Bob Hughes (full interview)

Fri, Nov 26, 2021 4:01PM • 54:55

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

lso, dystonia, bass trombone, people, trumpet, playing, play, players, trombone, bit, teaching, thought, embouchure, brass, horn, problems, started, job, musicians, suppose

SPEAKERS

Bob Hughes, Rebecca Toal, Hattie Butterworth

Hattie Butterworth 00:03
Hello and welcome to Things Musicians Don't Talk about with your hosts Hattie Butterworth

Rebecca Toal 00:09
And me Rebecca Toal.

Hattie Butterworth 00:11
Within our vibrant musical world, it can often feel that the struggles and humanity of musicians is lost and restricted.

Rebecca Toal 00:18
Having both dealt in silence with mental, physical and emotional issues, we are now looking for a way to voice musician stories, discuss them further, and to connect with the many others who suffer like we have.

Hattie Butterworth 00:30
No topic or the out of bounds as we are committed to raising awareness for all varieties of struggle, and hope to do so with some fantastic guests along the way.

Rebecca Toal 00:40
So join me Hattie, and guests, as we attempt to bring an end to stigma, by uncovering the things musicians don't talk about. Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me about a subject that is, you know, pretty important, and I think quite relevant to talk about these things, particularly for somebody that's so influential and successful as you are, I think it's important for us to hear their voices, so thank you.

Bob Hughes 01:17
And there, there are quite a few. I mean, there are, you know, people who who have had successful playing careers, and maybe for one reason or another had to change track, you know?

Rebecca Toal 01:34
So to start off, because I mean, I'm not completely clear, but I'm sure that some of our listeners also won't be completely clear, could you just give a layman's summary of what focal dystonia is?

Bob Hughes 01:46
Well, I'm not a medical expert, and I don't want to be sort of quoted as being one...but in my sort of understanding of it, it's a neurological condition, where signals from the brain for fine muscle control get confused, and that can result in loss, loss of muscular control, possibly even spasms. And so, in my case, probably unwanted tension in the muscles that I didn't, wasn't asking for, you know. I mean, that's just my interpretation of it.

Rebecca Toal 02:26
And so can you give a sort of summary of your, you know, your musical story up until, well, not necessarily up until but give me a background of your musical history? And whereabouts did the focal dystonia hit, as it were?

Bob Hughes 02:44
Very, very briefly, I mean, I studied at the Academy, where you were, and that was sort of mid 70s. And I got a job very early on in the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra when I was 20. I just auditioned and I was so green I, I wasn't really aware what the standard was really, and I didn't really know the orchestral repertoire very well, but I suppose they saw some kind of potential in me, and so I was lucky enough to get the job. Then after three years, I went to the Scottish National Orchestra for eight and a half years, I think. And then I came down to the Philharmonia Orchestra in 1989. That was to replace Ray Premru, who was a very well known musician, but not just a bass trombone player. And then I spent five years there and then I went to the LSO to I followed Frank Matheson in the LSO. That was in 1994 and I was there for about 10 years. And it was about 2002, or 2003, it's a while ago now...I mean, god it's nearly 20 years ago so my memory's, not quite as clear as it was. But that's when I started experiencing difficulties and very often with this dystonia there's a trigger, which kind of unbalances something that has been ...you've been doing for maybe years and years without any problems. And then suddenly, and in my case, I think I try, I tried a new trombone and after a few months, I decided "no, this isn't quite as good as my old trombone" and I went back to my old trombone, and I found a few notes not responding quite as I, as I wanted. And I didn't think ...I thought: "Well, it'd be alright. A bit of practice, and it'll come back", but it didn't, it seemed to go in the other direction, it seemed to, instead of getting better, it seemed to start spiralling down. And I think that's a very, that was probably a very crucial time because nobody... I mean, I, I asked my colleagues in the LSO, I said, "I'm not very happy with how things are going". And they said, "Oh, it's fine, it sounds great, Bob, you know, just sounds like normal" and I thought "well, but it doesn't feel like normal", you know. So. And then so, and it started in the, in the lower register, just one or two notes that just felt a little bit kind of dull and uncentred. And I suppose what I started doing was perhaps making minute changes to the embouchure, which, to try and compensate for that. And that's when things started getting out of kilter and that... those one or two notes started spreading then, before I knew I was then having problems perhaps in, in, in a half octave, in the low register, and then it spread. And then I just ... being the sort of person I am, you know, perhaps a bit of a perfectionist and someone who works hard, I tried to practise more thinking "right,

I've got I've got to work my way out of this." Perhaps in retrospect, if I'd said all that, forget it, I'll just, I'll just have six months off and not touch the trombone. Who knows? It might have been I'll never know that now. And anyway, in the early days, it was too much to kind of ask for six months off the LSO you know? I still needed to earn money and keep doing the job, you know, so I battled on for maybe for about 18 months, two years. And then it got really bad and people I think, started to notice that... so I thought, right, this is what now I need to take some time off. So that that summarises the kind of this, the beginning of it all really.

