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Conductor's Podium

Writing Music

Whilst everyone who writes music probably approaches it in their own way, the same principles apply as they do to any work of art, physical construction, or even political or philosophical thought. There has to be “an idea”. Where this comes from and in what form it exists will again be different. The job then is to turn the idea into practical reality, which involves various stages of detailing and finally the practicalities of making a physical artefact – be it a score, a sculpture or a political manifesto. It is thought that Mozart's initial ideas would encapsulate an entire piece of music, and that all that was left for him to do was to notate it. Very few other composers have been able to do this and the degree to which one can do it separates the few superb, natural musicians from the rest of us. For most composers ideas are received in a less-defined form.

The Idea behind *Dances of the British Isles*

For this year's Prom, once I knew the theme was to be a European tour the first idea was one that I had many years ago for a piece that would portray our town, Alton. This was either a single movement fantasy, or a suite of movements and crystallised itself in so far as wanting to portray the Tuesday Market (with cries of “ripe strawberries, get your ripe strawberries”), Flood Meadows with echoes of the murder of Sweet Fanny Adams (from whose initials would

Articles or feedback can be submitted to the Editor by email: helenandpeteharvey@btinternet.com or find me, Helen Harvey, in the cello section at rehearsals.

come the motif Eb–F–A (Eb in German is “Es”, and tends to represent the letter “S” in musical ciphers), the Battle of Alton and the Watercress Line. On my daily cycle ride I could even unlock these thoughts and hear them in great detail and vivid orchestral colour. Ultimately, for the purposes of this year’s Prom, it was replaced by an idea for a suite of dances, initially three but which became four when I thought that would improve the overall balance and structure. I knew that I wanted each one to represent a country within Great Britain, and I also knew that I wanted a Strathspey, something in waltz time, a slow and mysterious movement and finally a good old straightforward folksy “romp”.

The next stage

The second step was to find the tunes. I could have written them, but to truly represent the Countries I decided to use local tunes. The internet is a wonderful resource and amongst other things I found an online copy of O’Neill’s great book of Irish folk tunes. I went through what seemed like hundreds of tunes, rejecting them before settling on two very well-known ones, The Foggy Dew and The Ash Grove. The “Woodbridge Strathspey” which was the first Strathspey I found on the internet, and there were two tunes from my old standby, a volume called “Hampshire Dance Tunes”, for the final number (“Isle of France” and “Lady Caroline Bertie”).

Bricks and mortar

Each tune needed a distinctive treatment.

The first one has a slow introduction to place the audience’s mind firmly in Scotland and to conjure up a Gaelic atmosphere. The dance itself is in an A–B–A structure, with contrast provided by the B section. The reprise of the A section has a countermelody written by me which in turn grew out of the original material in the B section. The piece fades away using the same material as the introduction, giving hopefully a balanced structure, with the climax (the recap of the A section) between two thirds and three quarters of the way through the movement, which generally works well.

The feature of “The Ash Grove” is the development of the harmonies through each reprise of the melody, becoming more jazzy and extravagant towards the climax.

“The Foggy Dew” is intended to conjure up some emotion and mystery. It is the only one in a modal/minor key, and the tune is played 4 times, each time a major third higher. We start in E minor, then G# minor (sorry), C minor (phew!) and when I got back to E minor I realised the tune harmonised just as well in G major and took that route which gave it some finality, as if reaching the destination after a journey through the fog.

The last one uses two tunes, “Isle de Paris” and “Lady Caroline Bertie”. It is again A–B–A structure and I have not embellished the originals greatly. It’s no-nonsense,

and hopefully fun, with a Percy Grainger style chromatic flourish at the end of the B section being the only adventurous bit (and which won't make its effect until we have a full brass section!).

Adding Detail

The main work in producing any piece really is the detailing; deciding which instruments to use where, which doublings, how to apply colour and shading. It really is like painting a picture. When we first play through a piece I become immediately aware of all the things which could have been done better. Even though the piece generally sounds as I heard it in my head, my ear tells me "that should have been oboes and clarinets, not flutes and clarinets", or "a little muted horn would have added an edge to that". Being practical for a moment, it is important to me to create parts which the orchestra will enjoy playing – it must be idiomatic for the instruments, provide some technical challenge, give each player enough to do and enough of the limelight, and so on. Paramount in my mind is that people play music for fun, and if they don't enjoy it, it's not fit for purpose. This practical aspect of composing is vital to a composer, especially if working with amateur musicians.

Summing up

Basically when you write a piece, you are responsible for every single note and every single instruction to the players. Nothing should escape the composer's attention. Attention to detail and the ability to finish what you have started are two of the most important tools of the composer's craft. Of course you must have ideas, and those ideas must be good, but in a sense they are easy to come by. It's what you do with them that matters.

