

Building your Audience

Jayne Rollason, administrator of Birmingham Symphonic Winds, talks to Jane Woolfenden

Birmingham Symphonic Winds frequently achieves full houses for its concerts and has even been known to turn people away. They are obviously doing something magical which we could all learn from. Jane Woolfenden finds out more.

JW: It goes without saying that a fine conductor, and a talented and committed group of players are essential ingredients for a successful wind orchestra, but, assuming that this is the case, how do you make the public aware of what you have to offer? Let's start with your printed publicity material, which is always of very high quality

JR: Yes I believe that if you are wanting to attract people to a concert, it is important to have publicity material that looks appealing, is well-produced and of high quality, so that you give people the confidence to feel that, if they come to the concert, they are going to have a good evening. It must be well presented. If it is produced on a piece of photocopy paper, which is difficult to read or crooked, it might appear that we do not care about the product we are promoting, which is the orchestra and the concert. It is very important to put the image across that you care about the product. The colour and design of our annual brochure changes each year. It covers a three concert season and we produce a separate flier for the final concert of the season, to give it an extra push.

JW: You have an lovely venue for your concerts. Tell me something about it

JR: We started, as many orchestras do, performing in churches and school halls, which is not always ideal. When we learned about the plans to build the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra Centre we actually went on the building site to talk to the director, so that we

could be one of the first organisations doing regular concerts there! It's a fantastic building, a purpose built, 300-seat concert hall, with a great foyer space, built primarily for the CBSO administration and as a rehearsal space for the orchestra. The hall is brick built, with quite a different feel from the normal concert hall, which I think is right for the music that we play, being not the standard orchestral repertoire. It's good to be in a concert hall that has a different ambience, as it can be used to enhance the effect of the wind band music we play.

JW: I love the galleries behind the orchestra and all around the auditorium, spaces you can use when the music calls for it

JR: Yes. It's very flexible and can be used in a variety of ways. We are not restricted by the standard classical look, that audiences have come to expect. A wind orchestra is not a normal orchestral set up, and I think it's good to promote the difference in whatever way we can.

JW: The seating is flexible too. Whilst there's the possibility of raked seating with a flat area towards the front, you seem to change the seating plan depending on the nature of the concert

JR: To create more of a relaxed atmosphere at our summer concerts, we keep the raked set up at the back, but replace the seating at the front with tables and chairs. We have an arrangement with the bar, so that people can enjoy their drinks at the table. People in the tiered seating can also bring drinks in. This creates a relaxed atmosphere for the audience, which is not what they necessarily expect at a concert.

JW: There is a beautiful foyer space and the fact that you can get drinks, coffee or wine fairly easily is very attractive. You have music playing in the foyer before the concert and during the interval, and very often it's a violinist or a pianist, not a wind instrument. Tell me about this idea

JR: This is part of our philosophy. When I think about people coming out of their homes and choosing to attend our

event, I want to make it welcoming to them from the minute they walk through the door. I have attended far too many concerts where you walk into a concert hall, and it's deathly quiet, tea or coffee is served in plastic cups, and it all feels rather depressing. We like people to come into the concert knowing that they are going to have a great evening, feeling relaxed the moment they walk through the door, and they hear some music, because, after all, that's why they are there. (The excellent violinist, you mentioned, is actually a percussion player from the band!). We hope to get them into the mood of the evening before they actually go into the concert hall, so they are already open and ready to enjoy a good evening of music-making.

JW: You keep the bar open after the concert, which is often not the case in many venues?

JR: That's right. It comes from personal experience of attending concerts where you've had a wonderful evening, you leave the concert hall itself, and everything is closed. It almost feels as if you are being thrown out and I don't think that's a good ending to a concert. It's nice to go out of the concert hall and share the atmosphere with your family and friends and the performers. They talk about the music and these discussions take place in an environment where they can get a drink and unwind from the evening before they go home. Of course, if they want to go straight home, they can, but it's very popular and we usually find we are having to throw people out of the bar in the end, because they just stay and stay!

JW: Apart from your concerts, I have only attended a few concerts in the CBSO Centre: a Britwistle opera and several 20th century orchestral concerts. But I am not on the mailing list so don't see their general publicity. I know the manager loves having BSW at the centre because of your full houses, so I can't see the hall ever not being available to you, which is great

JR: It is great, but it is all about developing a partnership. Part of the

BANDS

philosophy about our performing there is because of the other events that are on in that concert hall. We are certainly the only wind orchestra performing there, but it is regularly used by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, soloists or chamber groups from the CBSO and visiting opera companies, like Music Theatre Wales. The CBSO Centre produces a leaflet of everything that goes on at the hall and we are pleased that BSW's name is amongst these artists. People will start to accept that it is a perfectly normal to include a wind orchestra alongside all those other musical forms.

