

COMMUNITY ORCHESTRA

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

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING: 15th SEPTEMBER 2021

Report to Members

covering the period April 2020 – March 2021

INTRODUCTION

When we wrote the report for the last AGM in September 2020, little did we know that before the next AGM report, we would have: begun in-person rehearsals (tentatively) under COVID secure guidelines, become experts in risk assessments, tried to understand the complexities of the Tier system, gone through a further lockdown, carried on with Zoom play-alongs, had Christmas 'cancelled', experienced the staggeringly amazing start of the vaccine roll out (since when did having a needle in your arm create so much excitement!), started in-person rehearsals (again), and seen restrictions beginning to ease somewhat. To say life has been a roller coaster of emotions and changes in regulations doesn't come close to the reality.

The report is split into three parts:

- An update of the addendum to last year's Report to Members covering the period April 2020 to September 2020;
- A review of the period October 2020 to March 2021;
- An addendum covering activities from March 2021 to September 2021 (mainly because it demonstrates our continued activities as restrictions eased).

MARCH TO SEPTEMBER 2020

The end of March 2021 was truly a dark time in the history of the nation. The pandemic took everyone by surprise and on 26th March, what was to become the first lockdown began. It was scary, but the fine weather tempered what could otherwise have been a really frightening time. Of course, for many it was a

truly gruelling time as the illness took its toll on families and the NHS battled heroically to keep us well. Our hearts go out to all those who suffered and we give our unending thanks to the NHS and other key workers (including supermarket staff and delivery drivers) who kept us going.

For the orchestra, it meant that all rehearsals ceased and our 4th Birthday Concert, scheduled for 29th March was cancelled. Eighteen months on, it is hard to believe that as late as mid-March we were still discussing going ahead. It just shows what a difference a few days can make in a pandemic.

But there was some good news at the end of March when we heard that HMRC had accepted us our charitable status and we would therefore be able to claim gift aid on all donations. This is thanks in great part to our marvellous treasurers, Lucy Arterton and Harriet Leach. Since that time Harriet has worked tirelessly and put in a claim to get several thousand pounds refunded which has been successful. Thank you, Harriet!

With the inability to rehearse in person or perform or even hear live concerts, the music world and the NDCO was thrown into a period of inactivity. In mid-May a committee meeting was held using some new-fangled software called Zoom which allowed us to meet online in a sort of multi-person FaceTime call. Everyone felt it was important that we try to re-engage with the membership to keep the orchestra alive for when proper rehearsals and concerts could recommence. Colin was particularly motivating and various ideas for keeping in touch were discussed and the idea for the Newsletter was developed and agreed. Thanks to Alex Colbourne, a monthly newsletter has been published and sent to all members ever since. The potential for using Zoom for online virtual rehearsals was discussed. Other music groups seemed to be using it, so why shouldn't we?

On 3rd June 2020, the NDCO held its first ever Zoom rehearsal. And guess what? It worked!

From then on, through 3 pandemic waves and 2 lockdowns, and due to Pam's indefatigable determination and drive, Sara's willingness to lead us with a feather duster baton and the help of some more technically minded in the orchestra (Liz and Paul in particular), we held Zoom 'rehearsals' 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.

As lockdown eased in the early summer 2020, Pam and Sara again worked tirelessly to start in-person rehearsals, first in Pam's garden with just strings and percussion, and then in an external outdoor venue with wind and brass as well. This required a huge amount of research and due diligence, reading and understanding 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, took on the burden to ensure we could 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.

Another members' survey in August 2020 received an excellent take up from the membership and the results have informed our plans for a return to in-person rehearsals and provided a guide for Sara and the Repertoire group to prepare the music list for the next concert. Thank you to all who responded and to Colin for his hard work in designing the survey and then analysing the results.

By September the Government realised 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 were reclassified as 'organised activities' rather than constituting 'social interaction', opening up the possibility to rehearse with more than one group of six in a venue.

Things were beginning to look up!

