



# Susan Milan at 70

by Carla Rees

Susan Milan is one of Britain's flute playing success stories, with an impressive career which has included a huge number of firsts - she was first woman principal and member of the RPO, the first woman to play principal in the LSO, the first woman flute professor of the Royal College of Music, first female Chair of the BFS and first female jury member of the Kuhlau Competition (in 1995). This year she celebrated her 70th birthday with a recital at the NFA convention. Her busy professional life continues apace, with numerous projects underway, and I caught up with her to find out more.

## *CR: How did it all start for you? What made you start playing the flute and who were your teachers?*

My mother sent me to ballet school when I was three. She said I made expressive hand movements as a baby. Looking back on it, it was quite imaginative of my dear mum. Neither of my parents were "musical" or particularly interested in the performing arts, although I believe my grandmother and great grandmother were fond of opera. Both my grandmothers had good voices and I remember well my paternal grandmother's sister singing *Danny Boy*. She was Irish.

I have been extremely lucky. My first school was blessed with Miss King, a headmistress who was passionate about the arts. The music teachers were all professionals, quite something for a little state school. I continued my ballet until I was eleven. I think it gave me a good sense of rhythm and I must have heard good music, although I don't really remember. I began the recorder when I was eight with John Myatt, the flute at nine with the clarinettist George McDonald and the piano at ten with Mary Peri. Mary Peri was the Head of Music and knew many people in the profession, people who played in English Chamber Orchestra and other orchestras. Her son led the Covent Garden Orchestra. I used to have piano lessons in her house on her grand piano and I met many musicians.

George and I looked up the fingerings of the flute together with the help of *Tune a Day* and the Otto Langey Flute Tutor. This book was full of good little exercises, orchestral excerpts and generally good music. Old fashioned now of course, but it got me off to a good start. I never played light or jazzy music. The first pieces I learned were Handel Sonatas. How lucky was I!

George and Mary Peri left a lasting impression on me.

Their musical integrity and sense of responsibility were a tremendous influence on my attitude to teaching and playing. George later joined the Northern Sinfonia as Principal clarinet. He must have been very young when he taught me, although he probably seemed ancient to me when I was nine! I recently reconnected with him and look forward to visiting him soon and reminiscing.

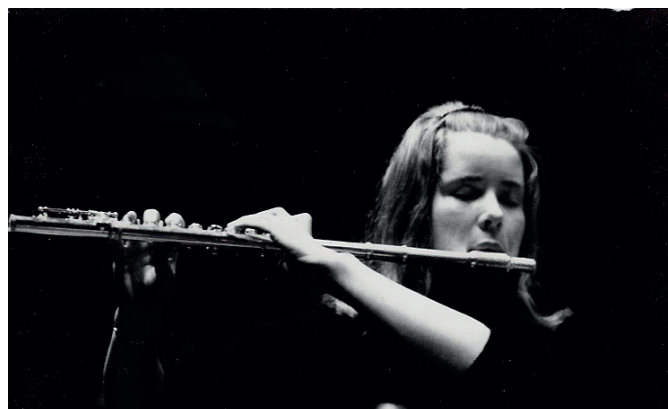
When I was 11 George sent me to audition for the RCM junior department. In those days you had to be able to play the piano to a certain level to gain a place and as I could only play Beethoven's *Für Elise* from memory, and probably not perfectly, I was not admitted. George was concerned that I should have specialist advice about embouchure and he approached John Francis, who was the senior flute professor of the Royal College of Music. I went for a consultation at his house in St John's Wood and played for him and played my *Für Elise* for Millicent Silver, his wife, who was a concert pianist and harpsichordist.

John was a force to be reckoned with and a very generous man. After a consultation in which I had to make some fairly ugly faces, he took me on as a pupil privately, free of charge for a year, as did his wife. Both were amazing disciplinarians and I was on a strict regime of scales and studies from the age of 11 on both instruments. After that year, I gained a place at junior college and studied the flute with Graham Mayger, a pupil of John's and the star flute player at senior College.

