

# CSO AGM 2024: Report of the Chair

## Introduction

Welcome to this year's CSO AGM Chair's report.

It's been a good year for the CSO in many ways, fantastic concerts, stabilised finances, and sorting a few of the issues that had slightly unravelled – particularly around programming. I'm particularly grateful to our Programming Committee and their new chair for their patience and hard work.

We've also made progress with our online communications, especially the work on the website and the members webpages. We can now easily make suggestions and find information that we need about the Orchestra and our concert plans.

## Some Changes and Thanks

As you know, this is my last year as your Chair. After 5 years (including the Covid period) I'm reevaluating many things in my life in terms of time and work-life balance, and it's time to hand on. Perhaps not surprisingly it been difficult to find a replacement, but I hope by the time this is shared as part of the AGM preparations I am hopeful that we will have at least one candidate. I will of course continue to help where needed behind the scenes.

There are too many people to thank personally for their help over the last year – (and the previous 4 years), but I must single out our Orchestra Manager, Judith Houghton, who has done so much and particularly helped me over the time I have been Chair. Thank you to everyone for your personal support – you have made my task over the years so much easier.

Many hands make light work, and contribution in supporting the Committee, either as a committee member or in other ways, is absolutely vital to our future. I know you have busy lives, jobs, families and other music or leisure commitments. But so do the Committee, so please consider if you can personally do a bit more for your orchestra.

As with every year, there are some changeovers of players, and I do want to mention Dave Kendall who retired as our tuba player after 48 years. He will be missed, but I know will remain a staunch CSO supporter.

## Money

Following Covid, the CSO like many organisations has faced significant challenges. Audience habits had changed, we had to dip into reserves to honour commitments, and our costs also rose sharply with inflation biting. We needed to rethink our costs and income, whilst not detracting from our need to restart after Covid and to celebrate our 50th anniversary.

Under the stewardship of our Treasurer, and with your help, our finances are now stabilised. For the first year since before the pandemic we have begun to replenish our reserves, and subscriptions have risen by less than inflation.

With concert costs under control, programming appealing to audiences, and modest increases in subscriptions, I am confident that we are now in a stronger position going forward and we can begin to consider new and more ambitious programmes if we wish.

There is still more we can do to further strengthen our financial position, but that depends on everyone's help in publicising concerts, reaching out to new audiences and supporting work to see if we can create new income streams.

I'm delighted that Louise Coggins has taken up the challenge of researching and coordinating wider sponsorship and grants. It is far from easy to secure money from new sources, but we have limited progress this year, with one sponsor. I remain convinced that there is an opportunity, especially as we raise our profile, and if everyone supports Louise by providing openings and ideas that we can pursue through our many connections.

## Open Evening

We held our members' open evening again in July, the third time of doing so. This has proved to be a great opportunity to talk about plans, ideas, and to get member's feedback in a relaxed and unscripted conversation and is always well-attended (a good indicator that it is useful).

I've summarised the discussions we had this year in a note sent to everyone which is on our members' webpages, (so I won't repeat them here). But we covered a wide range of ideas, issues and your feedback, which the Committee can then consider in future plans and for this AGM.

I do want to thank you all for your active involvement (including criticism). I genuinely have found your feedback helpful over the last 5 years, whether at the open evening or by email, and I hope I've always managed to get everyone a personal reply. It is particularly helpful to hear when we have not quite got things right – we (the Committee) usually know, but not always, and it is a chance to correct things.

## Members Web Pages

Our member's webpages were launched at the last AGM. Since then, Debbie Hickson has taken over the management of the CSO website as a whole, as well as making even more improvements to our member's pages.

It's a great achievement, and you can now make your programming suggestions there as well as find out what's going on, orchestra etiquette, archives, rehearsal schedules and more. I hope it will gradually become the 'go to' place for new members, and anyone wanting to know how to get more involved or find out about our plans.

In particular I would urge everyone to use the website to make your programming suggestions. The Programming Committee are already using these and it's very easy. Go to the web page, look for the members' link and scroll down ..

*P.S. If you can't remember the password... HINT: it's the name it's our name plus the date of an important overture.*

## Programming Committee

The Programming Committee has perhaps the most important function in the orchestra in setting the repertoire for the orchestra, and it is no mean feat to balance a range of competing interests and constraints.

