

**Interview of musician Connor McLean by Margaret Scott, National Centre for
Early Music
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MAS: Good morning. I'm Margaret Scott, I look after the Mystery Plays Archive here at the National Centre for Early Music, and this morning I'm interviewing musician Connor McLean, about his role in the 2016 York Minster Mystery Plays, where he was the Assistant to the Musical Director. Welcome, Connor, thanks for coming in today to talk about your experiences.

CM: Thank you.

MAS: Let's start with asking why you wanted to be involved in the 2016 Mystery Plays.

CM: Well, first of all, Richard Shephard sent an email to the University of York Music Department, where occasionally we get certain emails forwarded on to us [students] and he was asking for various musicians for the Mystery Plays. Most people were actually quite daunted by the 41 performances. So.... But I dived straight in and then replied straight to him to say that yes, I would love to do it. So then he invited us all over to his for some pizza and some drinks so we could discuss further what we were letting ourselves into. Because I personally had never heard of the Mystery Plays before.

MAS: Shock, horror!

CM: Yes!

MAS: [laughs] Three years in York and you hadn't heard of them!

CM: No. So it was quite an exciting thing to learn what goes on, on that side.

MAS: Yes. This was during your final year, as I understand it. And you thought you might have time, despite the fact you had exams?

CM: Yes. Yes, well OK, I wasn't entirely sure how much work I was going to be letting myself in for, but I'm very glad that I did do it. I feel like it has helped me, not only as a musician but also you know, in how to deal with difficult situations. Of which there were several! But then there always is in these types of things. So Richard had already said that it would be great for me to play trumpet.

MAS: That's your particular instrument?

CM: Yes. So I was the principal trumpet player, for the actual plays. I think there was only a week that I had off, when I actually went to Cambridge to make my own natural trumpet. So I just left for that week and then came back.

MAS: What's a natural trumpet?

CM: Well, it's just, it hasn't got any valves or anything like that. It's a baroque trumpet.

MAS: More like a bugle?

CM: It's quite odd.

MAS: And you make the noises with your lips?

CM: Yes. So yes, I went off to make my own trumpet and I came back for the last week.

MAS: Right, yes.

CM: And then...So going back to the meal, the pizza at Richard's, he said he was looking for someone to help him to fix the actual band. So I volunteered my services. And so I started to source various players. Then he said it would be a good idea to use mainly players from the University, the which I did. But there were a few players that I got in from outside, both as teachers and say from the RNCM...

MAS: Royal National College of Music?

CM: The Royal Northern College of Music.

MAS: Beg your pardon. Royal Northern College of Music, yes.

CM: But that was just, I think that was mainly horn players. The horn players were the hardest people to try and find. But there were, there were a couple of very good, good players which I sourced from the University, so that was all very good. So I think it was just....

MAS: So when he asked you not just to play trumpet but to be his assistant, did that mean you would also get a paid post?

CM: Yes.

MAS: Obviously, a nice incentive for any student to have.

CM: Definitely.

MAS: But the students and the other people who were playing were just volunteers, is that right?

CM: No, so all of the musicians got paid.

MAS: Good, good. Such hard work.

CM: Yes. So I don't think anyone would have done it if it wasn't, obviously, because you are in what Richard liked to call the Padded Cell for the five weeks, probably six weeks including rehearsals, so obviously you needed some source of income.

MAS: Income, yes, of course you do. Mmm. So, your musical training and background – you mentioned trumpet. And you were doing a degree in Music at the University [of York]. Anything else relevant in your background to the Mystery Plays?

CM: Well, I suppose.... Well I don't think there is anything in particular which is particularly relevant, but then I've always done various shows, around York. Then I originally came from Cornwall, so I did various shows, say at the Minack theatre. I did the *Pirates of Penzance* down there, which was very apt to there.

MAS: You didn't come across Joe Hopper, did you? He was the man who played Malchus, and then Lucifer, but he has also acted at the Minack theatre.

CM: Ah, no, no.

MAS: It would have been a great coincidence!

CM: So, but I think every musician's experience always leads to somewhere within their career, I think everything I had done up to that point had led to the Mystery Plays, you know, and then there are various other projects that I am working on. So...

MAS: So you like early music, by the sound of it?

CM: Yes, yes. Well I play all sorts, from baroque, classical, jazz... I think nowadays you have to be very versatile in what you do. Which is a shame, because you can't hone your skills on one particular style. But there you go.

