

An Interview with James Holland

BY ANDREW P. SIMCO

JAMES HOLLAND WAS PRINCIPAL PERCUSSIONIST of the London Symphony Orchestra from 1962 until 1971, before moving to the same position with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, a position from which he has recently retired. In addition, he has been for many years percussionist with the London Sinfonietta, where he is still engaged, and has worked with such eminent composers as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Oliver Knussen, Krystof Penderecki and Hans Werner Henze, just to name a few. He is the author of the book *Percussion*, published by Kahn and Averill as part of the Menuhin Music Guide Series.

The Scandinavian Percussion Symposium was held at the Norwegian State Music Academy in Oslo, November 10–12, 1995. Holland gave an informative and interesting two-hour presentation on Saturday, November 11, and on the following afternoon, the two of us sat down and taped the following interview.

Andrew Simco: Jim, you might want to start off with telling us a little bit about your background.

James Holland: I started percussion when I was about thirteen, I suppose. I was very friendly with a boy whose father had a dance band in the South End. They used to do the odd radio show, and there was always a trumpet lying about, and I could never even get a “raspberry” out of the thing. When we were about thirteen, we joined the Army cadets at school, so we thought we’d have a go for the band.

Simco: You come from London?

Holland: That’s right. I thought it was no good me taking up the bugle, so I took the drum. Then I think I was a little jealous of my friend, because he was learning violin, and although I was learning the piano and was much further on, he was in the orchestra! I wanted to be in the orchestra, so I watched the lad play tims for two weeks, and then he left and went on to university. At the time I didn’t know one end of the stick from the other.

There was an amateur orchestra at home, and the conductor lived just down the road from us. Absolutely on the spur of the moment one afternoon, I saw his wife on the street and I asked her if there was anyone there who could teach me. That was how I started.

Simco: You mentioned in your clinic that when you started, there were only about eighteen percussion instruments listed in the Grove’s Dictionary of Music.

Holland: Sixteen, and that was the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*!

Simco: You also mentioned your first professional teacher, who was timpanist of the London Philharmonic at the time.

Holland: That was Peter Allen, and he played on four hand-tuned drums. His skill and facility over those four hand-tuned drums always had my utmost admiration. I can remember later on, having to take over an Elgar symphony, it took all my time to read the piece and play it properly on pedal-tuned timpani. I remember thinking, “But Peter played this on four hand-tuned timpani!” I was amazed by this, but then again, all the London players at the time used hand-tuned drums. Jimmy Bradshaw, who was the timpanist of the Philharmonia and an incredible player, had a set of pre-war Leedy pedal timpani, but he de-activated the pedals by strapping them into place, and he used them as hand-tuned drums!

Simco: As I understand it, the players in Britain at the time felt that the mechanics of the pedal timpani tended to dampen the sound of the instrument. They would rather have hand-tuned drums with a full, bell-like tone quality, rather than pedal-tuned drums with slightly less tone quality. Having had a chance to look at some of the instruments of that period, it seems as if the players of that period preferred a hand-tuned instrument with a very deep kettle. If tuned properly, they must

have had a magnificent sound!

Holland: That’s right. I mean, Jimmy Bradshaw’s sound on all those Philharmonia recordings in the 1950s was absolutely fabulous, as was Peter Allen’s sound.

Simco: You stated in your clinic yesterday that your original intention was not to be a professional musician, but to be a teacher.

Holland: Right, but I very quickly realized that teaching wasn’t for me. I was doing more and more playing and, of course, one had to do National Service, so I took the audition for the Central Band in the RAF, and ended up there for about three years, which meant that I could still take lessons, so I used to do my xylophone solos! Looking back, the RAF band was all good experience. But all these years later, I can remember going down to the audition, and being terribly disappointed by the instruments. I expected them to be new and gleaming, and it wasn’t at all like that.

Simco: You mentioned the instruments in the London Philharmonic during the period you studied with Peter Allen. He showed you what they had, and you stated that you were horrified to discover what they actually used.