After passing my 11 plus, I was offered a place at a grammar school, but my father thought the local comprehensive would be more understanding about my music, so I went to Mayfield Comprehensive School. He was right. The headmistress was Margaret Miles, later Dame, and she was very encouraging and tolerant of my constant practicing. When I later gave my debut concert at the Wigmore Hall, she came with a bouquet.



At 12 I joined the London Schools Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Dr. Lesley Russell, and I climbed up through the ranks, beginning on third flute in the third orchestra and eventually becoming first flute in the first orchestra by the time I was about 15. With this orchestra I had my first taste of solo playing. Performing the Quantz G major concerto in Bonn, Frankfurt and the Royal Albert Hall, London, as well as performing the Mozart flute and harp concerto with Skyla Kanga and the London Symphony Orchestra in the Royal Festival Hall as part of a youth programme.



*Performing Quantz at the Royal Albert Hall aged 17*



*Rehearsing Quantz in Frankfurt with LSSO in 1964*

The LSSO stood me in good stead for auditions later on. When I auditioned for the Principal job in the London Symphony Orchestra they asked for the whole of *Daphnis and Chloe*! Amazingly, I had played this with the LSSO! I didn't get the job though, but then there were no women in the LSO in those days.

When I was sixteen, John Francis decided that I should apply for a scholarship to senior Royal College of Music. It was acceptable to leave school at 16 - not so today - and so I obeyed my mentor and auditioned. All this time, my parents just watched from the sidelines. They were not musicians and they listened to John's advice. My father was, however, rather concerned at this development and I remember him talking to John and saying, "don't you think she should take up short hand typing, just in case?"

I won a scholarship and went to senior college as a double first study student on flute and piano. Without this scholarship, I would not have been able to accept the place. I returned to John Francis and studied the piano with David Parkhouse, both demanding teachers, and I was expected to practice four and a half hours a day on each instrument. The course was a performers diploma course, but there was still a great deal of history and aural to study and academic exams to pass, just as today. The difference was that after two years, when all those exams were passed, you could concentrate on your playing, build a technique and explore more repertoire. I had a slightly rocky ride with the piano, swinging from first to second and then back to first study. I changed teachers and returned to Millicent, performing in some concerts on the piano, but I was never as confident or proficient on the piano as the flute.

John was a tremendous mentor and musician. He gave his pupils confidence and encouraged them to be extrovert and play with conviction and personality. He used to smoke cigars in lessons and had very bushy eyebrows! He was charismatic with a powerful personality and one of John's catch phrases was "give it more oomph!" This was his way of asking for more passion! He was knowledgeable about Baroque style and insisted we all read Quantz's book and played extra-long appoggiaturas, sometimes in the most unexpected places! And he was also a great supporter of English contemporary music. Amongst other works, the Lennox Berkeley concerto was written for him. He ran a weekly scale and study class, a tradition which I carry on, and he was very ambitious for his students, but at that time not necessarily to be orchestral players. I think he wanted all his students to be soloists. His star pupil was James Galway, whom he also helped enormously. Sir James lived in John's house for some time and I remember him coming into my lesson one day and John insisting we played Kuhlau duets. That was a challenge.

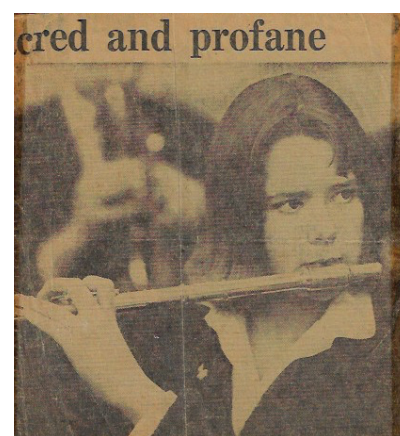
While at RCM I was presented to the Queen, received my Woodwind prize from Sir Malcom Sargent (nicknamed in the profession "Flash Harry". I was never sure why, except he was very dapper) and received my diploma from the Queen Mother.



