'more comfortable to perform', I never really think too much about it. Naturally there are different degrees of

technical difficulty, something one has to consider carefully in planning recital programmes in order to give the best chance of survival.

- **A.A.:** How do you feel about the Romanian contemporary music festivals? You have quite a wide notion about the worldwide festivals, you have participated in so many!

**B.W.:** If to begin with the Bucharest International New Music Week, with which I'm quite familiar having participated in all but a few editions, what has always impressed me is the focus on giving a platform to so many Romanian composers. There's a sense of the composers belonging to one big family. I think it also helps that the artistic directors of the New Music Week have always been composers. These are very special features of the festival.

It's very fine that several events are held in major national venues, such as the Radio, National Opera or the Athenaeum, attracting sizeable audiences. At the same time, the festival benefits from more intimate performing spaces within the Music University. I did notice that large student-based events attract large audiences, with students very supportive of their peers and creating a good atmosphere.

I've also been at the Bacău Contemporary Music Days and Cluj Modern and Timișoara Intrada festivals a few times. All are enjoyable festivals with a warm and friendly atmosphere. And all have impressive resources, which come together to support their festivals – their own composers, their own universities or academies, their own symphony orchestras and smaller ensembles.

- **A.A.:** How do you make your students get close to contemporary music? How do you make them like it, perform it?

**B.W.:** Students coming from a school background tend to have limited experience of contemporary music. At York (as in Huddersfield), contemporary music is well promoted, and a large number of students study composition. The trombone doesn't have a vast classical solo repertoire, so there's a real responsibility for the teacher to ensure that students be aware of what is out there. They all receive a repertoire list (all periods and styles represented) with recording links which they can

gradually explore. You need to know your individual students and give appropriate guidance... They will be the ones to decide.

➤ **A.A.:** Do your students go to concerts?

**B.W.:** They usually do. The university is a little bit out of the city, there's a strong sense of community, and the concerts are well attended. The regular venue is not a big hall, so it's usually full.

➤ **A.A.:** What projects are you involved in at this time, are you recording something? Is there something including Romanian music?

**B.W.:** There are a few things in the planning, including performances in Italy and Korea. Then the next Romanian appearance will be at the Cluj Modern Festival in May, with a mixed programme (Romanian works and others), for trombone and piano.

Regarding recordings, during the past year or so, Japanese composer Kanako Okamoto has been arranging a collection of well-known pieces for trombone and piano for me to record together with Australian pianist Michael Kieran Harvey for Move Records. These include classical works, popular songs, songs from musicals etc...

In the meantime, I'll be playing sackbut with a specialist early music group closer to home.

➤ **A.A.:** You mentioned the pandemic period, and it clearly had an impact on all of us. How did you perceive this period?

**B.W.:** It's quite strange looking back now, like a distant memory of a bygone era, quiet roads with little traffic, etc. Teaching was still ongoing, albeit online for one year, and at that time fortunately I had very good students, three of whom began in 2020. Towards the end of 2020 and into 2021, I was engaged in a project to record John Cage's number pieces for large ensemble with the London based group Apartment House for the label 'another timbre', followed by a couple of London performances in the summer of 2022. But in terms of international activity, we were all forced to become more insular –

there's still a bit of a hangover from this. Nevertheless, I was able, while we were still under Covid restrictions, to make it to Bacău in October 2021 for the Contemporary Music Days and to conduct a classical concert. So there was always something in the pipeline and I was not completely isolated. Anyway, when you play largely as a soloist, most of your work is in isolation.

➤ **A.A.:** Thank you very much and best of luck in all your future projects!

**B.W.:** Thank you too for your questions. It's been a pleasure to talk with you!

## SUMMARY

### **Andra Apostu**

#### **A dialogue with Barrie Webb**

Barrie Webb, internationally renowned British trombonist, conductor, and teacher, is widely recognized for promoting contemporary music and is considered a central figure in the development of the modern trombone repertoire, with over 100 works in his portfolio, many of which were written specifically for him. Barrie Webb is a frequent presence on Romanian stages and a connoisseur of contemporary local music. His skilful performances showcase the trombone in a very attractive light for those less familiar with this instrument, its sound being charming and full of depth. Many Romanian composers have dedicated works to him, and his visits to our country are a delight for musicians and all lovers of contemporary music.