

# Frances Wilson episode

📅 Wed, 2/9 5:32PM ⌚ 1:03:19

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, musicians, music, concert, feel, pianist, musician, audience, interview, piano, duncan, blog, repertoire, review, thought, questions, writing, experience, bit, contemporary music

## SPEAKERS

Frances Wilson, Rebecca Toal, Hattie Butterworth

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- H** Hattie Butterworth 00:02  
Hello and welcome to Things Musicians Don't Talk About with your hosts Hattie Butterworth,
- R** Rebecca Toal 00:08  
and me Rebecca Toal.
- H** Hattie Butterworth 00:10  
Within our vibrant musical world, it can often feel that the struggles and humanity of musicians is lost and restricted.
- R** Rebecca Toal 00:18  
Having both suffered in silence with mental, physical and emotional issues. We're now looking for a way to voice musician stories, discuss them further and to connect with the many others who suffer like we have.
- H** Hattie Butterworth 00:28  
No topic will be out of bounds as we're committed to raising awareness for all varieties of struggle.
- R** Rebecca Toal 00:34  
So join me Hattie, and guests as we attempt to bring an end to stigma by uncovering the things musicians don't talk about

musicians don't talk about.

H

Hattie Butterworth 01:06

Francis, thank you so much for agreeing to come and talk to us today. How are you doing first of all?

F

Frances Wilson 01:12

Thank you for inviting me, it's an absolute pleasure to have an opportunity to talk about what I do with, with fellow music musicians and music professionals. I'm actually I have to admit, I'm rather tired because I've been running a concert today. Um... one of the things that I do is run a concert series in Weymouth nowhere, I live in South Dorset, with the pianist Duncan Honeybourne and today's concert was our first concert of 2022. So it was really lovely. And it was great to see our audience again. Um and I felt that we're beginning to get back to normal, which is really important, especially for our industry.

R

Rebecca Toal 01:50

Is that the first one since the pandemic or have there been a couple?

F

Frances Wilson 01:54

No, we we actually restarted last autumn in September. And we had three really good concerts, sold out audiences of about 80 in the church where we hold them. And given the our audience, generally are very elderly people, the fact that they came back in their droves was really encouraging. And then we had a Christmas concert planned for December, and we just felt that given the situation at that time, we should postpone it, which was a great pity. But, you know, we have to be careful and mindful of the audience. So they were very happy to be back today and we were very happy to see them.

H

Hattie Butterworth 02:33

Who was performing today?

F

Frances Wilson 02:36

Today we had a lovely bassoonist called Antonio Lazenby. You know Antonia?

H

Hattie Butterworth 02:42

Oh yeah!

F

Frances Wilson 02:42

It's a small world. And she was accompanied by Duncan, who's our artistic director and pianist. Um very interesting programme and actually very, very enjoyable. We try to give our audiences unusual repertoire, not mainstream, and they ... they're very receptive and basically happy to listen to anything. So it's kind of a win-win.

H

Hattie Butterworth 03:06

I think um... it's so weird, honestly, I'm so baffled by like how coincidental is that literally last night, I was on this music society's website, like looking at it, because I remember reading something about how you're very keen to support young musicians earlier in their career, and that's something I thought, "wow", like, because I have a piano trio and the struggle we have talking to music societies, trying to play, just trying to play, wanting to enjoy performing to people, and just feeling like we're up against huge names all the time, and there's no room for us. And I just remember reading on that website, on your website clearly, about that and it just really struck me like, wow, that that's clearly something that is really needed. But you don't often see.

R

Rebecca Toal 03:52

For me as well, like, I like to do a lot of contemporary music, and that is the thing that you often run up against is that you feel that you should ...if you want to do contemporary music, you maybe do one piece in a programme, but you've got to sandwich it between, like ... I was about, say Beethoven, but he didn't write anything for trumpet. But yes, something not so contemporary. So that's yeah, really amazing to hear that especially an older audience is receptive to contemporary music. That fills my heart with a lot of joy.

F

Frances Wilson 04:23

They are amazing. I mean, we give them all sorts of stuff. But this is driven by Duncan, the who founded the series 20 years ago. It's our, our 20th birthday this year, which is really special in the fact that it's been going that long is huge credit to Duncan and I took over as concerts manager in 2019. And having moved down here from London, this was like a kind of dream job, because I like doing admin, and I like the admin of running the concerts and I like the the contact with the performers and the audience. And so it's just Duncan and I, we don't have a committee, we don't have trustees. So it's largely driven by Duncan's vision and he's very keen to support young artists and also to, to present unusual or lesser known repertoire. So today we had a bassoon sonata by William Hurlstone, which I had never heard of. I have to admit I hadn't even heard of composer before today, and it was absolutely fabulous, and the audience came out beaming and you know, full of praise. So I think it's a myth that audiences are unadventurous. I think it's more that perhaps promoters are, are concerned that if you put contemporary music or unusual repertoire into a programme, people won't come. And I feel that what we do is kind of make people feel comfortable about hearing music that is different, shall we say. I mean, we don't put a lot of, you know, kind of squeaky gate, shall we say, contemporary music in in our programmes, but now and then we do, and like you say, if it's presented in the context of other pieces...and the other thing that we always do is either

Duncan or the other guest performers will talk about the repertoire. So I think that also gives audiences a way in. It makes them feel immediately connected, and to understand why musicians have chosen certain repertoire. So I think we I feel we're doing really good things for promoting classical music.

H

Hattie Butterworth 06:29

Yeah, I think you know, I've got so many questions for you about about where you've come from and, and how you got started with everything, but in terms of your being a pianist, and the kind of musical side of things, can you sort of explain a bit to us about how you found yourself as a pianist and your journey with that a little bit maybe?

