



Performing with Martin Clunes, a great supporter of the orchestra, is obviously an enjoyable experience

Star Chamber

The Dorset Chamber Orchestra has been making all kinds of music in the county for more than twenty years. Tony Burton-Page tells its story.

Live music, we are told, is making a comeback. While there are many of us who didn't think it had gone away, it's true that recorded music has dominated the music scene since the 'sixties. But it's also true that recorded music has become such a commonplace of everyday life that music devotees are turning to live performances in search of that elemental thrill which recorded sound can never provide.

Lovers of live music will agree that Dorset is fortunate to be blessed with so many resident orchestras. We have the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in our county for most of the year, a fully professional ensemble which can hold its own with its more famous London counterparts. There are plenty of amateur groups, too: the Dorset County Orchestra, the Dorset Youth Orchestra, the Dorset Philharmonic Orchestra and many others – and high on that list is the Dorset Chamber Orchestra.

Everyone knows what an orchestra is – but a *chamber* orchestra? Surely this is a leftover from the Age of Elegance, when the gentlemen wore perfumed wigs and the ladies wore skirts as big as a Smart car? The term 'chamber orchestra' was originally used to show that the ensemble was small

enough to fit into a room. Since the size of room isn't specified, it's not a particularly helpful phrase, but it's safe to say that a chamber orchestra consists of about forty players or fewer. (Thank goodness no one has yet thought of calling it an 'Orchestra Lite'.) Economic pressures in recent decades have made smaller orchestras a more attractive proposition for concert promoters and chamber orchestras, sometimes called 'sinfoniettas', have sprung up all over the world.

The Dorset Chamber Orchestra was the brainchild of violinist and conductor Robert Jacoby, who had moved to Dorset after several years at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth, where he had been the leader of the university's resident string quartet and had founded a small orchestra, the Philomusica of Aberystwyth. Once settled in Dorset, Robert saw that there was a gap between the all-professional Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and the all-amateur Dorset County Orchestra. He realised that it could be filled by a small orchestra with an amateur core which was supplemented by professionals for actual performances. He envisaged three or four concerts a year, with only a few



rehearsals for each concert. This was a crucial point because Robert knew that over-rehearsal was, for practical as well as musical reasons, a deterrent to attracting first-class musicians. And it was first-class musicians he wanted; he was used to a high standard of music-making, having studied conducting at the Royal College of Music in London with that doyen of English conductors, Sir Adrian Boult, and having a career as a solo violinist that brought him first prizes at the Royal College of Music (awarded by the composer Arthur Bliss) and at the Cardiff International Violin Competition (awarded by Yehudi Menuhin). So it was that Robert recruited some of the best professional and semi-professional players in the area as well as advanced students.

The first concert was given at St Mary's Church, Dorchester, in October 1987. One of the orchestra's original aims was to take its programmes all round the county, especially to smaller venues where a full symphony orchestra of Wagnerian proportions could not be accommodated. In recent years, though, for logistical reasons the orchestra has settled on its first choice and all its concerts now take place in St Mary's, Dorchester.

Another original aim was to provide a concerto platform for outstanding young soloists and more than fifty of these have already appeared with the orchestra. In several instances this opportunity has turned out to be an important stage in the development of exceptional young players. Clarinetist Fiona Cross (soloist at the inaugural concert), cellist Rebecca Gilliver (soloist at the second), violinist Malu Lin, pianist Fiona Dalzell and mezzo-soprano Sophie Grech are just a few who have gone on to win major prizes and

establish distinguished professional careers, while cellist Natalie Clein, who made her *début* with the orchestra at the age of fifteen, went on to win the BBC Young Musician of the Year and become an international celebrity, returning last year to play the Elgar Cello Concerto at the orchestra's twentieth anniversary concert.