Holland: I just could not believe my eyes! They had four hand-tuned timpani of the Parsons-type, a single-headed bass drum of about forty inches in diameter and the pair of cymbals was a fifteen-inch and a sixteen-inch—not your matched pair of today. There were two deep snare drums, which only sat on trestles, so they could only be played at an angle of forty-five degrees and there was no adjustment for height, a tambourine with half the jingles missing, a three-octave xylophone, and a glockenspiel with all raised screws, so if you weren’t totally accurate, you’d wind up hitting the screws instead of the bars. There were some triangles and a tam tam maybe twenty-six inches in diameter, which always reminded me of



kicking a dustbin lid. It was an absolutely appalling sound!

Simco: In terms of instrument quality, when did things begin to change for the better?

Holland: In the late 1950s there was a very good recording firm that began to make records in London. I believe it was the Everest label. Then, of course, as some of our players went abroad to shop, we began to get Avedis Zildjian cymbals and Paiste tam tams. Composers and conductors were traveling much more over the world, and they would see these ethnic instruments. The composers would write for them, and of course the film world and pop world all contributed to the influx of new instruments. This led to the situation where a conductor or composer would ask, "Haven't you got a proper bass drum?"—by which they meant a double-headed bass drum.

Simco: I've seen the single-headed bass drums only in pictures, but from what you said in your clinic, I understand that they are still in use. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this particular drum? I notice that the BBC Symphony has one such instrument.

Holland: They are wonderful for certain pieces. For example, I use one in performing Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*. The single-head drum offers a more focused sound, which I prefer. Last year, we recorded a Stravinsky piece which I had never come across before, a late work, called *The Flood*. This has a narrator, and while the narration is going on, there is a bass drum semi-quaver pattern underneath. I knew that it wouldn't be any good

turning up with just one bass drum, and as it turned out, the single-headed bass drum, slightly damped, was just what they wanted.

Simco: I imagine that it would work very well in the Verdi Requiem as well.

Holland: Yes, sometimes. Perhaps in the solo in the "Dies Irae." However, there are even larger single-headed bass drums in London that would be more suited to that particular piece. In the *Rite of Spring* I would use the normal, or double-headed bass drum, and the single-headed bass drum flat, and slightly muffled for the end of Part One.

Speaking of the *Rite of Spring*, we did the 50th anniversary performance of the *Rite of Spring* under Pierre Monteux, and we were rehearsing at the Royal Academy of Music. This was a three-hour rehearsal, and Monteux, who was about eighty-five or eighty-six at the time, said to the orchestra, "We play now the whole piece." A voice called out from the back of the hall, "Oh no you won't," and up ran his wife, who proceeded in no uncertain terms to tell him off. He sort of waved her away, and then turned 'round to the orchestra and said, "Part Two."

Simco: When did you switch over to using the double-headed bass drum?

Holland: We started getting the double-headed bass drums around the end of the 1950s, but of course there were quite a few made in London. Of course, when Kurt came to the orchestra, we got one of the German-made bass drums where the depth of the shell is greater than the diameter of the playing surface. (Author's note: Jim is referring to Kurt Hans Goedicke, principal timpanist of the LSO from 1963 to the present.)

Simco: I heard that drum when the LSO came to Carnegie Hall in 1974 or 1975. The sound of that instrument positively filled Carnegie Hall!

Holland: It's a very interesting sound. I remember only a few weeks ago when I was in the car driving home, I switched the radio on, and they were broadcasting the *Symphonie Fantastique* of Berlioz. When I switched the radio on, the performance had reached the middle of the third movement, so I thought, "Inter-

esting. Obviously a very good band." They reached the last movement, and there were proper bells, but I didn't really like the sound of them. Then it got to the bass drum, and I remember thinking, "Oh! I don't like that! It sounds like an overgrown tom-tom." I thought "Which orchestra is this?" It turned out to be the Berlin Philharmonic and Karajan!

Simco: I guess that it must have been recorded a bit on the "dry" side.

Holland: It's always a bit of an education when you're listening to something, and you have no idea who is actually playing!

Simco: To get back to your studies, once you began to study with Peter Allen, you changed the focus of your education from teaching to performance. Was this at the Royal Academy?