Rebecca Toal 06:47
Yeah. Wow. I mean, that sounds because in my mind, it was something that was a sudden thing, or something that would take place just over a short period of time. But it sounds like quite a long, traumatic period of time. And because yeah, as much as you waited until other people started noticing, perhaps to take time off like that there was that whole span of time where you knew something was wrong. And were desperately trying to figure something out, which is, I can't even imagine how stressful that would have been. And yeah, not a not being able to take time off as well. That's I just I don't know how how an earth you would have coped with that.

Bob Hughes 07:25
Well, I think if it on the bass trombone, it you're a little bit, kind of tucked away a little bit, with exceptions. If you if I'd been on first trumpet or first horn, it would become more apparent sooner, but it felt like playing had always... I wouldn't say come easily to me, but I suppose I was a fairly natural player. But I did practice. I mean, if I had a day off, I would do an hour at least an hour's practice or something. And I enjoyed practising. But it for what I thought was, I mean, I, I was but I think I don't want to, I was playing well, you know, that was in the LSO, doing the job, surrounded by a fantastic colleagues and players. And it was it was life was I couldn't have been happier, you know. And then this and it it started to feel like the muscular memory kind of gone somehow, you know, you know, when you form an embouchure and you just there's a kind of feel that you know what it is? That's what started to become very muddied. And, you know, notes weren't where I thought there were,

Rebecca Toal 08:34
Have you played at all since you put the trombone down for that time off? Did you come back to it?

Bob Hughes 08:41
Well, that's when... when I took that time off, this was we're talking about 2003 /2004 by that. I couldn't I didn't know what it was and it was it was just so frustrating. And I went to see some medical experts and I had, I did hypnotherapy, some electrolysis kind of stimulation for the lips. I mean, it's sometimes it just felt the lip weren't vibrating freely you know? Like the muscles had got rigid or something like that, you know? And then my wife spotted something online and it was focal dystonia and this embouchure dystonia. And she said, I think you might have something like this. So that's when I when I went to see lots of top players. Well, at least half a dozen if not more, and they suggested different things, but nobody came up... I mean, these are the top brass players in certainly in the UK, some outside the UK. They didn't mention dystonia. They said, "Oh, you you know try to do more buzzing on the mouthpiece" or "do this and not do that" and none of it was working but Denis Wick, he was very supportive actually and he, he was interested in the whole subject of this as especially when we thought he could be this

dystonia. And he knew a lady in Texas called Jan Kaggereis (?) who had a very deep understanding of dystonia so I went over to Texas about four times, maybe four or five times. And she she actually came over to the UK a couple of times. And we were working together and I mean, they were I, there was some progress there. I mean, it was basically changing the ... playing relearning how to play in a way with a different mental focus. So basically, you're, you're relearning how to play, which, which is very difficult because if ... you know how to play, and it's, you can't unlearn how you play. You know, yeah, but somehow, it was a case of almost forgetting everything you done and start afresh, you know,

Rebecca Toal 11:07
I imagine it's like: I tried to learn the clarinet during lockdown and it was really exciting because it was something new, and the progress curve was quite steep and because I had all the musical knowledge, and it was a little bit frustrating that I couldn't play what I wanted to on this new instrument, but I imagine it was 100 times more frustrating, because you've already been up to the top level on that instrument.

Bob Hughes 11:33
Yeah.

Rebecca Toal 11:34
And you know, how you used to sound and you have evidence, you know, recordings, and whatever. So I can only .. that must have been incredibly frustrating.

Bob Hughes 11:43
Yeah, we developed between myself and this lady Jan Kaggereis(?), we developed a sort of strategy. And I mean, I had to think be positively I had to think positively, I think, "yes, I'm going to overcome this", but I found I had some sort of exercises I would do and I would kind of get things going: just very simple sort of glissandos slur exercises, and thing, I could sort of start building the thing up again. And then possibly the telephone might go and I'd have a five minute conversation with someone. And I'd go back to the trombone, and it all gone again. So it was like, it was like, you know, when you write your name in the sand, and wave comes in and just is gone. It was it was like that.

Rebecca Toal 12:36
What was the longest time you could play for at that point? Was there like a... I mean, in terms of stamina on a brass instrumen, you know, you can't play for that long anyway, was it that when you were relearning stuff, was there a point in which you would stop as well? And then you'd have to stop playing and then go back?

Bob Hughes 12:55
I don't think stamina ... stamina wasn't an issue.

Rebecca Toal 12:58
That's so weird.

Bob Hughes 12:59

I could play not bad in the high extreme in the upper register, but it is in ... and what's interesting, what I've learned with people with dystonia, it seems to affect the areas that you you've your bread and butter areas, or the areas that you focus on. So in my case, on the bass trombone, it was the bass trombone register that was affected. I mean, there are pianists and guitar players, violinists can get it in their fingers, where their fingers might be just one finger doesn't quite do what you're telling it to do. And, and, for instance, guitar players is it can be very often in their right hand, because that's what a lot of the focuses is on you know, maybe with fiddle well fiddle players it's more likely to because of being left hand because that that's where they their fingering, you know?