And if "Dances of the British Isles" turns out to be a dud, at least the tunes are good!

Chris Gardner



Regency Week and Regency Week Concert, June 26th 2015



Regency Week is now a well established and greatly looked forward to event on the Alton calendar, coming at the end of June when we have a good chance of some beautiful weather and memorable and fun events. It is the brainchild of Pat Lerew who passionately wanted to draw attention to Jane Austen's home town of Alton to the thousands of tourists who visit Chawton every year, and to celebrate the link of our special town with this most loved and celebrated writer. Pat began arranging Regency events in 2006, with the first full week of Regency and Jane Austen related events in 2008. This year Regency Week begins on Saturday 20th June with a whole day of Regency activities in Alton High Street and Regency Ball in the evening at Alton Assembly Rooms, and culminating on Sunday 28th June with daytime tours and teas at Chawton House and Regency Supper at the Alton House Hotel.

For the last five years we have enjoyed a Regency Evening Concert on the last Friday in June as part of Regency week. This came about through the tenaciousness of Pat Lerew who had the vision of a concert of music and drama, but finding one group with the range of repertoire and spare rehearsal time to commit to it proved elusive for the first four years! About six years ago I had an idea I thought might get around this sticking point, and my late husband Mac Newton and I chatted in the pub with Stuart Nash of AODS about combining Ancora and other groups in a concert hosted by Aods. And so in 2011 Aods and Ancora were joined by Suspirium Recorder Consort and the Dulcet Tones harmony group, and the first Regency Evening Concert was born. For the first three years we performed in the Swan Hotel with other local groups and several talented local pianists invited to participate. We have always aimed to produce a varied programme of music of the period, dramatised excerpts from Jane Austen's novels, and sometimes piano music from the films.

Jane Gray (AODS and Opera Loki), took over the organisation from Stuart Nash in 2013 and continued to develop the themes and musicality of the concerts. Last year, with a young baby, she took a back seat so I took on the overall organisation and

Jane produced Aod's contribution – excerpts from the modern opera 'Mansfield Park' by Jonathan Dove – a revelation, and confirmation that modern work of the right style and relevance sat incredibly well in this Evening Concert. Last year we changed our venue to the Alton House Hotel with its larger, bright and airy room and beautiful setting next to the garden and also for the first time the performers wore Regency dress.



The fascinating thing about organising this particular concert is that each year the line-up changes as new groups and material become available. After seeing local composer Phil Andrew's 'Chawton Suite' performed at Jane Austen's House last June, I felt this would make a wonderful focus for this year's concert and am overjoyed that Phil has organised his local musicians and narrator, James Willis, to perform this piece as 'Alton Chamber Ensemble'.



With AODS already having a busy programme this year, it was an ideal opportunity for them to have a well earned break and invite Alton Fringe to provide the drama of the evening. I am delighted that they have agreed and I am looking forward to their interpretation of Jane Austen's 'Persuasion'.



This year Ancora have worked closely with Jane Austen's House Museum to source three pieces of music from the Austen collection. The songs and piano accompaniment are written out in the hand of Jane Austen and would have been played and performed by her and her family at the musical evenings they so enjoyed having at the house in Chawton.

I hope you are able to come and support us and enjoy a varied and topical evening of music and drama, some of which Jane Austen herself would have performed and enjoyed, and some which is more contemporary.

Barbara Tansey

**REGENCY
EVENING CONCERT**

FRIDAY 26th JUNE 2015

Alton House Hotel, High Street
Licensed bar & restaurant
7pm for 7.30pm

Enjoy an elegant and entertaining evening of music and drama from Jane Austen's era performed by:

Amici Cello Trio
Ancora choir
Alton Fringe
Pianist David Bonser,
Soprano Rosalind O'Dowd and
The Alton Chamber Ensemble
performing the *Chawton Suite* by Philip Andrews
As our guests, you are invited to dress in Regency Style,
but this is by no means obligatory.

Tickets: £10 from Box Office

 **Jane Austen
Regency Week**

Box Office & Enquiries: Alton Community Centre
01420 85057 JAtickets@altonchamber.co.uk
www.JaneAustenRegencyWeek.co.uk

Last Night of the Proms...

...my biggest, ever evolving, sound challenge of the year. Original attempts at picking up the orchestra on two microphones hung over the conductor's head produced a muddled sound. Now multiple mics are set among the players, fed to the sound desks down multicore cables, mixed, then back to the main speakers. More recently, when crowds grew, a delayed speaker behind the bandstand has been added. The delay keeps it in time with the main speakers and pushes the sound to the back of the public gardens (and sometimes as far as Greenfields Avenue!).

What happens before the day? There are meetings with the Alton Town Council and the orchestra representatives, to discuss staging and programme to see if any lessons can be learned from previous years; followed by emails, calls, and other discussions before we have the full plan.

