



Against the odds

South African double bassist

Leon Bosch had to overcome difficult

circumstances in the early years of his career. **Lawrence Milner** interviews him as he returns to his native country for a series of concerts

‘MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE DOUBLE BASS BECAME A complete and all-consuming passion’ explains Leon Bosch, co-principal bassist with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and principal of the London Mozart Players, recounting his early years with the instrument. Bosch settled on the bass at the age of 16, having already spent 11 years working his way through the violin, viola and cello. It was a close battle between the two largest members of the string family for Bosch’s heart – he had already enrolled at the University of Cape Town as a cellist with the double bass as his second instrument before swapping the order of his studies.

But, had Bosch been able to pursue his prime aspiration to become a lawyer, the cello/double bass debate might never have occurred. Born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1961, Bosch was forbidden by the repressive regime of the time to study law, so applied to the University’s music faculty instead ‘as a light-hearted prank.’

The ‘prank’ soon turned more serious. Once enrolled at the University, Bosch studied with Zoltan Kovats, principal double bassist of the Cape Town Symphony Orchestra at that time. A single year into his studies, the young student was invited to play in the Symphony Orchestra’s bass section alongside his

mentor. Only another 12 months passed before he was giving his first solo performance of Dittersdorf's concerto in E major. Completing his Bachelor of Music Performance degree at the University, he received the highest mark ever awarded there in a performance examination.

Post-university, Bosch quickly realised that he would have to study abroad if he really wanted to further his performance career, but was thwarted once again by the apartheid laws which decreed that overseas scholarships could only be given to white performers. However, Bosch was undeterred. 'I had a passionate commitment to the double bass and never entertained the idea that I would fail in my pursuit', he asserts. Fortunately, a number of private individuals came forward to sponsor his travel to England where he was heard playing by Rodney Slatford, the former Head of School of Strings at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM), who offered to teach him. Bosch enrolled at the RNCM following a successful interview with Eleanor Warren to study with Slatford and Duncan McTier. He describes his time at RNCM as 'extremely fruitful'. Bosch's prestigious record of achievements also continued there, as he received the College's PPRNCM (Professional Performer of the RNCM) with distinction, the first such award to a double bassist in the College's history. Solo engagements followed, as did other prizes. One of these, the North West Arts Young Chamber



Musicians' Platform, gave him the opportunity to commission a new composition for the double bass. The resultant work was *Pueblo* by John McCabe for unaccompanied solo bass, which was premiered in Manchester in 1985.

Studies completed, Bosch embarked on the varied professional orchestral and chamber career that continues to this day. His first assignment was with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, moving onto The Manchester Camerata as principal in 1985. His playing career has also taken in the BBC Philharmonic, Hallé, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Opera North and Scottish Chamber orchestras, plus the Moscow Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra, Brodsky Quartet and Goldberg Ensemble as a freelance performer, a career path that he chose to 'give me greater variety in my playing.'

A decade after his first principal appointment, Bosch began his current association with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, touring with the orchestra's founder, Sir Neville Marriner. 'Chamber music represents the most enjoyable part of my musical life,' he enthuses, explaining why he has focused on this area through most of his professional career – which has taken in almost all of the major chamber orchestras in the UK. 'My love of music embraces many styles and periods, but I've got a passion for unearthing unusual, worthy compositions that wouldn't otherwise see the light of day,' Bosch relates. The late 19th century Russian composer Sergei Lyapunov has been one of his biggest enthusiasms, and the writer's Sextet for Piano, String Quartet and Double Bass (1915) is among the pieces that Bosch has helped to bring back to life. This enthusiasm also extends to new music commissions, and the Academy of St Martin in the Fields is currently considering requesting a violin and bass double concerto from Russian composer Dmitri Smirnov, to act as a companion piece to the Bottesini *Gran Duo Concertante*. Smirnov had previously heard Bosch perform the Bottesini work and subsequently offered to compose an original piece for the same solo instruments.