JW: Tell me about your ticket prices. Do you keep them as low as you possibly can?

JR: No, they could be lower. But there is an issue here, because if you price too low, people might assume that the quality is not necessarily there. It's a strange concept that people have: if you put on free concerts, half the time people don't actually come. The tickets are similar to the prices of other events at the Centre. Obviously we have to balance the books, and if the venue hire went up, costs would increase, but we try hard to keep them the same from year to year.

JW: Your current brochure itemises the concerts, dates, programmes and soloists. Have you thought about including early purchase incentives or subscriptions in your brochure?

JR: It is certainly something I would like to do. I would like to develop the "Friends" of BSW and have a support organisation, offering friends discounts and priority booking. At present, we always announce to the audience that tickets for our next concert can be purchased here and now, at a reduced rate. And we have a lot of people who take up that offer.

We also do ticket offers for people whom we have added to our mailing list through ArtsFest, which happens every year in Birmingham. About 100,000 people attend the ArtsFest weekend, and it has become an important part of our marketing strategy. We have an information stall in Birmingham, which we man over the weekend and it's our chance to put across what the orchestra is all about, and get names on to the mailing list. We then write to them, offering discounted tickets to their first concert. And we have a big take up.

JW: This is just a stall. You're not actually playing there?

JR: Yes, we perform as well. We are allowed a 25 minute programme, so they can actually hear us. ArtsFest takes place in the second week of September and we get our annual brochure printed in time for ArtsFest. We do the performance and have people giving out the brochures to the audience while they are watching and listening to us on a massive stage in Birmingham's Centenary Square. This year we handed out 1,500 brochures and we also had a computer on the stall so that

people could look at our web site, chat to us and learn more about what we do.



**BIRMINGHAM
SYMPHONIC
WINDS**

JW: Can people buy tickets there?

JR: No, we cannot actually sell them without a Street Traders' License, but we have been taking orders for tickets

at ArtsFest for the last three years. It is run by the City, and we believe it is important to be seen doing quality work alongside all the other sorts of orchestras and different art forms, which include groups like the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Shakespeare Company. As it is so early in our season, we only have one rehearsal to get the performance together, which is a bit tricky. But we have to overcome that and go for it. I think that's the ultimate thing: if the opportunity is there, take it.

JW: Do you have lots of helpers handing out the leaflets and chatting?

JR: Yes, children are particularly useful in giving leaflets out because people can't refuse them! We have great support from husbands, wives and parents, but, there are certainly times when we could do with extra support. A Friends Organisation would be helpful here and would also ensure that we had advance ticket sales for the season. I am also principal flute with BSW, so when I'm playing I can't always be doing all the administrative tasks that need to be done.

JW: How much press advertising do you do? You obviously flood newspapers with editorial material in advance of every concert, but how often do you manage to get a critic there?

JR: We have been very fortunate as critics have attended most of our recent concerts. We don't do any newspaper advertising, simply because it is very expensive, but if we had funds it's

certainly something that I would like to do. We do send press releases out to all the newspapers, but I find it more effective to foster a good relationship with individuals in the media, rather than just sending press releases out blind. For example, I always keep Christopher Morley of the Birmingham Post informed and try to let him follow our progress and understand what we are doing. And it works very well. The Birmingham Post is one of the main newspapers for the region and if they write about us, not only can we use the quotes, but it is promoting our name to our audience.

JW: A press release is much more likely to get into the newspapers if you have a photograph, so if you are working with, for example, Simone Rebello, who looks absolutely gorgeous and has wonderful photographs, it would be extremely helpful if you could obtain at least half a dozen photographs from her or her agent. But agents and artists are very unlikely to send so many when they cost around £5 a go. And they rarely see their photographs again. Are you good at getting photographs out of people?

JR: This is difficult because I'm an agent myself and I know what it's like on the other side! I also know that the press never, ever return them and there is no guarantee that they will use them. If we have a relationship with a particular journalist I would send the photographs, but I certainly wouldn't just send them out randomly to a whole lot of newspapers. It would be wonderful to be in a situation where you could. We have the facility to email photos now, which means that you have the file on computer, and you are not physically needing the photographs, but even in this technological age the press don't actually like it that way! This is a real shame, but I am hoping that this will change, which would make it easier for artists.

JW: You are obviously very able with databases. Do you have to keep them up yourself?

JR: Yes, but again it is something that I am quite keen on farming out somewhere. Are you interested?

JW: No! What size database do you have to fill a 300 seat concert hall three times a year?