F

Frances Wilson 06:48

Oh, goodness, well, it's a long time ago. I mean, I started having piano lessons when I was about five so that's, I'm afraid 50 years ago. And I don't know why I learned the piano because when you're five, you don't think about things like that. I think it was because my grandparents had a piano and my granddad used to play like Methodist hymns and bits of Beethoven and Haydn. He adored Beethoven. And I think I probably used to sit next to when I was a little girl and I liked the fact that the piano was kind of an instrument that made a nice sound, really, from the get go. And so I had lessons right through till when I was 18. And I did all my grades, and I did O and A level music, and I was very keen to go to music college. But I had a teacher at school that discouraged me. And what I have found very interesting was when I returned to playing the piano after a gap of some 20 years, that that comment that that teacher had made to me at 17 had stayed with me, and it was the thing that kind of drove me to actually go on having come back to the piano in my late 30s, to then take three professional performance diplomas, of which I passed two with distinction (I didn't get the final one). But it's quite interesting that that sort of thing...and it's something I've come across with conversations with other musicians, I mean, particularly amateurs, because I've had quite a lot of involvement with amateur pianists in particular, is that people carry those things from childhood. And it can just take one comment from a teacher at school or at university that can colour your attitude. And I, you know, after playing now, for nearly 20 years again, I feel like I've kind of got past that now. It's gone. I've put it all in, you know, aside, and I'm very happy with what I'm doing. And enjoying being a being an amateur pianist. I very rarely performed. I have occasionally but you know, it's just the pleasure of the instrument really.

R

Rebecca Toal 08:55

Yeah, I think Hattie and I both have also had experiences of a teacher saying something specific and it just sticking with you. I mean, also in all walks of life, that somebody can just say something that they will never remember in the **future**, that just will not leave your head, like word for word. Um so am I right in thinking that you are glad that you didn't go to music college? Or was it the other way around? Can you explain more about that?

F

Frances Wilson 09:25

Well I think probably at 17 you know when you'll be thinking about going to university I had a

Well, I think probably at 17, you know, when you're thinking about going to university, I had a rather kind of rose-tinted idea about what conservatoire life would be like. And it was ...I was fortunate that at my school I also had a very good English teacher who encouraged my interest in English literature, and I ended up going to university to study mediaeval and Anglo Saxon literature, which as my son said to me recently is not that useful! But it taught me how to write essays which has turned out to be useful in my blogging and other writing work. But so when I returned to the piano, and once I'd sort of got more established and the blog taken off, that's when I started to meet young people who were in conservatoire, or recent graduates and conversations with them was very eye opening. And also conversations with older professional musicians who've been through the system and seemed quite disillusioned about it. And it made me realise that if I had gone I think that I probably wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now. And I might have had that pleasure in music taken away from me. And I think it's a great pity if people feel that, you know, they've been through a system that's that's robbed them of the joy of music, because I think fundamentally, that's what it's about, whether you're a professional or amateur musician, it should be something enjoyable, that the actual, for me, it's the physical pleasure playing instrument, the sound, the music, and all the things that go with it. I mean, I love going to concerts and experiencing live music. And I wonder whether it would have been different if I'd taken different paths at 18. I think it probably would have been.

R

Rebecca Toal 11:10

But I think that's so spot on. And incredibly insightful.

H

Hattie Butterworth 11:13

Yeah. Because I think, I think I've had I probably you well, like we've both had that feeling of like, this kind of, what's the word paradox of sort of, like, oh, I can't not do it but also, I feel like I'd be a lot happier and I'd love it a lot more if I wasn't doing it. And if it was just fun, and, you know, there's so much going on kind of back and forth to do with that. But I'm wondering kind of what you did do. I'm just very nosy, you know, what did you do in those 20 years, you know? What did your life involve? Was there anything kind of musical going on? Or what was your sort of line of work?

F

Frances Wilson 11:46

Well, no, I mean, I, I gave up playing the piano at 19. I went to university - there was a piano in my hall of residence, but it was out of tune. But I did have a very good friend. And I'm, she's still a very good friend of mine who played the cello. So occasionally, we would try and ramble through some piano and cello music, but it was so disappointing because the piano was out of tune. I sang in the University Choir, which I enjoyed. But apart from the odd noodle on the friends grand piano, very, very occasionally, I didn't touch the instrument. And instead, coming out of University with a degree in English, I went into to academic publishing, where I worked for 10 years. And then I had my son, and I stopped work. And then my mother bought me a digital piano and said, you might like to start playing again and that was what got me going. And so by that time, my son was settled at primary school, and I had more time. And then one day, one of the mums at school said, "Oh, you play the piano, don't you? You could teach my daughter." and I had no experience of being a teacher, I had no inclination to be a teacher. But then I thought, actually, this is something I can do at home. And it fits in with the school day.

And I thought, well, you know, nothing ventured, which is kind of my general attitude to life, I'll try it. And I, I found it quite difficult to start with because it was sort of new territory, but by the that Christmas, I think I had a studio of about 15 students and the beginnings of a waiting list and it was it just took off. And once I'd kind of decided how I wanted to do it, it was very much driven by how I had been taught. So as a little girl, I had a very old fashioned teacher. And it was very much that you had to learn the piece of music. And no matter how dull it was, it was all you know, you had to learn it properly. So I remember weeks and weeks of seeing the same wretched piece of music, (it was so boring) and then I, when we moved from the Midlands to North London, I had a very good teacher who was... kind of encouraged and much more sort of thinking outside the box attitude to playing and never, never sort of criticised me if I turned up with with music that I had selected, which I was interested in learning, you know, we didn't have to just stick to the grade stuff. So those experiences coloured my attitude to teaching, and I determined from the outset that no student of mine would be bored, because it's such a demotivating thing to be bored. So I'd let the kids you know, choose what music they wanted to play. And so that's kind of how I got back into it. That's 2006 and I taught for 12 years in London before we moved, and then the blog and all of the other things follow on from that.

