

# John Wilson

“I am as passionate about Oklahoma! as I am about Brahms”

BIG INTERVIEWS JUN 6, 2024



John Wilson, conductor. Photo: Astrid Ackermann (2019)



### George Hall

George Hall writes widely on opera and has contributed regularly to The Stage since 2000.

From traditional pop to Gilbert and Sullivan to brass bands and more, the award-winning conductor’s eclectic career reflects the diversity of musical styles that fed into his upbringing. As he helms a new production of *The Merry Widow* for Glyndebourne, he tells **George Hall** about his journey from a council estate to the world stage and his quest to recreate lost Hollywood film scores

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John Wilson is in the rare position of being as revered for championing the scores of classic Hollywood films and Broadway musicals as he is for his career as one of the most acclaimed classical conductors working in the UK today. At the BBC Music Magazine Awards in April, he won in an

He has also contributed to such publications as T

unprecedented three categories: in the opera category for his recording of [Oklahoma!](#) and in orchestral music for a disc of English music for strings by Vaughan Williams, Howells, Delius and Elgar, which in turn went on to triumph in a third category, recording of the year.

**...full bio**

Having created two exceptional orchestras – the John Wilson Orchestra and, more recently, the Sinfonia of London – he is one of the busiest conductors around, also extending his reach into opera with shows at Opera North, English National Opera and Glyndebourne. It is an eclectic career, somewhat unique in its variety, but reflects the diversity of musical

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...ing me that he cannot make that connection, he says:

By the time he was three or four, he was showing musical aptitude – “picking out things on the piano when we went to my granny’s” – but it was not until he was 11 that he began musical tuition. “We didn’t have any money, so I couldn’t pay for lessons. But one day I saw this old boy carrying a bass drum across the courtyard at school, and I said: ‘Who’s that guy with a big drum?’ They said: ‘That’s Mr Robinson. He teaches percussion.’ I said: ‘I have to learn percussion.’”

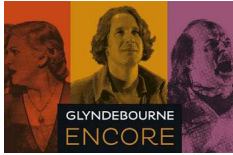
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*Conductor John Wilson (2024)*

He had been playing the piano for some time, having taught himself, although there was no piano at home – “there was a woman up the street and I used to play her piano” – but starting on percussion got him into brass bands, which led to other sorts of local amateur music-making: orchestras, Gilbert and Sullivan and musicals. “I remember once doing [the musical] No, No, Nanette and the rehearsal pianist pulled out, so I was promoted from percussionist to rehearsal pianist. Then the conductor pulled out, so I was promoted from being rehearsal pianist to conducting.”

Gavin Sutherland – now a highly regarded ballet conductor – was playing the piano in the orchestra. “I hadn’t a clue what I was doing, so he said: ‘I need to give you some lessons.’ We were both teenagers, 14 or 15 or so.”

Wilson quickly became, as he puts it, “obsessed with music. I must have taken out every score and every recording from Gateshead Library and Newcastle Central Library. I got to know them backwards.” He would also

borrow LPs from the local vicar. “He could see that I was this kid from the council estate with a bit of flair for music,” Wilson recalls. “Not only would he let me borrow records, but he would also give me spare tickets for the visiting symphony orchestras at Newcastle City Hall.”

He would go on to study at the Royal College of Music, having also been offered a place at Guildhall but rejected from the Royal Academy of Music, the institution at which he is now a visiting professor. It was at his audition for the Royal College that his aptitude for orchestrations was spotted. “I had taken with me a portfolio of arrangements. I presented them as professional work, because not only had I been conducting these shows, but I’d been writing arrangements for bands and orchestras for quite a few years. One of the examiners said to me: ‘Did you do these?’ He thought they were forgeries.”

Nevertheless, he was admitted, initially as a percussionist, but halfway through his first year he switched to composition “to use it as a tool for analysing great music”, a step that put in motion everything that was to follow. Was he thinking of becoming a conductor at this point? “Oh yes! I knew that’s what I wanted from the age of 16. I was hopeless, but I had enthusiasm.”

