

COMMUNITY ORCHESTRA

North Downs Community Orchestra - Registered Charity Number: 1183074

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING: 20th SEPTEMBER 2023

Trustees Report to Members

covering the period April 2022 – March 2023

INTRODUCTION

For the first time in several years, it feels as if the year 2022-2023 has been somewhere approaching normal. Or perhaps a 'new normal'. Gone are the restrictions of the pandemic and the limitations imposed by social distancing and mask wearing. There are some leftovers – we can still use the CO monitors to ensure rehearsal spaces have enough fresh air if we are concerned, we try to maximise space between desks both at practices and in concerts and we have retained rehearsal Zoom broadcasts for those unable to attend. But, joy of joys, masks are not required and there is no requirement to prove you have been vaccinated or taken a Covid test. Phew!

I think it is fair to say that the year 2022-2023 has been one of rebuilding our base and increasing numbers, of consolidating our online presence and building up our finances. That and working with Sara to improve our skills as an orchestra.

A major decision was taken at the start of the year that we would limit our concert schedule to two per year, one in the late spring/early summer and another in late November/Early December. This has paid dividends in terms of both quality of music making and audience numbers, not to mention a reduction in anxiety for all concerned!

This report is split into several sections:

- Rehearsing
- Concerts
- People
- Conclusion

REHEARSING

Despite Hazelwood School's inability to confirm bookings early, their Bawtree Hall remains the orchestra's preferred rehearsal venue both in terms of its location, the size of the car park, the space it provides and the fact that we are able to use their timpani, other percussion instruments, drum kit and their grand piano. Unfortunately, other organisations have a long-standing arrangement with Hazelwood School to use the Hall during the winter and this means that we are often 'bumped'. When that is the case, we have found a home at St Peter's Church Hall in Limpsfield and, on occasions, St John's Church, Hurst Green.

Rehearsals for the full orchestra generally still take place on most Wednesdays. In between twice monthly rehearsals there are now regular sectional rehearsals for the wind/brass/percussion and strings. These are now conducted by Sara and are appreciated by the players and Sara alike as they provide time to concentrate on those areas that need more focus, or the pieces in a concert that are for either section.

Rehearsals are generally well attended, and it is gratifying to note that numbers are gradually returning to pre-Covid numbers with average attendance increasing by over 12% from the year before with almost 25 people attending each rehearsal. Given that this includes sectionals which by their nature involve less players, this is a significant improvement. From a financial perspective it is very significant in bringing in additional revenue.

CONCERTS

As mentioned in the introduction, the orchestra took the decision at the end of 2022 to limit the number of concerts staged to two per year. Although this meant losing our traditional birthday concert, it was felt that there was never enough time to rehearse adequately for concerts in December, March and June/July. It was agreed that we would experiment with two concerts and see whether this made a difference. So, during the year of this report we held two concerts.

The first was held on 26th June 2022 at Bawtree Hall, Hazelwood School and as celebrations for the late Queen's platinum jubilee were well underway, the concert was called (perhaps a little unimaginatively) The Queen's Platinum Jubilee Concert. It was a truly celebratory concert, starting with the National Anthem and included a number of very British works including Walton's *Crown Imperial*, Holst's *I Vow to the my Country* and Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance #1*. In addition, we played Strauss's *Overture to Die Fledermaus*, *Themes from Scheherazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov and Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*. Solos were skilfully played by the orchestra leader Mel Holt and principal cellist, Dzana Haki. We were delighted to welcome back composer and pianist, Nick Drewe, who accompanied the orchestra playing his composition, *Somerhill Rhapsody*,

written in memory of his father. In a first for the NDCO, our main audience participation piece, a medley of tunes from Rogers and Hammerstein's iconic musical *The Sound of Music*, was led enthusiastically by soprano Laura Carew Gibbs who encouraged the audience to sing with gusto. We will definitely be inviting her back! An amazing 63 people played in the concert, including 18 guests to whom we are very grateful. Financially, the concert broke even, and we were delighted to be able to serve refreshments on the terrace.

