

----- NORTH **NDCO** DOWNS -----  
COMMUNITY ORCHESTRA

North Downs Community Orchestra and Ensembles - Registered Charity Number: 1183074

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING: 30<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER 2020**

**Report to Members covering the period April 2019 – March 2020**

**INTRODUCTION**

The year 2019-2020 will go down in the history of the World as one of two halves, and the experience of the NDCOE was no exception. The first half saw us continuing to develop as an orchestra with numbers growing, rehearsals becoming increasingly productive, our range of music expanding, the percussion and brass sections making their presence felt, and some cracking concerts. As 2019 moved into 2020, we continued to rehearse for our 4<sup>th</sup> Birthday Concert at the end of March. However, as the weeks went by it became obvious that Covid-19 was not going away and we made the sad decision to cancel our 4<sup>th</sup> Birthday Concert. The country moved into lockdown and life changed, quite possibly forever.

Whilst this report concentrates on the period prior to lockdown, there is an addendum bringing you up to date with the past 6 months when the orchestra has not been idle.

**APPOINTMENT OF OUR NEW PERMANENT MUSICAL DIRECTOR**

After the departure of Shona Fenion, our first Musical Director, we considered both Richard Cross (our long time wind and brass sectional conductor) and Sara Young (who had been introduced to us by one of our violinists) as potential permanent replacements, both of whom applied for the role of MD. Richard is a practicing trombone player and teacher; Sara, a violinist, had been head of music at Hazelwood School prior to her retirement. Richard ably conducted the orchestra during the spring term of 2019 and Sara the summer term, culminating in conducting, respectively, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Birthday Concert in March and the Summer Prom in June 2019.

In July, after consulting our members through a survey, it was agreed to offer Sara the position of Musical Director which, to our delight, she accepted. We agreed with Richard that he would be our Principal Guest Conductor, able to take Sara's place if necessary and working with Sara through shared communication and cooperation to develop our playing. Richard will continue to take wind and brass sectional rehearsals.

Sara is an enthusiastic and charismatic conductor with huge experience and talent, and a joie de vivre which keeps the orchestra motivated and on our toes. We look forward to a long and successful partnership with both Sara and Richard.

## **CONCERTS**

### *Summer Prom, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2019*

After the success in March 2019 of our 3<sup>rd</sup> Birthday Concert at St John's Church, Hurst Green under the baton of Richard Cross, the orchestra started rehearsing with Maestro Sara Young in preparation for the Summer Prom concert in June, again at St John's Church. St John's is becoming the orchestra's cultural home!

The repertoire, chosen by Sara along with the Repertoire Group, was the usual mix of popular classics, movie themes and some pop numbers thrown in for good measure. As it was a 'prom', Jerusalem and Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance #1 were included for the audience to sing along.

The concert was well attended by friends and family and the result was a huge success, enjoyed by players and audience alike. Dzana (cello) and Margaret (harp) entertained us after the interval with another beautiful duet. A particular favourite was the theme from The Great Escape, our encore, which demonstrated what an integral part the percussion and brass sections are to the orchestra.

### *Christmas Concert, Sleigh Ride at St Johns, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2019*

The Christmas concert was another joyous occasion for both the orchestra and all the family and friends who attended, again at St John's Church, Hurst Green and conducted by Sara Young. The repertoire, brilliantly selected by Sara and the Rep Group was a wonderful combination of seasonal and Christmas music including a selection of pieces from Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker" and "Christmas in Sarajevo" which has special resonance for our Principal Cellist, Dzana, who was in Sarajevo at the time of the siege in the

mid-1990s. The highlight was probably “Sleigh Ride”, arranged by Leroy Anderson, which is both challenging and exciting to play and was well received by the enthusiastic audience. It featured our percussionists and ‘horse’ trumpeter and demonstrated, as much as any other piece, how far the orchestra has come as the arrangement we used is played by many professional orchestras and bands.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Birthday Concert, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 (CANCELLED)