H

Hattie Butterworth 14:37

Well the blog is just, I suppose why probably anyone listening will know you and I mean, I've just got so much to ask about it. And also I find out I found a lot of other guests through your blog, which is kind of why I wanted to talk to you because I don't... how do I start this... I suppose I wanna know what was the idea? What was the inspiration behind ...you know, did you just have a kind of real inkling you wanted to know more about musicians' lives? Or how did this idea to talk to musicians and, and make that a big part of your your life, how did that begin?

F

Frances Wilson 15:17

What you're referring perhaps to the meet the artists series? That came a bit later. So I started the blog in 2010, and prior to that, I had been writing a food blog, which was just a sort of hobby thing. And I think this is a hangover from having, you know, done an English degree. I like writing, I'd always enjoyed writing even as a child, and I wrote poetry and, you know, essays and, and, you know, pieces of creative writing, I'd always enjoyed writing. So it was a good outlet and do food blog, taught me how to set up a blog. And then because I was beginning to ... by 2010, I was having regular piano lessons again with a professor at Trinity - private lessons - and she was the person that restored my confidence and helped me put that comment from the music teacher at school in a box. And she said, "You should consider doing a diploma" and suddenly I was like, "Yes, this is, now it's serious". And so the blog started initially really as a kind of practice diary, where I could go and write about my experiences. So rather than keeping a notebook, I wrote the blog. So I wrote about the music I was learning, I would report back on my lessons and the things that I had learned that day at my teacher's, and how I would reflect on that. And then I started writing about concerts I was going to, and I got approached by Bachtrack to be one of their reviewers, which I did for six years, six or seven years. Yeah so that's how it started and it was all very random, and I thought, "oh, you know, it won't last long. I'll get bored or I won't have time to do it." But I found ... it's quite addictive, actually. I like the activity writing. And it was also very complementary to the piano playing because it just gave me an opportunity to reflect on what I was doing. And then after a while, I

thought, possibly what I'm doing might help other people. And I was also involved with an amateur piano group at this point. I'd set up a club for amateurs with a pianist friend. And I was finding that there were people like me who had had, you know, 'returners' as we're called, who'd had very similar experiences to me, suddenly, I thought, "I'm not alone. There's lots of us, and we all want to talk about it". And so the blog became a kind of forum for that as well. The meet the artist series, which is celebrating its 10th birthday this year, which I find hard to believe.

H

Hattie Butterworth 17:48

Congratulations. Yeah, that's so cool.

F

Frances Wilson 17:51

The blog is 12 years old this year and the meet the artist series is 10 in April. And that came about, it was just like another sort of random thought. So I think one of the tricks of being a successful blogger is to be regularly producing new and interesting material. So I run quite a few series, sometimes their occasional series, or more regular things. I've just launched something called repertoire in focus, which is people contributing essays about specific repertoire, not just piano repertoire. So I think it's really important to offer the readers variety. So I was at my parents in law's house, and they had all these lovely glossy magazines like country living and there was Vanity Fair. And I turned to that page. And they had what's called the Proust questionnaire, which was a series of questions which the author Marcel Proust answered at different times in his life, to give a kind of impression of where he was in his life. And Vanity Fair had adapted this and used it as a celebrity interview slot. And I looked at the questions and I thought I could do something like this for musicians, so they'd all answer the same questions. I've obviously adapted it slightly over the years, because one wants to ask composers, for example, slightly different questions. But basically, it's a template, and everyone answers the same questions. And that's how it started and now, I did some totting up the other day, over 1600 interviews over the course of 10 years. It has its own site now, I just couldn't accommodate it on my main blog because I had so many people wanting to take part and I'm just astonished and very grateful as well, to all the musicians who've taken part and want to take part. There's a queue of interviews waiting to be published still, and who are willing to share their insights and their wisdom and I think it's a wonderful opportunity for people to kind of get beyond the notes and get past the concert platform and understand what musicians do all day. Because I think there's a there's a mystique, still there's this mystique around classical musicians, this idea that we're all in these, you know, gilded cages. And we don't see the light of day and practising seven hours a day. And I think what the interviews do is show that yes, there is this incredible commitment, but also, that musicians have a life beyond that. And that actually feeds into their creative life. So that that's how it came about and where it is now.

R

Rebecca Toal 20:35

Obviously, we're extremely interested in the people behind the, as you say, the kind of gilded cage or what people seem to put on a pedestal, so I feel like, yeah, that really shines with us. Yeah, I was wondering whether that because, you know, we try to dig a bit deeper as well. I was

wondering whether there's been, like, a surprisingly common theme throughout most of the interviews, or, I don't know, have you found that most people have come to you with an issue or being disillusioned with sort of the same thing or has it all be completely individual?

