

DAN'S THE MAN

Daniel Mendelow missed his first Mahler with the Orchestra because Australia Post mistook his visa application for a terrorist threat. As he approaches his 30th anniversary, he tells Bravo about embouchure, letter bombs and blowing his brains out.

DANIEL MENDELOW SPOKE TO RITA WILLIAMS.

I was born in New York City and my parents moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania when I was five years old. I started on the piano when I was about seven. I still remember the moment that I picked up a trumpet in my friend's brother's bedroom. It was an old trumpet that he had stored in his closet and I just thought: This is great. I was 10 and I pestered my parents until they rented one. My piano teacher taught me how to hold the thing, how to buzz the mouthpiece. And then she sent me to Frank Ostrowski, who was Assistant Principal Trumpet in the Pittsburgh Symphony.

People told me I had a natural embouchure. I used to play way up in the high range without much effort at all before I realised it was supposed to be hard. When I was 13, I was became the youngest member of the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony Orchestra. I was there until I graduated high school at 17 and moved to the Conservatory of Music at Oberlin College.

My trumpet teacher at Oberlin said: 'There is an opening at the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra. It's Principal Trumpet and there's no way you're ready for this but you may as well send a tape.' And they chose me. So at the age of 21 I started my career in Jerusalem. I was there for one solid season and then the Israel Philharmonic lured me away. I auditioned for Zubin Mehta. It was just a section position, what we would call a third trumpet, a utility trumpet. But I thought it was probably a very good thing for me to do at the time because it was a chance to learn the repertoire from a different position and to learn from more experienced players. It's got to be one of the world's busiest orchestras.

I was living in Tel Aviv when someone saw an advertisement for a Principal Trumpet with the Sydney Symphony and said: 'Sydney, Australia! Aren't we going to Australia later this year?' I knew that, being Jewish and 21 at the time, after three years of hassle-free

living in Israel I'd have been up for some kind of military service. I sent an audition tape like everyone else and I said: 'If you like the tape I'm more than happy to play for you live when I'm in Sydney.'

I arrived in Sydney at the end of June, 1978. I think I started officially on July 2. I was trying to get here for a performance of Mahler 6 at the end of May '78 and I had gone to the Australian consulate in Tel Aviv with all my pictures to fill out all the forms, and we put it

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together in a package and sent it on to Sydney. It was a few months after the Hilton Hotel bombing, so there was a bit of terrorism paranoia in Sydney, and when they got this stodgy looking letter from Tel Aviv they sent it right back. They thought it might be a letter bomb, so it delayed my getting here by a couple of months.

When I first arrived we had this German Canadian conductor called Franz-Paul Decker and in my first two weeks we did the Lutoslawski Concerto for Orchestra with a Haydn symphony, Bruckner 7, and a little piece called the Alpine Symphony by Richard Strauss. So for those first two weeks I didn't know if I was in heaven or hell. For a 23-year-old who had never really done any of those big trumpet parts it was a big learning curve. But I was pretty pumped and got through on perseverance, fear and adrenaline.

The trumpet can be physically the most demanding instrument in the orchestra. If you don't have the



physical strength to maintain the air speed in the upper register, you'll probably go off with an injury, like a hernia. There's a story about a player in the New York Symphony who was sustaining a top C at the end of the Mahler Second when he felt a pop in his abdomen. Bang! I go to the gym, do a lot of weight lifting with the machines and with the free weights. Most brass players will probably be among the more stocky players of the orchestra. I can think of a couple who just don't have any necks at all.

The pieces I would have played the most in the past 30 years are probably *Symphonie Fantastique* [by Berlioz] and Tchaikovsky 4 and 5. My teacher at uni said: 'Son, you'll be playing Tchaikovsky 5 until you've had it up to the eyeballs.' And she was right.

Playing in a big symphony orchestra is my passion and to do that you have to live in a big city and I think it's very hard to find a big city

that is nicer than Sydney if you combine the working situation with the lifestyle. I live in a top floor apartment that's right on the edge of a development in Canada Bay. I've got a view of the bay and the water and I've got a big open room with a 20ft cathedral ceiling. I keep my trumpets in my study and bring them out and practise in a trumpet nook of the room. Nobody can see in. I'm very lucky. I can blow my brains out during the day. I can practise and teach to my heart's content. I've been living there for eight years now and I'm lucky because we've got some neighbours who really like it. They're subscribers and big fans of the orchestra and they'll say: 'Haven't heard you practising in a while.' *Daniel Mendelow is the longest serving Principal in the Sydney Symphony.*