

The City Music Society – Experiences as a Concert Promoter

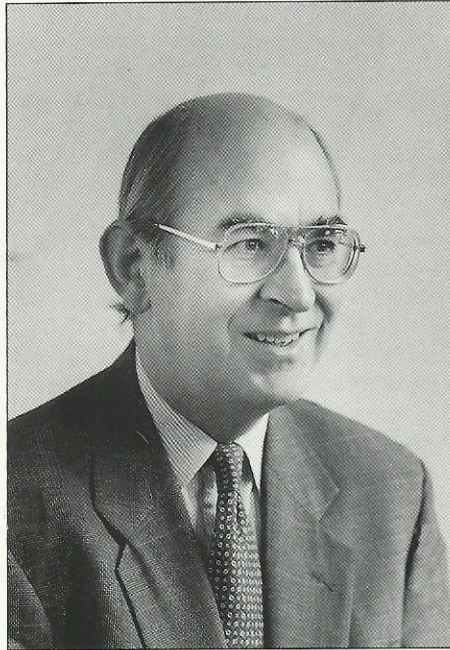
by Liveryman Alan Paul

The running of a music society as chairman, artistic director and administrator can range from the sublime to the ridiculous and the nail-biting. One of the most satisfying parts has been devising a series of chamber programmes to fit a theme such as Sir Michael Tippett's 90th birthday in Spring 1995 and the Purcell Tercentenary later that year on music from Diaghilev's ballets to coincide with the Barbican exhibition in 1996 and a Schubert series for his 200th anniversary in 1997. Also challenging and gratifying is the activity of 'talent-spotting' at other concerts and competitions and the successful presentation of a brilliant young artist in our own series.

On the other hand, as my predecessor, the late Ivan Sutton, warned me, two problem areas can be mundane things such as music stands and page turners. When Josef Suk flew in from Prague to play at Goldsmiths' Hall, his British accompanist promised to bring a stand but forgot: half an hour before the concert all my helpers were busy, so I had to take up jogging - to the GSMD to borrow a stand. We always advise accompanists that we will provide a skilled page-turner to whom we pay a fee. One regular page-turner started to become irregular and on two occasions I had to stand in at the last minute and turn the pages myself. Given a final warning that she must not let us down again, she arrived at the next concert to find that the accompanist had brought his own student whom he insisted on using. From famine to feast!

The potential nightmare which every promoter faces is a last minute cancellation. When Philip Langridge was struck down by a sore throat the day before his recital, his accompanist John Constable saved the day by ringing Jill Gomez, with whom he had done a programme a few days earlier to see if she was free. She was, and they gave a superb recital. A few years earlier, two members of the Takacs Quartet (one of Ivan's notable 'discoveries') arrived at Goldsmiths' Hall for a preconcert rehearsal but the other two members were nowhere to be found. Half an hour before the concert the Hall received a phone call: "We have two Hungarian gentlemen here; are they meant to be with you?" The call was from Goldsmiths College. Another concert nearly failed to start: Marta Fabian, the Hungarian zimbalom virtuoso, was due to perform but on the day of the concert her imported instrument had not arrived. It was still in customs at Heathrow and was rushed to the Hall just in time to be tuned.

The Society owes its existence to my distinguished predecessor, Ivan Sutton MBE, who sadly died in 1996. Inspired by Dame Myra Hess's concerts during the war at the National Gallery and those presented by Hildo Bor at the Royal Exchange (until the risk of bombs became too great), he founded the Society in 1943 and went on to promote a remarkable total of 1745 concerts until his retirement in



The Author

1993. Since then I have been running the Society on top of a near full-time job in the City which has proved demanding, but I am aided by a keen committee which includes fellow liveryman Leslie East, who is Vice-Chairman.

The City Music Society is now established as one of the leading music societies in this country and presents 30 concerts each year, 24 at lunchtime at Bishopsgate Hall and six in the early evening at Goldsmiths Hall. There are series in Spring and Autumn.

I am often asked how we select artists for our concerts. Although I receive well over 1000 promotional brochures and letters by post each year, I prefer to hear artists personally if possible to avoid being misled by excessive 'hype'. My committee often gives recommendations and we take account of word-of-mouth tips from reliable sources as well as reviews from the national papers and hi-fi magazines. I find it very useful to attend the major London competitions which are an important showcase for young talent. The Musicians' Company concerts sponsored by the Maisie Lewis Young Artists Fund are one source and we offered an engagement to the cellist Jamie Walton and his accompanist Daniel Grimwood on the strength of their outstanding performance at the Wigmore Hall. Other important competitions are the Young Concert Artists Trust (YCAT) auditions, the Royal Overseas League Music Competition, the Parkhouse Award, the Kathleen Ferrier Awards and major triennial international competitions such as the London International String Quartet Competition and the Leeds International Piano Competition.

Fees can be a difficult area, but at Bishopsgate Hall we pay fixed fees based on the number of players from one to four; quintets, sextets etc receive the same

as four players. Once a year we welcome a larger group, the GSMD Chamber Orchestra who often bring talented soloists to play concertos. For our evening concerts at Goldsmiths' Hall we try to pick artists of exceptional distinction, whether or not they are yet international celebrities (who are often far beyond our budget). Fees here are negotiable and we generally pay something near the artist's full fee, though occasionally top international names can be persuaded to play for less if trying out a new programme or if they remember us favourably from the day when we gave them a platform as a young musician. Our policy of artist selection for Bishopsgate Hall is to mix truly outstanding young professional musicians at the start of their careers with established names. Many who were almost unknown when they first stepped onto the Bishopsgate platform have since become household names such as Julian Bream, John Williams, Janet Baker, Margaret Price, Jacqueline du Pré and Nigel Kennedy.

I deliberately try to provide a variety of instruments at Bishopsgate Hall where a 45 minute lunchtime concert is ideal for a solo recital (sometimes with piano accompaniment): in recent years we have heard solo accordion, fortepiano, harp, double bass, recorder, trumpet, bassoon and percussion. I have found my own knowledge and appreciation of different instruments and their attractive repertoire greatly broadened and I now find many musicians far too narrow in their likes and dislikes. We try to cover different periods of music and have heard early music groups such as the Dufay Collective, Sirinu, Broadside Band, Hilliard Ensemble and Consort of Musicke.

We encourage artists to include a contemporary piece in some programmes and as a Society has commissioned 18 compositions over a period of 34 years: the last was from Diana Burrell and we have recently asked Stuart Mackae to write a piece for piano solo.

Dealing with the members of our Society causes few problems apart from the choice of finger food for the interval: this is far more contentious than the music itself! Dealing with artists, however, is another question, Ivan Sutton recalls a famous lady pianist on the floor before her recital and asked him to dab her eyes with lotion: she then announced that the keys of the piano were too cold. Fortunately the occupants of the flat above the Hall were able to produce hot water bottles to heat up the keyboard. On another evening, the great pianist Shura Cherkassky demanded a practice piano during the half-hour interval: Ivan hurriedly arranged for him to use the instrument in a nearby pub - much to the amazement of the local postal workers and businessmen!

Our Membership includes several Liverymen. We look forward to their continued support as well as occasionally providing a platform to some of the Company's outstanding young artists.