F

Frances Wilson 21:12

Um, there are common threads and it's, you know, regardless of what instrument we're talking about, I think what what is clear, in almost every single interview is that the, the, the kind of pull, and the wish to commit to this is very powerful, and it comes from an early age, and I can understand that, you know, even as an amateur musician, this, this, this kind of connection that you feel, to your instrument, and to its literature and everything that's connected with it. But I think with a professional, that is much stronger, and there is this willingness to to commit to the task and an acceptance that it's, it's for the long haul, that it's not easy. I think that's the most interesting, common thread. The other one, because one of the questions towards the end of the interview is, "what is your definition of success?". Now, to most people successes is measured in monetary terms, you know, how much money you earn kind of thing. And as we know, you know, there are not that many musicians at the very top of the tree who are earning 1000s and 10s and hundreds of 1000s, but it's a it's not a well paid profession. So people, you know, I don't think anybody has ever answered that question with sort of reference to how much money they're earning. It's all about things like the ability to leave an impression on an audience, to successfully communicate the music to the audience, much more kind of esoteric things like that, which again, I think is really important than giving readers you know, potential audiences an opportunity to understand what what, you know, what makes musicians tick really. I'm kind of interested at coming at it from a slightly, I don't know, I don't want it to sound like I'm really kind of questioning you, but I have got this, I suppose worry about always asking the same questions, which is, do you ever think maybe this is something that's going to make people people feel that they're inclined to compare themselves to others? Or do you think it's something where people will think, oh, my gosh, I've read 10 of Frances's interviews, and in all 10 of them, people are doing one thing that I don't do, or they seem to have the same path that I don't have, and I feel like I don't quite fit in or there seems to be a common thread towards, for everyone that's successful. Sorry, I'm not explained very well, but do you think it can maybe bring comparison for some people that might be reading it? I guess it might do. But I have to admit, I've never encountered that attitude. I mean, you know, I have people literally queuing up on my email, asking to take part, either musicians themselves, or it comes through their publicists or their agents. And I've never, I don't think I ... apart from the odd young musician who has said, "I don't feel ready to answer these questions at this point in my career", which is entirely understandable. I mean, I like to, to feature young musicians because I feel that, that it's very valuable publicity. But I haven't encountered that at all. And I feel that people are happy to answer and also a very, very honest, sometimes painfully, so I've had one or two where people have revealed quite painfully honest things about their, again, going back to conservatoire. This is a Russian pianist in particular, who had had a very, very negative experience at conservatoire in Russia and, you know, remarkable that she had got through that and then moved to America where her experience had become much more positive. But no, I don't feel that there is that, I mean, certainly it's never been mentioned to me, and I do think the willingness to take part suggests that they're, they are intrigued and interested in, in the way it's organised shall we say?

R

Rebecca Toal 25:13



I guess. Yeah, I guess the fact that they're queuing up is testament to like, they want to share their story. And yeah, I can understand both. I guess, if I was faced with the same questions as somebody else, maybe I'd want to give a different answer, to make myself stand out in some way point. But yeah, I can definitely see, if you were a bit worried about what to say, then you might look at somebody else's and try and emulate. I guess, sometimes for our platform as well, sometimes I worry that people because they want to share so much up to a certain point, and then I often wonder ... because you know, music is so reputation-based and word of mouth and everything. I wonder sometimes whether our guests hold back about something they want to say or because they're worried that the wrong person might hear it. Have you ever come across any guests that you've either felt have over-shared, and you've asked if they've wanted to redact something or whether they've said actually, I don't want to answer that, because they're worried about saying the wrong thing?

F

Frances Wilson 26:20

Um not really to be honest, I mean, every single question is optional. So I mean, I always say to people, you know, either the question may be irrelevant, or they don't, they simply don't want to answer it. That's fine. It's not obligatory. And I find that most people will answer all the questions, and they will give very interesting answers. So it's a it's an interesting one. I mean, there was another musician not that long ago, who was very, very honest about her difficulties of performance anxiety. And again, I was surprised at how open she was, because this was, I mean, you know, it's still a huge issue talking about performance anxiety. It's getting better but it's still a big problem. And, you know, a lot of musicians are very reluctant to discuss it, because like you say, the fear that it will affect their career. The same is true of injury actually, isn't it? But she was very honest. and reading it, I thought, actually, other musicians may see this and feel empowered, and supported by someone who is speaking out. So I hope that the series offers things like that as well, that maybe others feel feel inspired and supported by other people's responses.

H

Hattie Butterworth 27:37

That's definitely how I've reacted to reading it. And actually, Duncan's interview, really has stayed with me, especially how honest he was about his breakdown at conservatoire and all of that, because I think that's something that, you know, I went through, I had a big mental breakdown at the end of my first year, and I've suffered with mental health since then. and, as you say, I think it's something where it takes someone like Duncan to have the power and courage to share that and put their story out there because they know it will help someone else and reading that. Like even recently reading that and I was thinking, "I feel so much less alone", or I even what we're doing, I read that and I think, "yeah, we are doing the right thing in asking some difficult questions, encouraging people to share, because if he can make my story feel valid, but hopefully, you're making change",

R

Rebecca Toal 28:34

You're making change, yeah, by slightly pushing the boat out a little bit. Yeah. It's always hard to know where the line is.

**H** Hattie Butterworth 28:41  
Exactly.

**F** Frances Wilson 28:42  
No, I agree. Yeah.

**R** Rebecca Toal 28:44  
I wonder whether ... In my head I haven't quite ... so when you were a reviewer, was that before the meet the artist series?

**F** Frances Wilson 28:55  
No, I think I'm trying to remember when I started writing for Bachtrack, because I can certainly remember the first concert I reviewed. It was around it was about the same time and actually, to just to backtrack slightly, the fact that it was about the same time, the fact that I had interviewed people meant that when I went to a concert, whether I was reviewing or simply going for my own interest, I could go to the green room afterwards and actually meet the person because the interviews are largely conducted by email questionnaire, a couple I have done face to face. I'm not a natural interviewer, I prefer it to be written down like that. And also I feel that it gives people an opportunity to go away and think about what they want to say. I've done a couple over the phone, but I prefer to do it that way. But it means... it meant then that, and still means, that I can go to a concert and I can go to the green room and say "I'm Frances, the cross-eyed pianist. You know, thank you for your interview." It kind of creates a really nice connection for me with with the person because I do like meeting musicians in person. And I also like to go after a concert, and thank them for their performance, so it was quite useful to be doing that alongside the other things I was doing. It just for me, it just felt that it was this great big soup of things musical. They're all connected and I really like that, I still like that aspect of what I do.

**R** Rebecca Toal 30:25  
Yeah, I think one of the things that has definitely struck me about your whole career is just how much how many things you've managed to do in combination with each other. But going back to the reviewing and the meet the artist, I wonder whether, because often I've read a maybe a review of a performance that I've done in an orchestra or something, and not being like, I don't know, if there's anything negative, I feel like "oh but they don't know the musicians behind the music", and I wonder whether your meet the artists series and getting to know these artists affected your work as a reviewer? In terms of did you feel that there... you had more of an insight into how you could review? Or did it change the process at all, knowing more about the people behind the music?