Attending rehearsals is an opportunity to get the orchestral and solo parts in my head, get an ear for the balance between orchestral sections, and choose best microphones. The truth is, my hearing has slowly deteriorated and now I find this quite difficult.

Then the lists start to arrive... meaning only one thing... the prom date is nearly here.

Equipment check- LNOTP	
40 microphones: 16 x strings, 8 x wind, 3 x brass, 6 x percussion, keyboard, soloists, choir, announcer, sound fx	✓
12 loudspeakers: Tops, subs and monitor	✓
1 Processor	✓
5 amplifiers	✓
36 microphone stands (note to self – borrow ten for weekend)	✓
2 mixers: 24 channel	✓
22 channel digital mixer (my new toy !!)	✓
700 metres of cables: For mics, speakers and mains power	✓
3 multicores	✓
Additional technician with extra vehicle	✓
Third technician	✓
Gaffer tape / string	Always !

With info to hand, and a draft plan of the orchestra layout, it is time to work out exactly what equipment I need and how to patch all the desk channels. Slowly, more plans, lists and charts will appear on my increasing pile of paperwork.

On the Prom day the techs and I meet early to finish loading from the day before, and arrive in the Public Gardens by 8am. Two vans are needed to move the equipment and plenty of muscle to get it all in place. Then it's erect the gazebo, lay out cabling, set up mixers, install and test the 'delay' speaker. When the Marquee is ready Chris will place chairs for the orchestra. The speakers will be up and tested, and we can carry on with placing mics on stands and attaching their cables. Mic placement is a compromise, putting stands where they will not get inadvertently tapped by chairs or music stands, and ready for when the orchestra members arrive. We hope that all members of the orchestra will be in for rehearsal to give the best chance of recreating the orchestral balance that the conductors have been working so hard on.

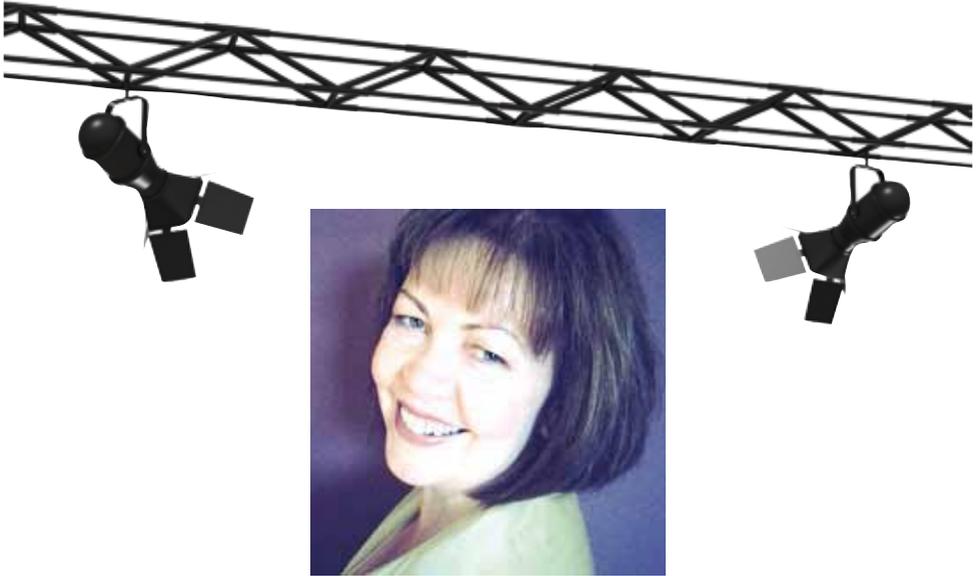
From my point of view the sound team only have one shot at getting it right, so the final rehearsals are critical. It's great to have as many as can make it the weekend before; and on the afternoon of the event to have everyone in their place, playing their parts, and hopefully with no interruptions (like the van parking in front of the marquee last year!!). Once the orchestra rehearsal is finished, and after a short sound check with the soloists, finally it's late lunch time, and a few minutes to make necessary tweaks here and there (if I don't eat now it'll be midnight before we get home and the chance to eat again). Then hopefully a little break for everyone whilst the audience turn up in their thousands and set up their picnic pitches.

All we need now is the weather to stay dry... rain on that marquee roof sounds like an orchestra's worth of people running round on a pebbly beach!

David Tigg



Spotlight on...



