

# Bass notes

Since leaving the Academy of St Martin in the Fields in 2014, bass player Leon Bosch has been encouraging a growing list of composers to have deep thoughts. Toby Deller reports

**T**he biggest news for me is – well, before I get to the biggest news, I'm going to divert for a second,' says Leon Bosch, who goes on to tell me about a concerto being written for him by eminent South African composer

Péter Louis van Dijk (Bosch, now a British citizen, was born in Cape Town). But his digression does not end there.

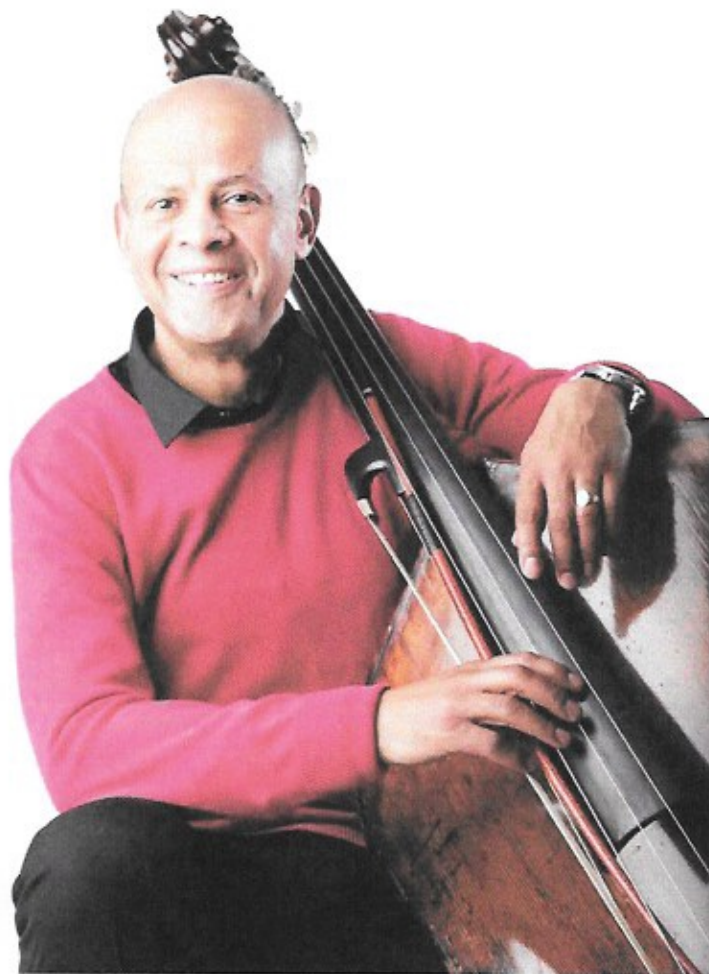
'Another, English, composer I have to mention before I get to the big news, is Paul Patterson. He's writing a concerto

for me that was meant to be finished for performance in late 2015 to early 2016 but that's shifted a bit. It's going to be the piece that completes the set because he's written a fiddle concerto, he's written a viola concerto for Sarah-Jane Bradley and a cello concerto for Raphael Wallfisch. But there's no bass concerto. It was my idea to go to him to finish this quartet of concertos for string instruments, because he's one of Britain's great composers and it would be a shame if he didn't.'

Until summer 2014, Bosch had been principal double bass with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, a post he relinquished specifically to allow him to focus on solo and chamber music playing. Already he has racked up dedications from a range of composers over the years, including Allan Stephenson, Dmitri Smirnov, David Ellis, Malcolm Lipkin, Philip Wood, Christopher Gunning and Arturo Cuellar. Meanwhile, Paul Hanmer, Robert Fokkens, Elis Pehkonen and Nikolai Kapustin are among others with works in the pipeline.

'The reason I go about getting composers to write? Take, for example, Benjamin Britten. He was one of Britain's foremost composers and he had a wonderful relationship with Adrian Beers, a wonderful bass player who played in the English Chamber Orchestra. But the tragedy is that he never wrote a piece for bass because Adrian never asked him. So I'm going to make sure that the great composers of our time, I'm going to ask them to write something so that when they've passed on, they've left something for future generations.'

As a result, Roxanna Panufnik wrote him *Shsholoza*, a homage to the popular



◀ Free agent: Leon Bosch

South African song, that he premiered at the Swaledale Festival in 2015. And John Woolrich has written him *To the Silver Bow*, a double concerto for viola and double bass with string orchestra that he performed in February with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and his old colleague, viola player Robert Smissen. The pair appeared together as soloists playing the Sinfonia Concertante on Bosch's recording of bass music by Dittersdorf. But apparently the idea of writing for the unusual pairing had already occurred to Woolrich, who has described the two instruments as nocturnal partners (the bow of the title is the moon, as a line in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has it) in contrast to the more diurnal violin and cello.

Bosch recalls that the first piece written for him was during his student days at the Royal Northern College of Music when he won a commission from his choice of British composer as a competition prize. It actually provided a somewhat cautionary tale for the young player.

'It was suggested to me John McCabe, because at that time I had no idea who to commission. This piece arrived, on big sheets of paper and it looked impenetrably dense. I looked through it from beginning to end and I decided I didn't like it. Despite the fact I'd programmed it in one or two recitals, I played another piece instead and I put the McCabe piece in the music cabinet drawer. There it sat until I realised that actually I couldn't do that, that I had a responsibility. I decided the way I was going to challenge myself was by playing this piece for an hour every day for a whole month. By the time I got to the middle of the month I'd fallen in love with the piece. Then I realised that it's all very well to say that you don't like something, but you can't say that until you've really spent a lot of time and tried to understand it properly.'

We eventually get round to the big news. 'It's easy to always do things within national boundaries, with composers with whom you rub shoulders day to day. But the composer who's just agreed to write a concerto for me is Wynton Marsalis. I played a piece of his called *A Fiddler's Tale* which is a bit like *The Soldier's Tale*, for small ensemble. And I liked it. And then I thought: this is a composer that I would like to ask to write for double bass. We've been in touch and we get on really well. On the basis of the personal relationship that's developed between us, and because he's found out a

© PAUL MARC MITCHELL



© CARLA REES PHOTOGRAPHY



▲ On the bass case (clockwise from top left): Roxanna Panufnik, Robert Fokkens, Paul Patterson, Wynton Marsalis

bit about my playing, he's going to write a bass concerto that's going to be ready for performance in 2018.'

That is a few years away, however. In the meantime, Bosch will keep plugging away on his personal projects – in particular, he is looking for further performances of the Woolrich, and there is his ensemble of handpicked colleagues, I Musicanti, to attend to as well.

'Once one has become professionalised as a musician,' he ponders, 'it can be a double-edged sword, because as a professional

musician you play music chosen by other people in places chosen by other people. There's very little chance to commit yourself to something that you personally believe in. Now that I'm roughly a free agent and I'm at a point in my life when I can make choices, the truth is I'd rather be penniless doing something I believe in and something beautiful than earning enough to pay the bills but being artistically unsatisfied. And I'm braver now, at the age of 54!' ■

[www.leonbosch.co.uk](http://www.leonbosch.co.uk)