**F** Frances Wilson 30:35

**F** Frances Wilson 31:15

I think, yes, that's...definitely, but also being a musician, myself. And, you know, I play at a high level, and I practice, you know, I've been taught by professional pianist, and I understand how to practice and I appreciate the effort and time invested in getting ready for a concert. And I think that, that still audiences, many audiences don't appreciate that, you know, the hours and hours, and that's all unpaid as well. So I always take that understanding with me when I go to concerts. And so I also appreciate that there are some times when a musician may be having an off day, for whatever reason, perhaps their journey to the concert hall was delayed and rushed, or they've stepped off a flight and they're tired, and yet, they've got to go and do this thing, so I've always tried as a reviewer to be sympathetic. and I also have always felt that, that it's not the job of a reviewer, even a reviewer who has an understanding or experience of being a musician or making music, to tell other musicians how to do their jobs. I don't think it's helpful. I have seen a number of reviews over the time I've been writing where I've, where critics have done that. and I think it's I think it's unnecessary and unreasonable. So I also believe that, even if it's a poor performance, and you know, there's times when I've been, and I've just sat there and thought, "This is not good." I've tried to be sympathetic, so even when writing what might be deemed a more negative review, I've tried to be as kind as possible, because I just think it's... I don't think it's fair to slate musicians in the public forum of music criticism, I really don't. I don't think anybody gains from it, not least the musicians because I know from my very limited experience as a performer, that when in the moments when you come off the stage, you are at your most vulnerable. And I mean, I've been in the greenroom where I've heard people going up to performers and and criticising their playing in that those 10 minutes post-performance, and I think that's dreadful. It's shocked me actually to hear people. I remember somebody telling the pianist that their tempo in one movement of Pictures at an Exhibition was wrong, and I just think "how dare you! How dare you! You know, you go and do that! If you're gonna make those those judgments, you show us!" You know, "you go and play it! Let's see how hard it is!" kind of thing. I mean, I do feel very passionately about that, and I think that that vulnerability - I've written about vulnerability as a musician - I think it's it can be channelled into a very positive thing. I think we need a sensitivity, because we're dealing with music, which is about emotions, fundamentally. And so that's important, but I also think that one has to be respectful. Musicians are quite sensitive. I mean, I admire those who have done things like... I can't remember who it is, there's a famous violinist who, who actually would actively publish bad reviews on her website.

**H** Hattie Butterworth 34:39

We need to talk to her whoever she is. That is mad. No way.

**F** Frances Wilson 34:47

Which I think is really brave actually. And then we've had the odd occasion when a musician has challenged a reviewer I think it was the pianist Katia [surname] that did that, and I I kind of understand what understood why she did it, and actually, when I reading the review in question, I thought she was sort of justified and yet I also felt that she should have just moved on. It's not I don't think it's a good idea to kind of get into these confrontations with with journalists either, and I think that one has to just draw a line. It's so difficult, though. You know, we are emotional people, as musicians, many, many of them. I haven't met, I haven't met

many who have got, you know, rhinoceros hide skin. You know, we take comments about our playing very seriously, and so I try to be very respectful when I write about concerts and musicians.

H

Hattie Butterworth 35:46

I think that ties back to your, I mean, to the reason really, why you took 20 years off, you know, and reason why so many people, even my mum, she, she got a really good level of violin, and it was the comment or one bad performance experience and the comment of her uncle that means that now, the idea of picking up a violin is just filled with an absolute, like, dread fear, everything stressful, you know. So I think that's such a good point, like, we are sensitive, and I've had that said to me, meant in a negative way before, like, "Oh, I knew I knew you were like this, because you're so sensitive", or "why do you have to be so sensitive?"

R

Rebecca Toal 36:25

Or it doesn't matter who it is that says those... You know, you have family members say stuff immediately after performance that they've, obviously they've had to come and travel and sit through the performance of you at whatever level, but it doesn't matter if it's a family member, a professor, someone you don't know...whatever that comment is, it can stick with you.

H

Hattie Butterworth 36:44

It's so simple just to say like, you know, "move on", not to criticise what you said, but it is very simple to say, "move on" when, you know, maybe someone's in a vulnerable state or like an emotional state where it means that moving on, isn't possible or like...

R

Rebecca Toal 37:04

Well, yeah, if I said to my dad, you know that comment you said after that symphony in 2015, you know, I still think about that, most times I play that excerpt. He'd be like, "why are you still thinking about that? Move on!" And yeah, as you said, it's not as simple as that, but I know that it wasn't meant in like... he would never remember that he said that, so of course, it's better just to draw a line under it and move on. But yeah, thanks, Dad!

F

Frances Wilson 37:32

I think what some, some critics and reviewers don't realise is that, you know, in the moments that you step off stage, and in the hours and days after a concert, that one engages in a huge amount of reflection, and soul searching and thought, you know, I'm sure that even the people at the top of profession are thinking, you know, "what did I do? What did I like about my performance? What could I change? What will I do differently next time?" you know, this, this constant, constant reflection, and reevaluation and experimentation, yeah, and every time you guys practice you, you should be going through those processes. So I do think that, you know, we should kind of leave musicians alone to do their jobs. So I see reviewing more as a kind of a

