

Reminiscences of past Winkfield Christmas Concerts

Anthony Hodson, manager of the Music and Merriment Christmas Concert muses on the last 25 years or so of these occasions.

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The earliest concert handout that I have for the Winkfield Christmas Concert is from 1998, when the concert was run by Peter Vaughan and Anthony Stevens, and conducted by Josh Tuffley. It was a great mixture of audience carols, Christmas music and readings, and the main voices were the 'Combined Choirs of Winkfield and Cranbourne'. The concert was supported by a visiting ensemble, the Kensington Consort.

Peter retired from the job in 2000, and Lucy Head, a professional French Horn player and singer took on the concert from 2001 to 2010. Lucy had a lot of musical friends and built a new kind of concert. She also started the Junior Choir as a performing resource; this was based on the small Junior Choir that then sang at Sunday services before the 9:30 family service was started many years later. At that time, the concert was called 'Voices and Bells at Christmas'.

Lucy had been a member of the National Youth Choir (NYC), and had made friends from music college and the NYC enough to put together a chamber choir for the concert. She had other friends who played instruments, and all this allowed her to augment local musicians, including the Handbell ringers. Jonathan Holl, Josh Tuffley and Tim Morgan played the organ on some of these occasions. Jonathan and Tim, sadly, have both died since Lucy's tenure as concert organiser.

Lucy and her family moved to Wokingham, and she decided to pass on the responsibility for the Christmas Concert, and the task fell on me, Lucy's father, so I 'inherited' the concert from my daughter!

As a practising amateur musician all my life, and father to musical children. I had a general opportunity to find excellent junior musicians through the Woodley Festival, and senior musicians through membership of the Woodley Concert Band (WCB).

By great good fortune, I had met a brilliant young musician at the Woodley Festival in 2011, an 18-year-old with a flair for organising and many achievements and connections of her own. She was leaving the Holt School that year, of which she had been the Head Girl. This was

Lucy Morris, whose late father had been the founder of the top performing Reading Phoenix Choir. I engaged her at once to direct (and perform in) much of the music for the 2011 concert, 'Christmas Music, voices and Instruments'.



Through the Berkshire Organist's Association I had met Ian May, organist for a church in the area and long-term conductor of the Cameo Singers, and invited him in as Musical Director, bringing in his singers as our adult choir. Ian and the Cameos continued to support our concert for four years, after which we

decided that we were able to create an adult choir with our own resources. The picture shows Ian in 2014, directing that year the full resources of junior and senior choirs, supported instrumentally by a wind quintet. Thank you, Ian, for giving us such great start to my tenure in managing the Music and Merriment concerts!

Returning to 2011, I was able to find a number of local children to sing in the Junior Choir, and Lucy Morris was able to augment the numbers, so we had no less than 17 singers, and they were expertly directed by her. You can find more about Lucy's exciting current work at <https://www.cantate.co.uk/team/lucy-joy-morris/> - what a find she was! *(Photo – permission applied for)*

We had readers and young instrumentalists in the programme, including Lucy Morris (who was a violinist and singer among her many abilities), and we were able to finish the concert with a splendid performance of Handel's Hallelujah Chorus with chamber-



orchestra support. The programme became a basic pattern of local amateur choral singers, young and old, young instrumentalists and singers with readers and other entertainment. With this goal, we faced (and resolved) the challenges of finding and integrating wonderful performance and director resources.

In 2012, for example, into our musical life came Su-Mei Kong, a brilliant professional pianist with many accolades, who was then working as Musician in Residence at Heathfield School. She maintained a long and valuable presence in many subsequent Christmas Concerts, before moving to Birmingham in about 2020.

Youthful players were well represented in 2012, with a young Chamber Orchestra, provided with Lucy Morris's help from top Berkshire players.

One of these was oboist Ewan Millar. In 2020, he won the BBC Young Musician of the Year award. His mother, Catherine Millar, leading local teacher of young bassoonists, also brought us the Acer Minor bassoon septet (a Berkshire Young Musicians ensemble) for that 2012 concert.

Over the years, many extremely talented young players have performed at our concerts, as well as a number of more senior players, including myself on the bassoon. From time to time, we were able to put together an instrumental ensemble such as a chamber orchestra, and on three occasions we had use of a wind quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, French horn, bassoon) of coopted players.

In 2017 mega-talented violinist Sarah Aizawa started playing for us (she is now 17), and each year we have revelled in her growing skill and confidence (see photo on page 11). The picture shows her, aged 9, standing with the Junior Choir after her first concert with us in 2017.



Sarah has been a continuing treat for our audiences over the years, and we love it that she still enjoys performing for the concert.

Over the last eight years, from 2017, (except 2020, when Covid stopped the concert) we have enjoyed the superb 5Ts brass quintet, under international musician Len Tyler (see photo on page 9). Len has always been 100% supportive as well as providing lively arrangements and compositions. Thank you, Len for your enthusiasm for our concerts.

In 2023, Darcey F-B (then aged 13) sang, played the piano and the marimba, an amazing contribution to the concert. Other instruments performed brilliantly over the years have been the bassoon, clarinet, harp, oboe and saxophone, and a number of rising young singers.

The following year, Darcey's younger brother Freddie (a chorister at St George's Chapel Windsor) not only sang the moving song 'Walking in the Air' (which he had sung professionally – for payment!) but also played a virtuosic piano piece – what a talented musical family! Darcey's and Freddie's mum Ali had taken part as a singer in the Christmas Concert 20 years earlier, when Lucy Head ran the show. They had met as members of the National Youth Choir and retained a long friendship. Ali accompanied Freddie on the piano with his song.

This year, Sarah Aizawa on the Violin is joined by Sergey D, a hugely talented 12-year-old pianist, who has been winning international prizes, and has to be a potential BBC Young Musician of the Year (photo on page 12).

Most of our older instrumentalists have come to us via the award-winning Woodley Concert Band (WCB), of which I am the bassoonist. WCB has provided soloists, and the 5Ts Brass Quintet members are mostly WCB, as were most of the wind quintet members.



Here they are performing to a packed house at their concert in Bulmershe School on 18 October 2025. There are four performers in

the band who have played in a recent Music and Merriment concerts, and others who have played in earlier years. There is a synergy here.

Nearly all our readers, musicians, including hand-bell ringers, singers and helpers live within a 15-mile radius from St Mary church, and most are Winkfield people.

Putting together complex concerts like Music and Merriment has involved up to 60 willing volunteers, as helpers as well as performers. Helpers include the mince-pie makers for the interval, people doing the catering, assisting with parking, and lots more. All this has involved a huge level of teamwork, led by a small committee that I have chaired; Lesley Philpot and Margaret-Anne have been members since the beginning, and we have also been blessed by the contributions and support of Marian Stevens, Viktoria Kincses and, this year, Sue Bish.

This will be the last year in which I will be managing this concert, and I am deeply thankful to the tangible enthusiasm with which I have been supported. I pass on more thanks than I can seriously express to everybody who has helped bring about the success of each concert – thank you all.