

Patrons of Cheltenham Symphony Orchestra Newsletter September 2017

It's all in the preparation

The orchestra and conductor (obviously) spend time rehearsing for each concert but this edition of the Newsletter provides an opportunity for the audience also to do some homework - for the concert in January 2018 in the Pump Room when Vaughan Williams' London Symphony will be performed. Our enthusiastic supporter, the Bard of Tysoe, is a great fan of VW's music and he kindly agreed to write an article for this Newsletter. If you have time to read it with the YouTube recording he suggests, both players and audience will find it rewarding. David Curtis may recognise it as a challenge to which he will no doubt respond with his usual vigour.

Once again, players have courageously agreed to write articles for the Newsletter – I hope you find them entertaining and interesting.

Michael St. John

Meet the players . . .

Seaside, squints and Sibelius

The midwife predicted I would be a pianist when I arrived waving my long fingers, but it was never my vocation. I was born in Eastbourne, instantly lowering the average age of the population, some years after Theresa May.

I was lucky enough to go to a very musical primary school and at the age of 9, after the customary sessions of descant recorder, Mum asked me if I would like to play the clarinet. Being completely ignorant of the woodwind family I enthusiastically agreed as I was in love with the oboe, disliked the clarinet but had no idea which was which. The head teacher gave a little talk about each instrument and there were demonstrations. He produced a silvery flute, asked if anyone wanted to have a try and then a very strange thing happened – I found my arm inexplicably raised in the air. This was very uncharacteristic as I hardly ever spoke up in class or volunteered for anything. I stood up, had a blow and got a note out first time. My fate was sealed, the oboe spurned, the clarinet despised and not a bassoon in sight.

We had a good school orchestra and I was soon introduced to famous classics. We even performed a version of the Farewell Symphony dressed in period costume and wigs. I also joined the county music school which ran in Lewes on Saturdays. The main memory I

have of that is the terrible smell of bad eggs coming from the cement works! I joined the ironic sounding Eastbourne Youth Orchestra. My first flute was an awful nickel thing which soon oxidised into a scary green alien in the sea air.

I moved on to secondary education, a decent Yamaha and my class music lessons were taken by Alan Schaaf who unfortunately wasn't there very long as he moved to ... Gloucestershire. I started having lessons with Shaun Sellings who was a rising star in East Sussex and top pupil of Graham Mayger at the Royal College of Music. At the age of 14 I auditioned for the East Sussex County Youth Orchestra conducted by Colin Metters. We met once a year for a week long residential in a creepy old building on windy Seaford Head. I remember the first rehearsal very clearly. We played Sibelius 2nd Symphony and I was blown away (not just by the coastal gales). I couldn't play a note I was so overwhelmed by the sounds and emotions. These memories came flooding back to me when the CSO performed the symphony in 2015. The orchestra took me on my first tours – to the Edinburgh Fringe and Germany.

Around this time I also made the decision not to take music O level. I didn't see myself teaching and the remaining music teacher did nothing to inspire. He was a stereotypical Eastbourne resident, close to retirement, very old fashioned in musical tastes and had a huge squint (which may have had some unforeseen influence later). I became principal flute with the Eastbourne Sinfonia and played for the choral society where my mother was the soprano soloist. Along with my two sisters, who played nasty string instruments, we used to give concerts to the town's growing population of elderly people, who were very supportive.



The time came to move away and I went to Cheltenham to study Orthoptics. In those days without social media the library was the place to go for information and I remember standing in the entrance making notes of clubs and societies who were advertising on the wall. I "wrote" – yes pen and paper - to a Christopher Sturdy regarding the Cheltenham Philharmonic Orchestra. He replied and I was duly

offered a small piccolo part in a concert. I also got some pit work for the Savoyards and first met Brenda Johnston (formerly Davies). While in Cheltenham I also met Ed – my husband – who impressed me with the fact he did have music O level and had played the French horn, although I have never witnessed it.

