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## STRING THEORY

Magnus Johnston, concert master at the Royal Opera House, tells *Jasmin Southgate* of his extraordinary musical companion and illustrious career in music

Always on the move, RBC Brewin Dolphin client Johnston spoke to *Perspective* from his car, waiting for his violin bow to be rehaired. He had just returned from France, having been fortunate enough to stay with a lovely local family while he was there. This is one of the many upsides to his career, he said: “You get to become a part of a community in a special and unique way.”

### ARMOUR MADE OF WOOD

Currently, Johnston is the concert master at the Royal Opera House in London’s Covent Garden and he describes this role as one of the biggest achievements of his career to date. “I practise the violin an insane amount, and I love the process of constantly trying to get better, which will go to the very end, I suppose.”

Preparing for a concert can be fraught with pressure, even for someone with Johnston’s talent and experience. Ultimately, “I just love playing the violin,” he says – a simple yet powerful statement that sums up why he can embrace performing wholeheartedly.

Being blessed with Ida Haendel’s Stradivarius violin, however, must make the pressures of performing all the better. In many ways, it’s a form of armour for Johnston, carrying with it centuries of musical talent and history.

Johnston first met this special violin, which he now plays at his Royal Opera House residency, years ago at the J & A Beare dealership in London. He went in to try some fiddles and passed this particular one, which “just had something that was extra special”. Seconds later, he learnt that it had belonged to Haendel, one of the 20th century’s most renowned and spectacular violinists, who owned and played this instrument for 60 years. Thanks to J & A Beare, the Stradivarius is currently on loan to Magnus, who is looking for a patron to enable him to continue to play this wonderful violin. Given the value and prestige of instruments such as Haendel’s Stradivarius, many musicians are not in a position to buy them outright. In order to keep such unique pieces in circulation and available for the public to see, they are often loaned to musicians, with the support of sponsors. >



LEFT: JOHNSTON AND THE STRADIVARIUS IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL, CAMBRIDGE  
RIGHT: IDA HAENDEL WITH HER 1699 STRADIVARIUS – AN INSTRUMENT SHE PLAYED FOR 60 YEARS

BELOW: JOHNSTON IN THE STALL AT KING'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE WHERE HE SANG AS A CHORISTER



› This particular violin was made in 1699, and for Johnston, its age is part of the magic of the violin world. Knowing it has survived all those years and all that history makes it as mesmerising to play and see now as when it was first made.

The violin-maker Antonio Stradivari himself had access to extraordinary materials, creating his violins from wood sourced from the Dolomite region in northern Italy. Over the course of the last two centuries, fine stringed instruments have become more popular in the investment space, and the combination of declining supply and rising demand has resulted in the consistent growth in the price of top instruments, particularly violins made by Stradivari.

“No one has ever advanced the style of making violins since him,” says Johnston. Stradivari’s violins and their exceptional quality stand the test of time, with a unique sound that, to this day, people still can’t really explain.

Layered on top of unparalleled craftsmanship are the specifics of the person who actually played that violin, and their whole story, journey and life, he explains. Ida Haendel rubbed shoulders with some of the greatest musicians of the 20th century, as well as being one in her own right.

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Born in the small Polish town of Chelm, Haendel was the daughter of a poor Jewish portrait painter. A child prodigy, she announced at age three and a half that she could play the violin. Later, she would travel through Western Europe with her Stradivarius by her side, eventually residing in London before the invasion of Poland during the Second

World War. “The violin is still alive, and it will outlive me. It’s a mystical world,” Johnston says.

When Johnston leads the orchestra through its many operas and ballets, from *Swan Lake* to *Don Quixote*, “to have

a violin like that by my side when I’m playing all these big solos, is honestly an insane bit of support”. Practically speaking, the projection level of the violin is special too. “Like a Formula 1 race car, it allows me to project above the rest.”

The Royal Opera House and Johnston are a special and paramount part of the violin’s continued history, ensuring that others can witness its beauty through performance for decades to come.

#### NOTES THAT RUN DEEP

Music and performing have been part of Johnston’s life for decades. He was born into a family as passionate about



STRADIVARI’S VIOLINS HAVE AN EXCEPTIONAL QUALITY AND UNIQUE SOUND THAT STAND THE TEST OF TIME



#### EMBRACING THE RIDE

From Chetham’s School of Music in Manchester, where he continued to study his passion, Johnston turned to freelancing. He explains that his career just grew very naturally and organically. “Without the violin, I would have never travelled as much as I have.”

He reminisces over crazy long days spent playing for a plethora of London orchestras: “We’d get up at four in the morning, get a horrendously early flight to Rome, rehearse in the afternoon, do a concert, and then fly back the next morning.” But for him, this was a thrill, and part and parcel of this stage in his musical journey.

Live music was just one aspect of Johnston’s early foray into work. He also fully embraced and enjoyed the studio aspect, playing on a lot of American films, TV shows such as *Downton Abbey*, and pop songs – for example, Ed Sheeran’s *Blue*.

“It’s funny, they [music studios] never say ‘oh, we have an album coming out for Ed Sheeran, can you play?’

They just say, ‘are you free from ten until five to come to Abbey Road?’ You get there, turn around, and coming down the stairs is Ed Sheeran.”

Revelling in the spontaneity and unpredictability of this stage

of his career was a must, he explains – with a diary that is never dead certain or concrete. One of his most noteworthy collaborators was David Attenborough; he describes the national treasure as “so interested” in the music aspect of the documentary and the musicians themselves.

Talent and tenacity have led Johnston to his current position within the Royal Opera House, where he delights thousands alongside his orchestra. It’s clear to see that the classical music space is still filled with as much magic now as it was when Haendel first picked up her Stradivarius – thanks to people like Johnston. ●

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music as he is; his grandfather was a clarinettist playing for the BBC in Belfast, his parents started a music school and play wind instruments, and his siblings are all as in love with music as he is.

As a child, summers were spent doing music courses and Christmases centred around playing music together as a family. Johnston and his siblings all went to a choir school in Cambridge, which, looking back, was a foundational element of his musical talent and passion. Not only did this help hone his skills but, to his mother’s relief, it kept him and his brother “out of trouble, too”, he says.

Before Johnston’s violin career had really begun, he’d already toured the world as a chorister at King’s College, Cambridge, singing in some of the most iconic venues on the globe – from Sydney Opera House to the Royal Albert Hall. These places and experiences have impacted him deeply, he explains, and he has carried them with him as he has moved forward in his life and music.

One of Johnston’s first memories of the strings centred around a tape that his father gave him. He listened to it repeatedly, immersing himself in the world of the violin. “To be honest, I just loved it.”