

The Charnwood Orchestra: 50th Anniversary Year

Personal Reflections On The Last Twenty-Five Years

by Nic Fallowfield

Having been conductor of the Charnwood Orchestra for half its fifty year history it seems an appropriate moment to look back over my own time with the orchestra and pen a few thoughts. A fiftieth anniversary is a significant milestone and a considerable achievement and the orchestra deserves many congratulations. Together we will be aiming to celebrate the auspicious season in style.

I write this almost twenty-five years to the day since my first concert with the orchestra. On 4th April 1998 I conducted a programme of Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* overture, Fauré's *Pelleas et Melisande*, the Saint-Saens Cello concerto (with Deirdre Bencsik) and Borodin's 2nd symphony. It took place at Rawlins Community Centre in Quorn, the first of only three concerts we ever gave there. In my early years it was where the orchestra rehearsed every Thursday.

I had been appointed the previous year but was unavailable for the November concert and this had been conducted by the out-going leader, Rob Moulin. On his departure Jon Barwell stepped up to lead and has been doing a sterling job for the orchestra ever since.

The June 2023 concert at St. James the Greater in Leicester will be my one-hundred-and-twenty-fifth concert conducting the orchestra: that statistic alone is sufficient reason to prompt a look back over programmes since that first day in 1998. (I wouldn't have been able to do this without information provided by Steve Hall, who was Chairman of the orchestra until 2010 - and did an exceptionally good job in all that time - and who asks to be named at this point only as Keeper of an Unofficial Partial Archive!)

My second concert happened to fall on 4th July so naturally we played an American programme: Bernstein's *Candide* overture (which will begin the 50th birthday concert later this year), Ives' *Variations on 'America'*, *Rhapsody in Blue* (with soloist Elaine Donohoe), *Fanfare for the Common Man*, Barber's *Adagio* and Copland's *Billy the Kid*. More than one member of the orchestra told me that day "this one [ie the concert in St. James the Greater] is the one the orchestra *really* cares about".

The following year saw two notable events. In November of 1998 the orchestra celebrated its 25th anniversary in the formidably dry acoustic of Loughborough Town Hall (the only time we ever played there). Two showpieces for orchestra - Prokofiev's *Lieutenant Kijé* and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (in Ravel's orchestration) sandwiched the Tchaikovsky violin concerto. The Tchaikovsky saw the first of many visits to the orchestra by my great friend, the violinist Thomas Bowes. Tom has been the most frequent visiting soloist over the years returning subsequently to play concertos of Elgar (twice), Brahms (four times), Britten (twice), Bartók, Bruch, Shostakovich (the 2nd concerto), Beethoven and Delius, as well as the Brahms Double Concerto with the cellist Tim Gill and Saint-Saens' *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*.

The other notable event of the 1998/99 season was the orchestra's visit to Ireland in May for concerts in New Ross and in Dublin's National Gallery. We performed Weber's *Euryanthe* overture, the Dvorak violin concerto (with Gina McCormack) and Brahms' 2nd symphony. With this trip a pattern was established whereby the orchestra would embark on a 'tour', with two concerts far from its home base, every two years. A communal meal and opportunities for sight-seeing were an important part of the schedule. In the year of the tour we would play the first half of the tour programme beforehand, in the March concert but with a different symphony (in March 1999 it was Schumann 4) and in the summer concert we would play the symphony from the tour programme (by now extremely well-rehearsed) with a different first half. In June 1999 this was Mozart's *Magic Flute* overture and the first of two visits by Glen Inanga, for Beethoven's 3rd piano concerto.

With the exception of an aborted trip in 2007 this pattern persisted until a planned trip to Scotland in 2020 - complete in the planning down to the last detail - was cruelly ruled out by the Covid

pandemic. These trips - to Ireland again in 2001 and 2009, to France in 2003, to Scotland in 2005 and 2011 and subsequently to Newcastle, Bournemouth and Cardiff - were hugely enjoyable and of enormous benefit to the orchestra in terms of making new friends and taking on new members and in general fostering a feeling of being a community, coming together for more than just rehearsing and performing, getting to know each other a little better.

Gina McCormack, the soloist in that first Irish trip, is one of eighteen violinists who have played concertos (or substantial solo pieces) with the orchestra in my time. This statistic surprised me as much as any other when looking back. The orchestra has also played concertos for piano (eleven different soloists), cello (seven), viola, double bass, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, tuba, harp and harpsichord. There have also been ten singers, making a total of sixty-four soloists in the last twenty-five years. Concertos have ranged from the small-scale - Bach's concertos for two violins and for violin and oboe for instance - to the grandeur and power of the great Romantic piano concertos of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and Grieg. We've been fortunate to have had soloists with impressive international reputations - the likes of Charles Owen and Katya Apekisheva for instance - but have also given opportunities to talented young players in their last year at music college.