JR: Around 200 people are on the mailing list, but it's growing all the time. On top of that there are important people whom we invite like George Caird, the principal of the Birmingham Conservatoire, BASBWE members and

BANDS

key figures in the area. It's a bit tricky now with all the data protection laws. We've had to write to everyone to make sure they want to remain on the mailing list. If they don't reply, technically, we cannot keep their names and addresses, which is a shame, but all organisations are in the same boat. Although that sounds a small list for filling three concerts each season, those people are very loyal and seem to appreciate being on the list.

JW: I sometimes spot people in your audience whom - this is an odd sort of thing to say - I don't believe I would meet at any other concert. A proportion of people who are having a wonderful evening and who come again. I suspect that they probably don't attend concerts at Symphony Hall or the Adrian Boult Hall?

JR: I think this is partly due to ArtsFest, which is free to everybody. People can just wander up to the stage and watch us perform, without having to physically cross the barrier of going into a concert hall. And that's quite an important thing because, while you and I are totally familiar with concert halls and theatres, there are many people who wouldn't dream of going into a concert hall, not even to look in the foyer. So ArtsFest is a great opportunity to show what we are about and to talk to people so that they feel comfortable about coming to see us perform.

Another great marketing tool is to use the players in the orchestra to spread the word. This is something we have developed with the players and they are very pleased to promote what they do. It has gone beyond the immediate family, whom everyone invites, and we now get the friends of the friends, and it keeps on growing. A lot of it is due to word of mouth, and I think a great number of the people you mentioned, who don't usually go into concert halls, come because they are made to feel welcome.

There has been a good response to the idea of themed concerts. Our next concert has a Danish theme because it is linked to a month-long Danish Festival in Birmingham, after that we are doing a jazz concert, then a concert with an English theme coinciding with William Walton's centenary. People have told us that they prefer themed concerts to a programme of random items. So they prioritise the date in their diary and they know they are going to have a good time.

JW: I have played in a lot of orchestras where to get the orchestra to sell six tickets each is really hard. What magic do you have to

get the orchestra selling tickets?

JR: One of our trumpet players regularly sells 20 tickets per concert and these are to people very much like the ones you mentioned. They are young, in their twenties, they really enjoy the evening, and I don't think they particularly class it as "going to a classical music concert". It's an event, and that's quite an important distinction. I have been to so many concerts myself, where it feels dead and lacking in atmosphere. There needs to be a buzz, a vibrancy, a welcoming atmosphere, and if we are not giving that, then why should we expect people to turn up to the concert? Perhaps it is a little easier with our orchestra, as we are all of a similar age, we all get on well and there's a very close community feeling in the group. It has a heart. We are committed to what we do and are proud of what we do, so we want to go out and tell people about it. I think it really is as simple as that.

JW: And apart from your soloists and your conductor, it really is absolutely an amateur orchestra? Everybody is playing for love?

JR: Absolutely, yes. In fact, they all pay a modest annual subscription, with concessions for students and the unwaged, which just about covers the costs of our annual hall hire.

JW: If you have to bring in extra players, do you pay their expenses?

JR: Very rarely. I think the only time I have ever done that is with a harp, which is understandable. It's all for love. That's why we are there.

JW: How much contact do you have with the management of the hall to make sure that the essential provision of what you need on the day of the concert is there, or are they now so



experienced that you don't have to worry much?

JR: We always remind them of what we need because there is no point in turning up on the day and finding essential equipment missing. It does not take much to write a fax to say, for example, we would like the acoustic curtains halfway up, we need the lighting done by this time, and we more staff on the bar! They know how many chairs we need, and the set-up of the orchestra, and how many seats to put out in the audience, but we also let them know exactly how we would like the audience seated.

JW: Where is the selling outlet for the tickets?

JR: As well as players having tickets on a sale or return basis, advance ticket sales are through Symphony Hall Box Office and then through a network of ticket outlets throughout Birmingham City Centre, for which we (unfortunately) have to pay commission. The CBSO Centre staff sell tickets at the door on the night.

JW: Your conductor, very generously, often has guest conductors sharing the concert with him. I have to mention here that Guy is patron of the orchestra and has conducted several times, and I remember Glenn Price conducted part of a concert when he was over from Canada. How important is it in the general view of things?

JR: Obviously most conductors would like to conduct the whole thing themselves - they have that kind of personality! We always try to vary concerts to attract the audience and having a guest conductor is a part of that variety. For the players, it is enjoyable to have different conductors, who encourage different playing, give varied interpretations, and help keep everything fresh. It is also good for the orchestra to work with top soloists, as it is inspiring and reassures the players that we always aspire to the highest standards.

