Norwich Philharmonic Society Chairman’s Report June 2018

I’m delighted to report on yet another successful year for Norwich Phil in its 177th season.

Kate will go through the finances and attendance figures as usual, but I just wanted to note some of the highlights of the past year.

For the opening concert, David unearthed The Cloud Messenger, a rarely performed choral work by Gustav Holst. It is always interesting to learn a new work and this piece was richly rewarding to perform. It was paired with Sibelius’ flamboyant First Symphony of which Christopher Smith, writing in the EDP said ‘*the Orchestra revelled in the stirring contrasts of Sibelius’s First Symphony, making the rhythmic exuberance of its third movement especially thrilling.’*

The early December orchestral concert continued the Society’s programme of performing Mahler symphonies. This time it was his monumental final symphony no 9. Frank Cliff wrote ‘*It was an ambitious undertaking; a massive score that makes great demands on the players, and interpretively, on the conductor, yet it succeeded. Brilliantly’.* Despite it being a bitterly cold evening we had a good audience and Matt Andrews conducted a very exciting performance.

For the Christmas concert, we used a different seating configuration for the audience which meant that we could fit a few more people into the hall. We were joined by The Cawston Band and the chamber choir from Norfolk Young Musicians’ Centre under Laura Morgan, it sold out again. The collection was in support of Priscilla Bacon and we collected a record amount. We have noted that the view from some of the additional tickets in the side of the centre of the nave had somewhat restricted views and this will be taken into account in the prices charged for this year.

For the February concert, we were joined by the exciting young pianist Alexander Ullman. The concert was to have included Rachmaninov’s less regularly performed 3rd Piano Concerto, but early in the year Alexander won the Franz Liszt International Piano competition in Utrecht and his commitments grew so much that he asked to perform the very popular 2nd Piano Concerto instead. It was a marvellous performance and a most enjoyable concert which also included Kabalevsky’s ‘Colas Breugnon’ and Martinu’s 3rd Symphony (which I know Matt had been keen to put on for some time). Alexander has promised to return, probably in 2020, to perform the 3rd Piano Concerto so we have another treat to look forward to.

For the final concert, David programmed two works which, again were unfamiliar to many in the choir and orchestra; Brahms ‘Song of Destiny’ and Mendelssohn’s ‘Hymn of Praise’. Both sung in English this time as the choir had sung quite a bit of German over the last couple of years.

Overall, the season has been well-supported and we have been pleased with the audiences even when the programme featured less well-known works.

This season marked Elizabeth Marjoram’s first as leader of the orchestra and she has been a popular choice and works very well with Matt to encourage the orchestra to take on the ambitious programmes and give highly creditable performances.

Kate will report, that the Society is in a strong place financially from the past season and this contribution will obviously help for the season ahead. This means that we can look forwards with confidence to planning for future years. We have also been fortunate to have received a donation in memory of long-term choir member Patricia Mockridge from her daughter Rachel Clayton. This will be used to fund choral workshops and possibly buy some music. We are still looking at ways to encourage younger singers to become familiar with the Phil type of repertoire and join us and are in discussion with Norfolk Music Hub but still have to find a way to do this in a sustainable way.

At last year’s AGM, Ivor Self raised a question about the safety of access to the stage in St Andrew’s for the choir. Discussions have been held with the hall team but it has not been possible to determine a solution. A further meeting will be held in July to explore whether there is anything which can be done, but it needs to be born in mind that we need to retain access to the ‘ashtrays’ and there are no obvious ways in which further rails could be installed with the current stage configuration. This issue is reflected within our risk assessments, members are warned to take care in accessing the stage and arrangements are made, where feasible, for less mobile members to wait in the ashtrays so that they have more time to get onto the stage.

The issue of evacuating in the case of a fire has also been discussed with the St Andrew’s Hall team and we have been advised that there would be a minimum of 20 minutes to evacuate the stage as the greatest risk is from smoke inhalation and, as the ceiling is so high, this should be the minimum danger period.

We have also checked the Society’s insurance and are covered so long as there is no negligence on the Society’s part through leaving loose cabling etc, regular risk assessments are carried out and members are advised to take care.

Some 80 of the choir have continued rehearsing over the summer as we have been invited to join Cambridge Philharmonic Society and others to perform Mahler 8 in Ely Cathedral on 7 July. Most people don’t get the opportunity to perform it once so to have the chance to perform it twice within two years is a real treat and especially to do so in the marvellous setting of Ely.

The committee has considered the impact of GDPR on its activities and is following the recommendations from Making Music. Our systems are already robust and all contacts held are in line with the ‘legitimate interest’ guidance. There is also further emphasis on Safeguarding from the Charity Commission and the committee will be reviewing the guidance in this area.

The Society continues to thrive and much of this is down to the great team of people involved the music making and administration.

We have two fantastic conductors who are ambitious for the society and encourage us to perform challenging and interesting works and develop our skills.

Rob and Sally keep the orchestra and choir in order, Caroline Furniss and Christine Gillham are our valiant and patient librarians.

Sue Mitchell is a brilliant secretary who does so many jobs behind the scenes and Kate is an ideal treasurer.

Sue Prutton is the assiduous front of house manager and our link with the hall stewards.

Judy Tryggvason does a great job with the website and newsletters as well as being deputy chairman of the Society and undertaking much of the liaison with St Andrew’s Hall.

Ron Jackson organises the staging arrangements and Mike Nutt is a very active chairman of the Orchestra sub-committee and has an encyclopedic knowledge of the orchestral repertoire. .

We also need to thank our rehearsal pianist Tim Patient and Moira Eagling who puts all of our publicity material together.

And thanks to all of the other members of the committee and society who give their time so freely.

Unfortunately, after six seasons, Hansells have stood down as our Season Sponsors. This is a real shame but we have been fortunate to received considerable financial, ambassadorial and PR support over that period. I would like to record the Society’s thanks to Roger Holden and his partners for this support. As we were not informed of this decision until well after the end of the season, despite trying, we have not been able to secure a season sponsor but will be working on doing so for next year or finding alternative ways of attracting financial support. If any members have contacts with organisations which might be interested in sponsoring the Phil, please let me or one of the committee members know.

Paul and Stephanie Allen ran their final super successful quiz – so many thanks again to them for running so many and making them a real high point in the Society’s social calendar. But all is not lost… Caroline Furniss has agreed to take on the mantel so put the 25 January 2019 in your diaries.

Thanks to all of you for continuing to support the society. I hope that you enjoyed last season and are excited by the programme for the forthcoming season – do come along and bring your friends too.