

## COMMUNITY ORCHESTRA

North Downs Community Orchestra - Registered Charity Number: 1183074

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING: 25<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER 2024**

### **Trustees Report to Members**

**covering the period April 2023 – March 2024**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

From a musical perspective, I think it would be fair to say that during this reporting period the North Downs Community Orchestra really hit its stride. From a standing start in March 2016, the orchestra has worked hard through good times and not so good times (the pandemic) and now presents a strong organisation with a healthy and growing membership with individual ensembles developing within sections, financially secure, administratively more than competently run, and in general fine shape. Musically we are beginning to sound more confident, coping with more complex scores (and time signatures!) with members in every section and able to attract audiences to sell out concerts.

However, it doesn't do to be complacent; there are always surprises and challenges around the corner and this year is no exception. At the 2023 AGM, Pam, our wonderful Chairperson, Pam Deverill announced that she wanted to stand back (although not down, thank goodness – or at least not yet) and reduce her orchestra workload. And then a further blow when our Maestro of nearly 5 years, Sara Young, decided it was time to hang up her baton and move to pastures new. Fortunately, both Pam and Sara gave us plenty of time to try to fill their very big boots; more of this later.

This report is split into several sections:

- Rehearsing
- Concerts
- Other activities
- People
- Conclusion

## REHEARSING

Hazelwood School's frustrating inability to confirm bookings and non-availability for many dates during the winter months meant that we used St Peter's Church Hall in Limpsfield for many of our rehearsals. This is a very comfortable venue with, usually, plenty of parking and a kitchen that allows for refreshments.

We continued to use Bawtree Hall, when available, especially for wind sectionals (for the timpani and piano) and in the run up to concerts, which is still our preferred concert venue.

This year, we did not use St John the Evangelist Church at Hurst Green, very often although it is still on our list of venues.

All orchestra rehearsals now take place on Wednesdays, with full orchestra rehearsals interspersed with string and wind/brass/percussion sectionals. All rehearsals, including the wind sectionals, were conducted by Sara. The monthly sectional rehearsals allowing time to concentrate on areas that need more focus, or the pieces in a concert that are specific to a section.

Rehearsals are generally well attended, with an average of around 40 people attending full orchestra practices, and 25-30 at sectional rehearsals. From a financial perspective it is very significant in bringing in additional revenue.

## CONCERTS

The decision to hold two concerts each year, as opposed to three, is showing dividends. It was sad to drop the birthday concert, but holding a concert in late November and then another in late May seems to be paying off.

The first concert of this period was called *Summer Smooth* and was held at Bawtree Hall on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> May. Coming just before King Charles coronation a couple of weeks later, the programme was rearranged to include the National Anthem at the top of the show, and a rendition of Jerusalem to start the second half when the audience were invited to join in and some even waved union flags.

The repertoire contained a number of gems including a beautiful performance by the strings of a work by Brian Balmages called *Voices in the Shadows*.



The first half concluded with the theme from *Mission: Impossible*; this was quite possibly the most challenging piece the orchestra had attempted to date due to the unusual and tricky 5/4 time signature. However, the orchestra pulled it off with great aplomb to the delight of the audience – and the relief of the Maestro! Another highlight was an arrangement of Carlos Santana’s hit record *Smooth*, after which the concert was named. The entire orchestra got into the groove, and this is likely to become a firm favourite with members and audience alike. The concert included 66 players of which only 12 were guest players, including our patron Rainer Hersch, all of whom were very welcome as was the audience which filled the hall.

Our second concert of the year was our Christmas offering. Last year, we had said goodbye to Liz Fernandez, flautist, founder member and trustee, who sadly succumbed to cancer just after our 2022 Christmas Concert. So, this year’s *Christmas Capriccio* concert, on 26<sup>th</sup> November, again at Bawtree Hall, was dedicated to the memory of Liz, and a retiring collection made in respect of the Royal Marsden Cancer Charity.