As an undergraduate, he wasn’t officially allowed to study conducting, but says he badgered one of the professors who took him under his wing. Formal training came in his postgraduate year, but in the meantime, Wilson began organising and conducting concerts involving fellow students.

“I got myself a job playing the piano at the Grosvenor House Hotel with a violinist called Andrew Haveron [now one of the country’s leading soloists] who still plays with me in the Sinfonia of London. We played for afternoon tea and evening things, then we started doing dinner dances. From that, I got offers of outside gigs – people would come to the hotel and see us and would say: ‘Could you put together a little band for my wedding anniversary?’ or something like that.”

This led to him forming the first incarnation of the John Wilson Orchestra

in 1994. “The general manager of the Royal Garden Hotel saw us doing a gig somewhere – I think we were at the Pizza on the Park – and offered us a residency.

“People started noticing us. I became known as somebody who did what we call ‘light music’. I’ve never drawn any lines between light music and classical music: before light music became a sort of separate thing, it was what every composer did.”

So while he had classical training at the Royal College of Music, “it just happened that there was a need for something that had been missing from the scene for a while”. He was approached by Austin Coates – son of light-music composer Eric Coates – “who spotted what I was doing and offered me my very first professional recording date. They wanted to re-record all his father’s music for CD with the BBC Concert Orchestra, and he said: ‘This is the chap to do it.’ I was 23.”

*Continues...*

## **Q&A John Wilson**

### **What was your first non-theatre job?**

Peeling potatoes in a chip shop in 1984.

### **What was your first professional theatre job?**

Playing the piano in the Grosvenor House Hotel with violinist Andrew Haveron; thirty-five quid a night plus a slap-up dinner.

### **What is your next job?**

Conducting Sinfonia of London at the BBC Proms in music by Wynton Marsalis, Copland, Barber, Gershwin, Ives and John Adams’  
Harmonielehre – the greatest piece of American orchestral music I know.

### **What do you wish someone had told you starting out?**

That many of the great artists you admire won’t be around in 30 years’ time – so go and see and hear them while you can.

### **Who or what is your biggest influence?**

The violinist Jascha Heifetz.



**If you hadn't been a conductor, what would you have been?**

A cabinetmaker.

**Do you have any theatrical superstitions or rituals?**

Just before I go on stage, I put on the cufflinks which used to belong to the critic Michael Kennedy and which were given to me by his widow.

*Continues...*



*Danielle de Niese in The Merry Widow at Glyndbourne Festival. Photo: Alun Callender*

*John Wilson in rehearsals for The Merry Widow at Glyndebourne. Photo: Tristram Kenton/Glyndebourne Productions Ltd*

**Picking the best players for his team**

In the years since, the John Wilson Orchestra has acquired a reputation – which Wilson has maintained in its successor, the Sinfonia of London – for having the best players in the country. When you look down the list of hand-picked players printed in one of its programme books, you wonder how any other leading orchestra manages to field a top team on the same date.

“They are often players who were there from the first and are still the people I want to work with,” Wilson says. “They were excellent then and they’re excellent now. Back at the beginning, we had a string orchestra with a rhythm section, and we had an old-fashioned dance band. They were two separate outfits that grew into one because I started investigating all those MGM musicals.”

It was ‘those MGM musicals’ that would make the fortunes of Wilson and his orchestra. “I thought the world had to hear these live, so we did concerts of them, initially at the Festival Hall and then at the Proms at the Albert Hall,” he says. His love of this particular repertoire of Hollywood scores ultimately stemmed from nostalgia. “You have to go right back to me watching them on the telly on a rainy Saturday when I was 11. I remember seeing the name of the arranger/orchestrator on the credits, and thinking: ‘So that’s the man that made that sound so good.’”

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When a friend wanted to celebrate his 50th birthday by putting on a concert of music from those musicals at the Festival Hall, Wilson set about tracking down the orchestral scores. “That was when I discovered that the music had been binned by MGM, and there began a 30-year process – which is still going on – of putting it back together again.”