Rebecca Toal 13:58
Yeah.

Bob Hughes 13:59
But it's the most frustrating thing because it can be very, it could be one finger, or in my case, it was just a certain part of the register you know? And of course, when you when you teach a healthy brass player, as you know, if they can get them you know, a few notes quite nicely, you can give them exercises and encourage them and give them tunes to play and they can gradually build the register, but this was this was very different. There was something unhealthy going on, you know.

Rebecca Toal 14:34
Yeah, usually you build from a foundation upwards and outwards.

Bob Hughes 14:38
Yeah.

Rebecca Toal 14:39
And it's like you've got the outward stuff but not the foundations.

Bob Hughes 14:42
Yeah, yeah.

Rebecca Toal 14:42
It sounds really bizarre. And at the time, you know, you said you went to like, these electro... hypnotherapy, all these people. How did you know where to go? And did you find that you knew where to go? Like did you have help find thinking where to go?

Bob Hughes 15:04
A little bit, a little bit, but it was a bit like finding a needle in haystack. I mean a lot of it was just trial and error... Other musicians would say, have you tried this? So no, it was all it was all very much trial and error. I went to, I did go to I was judging a competition in Hannover, and there's a very fine trombone player there who, again, I think, has got a very good understanding of these things. He, I had a few sessions with him. And I think he thought I we can get things going, you know, and I think I think he was a bit surprised why didn't seem to come together. But while I was in Hanover, there's a very, there's a well known neurologist there, who's I think, was a flute player an his name is Altenmuller. So I, I went to

see him. And he said, Yeah, he was very kind. So I'm early in the morning, and he's a bring your trombone and, and I tried to play a few notes to him and you know, my face was kind of all all over the place...a lot of... there'd be muscular spasms coming in so I might have funny little pulls to one side that was involuntary movement. Anyway, he saw me playing and very quickly, he said, "Yeah, you've got focal dystonia. And you've got it fairly, pretty severe. "He said, he said, "If I think if you keep trying to get your playing back, it's unlikely to come." He said, his advice was to take some time off and then maybe, maybe, you know, after a period of time, that you might find things start to work again. And I always remember that day at, you know, after trying for about two years to try and overcome this thing, which was very frustrating and emotional time really, that this wave of relief came over me that I thought that I have got such a condition. And I remember, it was from that day, I kind of felt you know, I'm just going to leave it alone. Now. I'd like to say that I mean, the LSO were fantastic, they not only the my colleagues but they the management, they said "look, take time off, whatever we can do." There was a there were some little bit of financial support, kind of an in house insurance scheme. So so that that helped, but then after, you know, after a couple of years, you know, you start asking yourself, "well come on. Is it going to come back?" You know, it was never near... what would have been frustrating if I got it 90% back and with just one or two notes that weren't quite right. In my case, it was the other way around. It was like 80%. You know, I couldn't have gone back to the LSO. Yeah, we'll be like playing for Manchester United with a broken ankle or something. You just couldn't have done it. Yeah. So it was in a way, it was a no brainer. In the end. I thought, you know, I've got to I've got to resign here and, and it was all it was, everything was fine. And, you know, I was very, you know, very disappointed. But I thought no, this isn't going to work.

Rebecca Toal 18:26
And yeah, I suppose going back to, you know, you said you felt that sense of relief when you sort of had it a name to give it I suppose that's kind of the same as like medical can any medical condition.

Bob Hughes 18:38
It does help.

Rebecca Toal 18:39
Yeah. And it helps you sort of maybe connect with other people that have the same thing, or at least you know, what to research rather than, as you say, trying to find a needle in a haystack. Did they say because they you know, this neurologist said that it was you were quite far along the along the progress of focal dystonia is it is that thing where the more you try and get it back, the worse it gets?

Bob Hughes 19:00
I think keeping trying to practice probably you trying to you reuse the old neural pathways so trying to play as you had had always played, that it's a no, you just can't do it. It won't come at you've got to find a new way. And someone was telling me the other day they know of a bass guitar player who who play a really top bass guitar player who plays in surgical gloves. And it I think, with his left hand and apparently without the gloves on, he has real problems. His fingers won't do what he's telling him to do. But he wears the surgical gloves and is a different sensory feeling and he can he can play you know, thank thankfully, it's really weird. I mean, one neurologist I saw in London, her name is Karen Rosencrantz, and she, I mean, she was a great support and she tried to, she thought, "Well, why don't

you try and practice playing on a plastic mouthpiece, or even put something over the rim of the mouthpiece like cork or something?" To which then the brain is going to you're going to you're trying to trick the brain that, you know, you're not playing the trombone. You know? I mean, there are crazy stories. I mean, I don't know if it's actually true or not but pianists who have problems they can play on plastic keys, but give them ivory keys, and they have a funny reaction.

