

## A BSO Player's Perspective

*This interview with BSO bass trombonist Douglas Yeo—who joined the BSO in 1985 and recently announced his retirement from the BSO following the 2012 Tanglewood season—is the first in a series of interviews with BSO members that will appear in the Boston Symphony Orchestra program book throughout the season. To learn more about Douglas Yeo, please visit his website at [yeodoug.com](http://yeodoug.com).*

### **What has playing in the BSO meant to you as a person and as a musician?**

When I joined the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1985 it was the fulfillment of a long-held dream. As a young trombonist growing up in and around New York City (full disclosure: I was NEVER a Yankees fan!), the BSO was my favorite orchestra. I had several LP recordings of the BSO, particularly the Tchaikovsky symphonies 4, 5, and 6 conducted by Charles Munch and Pierre Monteux, that were a real inspiration to me. In 1973, I wrote in my high school yearbook that my goal someday was to play in the Boston Symphony. In 1985, that dream came true.



### **What do you think distinguishes the BSO from other great orchestras?**

For me the list is very clear and specific: the finest concert hall in the world, Symphony Hall; the three distinct seasons of Symphony, Pops, and Tanglewood that appeal to a broad variety of concertgoers; the orchestra's superb musicians who also have the highest quality musical instruments; a roster of inspired and inspiring conductors and music directors; a management, staff, and Boards of Trustees and Overseers who understand what is needed to keep the BSO at the highest artistic level; and a devoted audience and a huge cadre of volunteers who support the BSO in many different kinds of tangible ways.

### **What distinguishes a great conductor from a good one?**

I have always said that there are two kinds of conductors: conductors who make you play well and conductors who make you WANT to play well. We in the Boston Symphony are professionals, and we will play well for any conductor, whether it be Big Bird or Leonard Bernstein. But there are some conductors—each player will have his or her own list but it is not surprising that there are several common denominators between all of us—who, because of the force of their personality, their manner of communicating with the orchestra, their knowledge of the music, and the “moment” that we share—can inspire a very unique kind of special performance. I would put Seiji Ozawa, James Levine, Bernard Haitink, Simon Rattle, John Williams, Kurt Sanderling, and Leonard Bernstein on my short list of that type of uniquely gifted conductor who can/could raise the level of BSO and Pops performance because the players have heightened attention from a desire to personally please the conductor because he brings so much—some of which is simply a mystery and I cannot explain—to our shared experience.

### **What sorts of changes have you seen during your time with the orchestra?**

Over 75% of the BSO's members have changed since I joined the orchestra. Over the years, my colleagues have been a great inspiration to me, and I have learned so much

from many of them who were in the BSO when I joined the orchestra but have since retired (for example, former concertmaster Joseph Silverstein, and timpanist Vic Firth) or passed away (such as former principals Harold Wright, clarinet, and Sherman Walt, bassoon). Other colleagues who are no longer with us were “characters” who gave the orchestra a different kind of personality (like bass players John Barwicki and Leslie “Tiny” Martin). My section has completely changed since I joined the orchestra—I now find myself the oldest brass player in the BSO—so I enjoy both the exhilaration of working with my new, younger, low brass section colleagues (Toby Oft, Stephen Lange, and Mike Roylance) and miss aspects of the longtime collaboration I had with my now retired colleagues (Ronald Barron, Norman Bolter, and Chester Schmitz). There have been changes to Symphony Hall as well—for instance—the opening of the clerestory windows that now bring the beauty of natural light back into the Hall for the first time in many years. Hindemith famously said, “The old is not good because it is past, nor the new supreme because we live with it.” Change is inevitable, so I cherish the good of the past that hopefully informs my enjoyment of the present. The BSO’s history is not a dry, stuffy artifact; it is all around us as a living, breathing inspiration to what we do on stage right now.

*What repertoire do you find particularly challenging or difficult, and why?*

Certain kinds of “new music”—Elliott Carter’s oeuvre comes to mind—is tremendously demanding mentally, as good performance requires phenomenal attention to the mathematical placement of every note. Trombone players love to play as much as possible, so pieces like Mahler’s Symphony 5, Mozart’s Requiem, and the Schubert *Great C major*

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*Douglas Yeo (right) with his  
BSO trombone colleagues  
Toby Oft and Stephen Lange*

symphony stand out as pieces that utilize our “voice” more than most and are great fun to play despite the considerable challenge of lengthy “face time” with the trombone. Too, our section—both the section I joined and the new section I’m a part of today—has had a special affinity for soft playing, so the beautiful chorales in the Brahms and Schumann symphonies are always something I look forward to because of the challenge of being under the microscope of sensitive, nuanced ensemble playing.