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## **‘I knew I wanted to become a conductor from the age of 16. I was hopeless but enthusiastic’**

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While Wilson has had assistance, he has done the lion’s share of recreating these scores himself: one can scarcely imagine the difficulty and sheer laboriousness of transcribing complex orchestrations by listening repeatedly to the film soundtracks and then slowly writing down the entire score, note by note.

“It has varying degrees of difficulty depending on the levels of completeness of the original material. With MGM, all the full scores and parts were destroyed. Some reduced or short scores, known as ‘piano conductors’ survived in complete form, others in a very abridged form, some with detail, others without. With some, there was nothing left at all.



“You just located what you could and then jammed your ear to the left speaker, then to the right speaker. It’s a complicated combination of skill, but mainly patience. After a while you get to know how it’s done,” he says.

The John Wilson Orchestra played its first Prom in 2009 – A Celebration of Classic MGM Film Musicals. It received an overwhelmingly positive reaction. “I felt vindicated that my faith in that music hadn’t been misplaced.”

Providing audiences with live performances of these wonderful scores quickly won Wilson a following: he and his orchestra have gone on to [appear at the Proms every year](#) since, in programmes of Rodgers and Hammerstein, classic Broadway musicals and Hollywood screen musicals, as well as concert performances of [My Fair Lady](#), Oklahoma!, West Side Story, Kiss Me, Kate and many others. “We never looked back. We had a record deal with EMI and tours up and down the country,” he says.

His is an accomplished and enviable career, made all the more impressive due to the fact that throughout, Wilson was also building up a reputation as an exponent of the classical repertoire with the UK’s leading symphony orchestras, in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and Glasgow.

“I loved what I was doing with the John Wilson Orchestra, but in real terms it was a smallish fraction of everything I was doing, the dessert at the end of the meal, if you like. I was earning my living as a conductor of standard classical repertoire. I also did a lot of light music with these orchestras, plus quite a few concert performances of operas: Butterfly, Cavalleria Rusticana and so on.

In 2018, with the backing of Ralph Couzens of Chandos Records, Wilson founded a second orchestra – the Sinfonia of London – reforming an outfit whose first incarnation was back in the 1950s and 1960s as an orchestra recording film scores, as well as classical repertoire with such conductors as John Barbirolli and Colin Davis.

“I acquired the orchestra’s title intending to continue the ethos of a London orchestra built for projects, with the best possible people in town,

and that's what it is.”

### **Revealing his passions**

The orchestra began with an award-winning recording of the symphony by Erich Wolfgang Korngold – a composer still best remembered for his Hollywood film scores – and subsequent releases have included the award-winning Oklahoma!, the first ever recording of the musical's complete score. Recordings of Carousel and My Fair Lady are already in the can, too. “We've recorded every note of all of them.”

Wilson has lived with these musicals all his life, he says, “and I remain as passionate about Oklahoma! and Carousel as I am about Brahms and Rachmaninov”, he says.

Operettas, particularly those of Gilbert and Sullivan, are another of his passions, and this summer, he will conduct Glyndebourne's new production of Franz Lehár's operetta The Merry Widow. He agreed to work on it after seeing its director [Cal McCrystal's](#) Iolanthe at ENO: “I laughed my socks off and went again.”

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## **‘The Merry Widow is a bit like Carmen, every time you turn the page there's something wonderful’**

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He has conducted quite a few of the Gilbert and Sullivan series in concert performances – The Yeomen of the Guard, Princess Ida, The Pirates of Penzance and Trial by Jury – as well as a staged production of Ruddigore with Opera North. “I have an ambition to make a complete set of recordings where every single note and word will be Gilbert and Sullivan's final thoughts on the matter. It'll happen eventually – watch this space.”

His 2010 production of [Ruddigore](#) at Opera North was the first opera

Wilson conducted in a fully professional staged production. “In fact, I’ve done very little opera in the pit. I’m glad I waited until I was in my 40s to do *Butterfly* at Glyndebourne, because opera takes some doing and a huge amount of your time.”