*Receiving a prize from Sir Malcolm Sargeant at the Royal College of Music, aged 18*

A turning point in my life as a flute player came when I was sent to Holland and Denmark with a group of RCM students as ambassadors for the college. There were four of us and the then Bursar of the college and his wife. It was a

friendly and pleasurable trip. I played with the wonderful Clifford Benson who was my age. We were both scholars at the same time and the youngest in the college for a while. I played the Poulenc Sonata and Ibert *Pièce* on my new, silver flute, which was a Rudall Carte 1867 Patent flute with a cylindrical ornate lip plate (shown below). I think the sound must have been very small and the tuning pretty bad. I received numerous grants to buy this and I was very proud of it. I even performed the Quantz G major concerto at the Royal Albert Hall on it, but I doubt if it was loud enough for that hall.



While on the RCM tour I met Poul Birkelund, professor of the Royal Danish Conservatoire, in Copenhagen. Another iconic figure, who came to our concert and caught me afterwards for a chat. It was he who suggested I attend the Marcel Moyse course in Boswil, Switzerland. At that time, I am ashamed to say that I thought Moyse was no longer alive. John Francis had taken some lessons with him during the war years and used his methods and studies, but had never mentioned that he was still alive, so I was quite surprised.





*Marcel Moyse in Boswil,  
Switzerland  
1965*

That summer, somehow I scraped the money together to go and I took a train to Zurich. It was the “Milk train” and I travelled overnight, sitting up all night. I was met the other end by Laurie Kennedy, an amazing young flute player with the fastest tonguing I had ever heard. He took me to my accommodation and then on to the church. There was a small gathering of flute players sitting on the de-consecrated altar platform of a little church, with the great Marcel Moyse listening to players of all ages, some professional, while we all sat in awe, in silence, watching and hearing him transform players. He could do this with just a few words, or by singing, or dancing. He did not play. His style in masterclass was entirely descriptive, poetic, uplifting, personal. I don’t remember him talking about physiology or technique in the class. Tone, yes, and working on the wonderful *De la sonorité* and *Tone Development Through Interpretation*. He was very direct! He did not waste time being polite and sometimes would humiliate a student. I felt that in some ways this was inadvertent due to his limited English more than any intended harshness on his part. For myself, he quickly showed me that I had a lot to learn! He did, however, after hammering me down, pick me up again and he gave me a long lesson on articulation, which was a revelation. He could be very generous.



*Card from Marcel Moyse*

### *How did the Moyse classes shape your approach to playing the flute?*

I returned to the Marcel Moyse course six years running, even when I was in the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. He inspired everybody to play better. His perception of flute playing as a voice was transporting and we learnt nuance, inflection, how to visualize and play poetically in the most sophisticated way. He was able to reach the hearts of all listeners because he was openly sentimental and romantic, dramatic and passionate, without any embarrassment. He made us better musicians.

That particular, first Boswil course was attended by many now famous names and from the UK, notably James Galway, William Bennett and Trevor Wye.



*Left: Sue with James Galway and Trevor Wye*

*Right: Sue with Marcel Moyse after she joined the RPO, c.1976*



They all gave me good advice and William Bennett found me a wonderful Flutemakers Guild headjoint to replace my Rudall Carte cylindrical head. Jimmy suggested I should study with Geoffrey Gilbert, as he had done after studying with John Francis. And so at the end of four years with John, I won a Countess of Munster Award to study with Geoffrey Gilbert at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama as a Post-Graduate. An extraordinary disciplinarian and generous spirit, Geoffrey introduced me to a whole new world of technique and physiology. The year was spent practicing only scales and studies. Geoffrey was quite formal and one always called him Mr. Gilbert. He was extremely demanding and very polite. About my embouchure (ultra relaxed in John Francis style) - I remember he said to me, "Susan, I think you don't need to pull the corners down quite so much now."