*Aside from the instrument itself, what are some of the ways in which being a member of the BSO’s trombone section differs from the experience of players in other sections of the orchestra?*

Trombones are usually a supportive voice, and composers most often use us to play either very loudly or very, very softly. Both are challenging. For example, the Brahms Symphony No. 1, where we sit silently for the first three movements and our first entrance—in the finale—is a very soft, exposed chorale. Sitting for thirty minutes waiting for that moment provides an opportunity for many thoughts to go through your mind! Also, our section has only three players, and we play together on nearly all repertoire—as opposed to other wind and brass sections that often use just two members of the section at a time, or rotate chairs with both the principal and associate/assistant principal player playing the first part. Because Toby and Steve (and Ron and Norman before them) play together with me all the time—sitting in the same positions in our same chairs—we have been able to develop an extremely close working relationship. A by-product of that will be several trio concerts our trombone section will give in March 2012, sponsored by the BSO as part of the orchestra’s Community Concert series.

*What are some of your other interests and activities, and how do they factor into your work with the orchestra?*

I always tell my students that for every hour they spend in the practice room, they need two hours out of it, doing other things—experiencing nature, exploring other arts, cheer-

*What concerts have you played that you've found particularly memorable?*

In over twenty-six years with the BSO and Boston Pops, a comprehensive list of my most memorable concerts is simply too big for the program book to hold. But a few come to mind as standing out as unforgettable:

- Brahms's Symphony No. 1 with Leonard Bernstein in 1985 during my first summer at Tanglewood, and the "Sea Interludes" from Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* in what turned out to be Bernstein's final concert five years later, also at Tanglewood.
- An electrifying performance of Berlioz's *Requiem* with Seiji Ozawa in Carnegie Hall, just weeks after the 9/11 attacks.
- Haydn's *The Creation* with Sir Simon Rattle in an ebullient performance that captured unspeakable joy.
- Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, and Mahler's Symphony No. 8 with James Levine, where I experienced some of the most remarkable singing I have ever heard.
- Schubert's Great C major symphony, Bruckner's Symphony No. 3, and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 15 conducted by Kurt Sanderling—a maestro with "old world" perspective and gravitas.
- Mahler's Symphony No. 2 in Salzburg with Seiji Ozawa and Jessye Norman, where the audience's prolonged, enthusiastic ovation continued even as the orchestra was boarding busses to return to our hotel.
- Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 conducted by Roger Norrington—a controversial interpretation that I found exhilarating in its freshness.
- A performance of Mozart's Requiem with James Levine, where our trombone section utilized German trombones that give a special kind of warmth that blended so beautifully with the Tanglewood Festival Chorus.
- Performances of Mahler's Symphony No. 7 under Seiji Ozawa and Bernard Haitink, where my first-movement duet with my former BSO trombone colleague Norman Bolter—who played tenor horn in those performances—stands out as a testament to the deep connection two players can have when playing great music.
- Recording the "Scherzo for Motorcycle and Orchestra" from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* by John Williams, with John conducting the Boston Pops—a new piece that came to the orchestra by fax from the copyist just minutes before the end of the recording session and was recorded with no rehearsal with white-hot intensity.
- Bernard Haitink conducting Brahms's Symphony No. 2 with the BSO in Amsterdam—a moment in time that stood out as a representation of the tremendous love and respect between him and the orchestra and how a transcendent performance can come together as a result.
- Playing the pre-game show with the Boston Pops and Keith Lockhart for Super Bowl XXXVI in New Orleans, and enjoying the game thanks to the generosity of New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, who gave a ticket to every member of the orchestra so we could see the winning field goal come right to us in our end zone seats as the Patriots took their first Super Bowl title.

ing at sporting events, and such—so they can bring other types of beauty, joy, love, pain, and experience to inform their playing. I practice what I preach. My wife and I love hiking in the great National Parks of the American west, and we spend many vacations hiking in Zion, Grand Canyon, Glacier, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Arches, and many other parks. Acadia National Park in Maine, where we ride our tandem mountain bicycle, is another of our favorite places. Seeing God's great canvas of creation up close inspires me as a performer as I hike among mountains, valleys, lakes, and other natural formations that are staggering in their size and beauty.

I also enjoy researching and writing about historical brass instruments, and have for many years played the serpent and ophicleide—historical, 19th-century instruments—that I have had the opportunity of bringing to the BSO in performances of pieces like Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music and *Reformation* Symphony, and Berlioz's *Messe solennelle* and *The Damnation of Faust*. I even played a Concerto for Serpent with John Williams and the Boston Pops several years ago. Playing instruments that were so important and common long ago but which are not so familiar to modern ears has given our audiences a chance to hear unique sounds that are so old that they are new.

And as I am now in my final season with the BSO—I will be retiring from the orchestra at the end of the 2012 Tanglewood season and taking up the position of Professor of Trombone at Arizona State University—I will treasure every minute of the coming months while on stage with my colleagues in our performances at Symphony Hall, Tanglewood, and on tour. I could not have asked for a more satisfying, meaningful, and enjoyable career as a performer of the trombone, and my decades in the BSO will continue to inform my teaching as I work to encourage and challenge the next generation of young musicians, some of whom may already have written in their high school yearbooks that one of their goals in life is to play in the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

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