Now for those of you who are wondering, an Orthoptist specialises in disorders of eye movement and binocular vision, diagnosing squints and other visual problems (hence the subliminal influence of the wall-eyed music teacher). I spent a couple of years working in Bristol then Cambridge but was lucky enough to get a job back in Cheltenham and returned to the Philharmonic where I soon became principal flute. Around that time I first met Peter Tomlinson and played with the illustrious CSO as 3rd flute/piccolo. Peter has had a great influence on me, being a huge inspiration with his beautiful playing and kind nature. He phoned me one evening in 1997 to invite me to join permanently as 2nd flute. I felt hugely honoured, and still do, to be part of such a high quality orchestra with so many talented musicians who have become great friends. I never take for granted the opportunities music has offered me and I am looking forward to my next big challenge in 2018 – performing a concerto with the Cheltenham Chamber Orchestra.

Catherine Billington

Christopher Sturdy comments.....

One received many applications from players coming into the area (often to GCHQ) leaving music college etc., particularly for some reason from flute-players, some of whom (though not the ever-modest Catherine) were used to being a big fish in their fairly small local pool back home. My reply (to flutes and all instrumentalists behind the strings) was always this: don't expect to parachute into an orchestra's first part - there's someone doing that; take any humble position that is offered you, without any snot - i.e. pitch up on time, sit down quietly and play the part properly, and be nice to everyone - 4th flute with only four bars to play if necessary; but be prepared to play the first (or any other) part if the player happens not to be there for a rehearsal. This happens surprisingly often and that's your chance. If you're any good, they will soon all be asking for your phone number....As happened of course for Catherine.

Squeezed in the middle

What unites a group of people with qualifications and professional expertise between them in primary school teaching, physiotherapy, physics and astronomy, nursery school management, classroom and instrumental music teaching, company law, composing, conservatoire teaching, jazz performance, Associated Board examining, dining room assistant, librarianship, IT consultancy, life coaching, engineering and technical software development in two vastly different fields?

It is of course, our passion for playing the viola – our beloved but much maligned instrument. It's a tough job, but someone's got to do it and with thirteen

of us officially on the CSO's books (and several others currently masquerading as violinists) we regularly field formidable forces. You may not always be aware of what we're doing, but I guarantee you'd notice if we stopped doing it...Why **do** we do it? The instrument itself regularly fights back, injuring backs, shoulders, arms, fingers and wrists and making us the butt of all those jokes. Well, one of the great joys of being an orchestral string player is playing in a team and one of the defining characteristics of the CSO's viola section is its team spirit.

For an amateur symphony orchestra, our numbers are quite extraordinary. Looking back through old programmes, since the early 1990s alone we have had 40 individuals through our ranks and in 2006 instituted the now traditional 'Viola photograph' at each concert, which has become a permanent record of us all pictured in varying degrees of elation or exhaustion, depending on the programme!

We are also proud to boast Gill Tomlinson in our section, who is one of the founder members of the CSO. During the years we have waved several people goodbye; some off to university and others to new lives in other areas. Sadly, we also lost treasured member Philip Adlard, who died in December 2006. We were privileged to attend his funeral and former member Jo Joyce played in a beautiful tribute on behalf of us all. We have had births too; in fact we hold the record for the highest number of pregnancies in any section of the orchestra and once had three babies born to three members in successive years. Our last outing was to Jo's wedding, when to the bemusement of other guests, we took our bows to form a ceremonial arch after the ceremony. We've also had our fair share of injuries and illnesses. One September, our collective goal was simply to get through the season without anyone requiring a general anaesthetic!



Violas in the Pump Room – April 2017

Keen observers ('Alto twitchers'?) may have noticed that we've recently started to rotate desk positions and that Helen Hogarth and I now share the leadership. Rotating desks has given us all opportunities to sit with and get to know other section members better, experience a different soundscape within the orchestra and take on different responsibilities at different times. This all contributes to helping us to play together.

Desk partnerships are part of the fun of playing in a section, but delicate negotiations have to be conducted over stand height, seating position, page turning and how we mark up our parts, especially when faced with music which looks as if it has been handwritten by a spider down a coalmine at midnight. Height and eyesight differences can be considerable and also have to be accommodated.