*In 1974, you became the first female member of the RPO. What particular challenges did you encounter and how did you overcome them?*

After graduating from GSMD, Geoffrey suggested I audition for a second flute position in a chamber orchestra in Bournemouth, which I obediently did and won the place. And this was the beginning of my orchestral career. After a short time, the then Principal Flute left and I auditioned for the job. I was offered a three-month trial. At the end of this I was then offered another month's trial. I thought this was rather strange, so I asked the leader why I was given another month's trial and he said, "To be honest, I don't want another woman principal in the orchestra." This was my first taste of the challenges

ahead. Of course, this could not happen today, at least not openly. Anyway, I got the job and once I had some income, I bought my first Albert Cooper flute. It was £300. In 1981 I started my first flute masterclass course. Albert came every year to talk to the students and Top Wind have supported a scholarship for my various courses every year since then.

The strange thing was that when I was offered the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra Principal Flute job, the same thing happened. I was offered a three-month trial and then another month's trial. I asked about this and was told they were waiting for the Principal conductor to approve and confirm my appointment.

*You have had an impressive career which has included a wide range of musical activities, including performing as a soloist and orchestral player, and conservatoire teaching. What have been some of your main highlights?*

My years in the RPO were some of my happiest. The players were good to me, although one or two liked to tease. I loved learning the symphonic repertoire and I was privileged to play alongside some of the best wind players in London and to perform under great conductors. My principal supporters in getting the position were Derek Wickens, the Principal Oboe and Antony Pay, the Principal Clarinet; both formidable players. Rudolf Kempe was Principal Conductor at the time and was an iconic figure, a thrilling conductor and musician.

I stayed in the RPO for 8 years and while there I ordered and bought the last Cooper silver flute to be made.



*Left to Right:  
Derek Wickens (principal  
oboe),  
Susan Milan,  
Rudolf Kempe (principal  
conductor) &  
John Price  
(principal bassoon)*

*Albert Cooper at Hindhead*



Of course, being the first woman attracted some interesting press coverage...



Once in the RPO, I was invited to play as Guest Principal in all the London orchestras, apart from the BBC. I played and recorded a great deal with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and the English Chamber Orchestra and I suppose I was the first woman to play Principal in the LSO at that time. I worked with many great conductors and soloists. Rudolf Kempe was the Principal Conductor of the RPO who endorsed my appointment and he was an inspirational conductor. I have played under Charles Groves, Colin Davis, Daniel Barenboim, Leonard Bernstein, Leopold Stokowski, Adrian Boult, Riccardo Chailly, Bernard Haitink, James Levine, Charles Mackerras, Simon Rattle, Neville Marriner, Charles Dutoit, Kirill Kondrashin, JP Tortellier and others. I have been privileged to support in the orchestra soloist such as Yehudi Menuhin, Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman, Kyng Wa Chung, Murray Perahia, Zara Nelsova, Alfred Brendel, Arthur Rubinstein, Paul Tortellier, Rostropovitch, Isaac Stern, Daniel Barenboim, Clifford Curzon, John Lill, Shura Cherkassky, Radu

Lupu, John Ogden, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Jessye Norman, Luciano Pavarotti, Dietrich Fischer Diskau, Victoria de los Angeles, Lucia Popp. I have played solo concertos with all the London orchestras.

Geoffrey Gilbert was by then in Stetson, USA, but he used to visit UK occasionally. On one of these visits he came to an RPO Concert and arranged to meet me in the Royal Festival Hall bar. To me he was still Mr. Gilbert (sir) and I was quite nervous seeing him, but we met and it was all going fine. You know, “Hello Mr. Gilbert, how are you?” etc. Then in swept Kate Lukas and seeing Geoffrey threw her arms around him and rather loudly said “Hi big G!!!” Later that evening he said to me, “I think you can call me Geoffrey now!”