OCTOBER 2020 TO MARCH 2021

The end of September 2020 saw the expansion of in-person rehearsals including using an indoor venue at St Andrews Church, Limpsfield Chart and St John's Church, Hurst Green. Pam, Colin, and others carried out further due diligence to ensure that rehearsals were supported by Covid-secure risk assessments and procedures, informed by Government guidelines and recommendations from the Making Music organisation. Pam (what would we do without her?) managed to amend the website so bookings and payments for rehearsals could be done online. A maximum of 12 people were allowed to attend which was challenging in terms of balance of instruments. Everyone was socially distanced, string players wore masks, wind players used a variety of socks and other items of clothing to cover the bell end of their instruments. Latent Blue Peter skills were employed by the flute players to use plastic drinks bottles as mouth guards. Our intrepid DoM wore a face mask, stood behind a plastic screen and a personal PA was purchased so the

players could hear her. Sanitiser was available in liberal quantities to splash on hands and wipe down furniture. Windows and doors were left open to ensure good ventilation. It was all a bit of a faff and trauma, but completely worth while to be able to play together again. The groups of instruments at any particular rehearsal were strange to say the least, but Sara managed us brilliantly and through October and a great deal of fun was had by those members lucky enough to attend. It was glorious to be playing with others again.

We continued in this way for a few weeks, through varying differing regulations, the confusing Tier system and promises of family Christmas. But Covid-19 has other ideas, from September the numbers of cases was beginning to rise, and in November the in-person rehearsals ceased. The beginning of December saw the last in-person wind sectional playing Christmas music with Richard in a very cold St John's church hall. And then Christmas was cancelled, and we couldn't see our nearest and dearest, let alone our fellow orchestra players. And so the 2nd lockdown began.

On the plus side, by this time the NDCO were masters at Zoom rehearsals, and they recommenced in early January. Sara delighted us all with some new music including the glorious Romeo and Juliet by Tchaikovsky and a medley of songs from Grease. Both cheering the spirits on those long dark days of the winter lockdown. Indeed, from a survey done by Making Music, the NDCO was in the minority of amateur music groups that managed to keep going in some way during the pandemic. For that we should be proud.

The end of March saw the approach of the orchestra's 5th birthday. We'd had to cancel our 4th birthday concert in 2020 and although we had hoped to have a 5th birthday concert, it was not to be. But there was determination from the committee that the birthday would not go by unrecognised, so an evening of 'Party Pieces' was organised via Zoom with volunteer members playing various solos and duets. It was a truly wonderful evening; 36 people attended, with some brilliantly virtuoso performances on the harp, piano, clarinet, cello and even our president Rainer Hersch joined us to play his viola. A good time was had by all, performers and audience alike.

It was a reminder of the uplifting qualities of music, the impact it can have on bringing people together to enjoy a common aim and the benefits to our mental health in times of trauma. And, especially, that nothing, not even a pandemic, can prevent the NDCO coming together to play our instruments and having fun. Which is what we are: the Fun Orchestra.

APRIL TO SEPTEMBER 2021: Addendum

A quick note to bring us up to date.

The 2nd lockdown began to ease in April, and by May the orchestra started in-person rehearsals together, in a larger, new venue at St Peter's Church Hall in Limpsfield, with sectionals at St Andrews in Limpsfield Chart. And despite some COVID precautions it is beginning to feel almost normal. We have continued with sanitising, masks when not playing and booking online so we know how many people are going to attend. But it is a joy to rehearse the new pieces that Sara picked out and revisit those we were rehearsing prior to and during the first lockdown. Orchestra rehearsals on Wednesdays are rotating with sectional rehearsals on Thursdays and we are getting into a rhythm.

Wendy Tai has worked hard and revamped the website which is looking fantastic. Thank you, Wendy.

And now we are looking ahead to re-engaging with those people who found Zoom rehearsals impossible to get on with. We had 60 people signed up to play at our cancelled 4th birthday concert, but a maximum of around 25 people are currently signing up for rehearsals and we want to encourage pre-pandemic members to return. We are also beginning to plan for a concert in the autumn and tentatively our 6th Birthday Concert in March 2022.

As usual, there are many thanks. Sara, our wonderful Music Director, who has been so inspirational and helped us improve, even through lockdowns. Alex, who edited and produced the newsletters which allowed members who didn't attend Zoom to keep in touch. Colin who kept us motivated and thinking ahead, and was indispensable in finding COVID regulated venues for us to rehearse in. Harriet who has done a brilliant job on the finances, meaning we are in pretty good shape moving forward. Wendy, whose work on the website, is a real step forward. And many others too numerous to mention.

But the biggest thanks should go to Pam, whose leadership, enthusiasm, encouragement, and sheer hard work has kept the orchestra together through extraordinary times.

We salute you all.