Playing at the back and anchoring the section is hard; players are divorced from the main body of the section, are exposed to completely different instruments in the orchestra and cannot hear either the violas or the other string sections as easily. There is also often a significant time lag between the front and back of the performance space, which alters our preparation and attack; our sightlines are different and it takes longer to catch up with bowing changes and instructions from the conductor. On the positive side, it is easier to hear the clarinets and horns, with whom we are often harmonically linked and one hears the music in a different way. The further back we are sitting, the more concentration is required and rotating desks reminds us all of the many difficulties involved and increases our empathy towards our fellow violists. Individual competence is vital, but we all also need several other skills, including an ability to meld our sound with the others and to consciously strive for rapport with our colleagues. Paradoxically, we all have to be both sensitive enough to subsume our personalities into the section, but be ready at the drop of a hat to take over and re-set the section if mistakes are made, before dropping back into the ensemble.

When I accidentally became section leader in 2000, at a time when viola numbers had dwindled to three or four regular players, sheer terror forced me to actively reflect on how I was going to carry out this responsibility. As a non-professional musician, my starting point was to consider how I myself wanted to feel when playing in any ensemble; ie. welcomed, supported, valued and that I was contributing to that all important team ethos. This is especially important in an amateur setting, when players attend voluntarily and there is no formal organisational hierarchy or contractual obligation. In a leader, my ideal role model was someone who was well prepared, reliable and approachable; would communicate with the conductor and other section leaders and sort out the bowing! I also wanted someone who would signal when we were about to play! (*you mean you need a conductor? Ed*) Now that Helen and I share the role, both we and the rest of the section benefit from being able to play in different positions, sitting as we do in the centre of the orchestra, with the music coming at us from all directions.

You will not be surprised to learn that the CSO Violas take their musical development seriously. Between us we have lessons (sometimes leading to exam entry), play extensively in other orchestras and ensembles, attend recitals, go on music courses and

training days run by the professionals and generally keep up our practice schedules, grinding relentlessly through Ševčík position change exercises in the privacy of our own homes and for the private entertainment of our 'other halves'. We also hold our own occasional 'Viola Days', already chronicled in an earlier newsletter. Friendly and informal occasions, to which we also invite those colleagues who can actually play the viola, but have unaccountably chosen to go over to the 'Dark Side' (*violins – Ed*), these 'Continuing Professional Development' events could also stand for 'Cake, Play, Depart'...

Our influence is not confined to Cheltenham. A fellow violist from Belfast, facing the infamous stratospheric viola section solo in the first movement of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, recently emailed me to ask how we'd approached the problem. Helen's brilliant solution winged its way over the Irish Sea and was received with much relief by my friend's colleagues.

It is a privilege to play in the CSO Viola section and to enjoy the collegiate atmosphere and all-embracing goodwill of a group of people I would never have met without music. It's a cliché, but at its best, when that mysterious alchemy of music and collective striving for excellence kicks in, the whole really is better than the sum of its parts and I wouldn't have it any other way.

To conclude, test your knowledge of some of your violist colleagues (clue - one is really a CSO violinist) with the following questions

Which viola player....

...once appeared on 'TISWAS'?

...has a father who created the slogan 'P...P...Pick up a Penguin'?

...was a drummer in Oxford University's leading pop group and back-up band to 'Manfred Mann'?

...was once sawn in half on stage by a magician?

...once made a cake in the shape of the 'Starship Enterprise', complete with engines which shot out sparks?

Answers available from a violist near you...

Carole Wrightson - Co-Principal Viola Player

Mark the music

I was asked to write a guide to Vaughan Williams' [RVW] sumptuous *A London Symphony* (which closes January's concert) – "things for the audience to look out for" – using YouTube footage for reference; but I struggled to find any with high-quality sound that also focused on each instrumental entry, etc. – as well as with keeping within my word limit! I have therefore concentrated on the conductor-orchestra relationship: as demonstrated in the first movement.

You will need to load this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q532Rn6hP54&t=1554s> – of London City Orchestra, conducted by Pablo

Urbina. Do, therefore, watch him [PU] carefully: especially where *he* is looking. Then watch David on the night. There is, with his repertoire of smiles and meaningful 'hand signals', no clearer guide to steering a large orchestra through such a large work.