BANDS

JW: The other thing we have experienced at your concerts is the use of mixed media. I can't imagine how long it took to choose and set up the pictures you showed during Weill's The Threepenny Opera. How difficult was it to persuade the management of the hall that you were going to do a concert with films in one of the pieces? Did they have the equipment or did you have to hire it in?

JR: No. We had to arrange all that, but it was important for that concert. Again, in using the orchestra as a resource, we found that one of the players had a contact with somebody who worked in that business. The equipment and an operator, who set up the technical side, were provided pretty much free of charge, because they relished this new experience. It was something quite different from their usual round of business conferences! We talked with some of the players to decide what sort of images we were going to use and then we worked on the headings for each section. It was quite a collaborative effort! It was about presenting something fresh, so that each concert is an experience for the audience. I think that's really important. You have got to try to see things from their point of view. It's great to sit there playing in an orchestra feeling really passionate about what you do, but you have to try to walk across to the other side and imagine being in the audience for the first time. What is it that you are enjoying about the concert and what is it that you are not enjoying about it? I always try to address it from that side.

JW: And the audience may have had an exhausting day at work and just put three kids to bed, so there has to be something extra. Part of the welcome feeling is that Keith introduces the music with comparative ease.

JR: He has always introduced everything and I think this is crucial, because with wind music, we have the opportunity to create something new. We don't have to be restricted by the formula of a classical concert where the conductor walks on, you get straight into the piece, he walks off and you rarely hear him say anything. We programme a mixture of unknown works, and do a lot of premières; then there are works that the audience may have heard of, like *West Side Story* or a selection. In the Danish concert we are playing a selection from the *Hans Christian Andersen* film. So the audience can always plug into something that they know, interspersed with works

that they will never have heard before, some of which are quite tough. But, by explaining what the pieces are about, or who the composer is, they feel more comfortable. One of the pieces we had a great deal of feedback from was Andrew Boyson's *I Am*, about a child who died in a car accident. There was an unbelievable reaction. I always expect them to come out saying the works they were familiar with were great, but invariably they come out talking about a piece that we really hadn't expected them to talk about. It is great when that happens with new repertoire.

JW: How do you go about monitoring and assessing your results? Perhaps you don't actually have to if you have a full house?

JR: We can't stop monitoring. If we've got a full house, we know we are doing something right, but we always want to build on that to make sure that people are still happy to return to concerts. And the best way of doing that, as you know, is by meeting people. In the interval and after

think about the image you want to create
produce good quality printed material
create a good relationship with the press
create an atmosphere in the concert hall and foyer
use lighting to make the right effect
welcome the audience on arrival
talk to the audience and get out and meet them
take risks with programming

the concert, I'm out there, Keith's out there, and we both try to talk with as many people as possible, so that they can see we care.

JW: Do the players have any input into artistic plans? Can they put forward works they would like to do?

JR: To a certain extent. The conductor obviously decides the programmes, and that's important because someone has got to be in charge artistically and lead the group. An example of direct input from the players, will be when BSW celebrates its 10th birthday in November 2002. To celebrate this special occasion we are producing a list of everything we have ever played over the years. Every member of the orchestra will vote for four pieces

they want to play again. The audience will have a vote as well and Keith will compile a programme around the pieces with the most votes.

If there is a piece we are rehearsing that we don't feel too happy about, we'll talk about it. There is a piece in our coming concert which hasn't quite worked and we have discussed it and people have aired their feelings. It doesn't happen very often because most of the time we're pleased to be doing what we are doing. You have to be open-minded and that's part of the enjoyment of it. The high standard of the players is important, as difficult new music can be put in front of players and they will relish the technical challenges. If you want to sit back in your chair, and play things that you know all the time, you are looking for a different group!

Our orchestra is quite small with forty-five members, so every single person is really important. We don't have 12 first flutes and 20 clarinets, so the person playing second flute is as crucial as the first flute, and so on. It is a very open group and every person understands his or her responsibilities. And, hopefully, it's led in a way that people appreciate.

JW: Final question! You have such a lovely concert hall to perform in that bands from all over the country might be very envious. We don't all have concert halls of this calibre and we have all played in school halls and draughty churches. What advice can you offer the rest of us about getting the audience there?

JR: We have played in school halls and churches too, so we greatly appreciate the hall we have now. But the rules are exactly the same and these are some of the things I tell myself wherever we are planning concerts: think about the image you want to create; produce good quality printed material; create a good relationship with the press; create an atmosphere in the concert hall and foyer; use lighting to make the right effect; welcome the audience on arrival; talk to the audience and get out and meet them; take risks with programming.

Nothing is achieved without hard work, but a great deal comes from being proud of what you do. If you are proud and enthusiastic you can take the audience along with you. If not, you might as well forget it!