The year 2000 brought two memorable concerts. In June the programme at St. James the Greater began with Vaughan Williams' Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis. The nine players of the second orchestra sat so far back in the church that they could barely hear their colleagues and strained to be able to see me. Despite their resulting (and perfectly understandable) nervousness they and everyone else played well and memory tells of an atmospheric performance of this very special and much-loved piece, in an entirely suitable venue it must be said. Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony followed and then, after the interval, Tom Bowes was with us to perform the Elgar violin concerto. This was to be the start, for Tom and me, of a long association with this piece culminating in 2022 with a second performance with Charnwood followed a few weeks later by the recording at Abbey Road Studios which many will have heard about.

In December of that year the orchestra returned to St. James the Greater to play Beethoven's 9th, the great Choral symphony, an exciting and ambitious undertaking. If memory serves correctly three local choirs combined to form the chorus and the four soloists were engaged from a London college. It's well-known that Beethoven's writing for the chorus - for the sopranos and tenors in particular - is demanding to say the least, requiring them to sing at the top of their range for long periods. When rehearsing the chorus in advance I would alternate between singing at a slightly lower pitch in order to learn notes and to get used to how everything fitted together, and singing at pitch in order for the singers to get used to what it was they had let themselves in for. It didn't work for everyone: after one rehearsal one of the sopranos came to tell me that she wouldn't be singing in the concert. "I had a heart attack last year and I don't want another one" she said.

November 2003 saw the first visit to the orchestra of Katya Apkisheva: with her muscular, lively playing and her robust charm she quickly became a favourite with the orchestra. On this first visit she played the first concerto of Tchaikovsky in a programme also including the first symphony of Shostakovich. She returned in May 2006 to play Rachmaninov's second concerto and I think it was this concert - also featuring Stravinsky's Petrouchka - when Emmanuel church was overflowing and audience late-comers had to be accommodated in hastily-arranged seating in the entrance foyer (at a discounted rate of course!). Katya came back one more time to play Beethoven's Emperor concerto.

The Stravinsky mentioned above is one of a number of the great works of the 20th century that the orchestra has tackled in my time. Another came, unexpectedly, in November 2005. I had originally envisaged a programme to include the Sibelius violin concerto for this concert and I rang James Clark to ask if he'd be interested. I knew Jim well having either sat with him or led the second violins on many occasions during his time as leader of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. Jim had experience of leading many of the country's finest orchestras and was a wonderful and highly-respected player. He told me however that he hadn't ever learned the Sibelius concerto and that he didn't really have the time. After a bit of a chat I was about to put the phone down when he suddenly said "I'll do the Berg if you like". Well...the Berg violin concerto certainly wasn't a piece I would have thought of programming but this seemed too good an offer to turn down and so it was arranged. Jim was marvellous, insisting on coming to a Thursday evening rehearsal

despite suffering with DVT at the time and unable to drive, and communicating with the orchestra as if we were playing a piece of large-scale chamber music. The music of the Second Viennese School is not to everyone's taste of course and I'm sure there were some in the orchestra who found Berg's harmonic language difficult. But equally I know that there were many who, possibly after initial resistance, were completely won over by the sheer romanticism of the music and the beauty of Jim's playing.

July 2006 brought more wonderful string playing with the return of Tom Bowes, this time with the cellist Tim Gill, to perform Brahms' Double concerto. This was the first time I met Tim and we quickly became firm friends. With these two great players, with their totally assured technique and producing massive and irresistible sounds from their instruments, the Brahms was a truly memorable experience.

Tim returned the following year to play Tchaikovsky's Rococo Variations in a concert which ended with Rachmaninov's 2nd symphony. I'll never forget Tim, who was principal cello in the RPO at the time, asking me in the interval, "do you think the cellos would mind if I play in the symphony? We don't often play that piece and I absolutely love it!". Needless to say, the cellos didn't mind and were treated to the massive warmth of Tim's sound beefing them up from the back of the section.

In recent years Tim has joined my string quartet on several occasions for performances of the Schubert Quintet in C and it's been a huge pleasure and a privilege to play with him. He was also leading the cello section for the Abbey Road recording of the Elgar with Tom alluded to earlier. He is consistently a positive, encouraging and supportive person to have around. In an email a few days after the Elgar recording I received an email from him, hoping we might be able to revisit the Brahms 'or, if not that, how about the Walton cello concerto?'.
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There are many things that need to be taken into account when planning concert programmes, and seasons. A good balance of pieces and of soloists: the wishes of the soloist: cost (since hiring music is an expensive business and nowadays we even have to pay libraries to borrow their orchestral sets): occasionally marking significant composer anniversaries comes in to play (we will for instance be performing Bruckner's 7th symphony in 2024, the year of his bicentenary): and also of course, the level of technical difficulty in the actual playing of the programme. Here I have to hold up my hands and admit to getting it wrong on occasion. The concert in St. James the Greater in June 2008 was one such: Schumann's Manfred overture, Strauss' Four Last Songs (exquisitely sung by Marie Vassiliou) and Elgar's 1st symphony pushed the orchestra to its limits. Even the unflappable Jon raised an eyebrow. The orchestra came up trumps but it had been a struggle and I think I was slightly more cautious after that ... at least for a while.

