

# Jonathan Agnew and the Euphonium.

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S1

## NEWS

### Aggers swaps umpires for oompah

to take up euphonium.

His dogs aren't fans

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Arts and Entertainment  
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Jonathan Agnew, the voice of *Test Match Special* who won three Test caps for England, is back in a team – and it is nothing to do with cricket.

More than 40 years since studying music at school, the commentator known as Aggers has taken up the euphonium. His new hobby, it transpires, is one of the great joys of his life.

He is now a dedicated member of his local brass band, the Melton Band, founded in 1814 and one of the oldest in the world.

He plays second euphonium and practises every Tuesday, even taking his instrument on overseas tours with *Test Match Special*. “Mine’s been to Pakistan twice,” he said.

Agnew, who lives in Leicestershire, finds joy in the fact that no one in the band wants to talk to him about cricket.

He said: “I’m a team person. My whole life has been playing in a team ... Nobody talks cricket. They couldn’t give a damn about cricket. I go there. I’m second euphonium and if I get it wrong, the conductor tells me off. I am now one of the band and I just love that.”

The discipline of the practice room mirrors the necessary rigour required to be a successful cricketer. “It is that discipline to practise. That’s just something that gets drilled into a professional sportsman from an early start. Do the best that you can.”

Agnew said the culture of the band was “very much go off and practise and work and

get better”. He thinks that some of the cricketers returning from the “disastrous” Ashes tour of Australia, which ended in January, must have known that they “didn’t give as best as they could possibly give”.

When he was at school, Agnew played the tuba and the piano, reaching grade 6, and sang in the choir, motivated by the fact that girls had just been allowed into the sixth form at Uppingham, his private school in Rutland. The instruments were “more or less cast aside” when cricket took over.

But an encounter with the Melton Band at a village hall Christmas concert two years ago, which his wife, Emma, encouraged him to attend, provided the inspiration for the second stage of his musical act.

"I tracked them down and got in touch with the organiser and said: 'Look, I don't want to play the tuba. The tuba is the big bass thing that puffs away at the back. I want to play the euphonium,'" he recalled.

"It's been the best thing that I've done for many years in terms of me and my own wellbeing. I love music and to be playing music again, every Tuesday night, I just look forward to it."

He was surprised to discover that the musical skills ingrained in him at Uppingham have remained. "The euphonium, like the tuba, has four valves that you press, three on top and one sort of around the corner. And my memory – after 45 years – for fingering every note was there instantly. Muscle memory from school is rammed into you ... It just

shows what you do at that age goes in and sticks," he said.

Agnew suffers from Dupuytren's contracture, a condition that causes one or more fingers to bend in towards the palm of the hand, which means he cannot reach an octave on a piano, but he can play the euphonium.

He has had 13 operations for the condition, which is common in Scandinavia – hence its nickname of "the Viking disease".

"If you can't reach an octave on a piano, you might as well give up. Which I have done ... Frustrating," he said.

His two worlds will collide at the Nevill Holt Festival near Market Harborough. On June 13 he will be on stage with the actors Imelda Staunton and Jim Carter, who are married. Carter starred in the 1996 film *Brassed Off*, which Agnew watched recently.

"I couldn't believe Jim was playing the euphonium in *Brassed Off*. Except it was very clear immediately that he actually wasn't blowing a note," he joked.

The festival appearance will culminate in a performance. "I will pick up my euphonium. Jim is going to pick up his baton. And he's going to conduct *Barnard Castle*, which we regularly play," Agnew said. The Melton Band will also be performing at various times at the Nevill Holt estate from May 29 to June 21.

Away from the bandstand, Agnew is preparing for a new arrival at home: Ralph, a Romanian refugee dog, which will join the couple's spaniels, Bumble and Woody.

The dogs are, however, not euphonium enthusiasts. "They howl [when I'm practising]," Agnew said.

TERRY HARRIS FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



Jonathan Agnew delights in playing the euphonium with the Melton Band but says his dogs howl when he practises