I want to record special thanks to our Programming Committee this year and to Penny Burnett as Chair, for their patience and hard work. It has also not been without challenges this year, which we discussed at the Open Evening. I am also delighted that Sue Edmonds has agreed to stay on as librarian; Sue does such an amazing job in keeping our cost down and ensuring that we source music in the best possible way.

We've also had a joint Committee and Programming Committee meeting recently, which was very helpful in planning ahead and determining priorities and programming guidelines. I hope, after some 'turbulence' things can settle down on programming and that the Programming Committee once again feel in control of the agenda.

Reducing costs has meant a rethink about our programming, and we have shown that lower-cost concerts can be very popular, as with our for Dvorak concert at Turner Sims in March, which was a sellout and the biggest financial success of the year. Playing music that is popular with audiences does not mean that we 'dumb down' or pander to popularism.

I am of the view that shorter, less known but exciting classics, coupled with more recognised pieces is the way forward. This can include a mix of concertos and thematic concerts (film nights, opera nights etc). But what are your views?

## Marketing, Brand and Communications

I think that marketing is a key priority looking ahead. There is so much more we could be doing to develop our marketing and wider 'brand' awareness, helping to fill concert calls and reducing financial pressure. But it does take time (or money).

We are now publishing programmes further ahead, which helps, and we are giving more thought to our marketing, led by Wayne Landen. But he needs support from all of us if we are to be successful. These days there are so many competing events, as well as demands on our own time and for our audiences.

We could just spend money on more advertising, but this is expensive and not always good value. So, everyone needs to do their bit in promoting concerts for example – distributing posters, sharing fliers, 'word of mouth', social media, work and family connections.

One challenge is to widen our appeal and our visibility; our concerts often attract the same audience groups, and to widen our appeal we need to differentiate ourselves from other orchestras. Please let Wayne and the committee know your thoughts – what we could do better, more of, or less of, in order to raise our profile. The key is making the most use of our various networks and contacts.

## Concerts and Rehearsals

We've had 5 amazing concerts over the last year, each contrasting and offering new challenges and exciting music to rehearse and perform:

<b>November 2023, Thornden Hall</b>	We played Brahms Tragic Overture, the Saint Saën's piano concerto No. 2 with pianist Thomas Luke, and the Nielsen Symphony No. 2. A fantastic programme appealing to everyone. Thomas was a lovely soloist to play with – a sensitive and energetic performance that was thrilling for everyone.
<b>Family concert January 2024</b>	As ever, our 'family' concert was a great success – Peter and the Wolf, Carnival of the Animals and more. We have been considering some changes for the future however, including a potential alternative date (there are now competing 'family concerts' in December and January). The Programming and Main Committees have reviewed the criteria for the family concert – including our target audience and purpose.
<b>March 2024, Thornden Hall</b>	With our very popular and enthusiastic guest conductor Lucia Švecová, we played Mendelsohn's Hebrides Overture, Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite, Dvorak's New World Symphony and Sibelius' Finlandia. What's not to like? This was a sell-out concert and our most financially successful event of the year.
<b>May 2024, Thornden Hall</b>	We were back in Thornden with John Traill at the baton and Charlie Lovell-Jones: a brilliant concert of Walton's Violin Concerto, Holst's 'Perfect Fool', and Vaughan William's London Symphony. I was in the audience, and I have to say it was some of the best playing from the CSO. Charlie was of course spectacular, but the whole concert was tremendous.
<b>July 2024, Romsey Abbey</b>	John Traill was conducting, and we played the Amy Beach Gaelic Symphony and Schubert's 9 <sup>th</sup> (Great) Symphony. A huge and demanding concert, which the CSO rose to with confidence and the performance was widely seen as a big success.
<b>Music in the City, Art Gallery Southampton</b>	Ian Partridge was our conductor for a double symphony concert – Haydn no. 104 (his last), and Beethoven's first symphony. The standard of CSO playing was exceptionally high, the audience hugely appreciative, and it makes a change to be playing smaller works in a smaller space.

## Committee and other Roles

The CSO can only function with a lot of help from everyone. I do know that the support that many of you already bring is wide and varied, and often not as visible as some of the committee roles. Thank you so much for what you do, but of course I would like to ask you all for more.

I have spoken to many of you who tell me that you have busy jobs, family commitments, and many other musical commitments. I do understand this, and that is true of the majority of committee members; but please, if you can, could I ask you to consider if you can find a way to give that little bit extra back to support the Orchestra we love, if you are not already involved beyond playing.