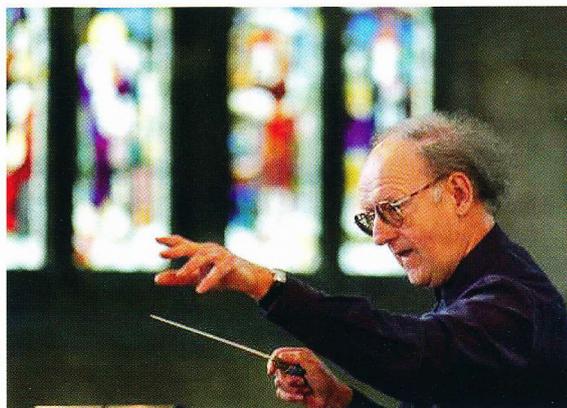
The DChO (to use its own idiosyncratic abbreviation of itself) has gone from strength to strength in the twenty years since its foundation. There have been many highlights

John Lill playing the complete cycle of five Beethoven piano concertos with the Dorset Chamber Orchestra in 1994

The full orchestra at a final rehearsal in St Mary's, Dorchester



Robert Jacoby is the founder and driving force of the orchestra



Courtesy Dorset Echo

in that time, but one of the most memorable was the complete cycle of all five Beethoven piano concertos given at Weymouth with John Lill as the soloist. John Lill has strong connections with the orchestra. His friendship with Robert Jacoby dates back to their student days at the Royal College of Music and their musical partnership has continued ever since. John has been the DChO's president for most of its existence, and he returned in May 2006 to perform Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 24 with the orchestra as part of its celebration of the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth.

Another highlight was the orchestra's visit to the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, one of the prime musical venues in the UK. This remarkable venture was brought about to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Dreamflight, the British Airways staff charity which every year charters a 747 and takes sick and disabled children to Florida for a visit to Disneyworld. One of the orchestra's horn-players, Barry Gaskell, works for BA and planned this particular event. He is one of the more remarkable members of a remarkable cast: he has been with the DChO from the start, not letting his globe-trotting interfere with his devotion to the orchestra. In the early days he would take orchestral parts with him on his travels, checking bowing marks for the strings and proof-reading the rest. Two decades later, he arrived at the final rehearsal for last October's concert in something of a whirl, having arrived from Tokyo at three o'clock that afternoon.

The DChO's commitment to youth was made even more explicit in 2004, when it began its 'Music for Youth' concerts. These concerts are aimed particularly at younger people, with the object of inspiring them to enjoy music. Even their starting time of 4 pm has been engineered to make attendance easier for younger children, and the programmes are highly appropriate for younger listeners. Almost inevitably, the first concert included that perennial children's classic, 'Peter and the Wolf', but it was a masterstroke to invite celebrated Dorset resident Martin Clunes to be its narrator. He obviously enjoyed the experience, as he not only became a patron of the orchestra but came back for more – he returned for the 'Music for Youth' concerts of the two succeeding years, and he is due back on 8 March 2008.

He will be heard in that concert as the narrator for 'Jurassical Music', a collaboration between the writer, Richard Baker, and the composer, Elizabeth Sharma. Richard has contributed the words of two other collaborations for 'Music for Youth' concerts, 'The Amazing Animal Band' (based on the Grimm fairy-tale, 'The Musicians of Bremen') and 'The Forbidden Music' (an original story). 'Jurassical Music' tells the story of how music is created at the dawn of time, the very pulse of life itself, and how it plays in chaos for millions of years until we reach the age of the dinosaurs. Richard is a poet with a sense of humour: 'It was beneath a volcano, by the edge of a sea, / Four billion years ago, just after three; / The lightning was blinding,

the thunder was loud, / The sunlight blocked out by a poisonous cloud!

The very fact that the whole enterprise was commissioned by the DChO demonstrates its whole-hearted commitment to the musical youth of the county – and also shows that its attitude is lightyears away from anything we might expect from that potentially alarming phrase, 'chamber orchestra'.

Natalie Clein is only one of several outstanding young musicians for whom the Dorset Chamber Orchestra has played a significant role in their early careers



Ray Burniston