MAS: Mmm. Perhaps later in your career you'll be able to choose your real speciality. I, I love early music, that's why I'm here, but I'm not a musician, I just like hearing it. OK, so you've already said something about the role of Assistant to the Musical Director, who was Richard Shephard. What did you enjoy the most? Because it does sound like hard work, I must say.

CM: Hmm. Yes, well, I suppose that it was interesting to meet new people along the way. Hmmm, but....

MAS: Just the learning then? Just the general learning experience?

CM: Yes, there was a lot, it was a big journey that we went on. Then obviously, to be able to play, to play the music, that obviously is of such a [prolific] composer, it's there...

MAS: Yes, because he [Richard Shephard] composed the music in 2000 as well.

CM: Yes, the score was similar, although he did re-orchestrate the music slightly and I remember we had to go through all of the parts and make sure that everything was in its right place and proof-read various things. So we would spend various afternoons for doing that, so...

MAS: So all that was before the production began. How early did you get going? The actual production began 26 May but you were involved long before that?

CM: Yes. I think I was asked maybe January, February time, which is when I started to fix the actual band, mmm, but then that was... so I only had, what was that, about three or four months to actually fix about five weeks [of performance], so it's not that long to do it. And in an ideal situation, you would want the same players for every performance. But, obviously, trying to keep players down for five weeks....

MAS: Impossible! Richard said there had been changes during the 41 performances.

CM: Yes, yes.

MAS: I'm not surprised.

CM: Yes. So I tried to keep as many players to play at one time as I could, but it was very, very hard, so I had to take various steps along the way. So there were very few performances where the same band actually played. And so obviously that's because everyone's so busy. People think, that we're, because most of us were students and everything 'Oh they have loads of free time' but we don't.

MAS: No, especially not in the final year! I know, I have been a student as well...

CM: Because a couple of us had dissertations and what not, it was hard work, and that's it.

MAS: Mmm. But worthwhile, obviously. Did you take part in the rehearsals?

CM: Yes. The rehearsals was a funny time, because it was the week of the Final Recitals, mmm, and then, so being a trumpet player I didn't want to tire myself out too much obviously before something which could affect my degree mark. So I was very careful with how many rehearsals I came to. But then I, I was in a good position, whereby I was fixing the band so I could arrange it around me, selfishly you know! But then the rehearsals were quite long.

MAS: Was it in St Williams College or in the Minster?

CM: No, this was in the Minster.

MAS: OK, so it was the later rehearsals.

CM: Yes. And then Richard was very worried about the welfare of the band. I remember there was one rehearsal where the organist, Robert Smith, didn't actually play a note. So he was there for four or five hours and he didn't play anything at all. Umm, so I think at almost every rehearsal Richard got in gigantic packets of crisps and then a few beers and all sorts. Which nobody else really knew about, it was sort of a secret thing.

MAS: You were in your Padded Cell and you could eat the crisps! And the cast couldn't see.

CM: Yes.

MAS: Gosh, poor Robert Smith. And so, that was just which scenes happened to be called on? And none of them needed an organ, was that it?

CM: Mmm, no. So we would only do, say, a couple of cues within those four or five hours.

MAS: That sounds awful, actually.

CM: Yes. Although it wasn't too bad, with being under the stage, we could hear if there was any bits of work we needed to do, we could have our laptops or Ipads, so...

MAS: So the time wasn't wasted then completely?

CM: No. We were playing various games on our I pads, Scrabble and various things, and watching TV as well so, it was quite a luxurious life, working as it were....

MAS: I asked Richard about the sound reverberation in the Minster as a player, or as a musician, and he said in fact that didn't impact because it was all managed electronically by the sound people. Was that your experience?

CM: Yes. Yes, there were only several moments where you could actually hear the reverberation coming back. But mostly we couldn't really hear much else. But I think one of the hardest things to do was to concentrate on the tuning of the band. Because we couldn't actually hear the organ properly, so which is obviously the one instrument we all need to tune to. And so, but, from what I've heard from various people that wasn't a big issue but....

MAS: I'm trying to remember, that's why I was frowning. Obviously I did see them [the Plays] and hear them, and they were fantastic! I can't remember thinking there was anyone out of tune.

CM: Fantastic! [laughs]

MAS: So you've been through the rehearsals, and then you came to the opening night. Was that frightening?

CM: Um. I don't think it was too frightening. It was... I suppose, because we had had a full run-through the night before, and that was the first time everyone properly understood what was happening where, and obviously how smoothly it would run. I think most people were worried about how long the Plays were going to go on for. But I think towards the end we managed to cut it down.

MAS: It was a long play. It was quarter past eleven before it finished, most nights.