Bosch has strong views on his instrument's role in the orchestra. 'The double bass has to be an instinctive and sensitive accompanist,' he claims. 'It has to be able to enhance and not undermine the best efforts of those playing the melody. But all orchestral violinists should spend at least one day playing the bass line,' he jokes. 'Centuries of preoccupation with melodies, to the exclusion of all else, induces myopia in some cases. Wayward violinists are the scourge of every orchestral bassist.' (Conversely, he concedes, it could be argued that all bassists should be given the melody from time to time in order to learn the art of phrasing.)

Bosch acquired his current instrument in 1995 from a professional who was on the verge of retiring from music. The senior bassist decided that he wanted his instrument to go to a young, gifted player who would be a deserving owner. He found Bosch fitted that category and sold the instrument to him at a nominal price. It's a very beautiful example of the luthiers' art and was assumed to be the work of Carlo Giuseppe Testore. However, during a recent restoration it was suggested that it was a Nicolo Gagliano. Whatever the truth of the matter, Bosch states that he loves the instrument 'completely and utterly'. He favours the German style of bowing and has in his bow collection two Pfretzschners, a Berndt, a Dölling, a Le Blanc, and a Paesold.

Over the course of his career, Bosch has developed a vast repertoire of solo bass works, which he has performed with many orchestras and for music clubs and societies throughout



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the UK – and two of his favourite works remain Bottesini’s B minor concerto and Koussevitsky’s solo bass concerto. He has made it his mission to bring to light a number of original virtuoso bass works and perform these alongside premieres of his own arrangements and new commissions. Bosch’s fascinating repertoire grows with every season – as Sir Charles Groves put it in 1988, after conducting Bosch in a performance of Bottesini’s *Gran Duo Concertante*: ‘I know that he can play anything there is to be found in the repertoire for solo double bass, for he is a true virtuoso.’

Despite the setbacks of his early years, Bosch has also retained his interest in law. He recently completed a Masters degree in intelligence and international relations. But, despite the circumstances of his early musical education, Bosch is glad that he didn’t pursue his original career path. ‘If I’d gone into law I would never have played the double bass and developed my talent for the instrument,’ he says. **DB**

Forthcoming performances

UK

30 March 2003 – Abbots Langley Orchestra, St Lawrence Church, Abbots Langley: Dittersdorf concerto in E major
16 May 2003 – London Mozart Players, West Herts College, Hemel Hempstead: Koussevitsky concerto
2 July 2003 – Stevenage Symphony Orchestra, Stevenage Hertfordshire: Bottesini B minor concerto
11 and 12 October 2003 – Beauchamp Sinfonietta: Bottesini B minor concerto and Elegy and Tarantella

South Africa

4 and 5 June 2003 – Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra: Koussevitsky concerto
8 June 2003 – Fish Hoek, Cape Town: Duo Recital Rossini (cello and double bass)

A South African concert

In February 2003 the prodigal son returned to his South African homeland for a short tour, performing three concerts in two days. These comprised a concert at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and two recitals at the Linder Auditorium, all in Johannesburg. He was accompanied by a 25-piece local string orchestra, conducted by David Murphy, a young British conductor. Murphy studied violin with members of the Amadeus Quartet at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, then later worked with Sir Charles Mackerras on presenting Beethoven symphonies using original manuscript sources. Murphy travelled with Bosch from the UK for the concerts – making his first trip to South Africa.

Because of economics, Bosch was unable to bring his own instrument with him and elected to borrow two basses locally to perform on. Why two basses? ‘The programme consisted of pieces which required different tunings. In order to save time I used two basses, one with solo and the other with orchestral tuning’, Bosch explains. Although both instruments were by the same maker, Justin Derazey, they differed slightly in the size of their string stops and necks. Arriving in Johannesburg the evening prior to the first rehearsal, Bosch hadn’t even seen the borrowed basses in advance.

The difficult programme, recorded at the SABC studios comprised combinations from the Rossini Duetto for cello and bass, Teddy Bor’s Bach at the double (trio), Bass Quartet for Strauss in the Doghouse, Eccles’ G minor sonata with string orchestra, Bottesini’s Fantasy on ‘La Sonnambula’ for bass and strings and *Gran Duo Concertante* for bass and violin with string orchestra. The principal violinist, Irene Tsoniff, joined Bosch for the Bottesini performance. SABC intend to transmit the performances later in 2003 on television in South Africa.