Rebecca Toal 20:40
Wow. Yeah, I mean, there's not much you can do with your mouth necessarily,

Bob Hughes 20:44
That's the problem. I know woodwind players who've had it in in there was a, I know a very good flute player is in a principal job, she had it in, I don't know a little finger or something. Or maybe that that finger. And she adapted a flute, so that the she didn't need to use that finger and had some clever way of designing and keys. And she was able to continue playing professionally. But it's just finding a way around it. And as you say, with an embouchure that there's only really one place you can put your mouthpiece, you know.

Rebecca Toal 21:19
Yeah and maybe if it was trumpet like it would maybe be your fingers but trombone...you haven't even got a different avenue for the dystonia to go down really.

Bob Hughes 21:27
Yeah, but I'll tell you an interesting thing is when I was in Hannover, there was a Radovan Vlatković, the horn player was there. And he, he's such a great guy, you know, and a tremendous musician, and very intelligent guy. He said "come around to my room, my hotel room, I'm really interested in this." So I tried playing..., you could see something wasn't working. And so he said, "try my horn." So I picked up his horn, this was before COVID, by the way, when you can share instruments a bit easier. And I managed to play a slight a scale of C on the horn. And he said, "That's really interesting." So I thought, oh, and I did try a horn for a while. But then it seemed to go haywire after a couple months, but then I, because I needed to earn a bit of money I took on a job one day a week teaching in a prep school, teaching little kids, which I've never done before. And I picked up a trumpet one day, and again, I could play the scale of C pretty badly, but I could do it. I thought "that's quite interesting." and I wasn't getting the kind of reaction on the face, like the muscular pulls so I still play the trumpet. And I play fourth trumpet in a big band in a kind of amateur - semi pro Big Band. I've got a gig tonight, actually. But I'm not good. I'm not but I can I can play for trumpet in a big band.

Rebecca Toal 23:03
But that's a fun like it. I guess it kind of satisfies some sort of musical outlet that you haven't been able to have.

Bob Hughes 23:11
Yeah I mean, I was I try and do a little bit of practice most days. I try, try not to get too serious about it because I think there's there's no way I'm going to be a good trumpet player but I think what if I can get a bit of enjoyment out of it and I also find it quite interesting that the trumpet works a bit, but but it's the

same thing when I pick first pick... if I'm trying buzz a few notes first thing, which should be just a natural so [buzzing] it's, it's rather confused, but I've got a few ways of getting around it a bit. And eventually I get some buzz going and then I build it up and do few scales and you know, so yeah, get the Herbert Clarke out and kind of do some of those. I mean, I what I what I struggle with on the trumpet is endurance and high register like every other trumpet player.

Rebecca Toal 24:07
You're one of us now!

Bob Hughes 24:08
I'm a lot lower down than you, Becky, a lot lower down!

Rebecca Toal 24:14
I suppose as you were saying your high register wasn't a problem on the bass trombone when it hit, so I guess that's sort of near the trumpet range that you're comfortable in now.

Bob Hughes 24:23
Yeah well, so I'm probably playing in the high register the bass trombone. You know, but what is interesting that it's like you're using slightly different neural pathways. You know, playing the trumpet. I mean, there's the obvious one, there's valves not a slide, but the mouthpiece of course, is much smaller.

Rebecca Toal 24:43
I guess just the sound and like, there are just enough things different maybe yeah, maybe the horn would have been too close to the trombone. I don't know. Maybe that's why trumpet works better.

Bob Hughes 24:54
Because the trumpet ... the horn's, got that kind of mellow, mellowish tone that the bass trombone's got and I think my sound got better on the trumpet. I mean, someone told me years ago that "oh, you sound like a trombone player and trying to play the trumpet." But actually, I think my sounds got better. I've got to go and play to Mark soon and see what he says but I'm embarrassed because it's not very good.

Rebecca Toal 25:17
It's pretty cool that you're persevering with it, and still finding like a regular place to perform. And I totally respect that. As you were saying about, you got this teaching job teaching primary people. You're, you know, a pretty internationally acclaimed teacher, I would say. And it always interests me this idea that, you know, you've coached lots and lots of some of the world's best bass trombonists. And do you I mean, it's probably a no brainer, but do you find that your experience of the dystonia has affected the way that you teach? Do you think you would be as good a teacher if you hadn't have had it?

Bob Hughes 26:00
Well, that's another interesting story, because when I was playing with the LSO and Philharmonia and all that, my method of teaching was I played, I played a lot in lessons. So it was a bit like "oh do it like

this," and I'd play and I suppose I didn't understand so much about brass playing, then I because it kind of worked.

Rebecca Toal 26:25
You didn't have to.

Bob Hughes 26:26
Like Maurice Murphy, if you ask Maurice, "how do you do that?" Well he's like "don't don't ask me!" Maurice didn't want to know. And he actually stopped...he didn't do any teaching in London, because he didn't want to think about it. And I can you get you can respect that, you know, but he was such a natural player, he didn't want to know what the tang was doing, or the embouchure you know, and I well had some element of that, but I think I've got a far greater understanding now of that, and of course, I never taught ... talking about little prep schoolers, I'd never taught at that level. And Andy Fawbert who's was a trombone player, euphonium player - great, great guy, you know - he was moving down to Somerset with his with his wife, she had a job down there. And he said, "Do you want this...take this day on in Gerrards cross." So I had to learn how to teach little kids you know, even I didn't even know what kind of method books you know, I knew Tune A Day but but there, there are loads of other little fun things, too, you know. So that was a learning curve you know, how I never started someone off on on a trumpet or a tenor horn or anything like that.