The trip to Galway in 2009 was memorable for many reasons but one occurrence in particular stands out in my memory and it has nothing to do with music. Tom was with us to play the Brahms violin concerto and after the first of the two concerts he and I were both presented with simply enormous bouquets of flowers. I've seldom seen anything quite as extravagant. So shortly before 10pm we found ourselves walking back through Galway intent on finding a bar that wasn't too packed with drinkers, but carrying, in addition to various bags with concert gear, music, violin etc these huge armfuls of flowers. As the absurdity of the situation dawned on us we saw two young women approaching from the opposite direction. It was Tom's idea - "Good evening ladies, I wonder if you'd like some flowers" - and we off-loaded our floral cargo onto the two young Irish lasses who were clearly too astonished to say much. I do wonder if, years later, they might occasionally say to each other "do you remember the time those two strange English guys dressed in black gave us all those flowers?".

In August 2010 I had major surgery and was unable to conduct either at Barrow in September or in Emmanuel in November (though I was well enough to attend the latter concert). Dan Rosina and Neil Aston respectively stepped in. I was particularly sorry to miss the November concert as it was a programme I'd been looking forward to keenly. Two of the pieces - Brahms' Variations on the Saint Antoni Chorale and Elgar's Enigma Variations - I was able to programme subsequently but Beethoven's Triple Concerto with its attendant problems in terms of space and cost (three soloists) would be difficult to revisit.

The orchestra's 40th anniversary in 2013 nearly began with disaster. I had asked the trumpeter Anthony Thompson to play the Haydn concerto in September's Barrow concert. Half an hour before we began rehearsing on the day I rang Ant to let him know about parking arrangements. "I'm glad you rang, Nic" he said "I was wanting to talk about arrangements for tomorrow". Having established that neither of us was winding the other up - (Ant and I are friends of old) - and that we really did have a big problem, Ant sprang into action. Despite having been about to leave home to go to a rehearsal when I rang, he got on the phone and within just a few minutes rang me back to let me know that a replacement had been found and was on his way. One hasty change of rehearsal schedule and we were back on track. James Stretton arrived, rehearsed and even played the concerto from memory in the evening. Relief all round, and a lesson learned.

The 40th birthday concert itself, in November, was a great evening. We had two excellent soloists and the orchestra was on top form for a sparkling programme of almost exclusively French music. We began by wishing ourselves Happy Birthday with Stravinsky's Greeting Prelude (composed as a tribute to Pierre Monteux on his 80th birthday) and followed it with one of my favourite overtures, Berlioz's Roman Carnival. Then came Saint-Saens' brilliant Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso with Tom Bowes as soloist and the first half ended with Poulenc's bright and witty suite, Les Biches (one of those pleasing occasions when I was able to grant a request for a specific piece from a member of the orchestra). The second half comprised Chabrier's Espana followed by Debussy's Premiere Rhapsodie with clarinettist Tom Caldecote. Being a local boy Tom was known to many in the orchestra and indeed he used occasionally to come and play in the violas. The evening finished with a spirited rendition of The Sorcerer's Apprentice by Dukas. Tom Bowes' comment afterwards was "the audience should have been on its feet!".

The concert in March 2014 was one of those that is memorable simply because everything about it worked well. A well-balanced, 'traditional' programme - Beethoven's overture Leonora no.3, Elgar's cello concerto and Brahms' 3rd symphony - an excellent soloist (and I can honestly say I've never heard anyone play the Elgar better than Tim did that evening) and the orchestra once again in excellent form. A concert satisfying and rewarding in every respect.

Incidentally, I'm sometimes accused, if that's not too strong a word, of programming Brahms symphonies more often than might be the case shall we say. Well, I find that of my (soon to be) one-hundred-and-twenty-five concerts with the orchestra, eighteen of them have included a Brahms symphony. I make no further comment and certainly feel no need to justify myself! Having found that statistic I decided to delve further and I find that I have programmed symphonies by twenty-four different composers, from C.P.E. Bach and Boyce right through to Prokofiev (nos. 5 and 7) and Shostakovich (nos. 1, 5 and 6.). In my time the orchestra has played ten Haydn symphonies, eight by Mozart and eight of Beethoven (with the sole exception of no.8, strangely). Aside from these aforementioned there have been symphonies by Berlioz (the Symphonie Fantastique of course but also Harold in Italy, a symphony in all but name), Borodin, Bruckner, Dvorak, Elgar, Glazunov, Gounod, Lalo (Symphonie Espagnole with the 12-year-old Callum Smart shortly after his success in the BBC Young Musicians competition), Mahler, Mendelssohn, Nielsen, Rachmaninov, Schubert, Schumann, Sibelius, Tchaikovsky and Vaughan Williams.