CM: Yes.

MAS: But obviously you are a performer, so you are used to first nights, as it were.

CM: Yes. If you don't really think of it as a first night, as such. You think this is the start of something which is essentially my life for the next five weeks, so... Or which had been for longer for me, as I was trying to sort our various things and issues. Mmm... And I remember there were some issues which I encountered. For instance there was one – I think it was the fourth or third to last performance, and one of the

players messaged someone else within the band to say Oh I'm ill, that I can't turn up. And this was at 28 minutes past! So which then left me two minutes to try to find a dep[uty]. Which I managed to do! Thankfully he lived quite close to the Minster, he came in within ten minutes.

MAS: [Gasps] Which instrument was that?

CM: That was clarinet.

MAS: You said the horns were ... or the woodwind...

CM: Generally the brass section was very good but that was because I had a better knowledge of who was reliable and who was a good player. But then not so much with the woodwind.

MAS: So you had to find a clarinettist at two minutes notice, oh!

CM: Yes.

MAS: Poor you! Phew! [they laugh]

CM: But it was a bit of a panic, yes. But I managed to do it.

MAS: And he got in before there was too much obvious gap in the music? He managed to get in?

CM: Yes.

MAS: Well done! I think that's probably a tribute to modern technology, that you can ring round, or text round or whatever.

CM: It is, yes.

MAS: Wow! So, you've talked about hiring, helping to hire, if that's the word, the rest of the orchestra. And your responsibilities on a typical performance night were replacing people who dropped out, but playing the trumpet as well.

CM: Yes.

MAS: And you were there for most of the 41 nights, but not all of them, you said you had a week away.

CM: Yes. Yes, for most of them I was there and trumpet was my main role though as I just said occasionally I had to sort out various problems which arose.

MAS: Richard said you were indispensable. I think that's the word he used.

CM: Oh, did he, so kind. [They laugh]

MAS: Just as an aside, did you by any chance, did you have the opportunity to stand in the open Minster with your trumpet and do a fanfare?

CM: No, no, unfortunately not. Although I do actually remember, when Phil McGinley did fall ill I've remembered that Richard said, Ah, did I want to go and play, play Jesus? And I said only if I could have my trumpet and I could be on the Cross and play away! Unfortunately Richard wouldn't let me, so....

MAS: [laughs] Well luckily the stand-in did very well, Lucifer stood in, and he is in fact a professional actor.

CM: Very well, yes.

MAS: Yes, luckily. But he hadn't, apparently, ever practised being on the Cross.

CM: No, really? I didn't know about that.

MAS: No, nor did I. So he did very well, thank goodness. So you were present on 27 June when Phil McGinley fell ill, and you had to skip some cues of music, I think. And then....

CM: Yes. Yes, I think generally the band had no idea what was actually happening. Well then obviously it was only about five or ten minutes until the end of the performance.

MAS: Yes, it was after the Resurrection and approaching the Last Judgement.

CM: So and then we quickly had to come in, I think, a few bars before the last cue. So we had no idea what was happening until I think the day after, actually.

MAS: The stage manager did come on and tell the audience there had been a break, and then started again. You weren't able to hear that?

CM: Well yes. Well, so... So we heard that the stage manager said that there was some sort of a problem but then again we had no idea what the problem was.

MAS: So right, you knew no more than the audience?

CM: No.

MAS: Right, mmm. And the next day you found out what had happened and...

CM: Yes.

MAS: Did it make any significant difference to you, having a stand-in, an understudy playing Jesus?

CM: No, not really at all. I think that's because we were really concentrating on the music. And it was Richard's job, obviously, to follow various speech cues, to bring us all in.

MAS: Yes. Mmm. What have you learnt musically as a result of working on the Plays?

CM: Mmm. Musically, I suppose, [pauses]

MAS: It's a different kind of music, Richard's music, from a lot of other things you'll have taken part in?

CM: Yes. Then I suppose I hadn't really played much church-type music before. So this was different from various things I'd done before. But it wasn't so vastly different that I... it was fine. I think that as a musician you are just used to going into a pit or a concert hall and just playing what's in front of you. And it doesn't really matter what it is for or anything.

MAS: You were more enclosed, perhaps, than usual, but otherwise it was that same adaptability that just was normal?

CM: Yes.

MAS: What about professional learning? How is this going to help in your future career?

CM: Well, I've definitely learnt a lot about speaking and dealing with various people who are somewhat hard to get on with. And also I have felt that sometimes there was a lack of communication between myself and Richard as against, say, the production team. For instance in the rehearsals, I didn't know how many rehearsals the band were needed for - which was, it turned out, all - until, say, a week before.