Rebecca Toal 27:37
Was it whole class or one to one?

Bob Hughes 27:39
Well it was thankfully one to one. Occasionally, I get maybe half a dozen have been, you know, to try try this out, rather but it wasn't any of this kind of? What do they call it when you get 30 in a class?

Rebecca Toal 27:51
Lke first access?

Bob Hughes 27:53
I know, I didn't do that. I don't know how people do that.

Rebecca Toal 27:56
So at what point did you progress on to teaching sort of music college standard people?

Bob Hughes 28:02
Well, I always taught but I mean, even back in Scotland, I taught to the academy in Scotland, or it's now the Conservatoire up there. So, but it was again, it was very, I'm started teaching when I was 21, 22. I mean, the students were only three years younger than me, but it was very much like, "do it like this." and I play a lot, you know. And then I when I came to London, Harold Nash, who was the old trombone professor there, he got me in there, because they didn't have a bass trombone professor before me. So I started teaching about 1989 at the academy, and I'd always done, you know, three or four hours a week, you know, in between rehearsals and concerts, that kind of thing. And then when I stopped

playing, Jimmy Watson was still had a brass at the Academy and he was very supportive. He sort of gave me a bit more not only one to one teaching, but brass group work, brass ensembles, and things like that. So he was really great and I think Jimmy, Jimmy had gone through difficult patches, I think so he was quite sympathetic to you know, it's it's not all plain sailing, playing a brass instrument sometimes, you know.

Rebecca Toal 29:20
Absolutely.

Bob Hughes 29:21
I don't want to freak anyone out.

Rebecca Toal 29:23
No, not at all, I think. Yeah, it can be interesting teaching people, I mean, I always find that it provides a sort of mirror or my own playing or sort of encourages me to think deeper or better about my own playing. And I wonder how did it feel when ... were you teaching when you are going through the dystonia period?

Bob Hughes 29:43
Yes.

Rebecca Toal 29:44
Did you find that your relationship with your students changed or did you find that you were thinking about the lessons differently at the time?

Bob Hughes 29:54
That's a really good question. I can't remember.. I just struggled through I think, but I must have been a bit distracted and I'd be a bit more careful as to what which bits I demonstrate. So probably during that time, the amount of time it played in lessons got less probably. And how do I put things into words? I find I need a piano in the, in a teaching room just to sort of play pitches and and singing, you know, because it is timing so much of is related to singing, not that I'm good, good singer, but uh, you know, it's the breath and phrasing and all, you know, that whole relaxation, you know, but I mean, the great thing about teaching at the Academy is, and Mark, I think that he does a fantastic job as head of brass and the guys we've got in like I was saying, it's the second week of term, we've got Jörgen van Rijen in and Jeroen Berwaerts. Next week, Rex Martin's coming in, I think in three weeks, Ian Bousfield's coming in. And I think Jeroen is backin, he's doing a concert, I think they're doing a brass arrangement of excerpts from Rosen Cavalier, I think. So, what I try and do, and I try and get in and listen to these guys to their masterclasses. And it's fantastic, in fact I've learned such a lot, because I've now got more time to go, you know, when you're with the LSO, you just you don't have time. You know, you do your three hours, and then you go back to the Barbican for the concert or, but to be able to I mean, I went in and I caught a bit of Jorgen's class yesterday and he's fantastic you know, he talks about it with not only the technical side of it, the relaxation, the musical side of it. He is amazing. I mean, I you learn such a lot just from listening to these guys.

Rebecca Toal 31:53
Yeah and it really influences your own teaching for sure. And how I mean, it's probably quite a difficult question and, you know, I'd totally understand if you don't want to answer it but if, you know, how does it feel teaching people that you see to go on to such great heights? And it's not that you didn't have that but is there any element of sadness or nostalgia for when you were able to play in the LSO or any other job that you had? Is there some sort of difficulty mentally when you see people, your own students going on to do such great things?

Bob Hughes 32:36
No, not now at all. I think early on, it was strange...Little things. I mean, if I heard bits of Richard Strauss, you know, some of those big climaxes eyes get very emotional listening thinkg "oh god I'll never going to sit in the LSO doing that again," you know, and I mean, or sometimes I went to the cinema cos my kids were at the age where they go and see Star Wars and Lord of the Rings and all those things and I used to that was a bit emotional, because we used to do those soundtracks with the LSO and I was on quite a few of them, you know? So that was, yeah, that was hard early on. But now I've moved on. I mean, I don't look, I don't look back at all now. And some I've been so lucky at the Academy with the the students, I've had some tremendous, I don't really want to name anybody because I might miss someone out. So but I've just been lucky, and they've gone on to serve several, well, there's a lot of got jobs and even the ones aren't in jobs, though they're pretty successful and they're pretty busy, you know? So and that's where I get my pleasure from me now, seeing these guys, you know, kind of flying, you know.