Holland: No, Trinity College. I was only with Peter Allen for a short time there, before I left, because as I said yesterday, it took them all of fifteen months to find a suitable instructor. I had a few kit (drumset) lessons with Max Abrams at the same time, although these were "under the table," so to speak. If Peter Allen found out I was studying kit, I would have been thrown out on my ear!

Also, I learned a tremendous amount from Charlie Donaldson, who was my predecessor as principal percussionist with the London Symphony. He was way ahead of his time in a lot of things. Everest actually gave Charles a whole session to experiment with different drums and sticks, just to see what they sounded like.

Simco: Sounds like they were a very forward-looking recording company—very much like the Mercury "Living Presence" team. Speaking of Mercury, you did many of their sessions, did you not? (Author's note: The Mercury "Living Presence" recording team made many excellent recordings with the LSO, most of them conducted by Antal Dorati during the late fifties and early sixties. Most of these recordings have been re-released on compact disc.)

Holland: That's right. They used these omni-directional microphones, and it was always the same with Dorati, who would always catch the first clarinet



player, Gervase de Peyer, reading a magazine at his stand. Dorati would get very upset with him, and then they would have to pacify him. That would take about half an hour, and then he'd come back in, and we could resume recording. Of course, Gervase managed to keep reading his magazine!

Simco: Did you go the LSO right after attending Trinity College?

Holland: No. I started with the London Philharmonic. I played with them for several years before going over to the London Symphony. I experienced the last years of Boult, then there was Eduard van Beinum, and later John Pritchard, who later had the BBC Symphony. I will always remember John Pritchard being the first person to address the musicians in the orchestra by their Christian name. Up until that point, one was always addressed by the conductor according to the instrument one played, for example "Mr. Clarinet" or "Mr. Timpani" and so on. Using Christian names in rehearsal was unheard of. When John Pritchard began to call us by our Christian names, I remember being quite taken aback. I also remember an incident involving Sir Malcolm Sargent and Dennis Clift, who was principal trumpet of the LSO at the time. Sir Malcolm kept on calling Dennis "trumpet." So Dennis held up the trumpet and said to the trumpet, "Well, go on, answer him. He's speaking to you."

Simco: How long were you with the London Philharmonic?

Holland: Five-and-a-half years. As I finished, we did a six-and-a-half week Far East tour. I returned from the tour to find that my wife had taken in a date with the London Symphony. I went to the Royal Festival Hall, and as I went up in the elevator, I ran into Ernest Fleischmann, who was the LSO's General Manager. He asked if I would be interested in the job as principal percussionist of the LSO. This was about 1962. I said, "Um...possibly."

This was *really* how I felt! I felt very loyal to the previous principal percussion player, Charles Donaldson, who had been very good to me. I phoned Charles up, and he advised me to take it. But he also advised me to hold out for certain conditions, one of the most important being the fee—seven pounds per service, I think—and he also advised me to insist on being able to be released for other engagements from time to time. I followed all of his advice to the letter, and it stood me in very good stead. In those days, the principal percussionist was regarded as a second-line principal, paid at the same level as the bass trombone—definitely not as a proper first-chair player. This was fairly common, as even in the States and Europe at the time, the timpanist was regarded as the only principal in the percussion section.

Simco: At least in the USA, all that changed by the mid- to late-1960s, so

that by approximately 1970 or so, you had the timpanist, who was a principal, but responsible only for the timpani, and you also had a percussionist designated as a principal and paid as such who was responsible for organizing the section and playing many, if not all, of the key percussion parts. Prior to that, the timpanist in many orchestras was in charge of organizing the section. This was due to several factors—one being the fact that since he played most of the repertory, he was "on hand," so to speak, and the conductor was used to dealing with him. Also, in many cases, he was also the most skilled of the percussionists available. However, as standards of instruction and tuition increased, more able percussionists joined the orchestras and it was easier to turn over the job of organizing the section to them.

Holland: I see. I'd imagine that it would be very difficult, especially nowadays, for the timpanist to run the section, what with all the complex contemporary music we have today. I remember once, when I was still with the LPO, going to an interview for the principal percussion job with the Philharmonia. This was when James Bradshaw was still the timpanist. So I said to the management, "Obviously when Mr. Bradshaw retires I'd expect full control of the percussion section." They reacted with absolute shock and horror! They thought I had a lot a nerve!