The Spring Term of 2020 saw the orchestra rehearsing for our 4<sup>th</sup> Birthday Concert. The repertoire selected was a wonderful smorgasbord of musical styles including the Monty Python theme “Liberty Bell”, the 1<sup>st</sup> movement of Mozart’s Symphony #36 (Linz) and, to celebrate Beethoven’s 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Movement 5 of his Symphony #6, “The Shepherds Hymn” and a version of “Ode to Joy”. While we practiced Henry Mancini’s “Moon River”, as rehearsals continued, we remembered our first tentative performance in our first year when we had no brass and no percussion. In addition we were looking forward to the premiere, by the wind section, of a special commission by Richard Cross called “Beneath the Surface of Things”.

Sadly, the pandemic started to take its hold in late February and by March it was obvious that the concert could not take place if we were to ensure the safety and health of our musicians and audience. The very difficult decision was taken to cancel.

It was doubly disappointing this would have been our first time performing at the Reigate Park United Reform Church and a great deal of work had gone into finding, checking and ensuring that the venue was suitable.

#### **OTHER ACTIVITIES AND OUTREACH**

For a third year some orchestra members had helped out by playing Christmas music with the church parishioners for Oakhall Church, Caterham’s, candlelit Nine Lessons and Carols service which is held the Sunday before Christmas.

This year there had been plans to visit another primary school in March but unfortunately we were not able to progress this visit.

During the pandemic it has become clear how much the well-being of a good proportion of our own members has benefited from our small scale musical activities and newsletters.

## **REHEARSALS AND MEMBERSHIP**

Until late March 2020, rehearsals continued to be held at Oxted School on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesdays of each month, from 7.30 to 9.30pm with occasional additional sessions if there is a 5<sup>th</sup> Wednesday in a month. Membership has continued to grow both in numbers and the range of instruments represented, although the size of each section does vary from term to term.

Wind and brass sectionals continue on a regular basis at the Red Cross Hall in Oxted, ably led by Richard Cross. Strings sectionals are led by Sara Young, again on a regular basis. These sessions are vital to provide additional practice and specific instrumental advice in preparation for any concert.

Our percussionists haven't yet had regular sectionals but, on several occasions during the year, usually at half term, Sara and other members of the orchestra have attended the band venue, with the percussion section, for additional practice. These low key sessions, which we call 'take it apart rehearsals, have also been appreciated by some players of other instruments as an opportunity to examine some more tricky sections a few bars at a time.

In October 2019 our percussion section was able to spend an afternoon working with a wonderful professional percussionist called Richard Scarffe. There were plans for another session in June 2020 which, for obvious reasons, was not possible.

## **THE NORTH DOWNS BAND**

The band, which welcomes all instruments, whether symphony or not, continued to meet regularly at the Endeavour Scout Hut but meetings have had to cease since March because of the lockdown.

## **THANKS**

As with any organisation, there is a significant amount of staff work to ensure that we are able to practice and perform. So many people are involved in choice of repertoire, organising rehearsals, looking after our music library and putting on a concert that it is impossible to name everyone, but a few people do qualify for special mention.

Harriet, our treasurer, has worked tirelessly to ensure that the orchestra remains in a good financial position. Her work, with others, in getting the NDCOE recognised by the Charity Commission and then registered for Gift Aid, has been exceptional and, as you will hear in the financial report, this means we are in a good fiscal state.

Sara, our Musical Director, is an inspiration and has brought the fun back to The Fun Orchestra. Richard continues to be a fantastic support and friend to the orchestra. We cannot thank them both enough for their contributions.

The trustees also work very hard to ensure that concerts are organised, that nothing is missed and the members can continue to turn up to rehearsals and concerts with as few problems as possible.

Many people are involved in putting on a concert and our thanks to all of those who work hard to ensure each of our performances is a success, and even rope in family and friends to help.

