

# Flute master & maker

Soon to be in Australia  
for the Sydney Symphony  
**David Vivian Russell**  
talks to Jacques Zoon.

Talking to Jacques Zoon is a disarmingly pleasant experience. Here is one of the best exponents of the flute performing in the world currently and we begin in a simple and fresh way talking about his family and of being Number eight in a brood of 10 sisters and brothers...

So how was it being one of the youngest of the 10? 'Well, in a large family you are surrounded by love, and I always felt supported and encouraged to do what ever I wanted to.' And music? 'Dad played everything – he was in the local brass band and was a repairer of all types of mechanisms – being an engineer he was attracted to all that metal. And my mother was a soprano singing in the local choirs. Finally my sisters and brothers played instruments as well – so, for me, music was a natural progression.'

As with so many young performers it seems, Zoon was smitten by a specific instrument early on, in his case at the age of seven, he was he says 'enchanted' when he first heard the flute. 'It seemed to represent joy and happiness.' He begged his parents to allow him to learn, even though he was, too small to manage the instrument at the time. By eight he could hold back no longer, he 'burst into tears, I wanted to learn the flute so much. It was still difficult for me and once I had finished my practice, from 7.30 to 8.30 every morning, I had a stiff neck all day.'

Still Zoon confesses that the flute seemed 'easy' as well – or, perhaps, he corrects. 'It was always the correct instrument for me.' What is clear, from the gently passionate way we discuss repertoire as well as the musical and mechanical developments of his instrument, is that Jacques Zoon is more than just a travelling showman. He has been importantly prominent in the rediscovery of the wooden flutes as a

mainstream instrument ('...its colour appeals to me with the instrument's more tangible physical vibrations') and not simply as an aural consultant to instrument makers. In his father's workshop Zoon created a flute, improvising (as it were) on a lathe with some junk metal. 'I managed to get it squeaking – it wasn't beautiful but I had done it.'

Since that time he has continued to work with makers and now is seen as not only a major performer and teacher but also as an advisor across the globe. It equates well with his philosophy on the development of music and his chosen instrument: 'It is good to have openness and to allow the evolution of an instrument. This follows the development required by performers; there is

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no point in living in the past – no – not for nothing did performers want to change their instruments – and both makers and composers followed.' It might also explain the *timbre* of Zoon's own playing that draws plaudits – either as a soloist, chamber musician in or simply with, the ranks of a great orchestra (such as the Boston Symphony Orchestra). He concentrates on style and a certain brilliance of tone 'projecting to fill a large concert hall – though obviously this is a limited way to look at flute playing, only looking at sound production.'

Teaching seems to come to all great performers and Zoon is no exception – he currently has eight 'high level' students in Geneva – and he spends many hours a week with them. He looks to 'give them the most chances to get a positive experience from their studies' and regards his teaching as a responsibil-

ity born of his own success – almost a duty. He mentions former student Emma Sholl, now Associate Principal Flute with the Sydney Symphony, as an exemplar of these 'high level' students. 'She's a fabulous talent with a determination to change her playing – rarely have I seen a student so willing to change and learn. Her tone is extremely beautiful but was small. We worked on creating loudness without force and a broadness of tone. It sounds easy but only through working hard can you achieve this – this generous sound.' The way he speaks convinces me that Emma worked hard and found, with Zoon's assistance, that extra dimension to her playing.

Born in 1961 Jacques Zoon studied at the Sweelinck Conservatory, Amsterdam, though he notes not before his parents made it clear that he 'must finish high school rather than quitting school early'. By 1988 he was Principal Flute of the Concertgebouw Orchestra.

Not content with being a respected soloist, ensemble performer, teacher and flute technician, Jacques Zoon tells me he now wants to develop his interest, and abilities as a composer and conductor. 'Writing for flute and cello [Zoon's wife is a cellist] and chamber orchestra – is challenging and then there's conducting – you have to be engaged and study a lot. But I think that this is a natural progression for me. The flute in many ways is a young person's instrument. The older you become the more you discover its limitations and look to other musical directions.'

We leave it there – he's (almost literally) building a house in Geneva at the moment and also has some practice to do. Something tells me, that even with all his other projects, he's not ready to leave playing the flute just yet – as he says 'It's...it's...it's my passion.'