Patricia Casement-Thomas

I was born, bred, lived and worked the majority of my life in Hull, East Yorkshire. Musically, I played violin as a child and teenager. I was a second desk, then a first desk (imagine!) violinist in the school and county orchestras. After school, that was the music over with, and I found myself working in a 'proper job' as a police officer. So far so good but then some six years later after a friend who was nursing a heartbreak dragged me along to a local Gilbert & Sullivan society so she didn't have to go alone, I discovered there was a voice in there as I started to drown out my fellow chorus members who were none too impressed at my wild, noisy singing. But that was that and the opera bug had me so that within three years I was singing the role of Carmen with the 'best' amateur opera group in the area and spending all my hard earned cash on singing lessons.

I carried on with the lessons over the next 10–12 years, travelling further and further afield for both lessons and performances which is when I studied and performed the majority of the roles in my repertoire in a semi-professional capacity.

In opera, performed roles include Cherubino (The Marriage of Figaro), Hansel (Hansel und Gretel), Belinda (Dido and Aeneas), Nancy (Albert Herring), Dalila (Samson et Dalila), Carmen (Carmen), Beatrice (Beatrice and Benedict), Micaela (Carmen), First

Niece (Peter Grimes), Violetta (La Traviata), Elizabeth (Maria Stuarda), Rozenn (Le Roi D'ys), Nella (Gianni Schicci), Leila (Pearl Fishers), Rosalinde (Die Fledermaus), Turandot (Turandot), Abigaille (Nabucco), Santuzza (Cavalleria Rusticana), Brunnhilde (Die Walkure).

Roles prepared: Ellen Orford (Peter Grimes), Aida (Aida), Elizabeth de Valois (Don Carlo), Lady Macbeth (Macbeth), Magda (The Consul), Tosca (Tosca) and Amelia (Un Ballo in Maschera).

So with the energy I had throughout my thirties I was working full time, often on shifts and running a second career as a singer alongside. I remember thinking nothing of doing a full day at work, hopping in the car and driving 60–70 miles for a rehearsal and back at work the next day. Oh for that level of energy now!

As time went on and work became busier I had to scale back my performances and started to include more concert work, but I did revel in further study and worked on a diploma in composition and a performance diploma. Then after 30 years in the police came a possible retirement age and combined with the government's austerity programme my employers were encouraging officers of my service to leave at the first legal opportunity.

So here I am two years down the line, a move to the south east and accessing all the opportunities in singing here on my doorstep. I have already sung Brunnhilde with London Opera Players and will be covering Dorset Opera's Amelia in July with concert performances and plans for further performances of Walkure and Tosca in the pipeline.

It seems that my type of voice (remember the annoying, noisy chorister) has a longevity and suitability for those roles which require a fully developed instrument which really only comes with some age. So I will continue singing until my voice tells me to stop (or some kind soul tells me...enough!)

I'm never going to make a fortune or access the world stages now, but who needs that when you have Alton!

Spring Concert 2015 in pictures...



Committee Members

Chairman:	Chris Leggett
Conductor:	David Budd
Secretary:	Judith Stradling
Membership Secretary:	Alison Stickland
Treasurer:	Rebecca Kiff
Publicity Secretary:	Sophie Barton
Concert Secretary:	Nora Dobson
Extras Fixer:	Angi Warran
General Member:	Trish Privetti



Mission Statement

The Orchestra exists to serve the local community and to provide a forum for all musicians who enjoy playing in an ensemble. We have a policy of welcoming anyone without the requirement of an audition and we maintain no restrictions on section size within the orchestra. However at the discretion of the Musical Director, we may occasionally have to operate a waiting list for certain oversubscribed instruments.

The music we typically play will require someone of at least Grade 5 standard but exams are not expected. The age range of players encompasses year 9 school musicians to retired members. We offer the opportunity for school players to stretch their playing ability. Our music repertoire is wide and varied to suit all tastes and ranges from classical symphonies to show music incorporating big band and swing. The string section plays together and we are developing the wind section into a separate ensemble. Whatever your musical taste it should be well provided for.

The Orchestra is run by a chairman and committee, and the involvement of members in organisation is encouraged and welcomed. We have social evenings from time to time and produce concerts three to four times a year. Members pay a termly fee to cover music cost etc. We pride ourselves on our friendly, hardworking approach to our music making.

Come and see for yourself!

We welcome opportunities to perform locally in aid of community causes.



Alton Concert Orchestra

Concert Season 2014–15

Christmas Concert

Saturday 13 December
Alton Maltings Centre, 7:30pm

Spring Concert

Saturday 25 April
Eggar's School, 7:30pm

Last Night of the Proms

Saturday 11 July
Alton Public Gardens, 7:30pm
*Rehearsal for LNOTP on Sunday 5 July, 2pm
at the Alton Maltings Centre*

Thinking of Joining us?

The Orchestra rehearses every Wednesday evening in term-time, 7:30pm at Wootey Junior School. Please contact us via our website if you wish to come along. Anyone is welcome although we would particularly like to encourage more strings, brass and percussion. We do not hold auditions.

www.altonconcertorchestra.org.uk

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