This concert was sold out several days before the event with a waiting list for tickets! Again, 66 people played including just 10 very welcome guests. We were delighted to welcome back our guest soprano Laura Carew Gibbs who sang Bizet’s *Habanera* from *Carmen* and led the audience in the ever-popular medley of ABBA songs. Sara Young has written about this concert in her report so I will not repeat her remarks here, suffice to say the concert was a cornucopia of delights including medleys from the films *Frozen* and *Polar Express*, Carl Strommen’s jazzy *Christmas is in the Air* arrangement and, of course, everyone’s favourite Christmas romp, Leroy Anderson’s perennial *Sleigh Ride*.

The concert was an enormous success, selling out before the day of the concert with an audience of nearly 200 people and raising £526.20 for the Royal Marsden Cancer Charity. Despite not serving refreshments, it was generally considered to be one of our best performances to date.

## **OTHER ACTIVITIES**

The success of the orchestra is perhaps most demonstrated by the strength within individual sections. Whilst we could always use additional trumpets and there are never enough violins, this reporting year,

saw some much appreciated horn players joining the orchestra. There is great strength among the wind section and trombone section and the percussion ladies have continued to excel.

However, some sections of the orchestra have taken it upon themselves to form their own mini ensembles, namely the Flute Ensemble and Cello Choir. It is a testament to the strength and quality of their playing that they have even secured some opportunities to perform on their own. Well done Celli and Flutes!

## **PEOPLE**

As always, the orchestra would not exist without a number of individuals who make things happen and we are lucky to have a dedicated band of members, many of whom are trustees, who ensure rehearsal venues are booked, we have music to play, chairs are put out for us to sit on, refreshments are provided in the interval, and many other jobs which vital to the smooth running of the organisation. Special thanks go to our secretary Alex Colbourne who continues to keep the committee in check and to our treasurer Sue Pharoah, who manages our finances brilliantly and keeps the website in shape. Marian Atkinson and Sarah Wiseman need a mention as they both ensure both the library of music is kept in order (Sarah) and that we all have individual scores to play. This latter requires a lot of purchasing of music, downloading, printing and photocopying. No mean feat – great job, Marian.

The committee and orchestra is led by our Chair, Pam, who has always combined her role running the committee and the orchestra with a care, attention to detail and empathy. There are so many facets to the role of Chair which Pam carried out, with her customary commitment and loyalty, maintaining an oversight on every aspect of the orchestra. Before, during and after the pandemic, it is not an understatement to say that Pam was the glue that held the orchestra together – we will be forever grateful. However, as I mentioned in the introduction, Pam decided it was time to divest herself of some of the roles she has so expertly presided over for so many years. Emma Scheck stepped forward and took on the role of Concert Manager, surely a task she was born to do with her organisational and managerial skills (not to mention legion of friends who help out with front of house and car parking duties at concerts). And Lin Larmer volunteered to help Pam with venue booking and marketing, with a view to taking on both completely very soon. She has done a fantastic job.



Our huge thanks, as usual, go to Sara Young, our Maestro, our Director of Music, who 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 rehearsal and concert exciting and fun.



However, in the autumn of 2023, Sara informed the committee that she had decided to retire from her position as Musical Director of the NDCO and seek her fortune in pastures new. She informed us that she would stay on until the end of the summer term 2024 and that her last concert would be held in May 2024. In addition, she announced that due to a generous donation, we would be able to hold the concert at the 530-seat concert hall at Woldingham School.

The orchestra were devastated at the thought of losing Sara, but excited at the thought of a farewell concert at Woldingham School, and very grateful that we had time to organise a planned and measured recruitment process for a new MD. The committee, appointed a small sub-group who developed a job description for the Musical Director position, advertised the role, read CVs and cover letters, and held initial interviews. The committee were delighted at the response to the advert and, while interviews and auditions were held after the period covered by this report, it looked promising that a suitable replacement would be found. As this report is being written and read in September 2024, we are delighted that the recruitment process resulted in the appointment of Anna Tabor, who took over as MD at the end of August 2024.

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. 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!

## **CONCLUSION**

2023-2024 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 7-year history. Our numbers are at an all-time high and the quality of our playing has improved enormously under Sara's baton. 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.

The next year will see great change with a new MD, and different working practices among committee members as Pam gradually hands over responsibilities to others.

The orchestra is living in exciting times!

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 2024*