

Royal Manchester College of Music, where he would later win the Hiles Gold Medal for Orchestra Playing. “At those early concerts in Leeds I would sit in seats behind the orchestra to watch. It was wonderful. The nearest player was no more than 10 or 12 feet away. You could see all the instruments, and everything the conductor did. I developed a real interest in conducting from those seats.”

This interest blossomed alongside his talent for the clarinet during his time at college. For its end of term

concerts, the college would invite noted guests, one of whom was Sir John Barbirolli, one of Britain’s greatest conductors, who was with the Halle Orchestra at the time. For one performance, Christopher played clarinet in the Mozart Clarinet quintet, alongside a string quartet, while Barbirolli was in the audience.

“It was wonderful. Sir John ‘bravoed’ the performance several times. I didn’t know it at the time but this was to have a significant effect on my career. Some time later a temporary clarinet position became available in the Halle Orchestra, and he invited me to play. Sometimes I doubled for first and sometimes played second clarinet. So there I was playing for this wonderful orchestra, while still at college.” It was something he would continue to do on a freelance basis long after he finished his studies.

“I fell under the spell of Barbirolli as a conductor,” he says. “He had such extraordinary qualities – I always felt he was telepathic and I’d often get the shivers during a performance. There might be a particularly important piece coming up for a section, for instance the woodwind, and he would direct his attention towards you. He would want a particular nuance added to the piece, and I would feel that I knew exactly what he wanted. I would play it, as would everyone else, and a little bit of magic would happen, something more than just the notes. I never came across any other conductor with that kind of gift. That made me want to conduct even more.”

This was fortunate, for throughout his clarinet career Christopher had been battling a physical problem. “I suffered from mouth ulcers very badly,” he says. “Eventually I could only play for two weeks before the ulcers flared up and they would take

two weeks to heal. It was incredibly frustrating. I realised there was an increasing risk of me having to pull out of concerts. It had already happened and it was only going to get more frequent.”

Despite his problem, Christopher was accepted by the Royal Academy of Music to continue his clarinet studies under Jack Brymer, one of the great clarinetists of the day. The Academy also ran a conducting course, which Christopher joined in his third year. In order to get a place on the course, he significantly exaggerated the amount of experience he had enjoyed back in Leeds. On the first day he conducted an orchestra in the morning, and in the afternoon his efforts were critiqued. After a nervous lunch break, the lecturer opened with the line: “Christopher clearly has the most conducting experience.” In fact, it was the first time that he had conducted that scale of orchestra in his life, but the many hours spent playing under Barbirolli had clearly left their mark.

“After finishing at the Academy I won the Gulbenkian scholarship for The Advanced Conducting course at Guildhall,” says Christopher. “With the ulcers still a problem, I made the decision to concentrate on a conducting career.” Here his natural flare for conducting came through. He won the Ricordi Conducting Prize in his first year and took part in masterclasses with conducting luminaries such as Sir George Solti.

At the age of 28, Christopher was appointed apprentice conductor at the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra. It was the start of a happy few years which saw success in this post followed by a year as assistant conductor with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra. When he returned to the UK, he was hired as one of the conductors of the Royal

*Viel Richardson meets Christopher Ball – performer, conductor, arranger, composer and unlikely adherent to the Quincy Jones school of subconscious inspiration*