My first son James was born while I was still in the orchestra. I was given one month off before his birth and two months after with no pay. My job was kept open for me - and I appreciated that. Such were the times. When James was one I left the orchestra and moved to Holland for three years in consideration of my husband’s work. While there I gave birth to my second son Christopher. I played Principal flute with the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra and enjoyed that very much. I somehow maintained my life in London by travelling back and forth to play as guest Principal in orchestras or take on recording sessions. I usually travelled with my two little boys, the au pair and a car full of baby equipment, but it seemed the right thing to do and kept me in the frame, as it were. I also developed more solo and chamber music playing and began recording for the Chandos label. I had a good agent in Holland and through them I toured Japan as soloist with the Lucerne Festival Strings playing Bach and Vivaldi. My second son Christopher was very young at that time, less than a year old, and I was extremely miserable being away from him and James for a month. I hadn’t really anticipated such a violent reaction and it was then that I realized I was a Mummy who played the flute, rather than a Flautist who was a mummy. James is now 37 and a Senior Research Fellow at University College, London. Christopher is 35 and Co-Principal Cello of the Basel Symphony Orchestra.





My first recording was of the Mozart concertos with the English Chamber Orchestra under Raymond Leppard. I was under contract to make nine CDs for Chandos. It is harder now for wind players to have a contract like this, so I was very fortunate. I also had a very good London agent, Clarion Concert Agency.

*You have commissioned a number of works from British composers which have become mainstays of the C20th repertoire. Can you tell us a little about your work with these composers?*

Even while I was studying, I was drawn to contemporary music and I played in a number of contemporary groups before I began my orchestral career. I was and still am very interested in new sounds and effects on the flute. I have enjoyed working with every composer who has written for me. Since 1967, composers dedicating works to me include: N. Sohal, P. Lamb, L. Simpson, R. Saxton, D. Morgan, J. Feld, A. Dorati, R.R. Bennett, O. Schmidt, R. Walker, C. Davis, R. Simpson, E. Roxburgh, E. Cowie, K. Gates, C. McDowall, B. Lock, I. Finney, J. Thompson, D. Weiland, and C. Hussey. Mostly they have approached

me and I have commissioned some works. At present, I am working with the English composer Douglas Weiland, who has written an epic concerto for me, which I hope to premiere soon if I can persuade an orchestra to take it on. It is 35 minutes long! I will record the Richard Rodney Bennett *Memento*, the Robert Simpson Concerto and the Carl Davis *Flute Fantasy* with members of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra in January 2018. *Memento* was commissioned after I premiered his *Six Tunes for the instruction of Singing Birds*. I just loved his 12 tone music, composed in such a skillful, sensitive and lyrical way, like the *Winter Music*. *Memento* was originally to be called Concerto, but a close friend of Richard's, Pat Smythe, sadly died while he was composing and he was moved to change the title to *Memento*. Pat was a jazz pianist and the finale of the work became a sad and beautiful jazz influenced movement. It was premiered in 1983 at the Windsor Festival with the London Philharmonic Orchestra.



*Sue with Richard Rodney Bennett*

Robert Simpson's Concerto is a completely different language, soul searching, at times bleak. He was a great admirer of Nielsen and wrote a book about him. Bob was a BBC producer and he produced a BBC recording I made of the Nielsen Concerto with the RPO. That was how we met. He told me that he wrote my concerto with Nielsen's pen. Carl Davis's *Flute Fantasy* is full of melody and spirit. I worked with Carl on many film scores when I was in the RPO and beyond. He is a brilliant film score writer and a very skillful composer.



*First meeting with Jindrich Feld, 1993*



*Rehearsing Feld Concerto with Charles Dutoit, 1975*



*Receiving an FRCM from Prince Charles, 2002*

The Nielsen concerto also introduced me to the conductor and composer Ole Schmidt who wrote a dynamic and jazzy concerto for me after we performed the Nielsen together. Jindrich Feld agreed to write *Quintetto Capriccioso* for my Instrumental Quintet of London after hearing my recording of his Sonata. I went to meet him in Zurich and this was the beginning of a friendship which lasted until his death ten years ago. I had premiered his Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1975 with Charles Dutoit conducting.