He conducted [Madama Butterfly](#) at the Sussex venue in 2016, returning in 2019 for Massenet’s fairytale [Cendrillon](#), in between making his ENO debut with Gershwin’s [Porgy and Bess](#) in 2018, a production he describes as “one of the highlights of my life”.

Speaking of his Glyndebourne debut, he says: “I had a very strong feeling of: ‘I’m absolutely where I want to be.’ I felt at home because I’m fundamentally a theatre person. I love all the other disciplines – singing, acting, costumes, sets – I relish every minute of being part of that, and love working with all these incredible people who can do things other than music. It’s a privilege to be around them.”

*Nicole Cabell and Eric Greene in ENO’s Porgy and Bess at the London Coliseum (2018). Photo: Tristram Kenton*

*Danielle De Niese in Cendrillon at Glyndebourne in 2019. Photo: Richard Hubert Smith*

## **The operetta genre**

The *Merry Widow* is, of course, neither an opera nor a musical but an operetta – a long popular theatrical genre, with Lehár’s 1905 work one of the most famous of all: it has been estimated that it was performed some half a million times in its first 60 years.

Yet Wilson agrees when I suggest that apart from three or four titles, operetta is largely neglected in the UK. “It’s strange, isn’t it? The fundamental thing about operetta is that it can often depend on being effortlessly charming, and charm doesn’t seem to have much purchase at the minute, does it?”

One of the other reasons for this neglect, he thinks, is that operetta is really difficult: “It has to reach a polished and effortless perfection – and achieving that is a damn serious business. It takes tremendous precision and élan.”

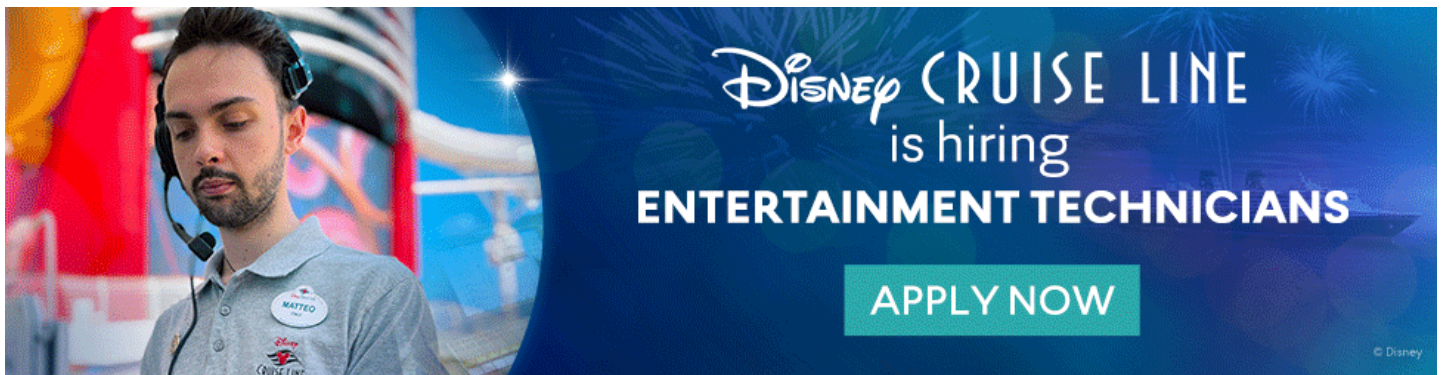
As we speak, the choruses of Bizet’s most famous opera are drifting through the Glyndebourne windows from an adjacent rehearsal room. I ask Wilson why *The Merry Widow* is special? “It’s a bit like *Carmen*, every time you turn the page there’s something wonderful: there’s not one uninspired idea in it, and that’s why, 120 years after it was written, it’s never left the repertory.”

There’s also the economy of the whole piece. “In operetta, you have a limited time slot, and *The Merry Widow* is very concise. There’s absolutely no fat on it. Every note earns its keep. From the first page to the last, the level of invention is sky high.”

*John Wilson conducts The Merry Widow, in a new English version by Stephen Plaice and Marcia Bellamy, at Glyndebourne from June 9-July 28; [glyndebourne.com](http://glyndebourne.com)*

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