Then I had to organise a week's worth of rehearsals for the band, at you know quite short notice.

MAS: So you had told them 41 performances and then you had to tell them, Oh and all these rehearsals too?

CM: Yes.

MAS: Ouch! So you became a manager, almost?

CM: Yes, I suppose I did, actually. And you know there's forwarding various bits of information on to the band as well. And then I was a point of call if there were any issues, people generally came to me, and obviously if I could sort it out I did. And if not, Richard or someone else.

MAS: Which member of the production team, apart from Richard, were you mostly involved with, if anyone?

CM: I think it was mainly just the crew generally. There was no-one really in particular.

MAS: You didn't have a particular producer assigned to be your ~~assistant~~? To be your first contact, as it were, apart from Richard?

CM: No. I think the person I dealt with most was Joan. Mmm

MAS: Don't worry, it's not a trick question, I was just wondering how it worked, that was all. So that will be Joan..... [looks at programme] Joan Humphreys [Production Manager].

CM: Joan Humphreys.

MAS: I'm just interested in how it all works together. Because you've got so many volunteers, including among what they call the Creatives. But I remember when, after Philip McGinley was ill, and you had the two actors understudying, they were apparently each given a producer literally to be alongside them in the wings, and prompt them, and make sure they were in the right costumes etc. So I know there was something in place like that. I wondered if there was a 'fall-back' for the musicians, if Richard had become ill, or something, whether anyone could have helped you.

CM: Well, there was Danny [Purtell, Assistant to Music Director], who would have had to have come in to do it. But I think it's quite a hard play to actually, musically,

direct. So I think that if anything did happen to Richard then it would have been left to Danny and I, probably. Obviously probably I would have known the play better than most people, having spent the most time dealing with it.

MAS: And at rehearsals.

CM: Yes, but also going through the scores. And also the script. But yes, I think.....It would have been one of those occasions where you would have just dealt with the scenario, and tried to do as best as you could.

MAS: And did you manage to do all that while completing your degree? Have you had your results?

CM: Yes, that's fine. I got a II-1.

MAS: Well done. Good. Is there anything else you'd like to add about the Plays or about York or the whole experience?

CM: Mmm. Well, I think that the Mystery Plays were a great thing to be involved with. They are something that I will never forget that I was involved with. And how I feel it has acted as a springboard on to various other things that I've done. And I feel I've met some very interesting people along the way, who have helped me in various ventures within York. Because York is somewhere I would like to stay. I think it's a great city, there is a lot going on. And I feel obviously the Minster is a key element to the city and everything seems to centre around it. So when something as huge as the Mystery Plays happens within it, you know, there were various people who would, who would flock and see it. There were various people... So in between the matinee and the evening performance then we would usually go to the pub. Where else better to go in York?

MAS: There's certainly a choice of pubs! But there were meals available at St William's College as well, weren't there? That was a helpful thing.

CM: Yes there were. And so then you kind of got talking to various people. I remember talking to someone from New Zealand that, who had only recently heard about the Plays, since their arrival to York. And then they came along for that night.

MAS: Oh, wonderful!

CM: Yes, I think that it attracted people from all over, not just locally.

MAS: I think so too, I get contacts, from various people who find out about the Archive and email me, and I had people saying Oh, I'm coming later to England to

see the 2016 Plays. So you are right. And you are back in York at the moment. Have you managed to find work here or....?

CM: Well, I'm currently still at the University of York, studying for a Masters in Performance.

MAS: Right.

CM: So work is obviously, essentially, today's place of work is somewhat a hairy area.

MAS: Yes, it's an expensive business, doing an MA.

CM: Yes, it is. But I do various playing jobs around York, and teaching, and various bits of admin. Then I work at the University, I have a few jobs up there.

MAS: Good, good.

CM: So you know, it's essentially just whatever I can pick up. And eventually hopefully it will all increase. And I've been very fortunate to work with the Heslington Foundation, which is to do with the University of York, the Music Department, and also recently the Archbishop of York Youth Trust. I do various bits of research for them.

MAS: Right. So you keep the wolf from the door!

CM: Yes.

MAS: I'm sure your Mum and Dad are glad to hear that! OK, anything else you want to add, before we wrap up?

CM: I don't think so, no.

MAS: Well, thank you very much for coming in to talk to us today, Connor, and I'll let you see the transcript as soon as I possibly can. Thank you, and all the best for your future career.

Ends.