Our second concert of the year was our Christmas offering entitled *Christmas is in the Air*, also performed at Bawtree Hall. This was a cornucopia of joy and among some old favourites (Anderson's *Sleigh Ride* – always a crowd pleaser; O'Neill and Kinkel's, *Christmas Eve in Sarajevo*; a medley from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* and *Dance of the Hours* by Ponchieli), the orchestra played a selection of pieces by Handel; *Forrest Gump Suite* by Silvestri; a lovely arrangement of popular Christmas Songs arranged by Carl Strommen, called *Christmas is in the Air*; and the ubiquitous arrangement of sing-along carols for audience to join in. The string section excelled themselves with *For Unto Us a Child is Born* from Handel's *Messiah*, and the wind/brass section just about held onto J.S.Bach's beautiful *Sleepers' Awake*, much to the Maestro's relief.

The concert was an enormous success, selling out before the day of the concert with an audience of nearly 200 people. Despite not serving refreshments, it was generally considered to be one of our best performances to date.

Again 63 people played in the concert including our Patron Rainer Hersch and 14 other guests. A great deal of fun was had, and some very fine music made.

The audience comprised mainly friends and family, but they were very enthusiastic, none the less and again totalled around 200.

PEOPLE

The orchestra would never exist without a number of individuals who make things happen. The committee are a dedicated band of members who continued to meet through lockdowns and restrictions, to make sure that when life got back to 'normal' we were ready to regroup and perform. Special thanks go to our secretary Alex Colbourne who continues to keep the committee in check.

We have been very fortunate in our Treasurers since the orchestra started. Our inaugural Treasurer, Lucy set up the role from nothing and took us from a small band of enthusiasts to a registered charity with a formal constitution. She handed over to Harriet whose continued the development of the financial role and

registered the orchestra to claim Gift Aid, no small financial gain. Sue Pharoah took over the Treasurer's role just before this year commenced and she has had an immediate impact on the our finances and the technology that we use, continuing to develop the website and online ticketing, the storing and archiving of documents and analysis of concerts. Our grateful thanks are due to Sue; it is no easy task.

We have welcomed two members to the Committee, Emma Scheck and Lin Larmer, both of whom are already demonstrating the value they are adding.

A mutual decision meant we parted company with Richard Cross this year as his work schedule no longer matched the rehearsal schedule for the orchestra, but will remain friends and, perhaps in the future, will work with him again.

Our huge thanks, as usual, go to Sara Young, our Maestro, our Director of Music, who has continued to challenge the orchestra with new targets to develop our skills and build our confidence, and introduce us to new and exciting repertoire. In addition to this, she makes each rehearsal and concert exciting and fun.

And of course, there is our Chair, Pam, who combines running the committee and the orchestra, and all that entails, with a caring and empathetic attitude that means she always knows who is unwell, or caring for a relative or just needs a little TLC. She is so much more than just our Chair – she is the orchestra's de facto mother! We owe her a great deal.

It's impossible to mention everyone who helps with setting up rehearsals and concerts, and then clearing things away, but nothing happens by magic and there is a great deal of work required to ensure the show, quite literally, goes on. Thanks to everyone who helps – we hope you know who you are!

Finally, it was with great sadness that we said goodbye, in December, to Liz Fernandez, who passed away after a valiant fight with cancer. Liz was a founder member of the orchestra and played flute and piccolo. Just before she died, we were delighted that she was able to attend the dress-rehearsal for the Christmas in the Air concert. She was not well, but she made it and it meant so much to Liz and her family and those of us who had played with her. She is sadly missed.

Thank you to everyone who is involved in running the orchestra, however small your role is, we are extremely grateful, and your contribution is vital.

But of course, the most important thanks must go to our members without whom there would be no orchestra and nothing to organise. Thank you all, you make it all fun!

IN CONCLUSION

2022-2023 has been a good year for all sorts of reasons. We are financially in a stronger position than we have been throughout the orchestra's 6-year history. Our numbers are increasing, slowly but surely, and it is wonderful to have a marvellous brass section and very talented percussion section. Our decision to stage two instead of three concerts a year seems to be paying off with larger audiences and improved proficiency due to more rehearsal time.

All in all, the orchestra can look back on a successful period from which we can build our future.

Pam Deverill and Alison Cattermole, September 2023