We often need simple help in a variety of ways, not just committee roles, but also general support. This includes things like helping to set up and clear up after concerts, liaising with stewards, marketing, supporting social events or helping committee members with the jobs they have.

Our Orchestra Manager needs more help behind the scenes too, so we are asking for at least two assistants who can take on some minor duties to reduce the burden. It does not need to be onerous or a formal committee job.

Two Committee positions also need filling – the Secretary role and chair. I hope we will get nominations at the AGM.

I confirmed at the last AGM that I would be stepping down this year as Chair. I have enjoyed the time I have spent in the role, and I hope I have brought some new ideas. Covid was not easy, and financial challenges have taken up time, but with your help we have moved forward, and I have many fond memories. I'm happy to help someone to prepare to take on the role.

## A Word About Standards

I know it can be a sensitive topic, and always raised at the member open evening. There is an important balance to be struck between formality and informality, socialising and serious playing. Mostly I believe we get it right. Sometimes we don't, and inevitably some people have slightly different views.

It will be for a new Chair, with our orchestra manager, our principal conductor and orchestra leader to ensure we keep the right balance. But I wanted to share with you my personal views, as your outgoing Chair, particularly to close off the discussions for now.

Firstly, **etiquette** in rehearsals and concerts really does matter. It enhances both our playing and our enjoyment of making music together. We now have some clear guidance on our member web pages which I think is very helpful.

I also wanted to mention **practice**. The CSO aims to set high standards as an amateur community orchestra – probably the highest in the region. The harder the music we play (and sometimes it is hard .. although we try to make sure it's not too hard!), the older you get (and I speak from experience) the more rehearsals you miss (please try not to), and the less proficient you are (we are all on a spectrum), determines how much practice you need to do. The more private practice you can fit in, the more rewarding the playing experience will be.

If you feel stuck on a passage or a technique and need a bit of input from someone else, do ask around for some help. And do let section leaders know early on in the rehearsal series if there are passages you would particularly like help with in sectionals. At the same time, rehearsals should always be fun – if sometimes hard work. We spend far more time in rehearsals than in concerts.

It's particularly important that we welcome and encourage new members, helping them to understand etiquette and expectations in a supportive way. Sometimes in the fray of a rehearsal, it is easy to forget that someone new might find it all a bit daunting. So, we need to make sufficient time to welcome them and check they are being looked after.

Above all, it is vital that we remain a friendly and social community orchestra. So, if anyone ever feels unhappy at any point never hesitate to have a quiet word. Our main motivation is enjoying the pleasure of being able to play music together.

## Social and Other Activities

We are lucky to have the support of Sue Dancer and Rachel Barlow for arranging our curry evening, and refreshments at events such as the AGM. But should we do more socially – perhaps surrounding informal playing opportunities, or shorter rehearsals linked to a fun musical social theme? Your views would be appreciated.

Some players go to the pub for a quick drink at the Belmore Pub after rehearsals – just pop along and join in (but don't forget to register your numberplate if you park there, or you'll get a fine!).

Members have also suggested that we could do more playing by taking on smaller more informal events, representing the CSO and potentially raising a bit of income. This could include playing in quartets of chamber groups – we can now share ideas on our (yes, again!) member's web pages.

## Bernie's Vision

I asked Bernie for a contribution to this annual report. He has come up with the following:

### *Musical Chairs by Bernie*

*Well, folks, the time has come at last,  
Our chairman's reign is in the past.  
With meetings led and papers signed,  
He's moving on—don't look behind!  
You kept us going, steered the ship,  
With coffee, notes, and many a quip.  
But now it's time for someone new,  
A fresh face with a fresher view.  
So here we are, in line we stand,  
To give a hearty bear-hugged hand!  
Welcome, new chair! Now don't be shy,  
We promise not to make you cry.  
So, grab that gavel, take your seat,  
Let's make this year both bold and sweet!  
And to the old chair, one last cheer,  
Thanks for all the laughs and beer!*



Well, there you go... what can I say (in so few words)?!

## Looking Forward to 2025

Over the last six years there has been a lot of change and challenge. I'm hopefully passing on the Chair role at a time when things are more stable, positive and improving, with new opportunities for the future. I look forward to playing for the foreseeable future but taking a rest from committee duties!

Best wishes everyone!

**Jos**