record of an event so that it's there, you know, we have archives of reviews going back hundreds of years, in fact, and the internet, of course, means that they're all over the place, and they're easy to find. And I think it's important to to make a record of that event in time. I don't know how... I don't know how valuable musicians, professional musicians, see reviews. Some, I think, set great store by them and I, I have come across people who have said, "Oh, I would never put a review by a blogger on my website", which I find quite interesting, because I feel that, especially in recent years, the blogosphere, and the independent reviewer and the online reviewers have a place and it should not just be the preserve of the mainstream media to comment on our culture. You know, there's, I know a lot of other bloggers, culture bloggers, who are very intelligent people who have a very good understanding of what they're writing about. And yet they're dismissed in a comment like that. I'm uncomfortable about that. I'm pleased to say that that musicians do quote me on their websites, not that often, but it's, and it's, you know, it's very flattering, and I feel that that's a it's a very nice thing to do to see one's name. I don't go reviewing to seek that I, I review because I, you know, I go to a concert and I think actually I'd really like to write about this. I want other people to kind of experience it. I mean, the greatest compliment that someone paid me was that reading one of my reviews was like sitting in the concert with me, or having a discussion in the interval, or on the train home. And if I can make people feel that, you know, experience what it's like to be there, you know, I leave the highfalutin intellectual, you know, highbrow writing to others. I want people to enjoy the experience of music, whether they're reading about it, or they're actually sat next to me in the concert hall.

R

Rebecca Toal 40:26

Yeah, it sounds like that very much comes from your perspective as a performer as well. To me, that's all I would want my audience to ever experience. Um and I, yeah, I suspect that a lot of your talent as a writer, and your success as a writer, comes from the fact that you've had all of these angles, coming at music, you know, you've... the teacher, the performer, the writer, I understand that you've done a bit of publicity. You've had all these different angles, which then make your perspective so well-rounded and so insightful, that yeah, like, of course, people would quote you, it's just like this direct gaze into what they are.

H

Hattie Butterworth 41:09

Also, having read 1500 reviews or whatever, not reviews sorry! Interviews! Like, different insights into musicians' lives, like I just cannot, like, it just doesn't even, you know, it's like, you know probably so many different musical personalities and ideas and things that come through, and I think a big part of what we're trying to do, is to talk about, "okay, music can be beneficial for our wellbeing, music can be beneficial for our mental health" and all of this, but in terms of the actual lives of musicians, how do you find ... how important do you think it is that when a musician is interviewed, they talk about their playing their music, their career, their success? And how much do you think maybe we should be asking questions more to do with them as a human being?

F

Frances Wilson 42:07

Oh, gosh, it sort of, I suppose it partly depends on the who, who is the audience for such an interview. So going, it relates to my own series, that, that there is this fascination with what

musicians do all day. And what makes them tick. I mean, from my point of view, as a musician, I am interested in things like why people, you know, select certain repertoire, and how they were trained, the things that that kind of help them with their interpretation of peace. I mean, again, one of the questions in my interview is what do you do walk offstage that provides inspiration for onstage and some people just say, well, I sit quietly, and think about the music before I go onstage, others talk about going for walks in, in forests or enjoying cooking or, you know, and again, it just reminds us that we're dealing with ordinary people, well they're ordinary and extraordinary. I've also written about that. You know, I think I think musicians are extraordinary people. So it's, it's a tricky one. I mean, I personally, I'm very, I'm very interested in what what other things are going on in a musician's life, but it does depend on the audience. I mean, I think what you're doing is really important, because it's getting musicians and people in the industry to talk about the other things, especially the things that are somewhat still taboo. And I think the more people feel comfortable about discussing things like injury and performance, anxiety, and, you know, bullying at conservatoire, and stuff like that is actually very important, but one is always mindful that, you know, you can overshare and it might come back and bite you. So it's, it's very, very difficult. And like I say, also, we're dealing with sensitive people who were engaged in, you know, high art and bringing that art to others in the most beautiful way they possibly can.

R

Rebecca Toal 44:09

It is so tricky and I do feel that, that is, where I feel our audience is, is, particularly people that are also struggling with those things that want to see those conversations. Whereas I don't feel we get so many people that are coming at it from like a review point, or, at the moment, we're just building up from people that are similar, who are like...love oversharing and all this kind of thing. And yeah, I mean, I've already said it today, but it's such a fine line of knowing where is too you much and as you say, what might come back to bite you. And yeah.

H

Hattie Butterworth 44:54

I think I come at it from a point of view where. and this is only my own experience, but I think because I got to the point where my actual sense of being alive, had gone. Not to be completely dark, but like, because I was so unwell that even being a human, let alone a musician was impossible. I feel like because I know that experience exists and I know that musicians can suffer to the level where they can't practice and they can't function in society, then I feel like actually, at the moment, I'm a little bit obsessed with coming it from that side first, and not from a sort of "who are you as a musician?" Oh, and do you, you know, and "what's your stuff outside as well?" you know, I think, probably only because of my own experience, but I'm always just kind of really interested in well, when has been your real dark time.

F

Frances Wilson 45:43

I think your point about the dark places has been very apparent over the last two years, I've had many conversations with musician, friends and colleagues, and some have revealed this in their interviews about the effects of the lockdowns and, you know, the closure of our cultural life, and, you know, some have had serious conversations with themselves and their families

and others about whether it's worth pursuing a career as a professional musician, and I've found that incredibly upsetting. You know, I know of several who have decided that it's not worth it, and they've gone done other things. And it's tragic to hear. And, you know, I mean, I've come across people at the beginning of the lockdown sort of saying things like, "well, it's wonderful for musicians, because you've got all this time to practise now". And there was like, yes, initially, it was fantastic, you had all this time to practise, I had all this time to write, all my publicity work stopped the moment the concert halls shut in mid March in 2020. I had no work. And I thought, "yeah, I can do some really serious writing" and other musician friends and colleagues were like, "Yes, I'm going to practise, I'm going to take this chance to learn the Liszt sonata, or the Hammer Klavier or something", and then as the weeks rolled on, you think, "when is it going?" You know, the time suddenly stopped being a luxury and it became this kind of wait. I felt it with my writing. I lost the will to write and I found the lockdowns absolutely soul-sapping in terms of creativity, and I, you know, I find with writing, it's like music practice, you have to do it regularly, otherwise, you get out of the routine, and to have these days where it was the same every day, I know that lots of musicians felt this and became incredibly demotivated, and you start to think, "what's the point? What's the point?" But it's, you know, as I said, at the beginning of this conversation, to see a full house at our Weymouth lunchtime series, and the audience coming out smiling and complimenting the performer and the joy that the music gives, I hope that that is the thing that encourages people not to give up, because we you know, we need them. It's such a important part, I think, an important part of our life to have that. But it's so sad to hear of people that have just become so disillusioned. And you know, it also revealed the fragility of the profession, you know, so many are peripatetic, freelance... It's really tough. It's tough when we're not in a global pandemic, isn't it? And I think it really highlighted the fragility of the profession and for a lot of people it was, it was too much to bear. It's terribly sad. It's really upset me.