Simco: Referring back to the fact that when you started, there were only sixteen instruments listed in the Oxford Dictionary of Music, how many would you say there are today?

Holland: Well, I am just working on a video. I'd actually like to have the instruments listed on some sort of CD-ROM, so that composers can actually see and hear the instruments as they write for them, and have a better idea of their capabilities. I think I am up to about two hundred by now.

Simco: Quite a difference indeed! Speaking of composers, you spoke yesterday about working with Pierre Boulez. From the way you spoke of him, I gather that you have a great deal of respect for him. Can you tell us a little about him?

Holland: Pierre first came to the BBC in the mid-sixties as a guest conductor,

and he created *such* an impact. His specialty was, of course, contemporary music and music of our century. I can remember doing a BBC recording of Webern's *Six Pieces for Orchestra* with the London Symphony, under a conductor other than Boulez, and people more or less played anything!

Boulez turned up at the BBC, and not only did he want the right notes, he wanted the right rhythms in the right places. Not only was it quite unprecedented at the time, it seemed quite unreasonable. I remember a woodwind player saying something to Pierre about a particular passage being impossible to play. Pierre said to him, "That is your problem. Next!"

I had heard so much about the way he rehearsed. He was used to rehearsing the various instruments on their own—the bass clarinet, the fourth horn, the vibraphone or whatever. And then there was the time I was asked to do one of the main keyboard parts of *Pli Selon Pli*, which is a huge work. This was about 1969. There were twenty rehearsals—*twenty*, mind you! And there were a couple of concerts in Paris, and a couple of recording sessions. It was very worthwhile financially, and I'd wanted to see what this chap was like since I had heard so much about him! I suppose the first five rehearsals were given over to the keyboard percussion and the harps, and he'd rehearse each of us in turn. "I take now the vibraphone," and that meant the vibraphone alone! And that person had to be at least ninety-five percent there! As long as one did one's homework and was conscientious, he could be the most patient man in the world. He is really a gentleman. But, if one was not prepared and was not conscientious, then that person would have problems.

I found that I enjoyed it very much, and then, moving on a year or so in time, I was getting a bit fed up with symphony orchestra life. I had already started with the London Sinfonietta, I was doing a lot of film work, and I was only doing about half of the work with the LSO. I had the feeling that they were not going to put up with this for much longer, and there was an opening in the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Boulez was just starting his tenure as chief conductor, and there was only one

player left, Terry Emery, who was absolutely brilliant, and such a versatile player to have in a section. So I said, "If you're interested in me coming, I'm interested." So, we talked, and of course it's a contract orchestra. They work five days a week, and I only had to do seventy percent of that, which meant that I could do pretty much whatever I liked. And it was Boulez as chief conductor, which for me was wonderful. David Johnson, who was principal percussionist with the Philharmonia, came over as well, and Kevin Nutty, who was also with the Philharmonia, came along too.

Simco: *Who was the timpanist at the time? Was Eric Pritchard still there?*

Holland: No. Janos Kesztei started just as I came, and Gary Kettel. Gary had a great relationship with Boulez. I remember once when Boulez stopped the orchestra in rehearsal and said, "Gary, three bars after letter D, it is an F sharp." Gary looked at the part, stood up and said, "Well spotted!" The whole

orchestra collapsed with laughter, including Boulez, of course.

Simco: *Do you have any closing comments?*

Holland: I've thoroughly enjoyed my time in percussion, but I have to say that if the repertoire had stayed the way it was in the 1950s, I'd have died of boredom long ago! It is such a different world. There are so many percussion students going through the colleges now, and although there aren't that many jobs, they still manage to find many different outlets. At home there are different percussion ensembles, and everybody seems to be having a ball! Percussion seems to be heading towards an unending evolution. I see no signs of it stopping.

Simco: *So, you would encourage the students to go for it, if they have the talent and ability?*

Holland: Yes. If they have the talent and the ability, they are always going to make it.

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