The bulk of our individual thanks must go to Pam, our Chairman, without whose commitment, loyalty and dedication the orchestra would probably not exist, or at least not in the healthy, vibrant and exciting form it is. Pam – we are indebted to you.

Of course there would be no orchestra if it wasn't for our members and our biggest thanks go to you. For everyone who works behind the scenes, everything is worthwhile if you, the members, enjoy rehearsing and performing.

Despite the current difficulties, we hope you stay with us and come back when we are able to play more normally again. We hope we remain your musical home.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

We have had some enormous highs this year which we hope have compensated a little for the desperate low of the pandemic and all that has meant for the orchestra as a whole and the individuals. The orchestra is something we do for fun and enjoyment and, although important to the well-being of members, we should not forget those, some amongst our numbers, who have lost loved ones and livelihoods as a result of the pandemic. Our loss as amateur musicians is small in comparison.

But as we continue to suffer from this terrible virus, I would urge you to recall the thrill of playing the Great Escape last summer or Sleigh Bells just before Christmas and think how wonderful it felt and the fun we have derived from being part of this musical community. It may make you smile and forget the gloom of this time for a little.

In the words of the Queen in her broadcast of 5<sup>th</sup> April, echoing the words of Vera Lynn:

“We should take comfort that, while we may have more still to endure, better days will return: we will be with our friends again; we will be with our families again; we will meet again.”

And we will play music together again.

## ADDENDUM

This report should finish at the end of March 2020, but given that is 6 months ago, we thought an extra section to outline the activities of the orchestra since lockdown was in order.

Again, due to Pam's determination and drive, Sara's willingness to lead us with a feather duster baton and with the help of some more technically minded in the orchestra (Liz and Paul in particular), we have been holding 'rehearsals' by Zoom every couple of weeks. Of course these are not true rehearsals, by any stretch of the imagination, but they provide an opportunity to pick up and play your instrument and, via the chat rooms, a chance for socialising with other attendees. The people who have joined the sessions have found them valuable in many ways. In addition, thanks to Alex, we have started producing a monthly Newsletter that keeps us all in contact, especially so for all those who don't join the Zoom virtual rehearsals.

As lockdown has eased (new regulations notwithstanding), Pam and Sara have worked tirelessly to start in-person rehearsals, first in Pam's garden with just strings and percussion, and now in an external outdoor venue with wind and brass as well. It is hoped to extend this to small group rehearsals inside, as the weather gets worse, if guidelines continue to permit. This has required a huge amount of research, reading of regulations, taking advice from Making Music and the development of Risk Assessments and Covid-secure procedures for the orchestra. Our huge thanks must go again to Pam who, with assistance from other committee members, has taken on the burden to ensure we can practice in a safe and secure environment. Many thanks are also due to Colin for leading the search for suitable new smaller practice venues for us.

Thanks again to Colin, plans are underway preparing a road-map to ensure that, when restrictions ease, we are in a good position to stage our 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert at Woldingham School next March.

Another members' survey in August received an excellent take up from the membership and the results have informed our plans for a return to in-person rehearsals and providing a guide for Sara and the Rep group to prepare the repertoire list for the concert. Thank you to all who responded and to Colin for his hard work in designing the survey and then analysing the results.

The Government is slowly realising that amateur music making enhances the mental well-being of those taking part. As part of the Government's staged plan to bring back both professional and amateur performing groups, rehearsals of amateur performing groups are now, at the time of writing, classed as

'organised activities' rather than constituting 'social interaction'. This opens up the possibility to rehearse with more than one group of six in a venue. We are therefore actively investigating ways to hold rehearsals with multiple groups of six supported by Covid-secure risk assessments and procedures which are informed by Government guidelines and recommendations from the Making Music organisation.

It's going to be different from how we are used to rehearsing but after six months, we know that making any music together, even as 'an organised activity', is better than no music. To misquote the immortal words from Star Trek: "Its [music] Jim, but not as we know it."

Pam Deverill and Alison Cattermole, September 2020