Rebecca Toal 33:54
I guess that is just so satisfying as a teacher and maybe it's almost easier, not being a performer in the same way because I think when you're a performer and a teacher, and maybe I don't teach at music college, but I imagine that sometimes there's that maybe when you're still fresh as a music college teacher there can be that crossover between being in the same, I guess, industry as the people that you're teaching. But yeah, perhaps it's easier because you know, you're completely removed and your whole passion is just teaching.

Bob Hughes 34:25
Yeah. I mean, in the old days, some of the old guys, there used to be saying that, "don't teach them too much. They'll be just doing your work." And so you they wouldn't tell you that some of the secrets are there was that kind of they were protective...they didn't want the students coming in and stealing the work, you know.

Rebecca Toal 34:46
I mean, it's hilarious and awful.

Bob Hughes 34:48
It is it is hilarious and awful. Yeah, yeah. I don't think that happens now. I think people are much more generous, and they just want to give share their knowledge. I mean the only thing I do question sometimes in my mind is teaching up all these great players coming to the academy and their their career prospects, you know, that's hard to see. Yeah, but I was saying it the other day, you know, if

you're dedicated enough, I always think there's room for it, like a pint of milk, there's the cream at the top. And there's always a room for that cream. And if you can, if you work hard enough, and, you know, was mainly hard work, but talent as well, I think you will, you'll do, okay,

Rebecca Toal 35:36
There's always room for something new. And as much as it is hard to find something original, I think it's easier to find a career that takes into account lots of different strands of a person and their playing, nowaday, and I think as much as it's a cliche that you have to make your own work...

Bob Hughes 35:55
Yeah, yeah. Again, in the old days, you know, when I got a job and I was, I was always I was always proud to be in an orchestra. You know, I felt honoured that I, you know, I got the job in an orchestra. And I was very happy sitting there, doing the job. I'm trying to play as best I could. And I was very lucky because I had always had nice colleagues around me. So I was never I think I can I do remember back in like, late 70s or something like that, someon'd say, "Oh, Bob, you're still young. Why don't you do a bass trombone recital in a church or something?" And I thought, "Who wants to hear bass trombone you know?" And it was a bit like, that. I think a lot of a lot of the people in jobs thought "who wants to hear a blinking trombone concerto?" That has changed now. I think a lot of young players are, as you say, creating their own work and doing little recitals, of course, putting things on YouTube, partly because they have to, but I think there have been a lot they're thinking much wider and not not being so narrow in their musicality. So that's only a healthy thing and I think, there's always there always has been great players but I think there are more good players around now.

Rebecca Toal 37:21
Yeah and I think that I It feels like the culture of only wanting to listen to violin and piano concertos, that we recognise that that is the sort of culture that is only going to lead to the downfall of classical music. So actually, we need to do all the other things in order to keep it going and to revitalise it. Which, you know, is it's, we always say that there aren't enough jobs for all the amazing players coming out, you know, which is true, but I think we, for the future, we're doing the right thing of cultivating this more open mindedness and a wider platform for everybody, which is promising, hopefully,

Bob Hughes 38:03
Yeah, again, I remember being in, say, the Scottish National Orchestra and we'd have to, you know, every month we might have to go and do a day in schools and I sort of hated it. You know, I hated going to someone like Govan... in some really rough parts Glasgow and when I think back now, that that was a really narrow, negative attitude. And I think people now ... every orchestra's got his own educational department, and people, and some people really get into it. You know, a lot of players go, you spend a couple of days in schools, you know, regularly, and they love it and I think that that's great, because I think as the as you were talking about the classical music surviving, it's, it's got to be survive at grassroots, isn't it? You know, enthusing young, young kids, otherwise, we're, we're dead in the water I think.

Rebecca Toal 38:57

Yeah. I completely agree. Just because I wanted to ask you about your dystonia and there was one other question I had about a sort of more emotional side of that before I forget. And again, feel free not to answer anything that you don't want to but when you were seeking all this physical support for the dystonia, did you ever seek any I guess it wasn't such a thing perhaps back then, but did you ever seek any mental support? And how was your ... you said you were quite frustrated, but how was your mental state during that pretty awful time?

Bob Hughes 39:38
Yeah, I was anxious and depressed, but not not severely. So I must say, I'm very lucky to have any sort of loving family life and I've got my wife Jill...she was a real support to me, and she's successful in her old own field and she's very resourceful so so I didn't... I needed to earn money yes but I, we weren't starving. You know, so that that was a big pressure... that was one thing. And she fill that role. You know, she she made sure that I didn't have to worry about getting bread on the table, you know? Because that then that gets really hard and I couldn't have gone on for two years trying my best. I'd probably had to say no, ...actually, HGV driver would, that would have been the thing to do

Rebecca Toal 40:33
Foresight!