H

Hattie Butterworth 48:47

I can so imagine, especially seeing as it felt like it was a really kind of bountiful place before that, like, I felt like there was sort of so much at our fingertips in terms of classical music before, and I can so see that through your blog as well, like it must have felt like, "we've got all these amazing people doing amazing things" like there's so much creativity going on, and then now it's just felt like building from the bottom up again. Yeah, serious fragility.

F

Frances Wilson 49:17

I think it's given a lot of people in addition to the sort of what I've just said about having, you know, reevaluating your career, it's reminded me of a conversation I had with a pianist friend, this was back in the summer of 2020... he said, we're going to have to be a lot less fancy about where we play and I thought that was a really good comment and it stayed with me that, you know, one can't be so choosy. So if a music society in Bognor Regis gets in touch and says, you know, will you come and play? And this is the fee and it's perhaps not what you would normally get but you know, it's an opportunity. I think he had a point, valid point that you can't be quite so choosy. I do sense a much greater positivity now, I feel that our cultural life has bounced back pretty well. And I think it's a mark of how much people value it and want it. But I, yeah, it's been a period of a great deal of soul searching for alot of people.





R

Rebecca Toal 50:19

And I think also that yeah, that soul searching has infused with the desire to get the culture back, and actually in the same way that the culture has come back because we want it, it's been enriched by all these questions that we've asked, asked ourselves. And I also feel that there has been a trend towards making music more accessible in the past couple of years, and slightly before the pandemic, that actually, your comment about not being choosy about where to play, it also kind of ties into helping accessibility of music, which is good,

H

Hattie Butterworth 50:59

Thinking about alternative venues or alternative ways of presenting it.

R

Rebecca Toal 51:03

Or just alternative audiences. Yeah, and obviously, pay is a whole different matter but if it means that more people are listening to this kind of music, then that's kind of what we're aiming for, anyway. Yeah.

F

Frances Wilson 51:17

I mean, I think that the, you know, the amount of musical performance that was being put out online, you know, from from people just playing in their living rooms to to when the Wigmore Hall launched it's live streaming June 2020, and has continued to do that, you know, things like that, I think has been wonderful. And like you say, it's, it's open the art form up to a wider audience. Whether that live online audience translates into people buying tickets for live concerts, I don't know. I hope it has helped. I think it's a difficult one, because I think it's also made people think, "Oh, well, I can have this from the luxury of my living room for free". So that's, that's a difficult one. But I think that it's had put generally a positive benefit. And I think that, yeah, just being able to, I mean, my husband, who is not a huge classical music fan, by any means, but he's learning to like it through me. And we, we've watched things at home on live stream, and he's been able to...I think he's someone that feels quite intimidated by someone like the Wigmore Hall, but to watch from our sofa, and to chat about the music whilst we're watching it and have a glass of wine and things like that, it makes the experience much more accessible, and we use that word a lot, don't we? But it's, it's true and a kind of more relaxed experience. And I've noticed that, you know, the few concerts I've been to in London, since things started to open up again, that there is a different atmosphere. I think a slightly more relaxed atmosphere in making audiences feel much more comfortable and accommodating them in a slightly different way. So I hope that, you know, we were going to work more and younger audiences.

R

Rebecca Toal 53:09

I also mean, I think that things like meet the artist and things where you can see further past the barrier between the stage and stuff is really going to help people want to come and experience these humans that play music.



F

Frances Wilson 53:23

Yes, I think that's the important thing is to remember that musicians are human.

H

Hattie Butterworth 53:28

Yeah, that's just something that throughout this whole interview, I've been thinking, "but that's just not what I thought when I was learning". I just, I thought we were just a bit special. Yeah, a bit a bit robotic, a bit special, a bit, sort of like, "oh, I can't go out on the weekend, because I've got to practise." Or... you know, because of how my musical education was, it just felt a little bit exclusionary, you know, but I think what you're what you've brought back is the sense of like, slight like, you can do it your way, you know, because there are so many different paths, people have taken, path that you've taken, like, it's really shown me and given me kind of courage to do it my own way. It's in line with who we really are. I'm just wondering, to finish... I'm trying to think of a good question to finish on!

R

Rebecca Toal 54:17

That's always the one isn't it?

H

Hattie Butterworth 54:18

It's always the one, yeah. Do you have any good question to finish on?

R

Rebecca Toal 54:21

I was gonna say it, has there ever been a time where you haven't wanted to write about music?