Jindrich had a wonderful sense of humour and the *Quintetto* reflects this. There are interesting contemporary techniques for all five instruments in this later style of his, as he was always exploring new sounds and ideas. He was an intellectual. His idea of fun was reading Greek. He was extremely knowledgeable and had strong political views. He grew up without TV and spent evening playing string quartets with his family. He was Head of Czech radio for many years. When he was 72 I invited him to be guest of honour at the BFS Flute Convention which I programmed while Chair (1993-97). I remember that afterwards we went to William Bennett's house for a party. I was hosting Jindrich and after midnight I thought I should perhaps take him home. When we left he asked, "Where are we going now? To a nightclub?" Full of life! I played the sonata in his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration concert in Prague.

More recent commissions/premieres include *The Moon Dances* by the exquisite composer, Cecilia McDowell, a Sonata and *Dreamscape* for flute and iPad by the very imaginative multimedia composer Brian Lock and the Douglas Weiland Concerto. Christopher Hussey has promised to write a work for my quintet, which I am looking forward to.

### *You have taught at the Royal College of Music since 1984. Can you tell us about some of your most notable students, and how higher education has changed over the years?*

When I returned from Holland in 1984 I was asked to join the staff of the Royal College of Music. So I have been in the building since I was 12, with an intermission of course when I was in orchestras. I did not teach at all when I was in orchestras. RCM is a marvellous place to study music. In the 33 years I have been there many changes have taken place. The building and facilities have been improved. There are now Heads of Departments – quite different from my student and early teaching days, when the college revolved very much around the professors. There is a move away from mentorship of students which I am not sure about. I prefer to teach undergraduate students in particular in what may now be considered an old fashioned way, a bygone tradition. That is, seeing them through their undergraduate years to their degree, helping them make important decisions, steering them towards a career. This, with the present system of possible multiple professors, is becoming more difficult and I find that students are often confused. I have been blessed with some wonderful students, some of who are now in orchestras in UK, Israel, Scandinavia and USA. Numerous former students are successfully freelancing in London and doing well. I was awarded a Fellowship by the RCM in 2002 and received this from Prince Charles.

As well as RCM, I am currently in my fourth year teaching at Trinity Laban Conservatory. I enjoy working with young people and spend quite some time during the year travelling to various countries giving classes and recitals. I sometimes miss playing in a wind section, especially I miss Brahms, but I recently performed in a chamber orchestra again playing Schubert's 5th symphony and a Haydn symphony. I just loved that.



In 1991 I was invited by Edward Blakeman to join the committee of the BFS as Events Organizer and in 1993 I was appointed Chairman. I programmed two conventions in London, the first at the Royal College of Music featuring James Galway and many iconic flautists from UK and overseas.

The second was held at the South Bank and featured Jindrich Feld and of course many flautists.

I enjoyed being part of the Society. Judith Fitton was the editor and we became close friends. My dear friend Albert Cooper was on the committee and Top Wind were great supporters of the team. Simon Hunt was also on the team and some years later he published the first of the Popp Sonatina op. 388 which I had researched. I have researched and published 19<sup>th</sup> century repertoire for Boosey & Hawkes and recently published all six Popp Sonatines for Spartan

Press. I am interested in both the history and the future of the flute and enjoy very much listening to my collection of 78 recordings featuring extraordinary flautists of all nationalities from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I have also enjoyed being on numerous competition juries over the years, in particular the Kuhlau Competition since 1995.

### *What advice would you give to a young performer entering the profession now?*

Practising is more important than networking. Practise every day.

Learn the mainstream repertoire. There is a lot of it.

Diversify and accept every engagement, no matter what or where. You never know who is in the audience.

Don't give up, keep auditioning.

Girls, mothers – get help.

I have been happy as a musician and happy as the mother of two wonderful boys, now grown men. I still love the sound of the flute and feel it is my voice. I enjoy performing and exploring new repertoire. I suppose I am slowing down, but I have not ground to a halt just yet. I practice every day. I enjoy working with young people and have created a summer chamber music course, the British Isles Music Festival, for wind, strings, piano, voice and harp, which I hope fills young musicians with a passion for chamber music. I don't feel 70, but I am and life is good. The next big one is 80!