Bob Hughes 40:34
Loads of work now driving petrol tankers about. No, I'd have had to cut loose and get a proper job. So having that that family life and my kids were fantastic as well. And I think I mean, I don't know what age they were probably about 10 or 12 when all this was happening. They probably didn't pay much attention so so that side of it, I had a kind of a solid family, that supportive background, so that that really helped. I mean, if you don't have that, then it gets really hard, you know? Yeah, but mentally, yes, I didn't fall to pieces at all. I was I was kind of very focused that I wanted to do that. In fact, we moved house a couple of years ago, and I I found that tougher mentally. Just all the worries about moving house, that was far harder mentally for me, but no, it was. Yeah, it was, it was the worry going into say an LSO rehearsal thinking, oh, you know, playing I say a Dvorak symphony, I wouldn't even have thought about it, ou know, it's just yeah, I'd have just enjoyed it and play well on all that and then there was certain notes I was worrying about, you know?

Rebecca Toal 41:57
It's amazing that you managed to just keep focused and not not fall to pieces like you say, I you know. I feel like a lot of musicians struggle to separate their, their feeling of worth as a person from their playing and their instrument. Did you ever struggle with I mean, it sounds like you kind of just, were pretty good at being able to separate them and just keep focused, but were there any points where you felt like, your yeah, worth as a person was entwined with your difficulties on the trombone?

Bob Hughes 42:33
Well yeah, yeah, that there is one thing you know, when you're, if you you're in the LSO, or especially the LSO, I mean, the LSO's are just a great job, and well Philharmonia, Scottish National, whatever, you know, or any job and I was always very proud of it and I did the job. I mean, I was there 98% of the time. With these days, I think a lot of people always tend to try to take time off to do other stuff, you

know. So yeah, I was proud of being bass trombone in, in the LSO. And there was like, I had a badge you know, sort of... And that and that was hard. I think you when I when it was no longer there, I wasn't so the that little bit of identity, but you know, you are who you are, I think it's better... it's the person you are not what your job is really, you know, and again, having the Academy has been a great because I've kind of put my energies more into that now. So I've got a real focus for the teaching and, and I see I see all the brass and some of the woodwind as well now, which is, which is really nice. I mean, to do the chamber music coaching, that's fantastic...orchestral rep classes. I didn't have to really have the time before to do that.

Rebecca Toal 43:59
I wondered whether teaching, well financial issues aside... if you hadn't have had the teaching, do you think you would have found it as easy to move on from the dystonia mentally?

Bob Hughes 44:16
I feel I'm a musician and I've been lucky to have a whole life in music, you know, and I still love music. I still listen to music at home and and I love music. So I don't know if I could have changed track and become a I don't know, an engineer or, you know, I suppose I could have done it. It might have been he might have been good for me. I don't know. But I'm just thankful that I was I've still manage to have a career in music, you know, in many ways is more rewarding than playing in a way.

Rebecca Toal 44:54
And if any of your students were having issues that you thought were potentially injury related what would your advice be to them?

Bob Hughes 45:04
Well, I think general overall health and well being is is very important, you know, keeping fit, not abusing, you know, not doing things too much in excess...it's hard for brass player isn't it?! But yeah, just limit... being healthy is very important, I think and having a balanced life. I mean, I, again, practising... spending six hours in a practice room's not really healthy, I don't think, you know, I often think, you know, probably two hours or maybe three hours, really constructive practice, a day is more than enough, when you think you're what you're doing to your face. Maybe if I'd turned... I might not have practised so much myself, actually, I think you people need to be much more intelligent about how they practice. I mean, you know all about all about this but yeah, I think so many brass players, they get the instrument out, and they doodle away for hours a day. And because they enjoy it,

Rebecca Toal 46:05
There's so much that can be learned from outside of the instrument that affects you as a person and a player so you may as well go out and find those things, as well as just spending the time on the facial muscles.

Bob Hughes 46:19
I mean, there's the musical side of things. I mean, I think you said people should spend... I wish I'd done much more of it, spend more time reading scores, and listening. Again, it takes time, but I think that's really valuable to do half an hour's less practice and read scores for half an hour and listen to

recordings on things, to go to concerts, obviously, not, not just things with brass in... you know, go to the Wigmore Hall and hear a string quartet. Go to a pub and hear a folk band, you know, what, you just go and hear all sorts of music because you you absorb it and you learn from it, you know? And then of course, there's you should go to the theatre, you should..., see great actors, go to the cinema, see good films and art galleries. You should do all these things. And it because it makes you much broader as a person, and you'll be a better musician because of that.

Rebecca Toal 47:12
Yeah. And healthier physically and mentally I suspect.

Bob Hughes 47:15
Yeah, yeah, sure. And I think you do, I think we just brass players, you do need some kind of exercise, like, I've seen, you know, you used to run around Regent's Park. but I think I used to run a lot, but I can't, my knees are so good now. But even just brisk walking is good and swimming, quite a few players go to the gym. Whether that's, again, I don't think you should do that to extreme. So you know, you don't want massive muscles and all that. I do wonder if that if you're too tight in your abdomen, that that's not great for brass playing. You need to have that a bit of freedom and elasticity there.