The concert in St. James the Greater in June 2016 saw another major undertaking: Holst's Planets. With a ladies choir to be trained and also conducted off-stage in the concert and a host of extra players needed - including such rare visitors to the orchestra as bass oboe - this meant a great deal of thought and work for the orchestra committee and in particular for our fixer, Simon. Everyone pulled out all the stops and it was a triumphant evening.

November 2016 saw the first visit to the orchestra of the pianist Robert Markham, who played the Grieg concerto as well as you're ever likely to hear it. Robert is quite simply a top-notch pianist and the orchestra seemed inspired by him in a thrilling performance of Sibelius' 5th symphony after the interval. Robert will be back with us in 2024 to play the Schumann concerto.

The highlight of 2017 - for me at least - was the all-Dvorak programme in St. James the Greater: Festival March, the cello concerto (another totally committed, inspired performance from Tim Gill) and the 7th symphony, which we had performed twice in the trip to Cardiff a couple of months earlier.

In March 2018 we found another cause for celebration - my own 20th anniversary with orchestra. Another favourite soloist, the soprano Elizabeth Ryder, came to sing Berg's Sieben frühe Lieder and was perfect for this beautiful, late-Romantic piece. We began with Brahms' Variations on the Saint Antoni Chorale and finished with Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. There was a party afterwards for the orchestra and as many of the audience who wished to stay. There were sparkling drinks, a magnificent cake (provided by Kat) and a speech from me that went on far too long.

Coming closer to present-day, we all remember only too well the events of 2020. As mentioned earlier, a trip to Scotland was planned - travel arrangements in place, accommodation booked, music and soloist (from the Royal Scottish Academy) sorted, deposits paid. Sadly it was not to be and the enormous amount of work done by the committee in organising the trip came to nought. Our Viennese concert in January of that year proved to be the last for twenty-two months.

When we finally were able to rehearse and perform together again, in November 2021, we had Danushka Edirisinghe to play the Elgar cello concerto, as he had been due to do in the concert cancelled back in March 2020. The whole concert, which also featured Weber's Oberon overture and Dvorak's 8th symphony, felt like a particularly highly-charged and significant occasion, after everything that we had all been through.

One more memorable occasion to mention: in June 2022 it was 'Charnwood Goes to the Opera' in St. James the Greater, and what an evening! From the first arresting notes of Verdi's Force of Destiny overture through to the final drama of Mascagni's duet from Cavalleria Rusticana the orchestra excelled itself. And we were fortunate to have two soloists - Lizzie Ryder once again, joined by Samuel Oram - who sang with great spirit and passion and engaged with the audience throughout. This time the large audience really was on its feet!

I've touched on a couple of dozen or so concerts from the last twenty-five years: I could easily have chosen any number of others and found points of interest. I hardly spoke for instance of the dozen or more Viennese (or partially Viennese) concerts which have become a fixture at Humphrey Perkins School every January: they are always tremendously enjoyable occasions when audience members arrive expecting to have a good time, and do so. Since the idea began of playing a first half of shorter, popular classical works before the waltzes and polkas it gives a chance to play repertoire that might not otherwise find its way into 'mainstream' concerts.

For an orchestra like ours however, the concerts are only a part of the story. Charnwood exists for its members and my view has always been that the Thursday evening rehearsals are every bit as important, if not more so, than the concerts. It wouldn't be easy to rehearse with any sort of focus if we weren't aiming towards the next concert (although rehearsal orchestras do exist) but the giving of an excellent concert is not of paramount importance. (We do seem to manage this however, on a regular basis.) But the social side of the orchestra is vital. And of course, the one side feeds into the other. 'Families that play together, stay together.' Well, it's nice if an orchestra stays together... There is a definite Charnwood ethos that remains intact as years pass and it's no surprise that the orchestra has a reputation as being one of the friendliest around. I've long felt that it manages to strike a near-perfect balance between, on the one hand, rehearsing constructively and giving the best possible concert it's reasonable to expect and, on the other hand, enjoying each other's company and having a good time.

To finish I'd like to say a big 'thank you' to all the players, past and present, who have contributed to the orchestra during my tenure. It seems to me that the orchestra is in as good shape now as ever and in the capable hands of Ros and the rest of her hard-working committee I know that we can view the coming years with confidence.