F

Frances Wilson 54:30

Well, I've talked about the lock downs, and that that I, that was when I didn't want to write about music. I wasn't listening to music. The last concert I went to before the lockdown was at the end of February 2020. And I went to an incredible Beethoven recital at the Wigmore Hall with a friend of mine. And it was one of those evenings when you look across at your concert companion and you're like, "what did we just hear?" It was just electrifying, and I saw lots of friends there and it was just fantastic. It was a wonderful experience. I didn't know that that would be the last concert I'd go to Wigmore Hall for two years. I'm going tomorrow night, for the first time since then. And then I, I was sent this pianist's boxset of the Beethoven piano sonatas and I listened to it, listened to the complete set of CDs, and I wrote a review. And I just thought I, I just don't want to listen to classical music. Initially, I felt such a tremendous loss. Tremendous sense of loss just even just listening to Radio 3 made me miss the ... I love live music, I think you probably worked that out! I love the experience of going to, I always have done even as a little girl, I used to love going to concerts, and I still do, and I missed that so much, and I just couldn't listen to music, and I just felt very disinclined to write about it. I got

sent lots and lots of CDs, and actually, there's just as an aside, one thing that seems to have happened over the course the last two years, a lot of people have been in the recording studio, producing CDs! I mean, Duncan, my friend, Duncan Honeybourne, I think done three or four. And he actually said to me that...

H

Hattie Butterworth 56:13

He churns them out, it's incredible!

F

Frances Wilson 56:15

He's found that the the lockdowns, actually very positive, because it enabled him to spend much more time on the repertoire that interested him, because he's got a busy life as a teacher as well. So I was amazed at how many CDs I was being sent, you know, with the expectation that I might listen to them and review them and I had no inclination to do that. My son who's grown up was living with us, because he was out of work during lockdown, and I ended up listening to hip hop and reggae with him. And it was one of those strange things, which is actually something that I would say to someone who is unsure about engaging with classical music for the first time. You know, initially, it's like "hip hop? No way! I'm not listening to that!" The more I listened to it, and understood it and talked about it with my son, the more I found myself appreciating it. So it's that familiarity thing. Yeah, I just ... it was very difficult, but then I got some bits and pieces of work, which kept me occupied, then I had a job in 2020, writing teaching notes for Trinity, the piano syllabus, and that was actually really good, because it was it felt meaningful. And it was writing about music in a very concise way. And that, you know, like I said, it's the whole thing of habit and routine. Gradually, I started doing it again, I started writing articles also, which were much more reflective on on, partly on the effect of lockdown, which we just talked about, but only reflecting on, you know, my experience over a long time with music, you know, memories of past concerts, things like, yeah, it's, it's a strange thing. It's a similar thing to the pull of the instrument, the need to to write stuff down. Yeah, I think you'll find that if you talk to other... a very good friend of mine is a writer who's about to publish her first novel, but she's had several other books, non-fiction prior to that. And we talk a lot about this, this urge to do it. and you have to kind of keep feeding, feeding the the urge, feeding the muse, tossing the tiger regularly. Yeah, it's, I think all creative people would probably agree with that, regardless of what their discipline is.

H

Hattie Butterworth 58:45

Do you have any exciting project for the future that we can shout out? Or anything exciting, or any exciting interview coming to the blog or anything?

F

Frances Wilson 58:54

Um, I don't know, I can't remember who's in the queue for forthcoming interviews. Well, I've mentioned the fact that the meet the artist series is 10. and I think that's amazing. And I can't believe that an idea that came to me, you know, one Sunday afternoon, has taken off this way. And I'm incredibly grateful to everybody who's participated in it and continues to participate

and all the also all the publicists and PRs and agents and others who have put forward people and continue to. The new series on my blog for this year is this repertoire in focus, which is guest posts, largely, I think it's important that readers hear from other voices apart from me all the time. So I always I do invite others to contribute. And that's already proving a very interesting series with people writing about repertoire that interests them and their own insights into learning it, not just professional musicians, amateurs as well, so I hope that that will have some value. I don't know what the future holds. I've always said about the blog that whilst I continue to be interested in doing it, then it will exist. So I hope it might be celebrating its 15th birthday.

**H** Hattie Butterworth 1:00:16

So people want to follow you, can you let us know like how they can find you online?

**F** Frances Wilson 1:00:22

Sure. So the blog is [crosseyedpiano \(one word\) .com](http://crosseyedpiano.com). On Twitter, which is where I spend far too much time

**H** Hattie Butterworth 1:00:31

And how we met!

**F** Frances Wilson 1:00:33

How we met, yeah, I'm @crosseyedpiano. I have a Facebook page for the blog and the meet the artist has its own Facebook page as well. And the meet the artists site is separate and so if you key in meet the artist who find it, that's really where I am. I'm on Instagram, isn't everybody? But I don't really, I don't use it as much as Twitter. Yeah. And you know, if you're at the Wigmore Hall, you might run into me.

**H** Hattie Butterworth 1:01:03

Well thanks so much, honestly, like, we've covered pretty much everything.

**R** Rebecca Toal 1:01:08

The whole of life!

**H** Hattie Butterworth 1:01:09

The whole of life. It's just been amazing to speak to someone like you who's kind of done what we want to do, but kind of for longer, and from a different angle. And it's just been really, really

interesting. I feel like, I've got so much to think about and learn. So thank you so much. And final question: if people want to get involved with the meet the artist series, are you still taking sort of submissions for that?

F

Frances Wilson 1:01:37

Yeah, totally. They just have to, they can they don't even have to ask, they can simply go to the site, you can go to the 'About' page on the site and download an interview template, fill it in and send it to me. My email addresses is on the form. I actually really like people to just get on with it. You know, I have people sort of writing saying, "May I take part?" And I'm like, "yes, just, you know..."

H

Hattie Butterworth 1:02:01

I'm so obsessed with that idea! That's so good that you haven't like, sort of invites only or anything. It's like anyone can...

F

Frances Wilson 1:02:10

I don't want it to be like that, because, again, I want to encourage... particularly younger artists to take part. You know that the well-known ones, they don't need my help, although some of them are on the site. But I'm much more interested in younger, younger or lesser known people having an opportunity to, because everybody has something valuable to say. And also guest posts on my main site, I'm always interested if people have you know, an urge to write about something that's related to music. It doesn't have to be piano related. The site is a music site. I mean, I have obviously focus on the piano, but yeah, so please get in touch with me. Join the conversation! That's a wonderful thing about having a blog... [fade out]