Rebecca Toal 48:01
Well, thank you so much for talking to me. And I know that so many people will be incredibly... it will warm everybody's hearts to hear you talking so openly about your life and your struggles with dystonia. Um so yeah, thank you so much.

Bob Hughes 48:20
Well, thanks, Becky. But I think one of the things is, you know, as you go through, everyone goes through life and it's what has been especially hard lately with COVID, and all that sort of thing but I think nearly all you... everyone comes across a difficult moment in their life. If you get through life without... it's impossible to get through life without an issue because you know, people do get ill people die, and you know, you're going to be affected at some point, or you get ill yourself, or, you know, or something can happen. And it's how you how you react to that, I think, is the key thing. And it's really hard is trying to keep positive.

Rebecca Toal 49:11
I think it's it's one thing, being able to react to that yourself nut it's also another thing, how you react amongst other people in those times and how or how you support other people going through those times. I think it's yeah, it's one thing being an individual in those times, but also being part of the group is another. Another ballgame.

Bob Hughes 49:34
Yeah, yeah. And being able to support people who you might be thing are going through it, you know, just being there for them. You don't want to kind of, sort of smother them with advice and things like that, but just say just give me a call anytime. You know, that kind of thing. It's just nice to know. I'd actually Maurice, when I was having these problems at the LSO Maurice Murphy, he was a very caring guy. And he, he talked to me he had issues, thankfully he got he came, he got over it, you know, pretty

quickly. But he said, Bob, do you fancy going to Spain and play some golf? You know? And I said, yeah, yeah. So I went to Spain. It was just, it was just before Christmas. So is it was in December, we went to Spain as Maurice, Nigel Gomm again he's not with us and Richard Clews horn player, we went to Spain, and he was almost as if Maurice thought, "Bob get just get away from that trombone and play some golf for a few days." You know? That was, and he didn't say that. But I think that he was very caring of him. You know?

Rebecca Toal 50:58
I think because I almost expected the you were going to say, why don't you come over or place some duets or something. But I Yeah, completely agree. That getting away from the instrument sometimes because yeah, you know, playing in groups can be great but actually often you just need someone to be like, "Come on, let's put these instruments away. And let's go and do something. Yeah. Just completely not related to what we're doing workwise or" Yeah, yeah, "whatever is causing the issue."

Bob Hughes 51:29
Yeah. I think that's very important that, you know, being supportive, and, you know, just being there.

Rebecca Toal 51:38
And yeah, and as you say, you don't need to fix the problem, but you often just need to give them the space to talk if they want to. And if they don't want to talk then just Yeah, give them the space. That's right. It's very wise.

Bob Hughes 51:50
Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Thanks, Becky.

Rebecca Toal 51:54
No, my pleasure. And thank you so much.

Bob Hughes 51:57
And I suppose the other thing is it just it just because I don't didn't come through dystonia you know, I didn't get back. It doesn't mean that people can't but it's just because I didn't make it doesn't mean other people can't, you know,

Rebecca Toal 52:13
Well no, just in the same way that it's not going to be the same muscles for everybody. It's never going to be the same outcome for everybody. And, yeah, I expect that, like any injury, it's completely individual.

Bob Hughes 52:25
Absolute. Everyone's slightly different. You know,

Rebecca Toal 52:29
You can't just prescribe one exercise or one medication for everybody. So yeah.

Bob Hughes 52:36
Yeah because a lot of musicians, you know, if they, if they hit problems, they keep quiet about it because it's their livelihood and, you know, they, they're gonna hope they get over it, but they don't want to get out: "ooh he's having problems, you know, you know, you know, someone's always having problems with his high register, you know," so, you know.. chances are, so musicians don't talk about it as openly, I don't think.

Rebecca Toal 53:06
it just makes it so much worse and every person that doesn't talk about something, just enables or disables somebody else from talking about their whatever they're going through. So yeah, vicious cycle.

Bob Hughes 53:20
You know, if you if you're playing for a top football team, you probably got the whole support network behind you. Yeah, physios and probably people on the mental side, they've got the whole and they've got loads of money if you're a premiership football team, but that's we don't have that backup. There are some...financially there are some support places like the Royal Society of Musicians, and there's BAPAM, which is for medical...they can send you the right channels medically. And there're really great organisations really, but I often think with my own problems could I have prevented it? And I've got a few thoughts I won't bore you with now that maybe maybe it was that maybe it's that maybe is that you know, but I'll never know because it's happened. Yeah, anyway, I won't I won't bore you anymore.

Rebecca Toal 54:13
No it's alright! I do have to go and teach clarinet soon.

Bob Hughes 54:15
Well you go!

Rebecca Toal 54:16
I kind of wish I could just stay here. But now honestly, it's been such a joy talking to you and I really hope that we can chat again someday in person.

Bob Hughes 54:27
Come in and have a drink....etc.