[Start: 0:35] Listen to those cellos and basses, rumbling along the Embankment on this foggy morning. [1:42] Watch how PU controls the brief 'hold'; then leans into the cellos [1:52] for emphasis – but [02:16] pushes back the violins: growing too loudly, too quickly. [2:55] Another 'hold' – what RVW details as "a slight 'breath-mark' not a pause" – PU just holding his arms aloft (stopping time) momentarily – before a return to *ppp*. The harps (a left-hand signal from PU) chime the Westminster Quarters; then, again, a hush – the left-hand now flat [3:15] – before the horns build towards the *Allegro risoluto*. PU clenches his left hand into a forceful fist, gathering energy in the held silence. [3:28] The full orchestra enters, *fff* (and our hearts skip a beat).

This is "Hampstead Heath on an August Bank Holiday": and every single player comes to life (note how PU's body language also changes). At [4:06] there is a very David-like touch of the lips; but we are truly underway. Even when the air clears, *Pochettino animato*, the trombones and tuba [4:36] hold on to the fading mist. Then [4:44] PU's right hand digs deep for a horn call... – and then smiles (while simply keeping time): he trusts the orchestra to revel in RVW's portrait of a city "alive with the noise and scurry of street traffic"! At [5:05] he pushes the orchestra back again, and the sound recedes. Watch for his crouch at [5:19]: marking a sudden *fp* in the score. The whole orchestra is playing – but softly! [5:30] A timpani roll leads to the *Poco animato* section....

Note the harps "doubled if possible" at [6:00], and PU's sweeping gesture at [06:16], launching the brass into full flight (so perfect, therefore, for *our* orchestra)! At [6:35] we hear the glockenspiel – RVW demanding a large percussion section: of this, plus timpani, snare-drum, triangle, bass-drum, cymbals, gong, and even sleigh-bells – and, at [7:11], asking for the cymbal to be played with the side-drum stick for maximum rhythmic effect... – just before the music slows (but grows) to *fff* – everyone giving it their all (as PU, it seems, pleads to the gods)!

At [7:27] he slows the orchestra with his whole body. And at [7:43] we get the cor anglais player's view, as PU brings us in for our solo. [8:52] We then see the three flutes, two oboes and cor anglais on song... – but note the bassoonist counting the bars before her next entry!

The best section, for me, is at [9:14]: when the solo cello and violin – painting the city's "always underlying calm" – are joined by a cascading harp. (With the strings divided into an octet above the full body, it is hard not to think of the *Tallis Fantasia*, written around the same time.) Eventually, at [10:10], the wind take over. At [12:07] two cornets (scored in

addition to two trumpets) seem to lead us back. But what follows, instead, is a quiet conversation between brass and strings (under long, high woodwind notes). At [12:47] PU's eye-contact ensures the cellos and basses enter forcefully – although still *pp*. At [13:47] he calls out the cornets again; followed by the timpani [13:52] signalling yet another change of mood: the three trombones and tuba (this *is* a large orchestra) blasting out their motif.

At [14:03] everything comes together: the sun breaks through completely; with the higher instruments playing a descending motif in unison, while the lower ones thunder out their climbing theme. PU's body language alone should tell you just how exciting this is – especially that energetic close [15:18]! Wow. (And there are still three movements to go.)

The Bard of Tysoe

Young Composers' Competition - 2018

The CSO has launched its Young Composers' Competition. The aim is to encourage young musicians to compose works for full symphony orchestra. The winning composition will be played by the orchestra in their concert in the Town Hall on 20th October 2018.

Full details are available on the website or from Simon Cox –

secretary@cheltenhamsymphonyorchestra.info

Forthcoming concerts

Russian Magic

Saturday 4 Nov. 7.30pm, Pittville Pump Room

Borodin: Overture *Prince Igor*

Prokofiev: Suite *Cinderella* No. 1

Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade*

The FOAG Concert

In aid of the Farmers Overseas Action Group

www.foag.org

Saturday 25 Nov. 7.30pm, Pershore Abbey

Mozart: Overture *The Magic Flute*

Mozart: Violin Concerto No. 3 in G, K216 –

Soloist - Benjamin Baker

Tchaikovsky: Symphony No. 5

An English Celebration 1

Saturday 27 Jan. 2018 7.30pm Pittville Pump Room

Holst: Somerset Rhapsody

Britten: Violin concerto – *Soloist Fenella*

Humphreys

Vaughan Williams: Symphony No. 2 - London

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