**January 2024 Concert - Emmanuel Church**

The Loughborough Orchestra returned with a strong programme on 20 Jan, at Emmanuel Church, Loughborough – its last concert with Trevor Lax in sole charge.  First, Weber’s *Der Freischütz Overture*, where the classical gives way for the romantic era in opera, a piece Loughborough Orchestra realised well, with its calm, majestic start, unfolding drama where magic, danger and romance intersect, and confident conclusion.

Then came Smetana’s wonderfully evocative picture of the river Vltava, from his *Ma Vlast*. The woodwind’s bubbling start was particularly effective, preparing us for the big tune. A piece full of lovely colours, well captured.

For Richard Strauss’ 1st Horn Concerto, we were treated to something special, a 17-year-old of the National Youth Orchestra, Claire Marsden, playing the piece from memory – with strength, clarity, and a lyrical quality. The Orchestra was also on form, very expressive in the closing of the first movement. The second movement, with its haunting chords, showed orchestra and soloist well matched; and in the final movement, Claire showed her virtuosic skills, while showing passion and feeling.

After the interval, the Orchestra treated us to a fine performance of Dvořak’s 8th Symphony, starting with the ebb and flow from the early minor theme through the cheerful major passages of the opening movement. The slow movement, a masterclass in orchestration, gave plenty of opportunity for different groups of instruments expressing the part brooding, part flowing moods of the piece. A *valse triste* followed with folk-like charm, and plenty of movement, especially for the cellos, who handled it well. The finale, variations, fizzing with energy, gave us a glorious conclusion to a great evening.

Anthony Thacker

**June 2023 - Emmanuel Church**

The Loughborough Orchestra’s summer concert at Emmanuel Church, Loughborough, on Saturday 17 June, started with nineteenth century Scottish composer Hamish McCunn’s atmospheric Land of the Mountain and the Flood, ably played. After the rousing opening, we were treated to pleasant vistas, nice orchestration and plenty of ‘Scotch snaps’. Carl Reineke’s flute concerto of 1908 followed, played by Joseph Geary, a young man to watch, with a lovely tone, easy relaxing style, seemingly effortless playing, and perfect balance between soloist and orchestra throughout. Geary was very moving in the second movement, the emotional heart of the piece. But he was equally fine with the more virtuosic demands of the final movement. However, his encore was the highlight for me, a riveting performance of Debussy’s Syrinx, which moved me to tears.

After the interval, two giants of the repertoire: Wagner and Beethoven. First, one of Wagner’s most celebrated pieces, the prelude to Act 3 of Lohengrin – an opportunity for the expanded brass section to shine!

Then Beethoven’s glorious Pastoral Symphony. The Loughborough Orchestra well conveyed the warmth of the piece – the jubilant feeling of the opening movement; the elegance and charm of the second; the frolicsome merrymaking of the third; the drama of the fourth (the Storm); and the rewarding conclusion of the Finale. As for the demands of the piece, the wonderfully rhythmically off-beat phrases were handled so well by the oboes and other woodwind in the second and third movements, and the challenging pace for the cellos in the fourth was realised. This most agreeable of Beethoven’s symphonies was enjoyably rendered.

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Anthony Thacker

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**January 2023 - Emmanuel Church**

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The Loughborough Orchestra returned with a new concert on 21 Jan, at Emmanuel Church, Loughborough, opening with an old favourite: Mendelssohn’s Hebrides Overture, in effect, a tone poem before they became fashionable. Conductor Trevor Lax directed the orchestra effectively through its changes in tempo and dynamics, as the orchestra played the piece with warmth and confidence, bringing the sea-scape to life.

They were then joined by soloist Griff Wadkin, for Saint-Saëns’ First Cello Concerto, and the Loughborough Orchestra captured the urgency and engagement of the piece from the start, with its striking, flowing phrases. From the first movement, Griff Wadkin provided a wonderful, captivating performance; in the second, he was in turns lyrical and effortlessly virtuosic; and in the final movement, with its turbulence and energy, and lyrical episodes, both soloist and orchestra gave their all.

Griff then treated us to an encore – a version for cello and orchestra of Ennio Morricone’s “Gabriel’s Oboe” from the film, “The Mission” – a lovely piece to showcase emotional power and lyrical warmth.

After the interval, we were treated to Sibelius’ Second Symphony. We had warm, pastoral, positive phrases, flowing from the opening motif in the first movement; then pizzicato basses, then cellos, paving the way for the bassoons to set up the second movement’s pensive theme: the Loughborough Orchestra really generated passion here, through its various emotions. The scherzo was played with commitment and drive, with evocative playing, especially on the oboes, while the finale gave us its triumphant soaring theme, underpinned by rhythmic trombones, the movement taking us on a journey towards resolution.

Anthony Thacker

**June 2022 - Emmanuel Church**

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The London Proms have not even started, but the Last Night of the Proms came to Loughborough on Saturday 18 June with the Loughborough Orchestra providing all the traditional fare in the second half of its concert.

There was a full programme with eight items in each half, starting movingly with the Ukrainian National Anthem. After that came Rossini’s famous William Tell overture: once the Cellos had opened the piece, and the higher strings and woodwind joined in, the Orchestra well captured the familiar dramatic theme.

Soloist Sarah Ogden was exceptional, her clear, expressive voice drawing us in to the pieces she sang, including Lehár’s Vilia, Handel’s “Ombra Mai Fu”, his famous Largo, and the Habanera from Bizet’s Carmen, but first, “Where Corals Lie” from Elgar’s Sea Pictures, which really captivated me.

Two orchestral pieces provided variety in the first half: Ravel’s moving Pavane; and the World Première of conductor Trevor Lax’s tone poem, An Underground World, with added pictures and narration. The music was atmospheric and sonorous, the brass and wind conveying the cavernous world.

For the second half, Sarah Ogden ably led us singing the familiar items: Land of Hope and Glory; Rule Britannia; Jerusalem; Auld Lang Syne; and our National Anthem. Added to that were the hymn, “I vow to Thee my Country” to the tune from Holst’s Planets Suite; and all the orchestral fun and frolics of Henry Wood’s Fantasia on British Sea Songs. In the middle, with a welcome change of pace, came George Butterworth’s lyrical, pastoral piece, The Banks of Green Willow, with exquisite harp playing: fabulous!

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Anthony Thacker

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**January 2022 - Emmanuel Church**

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After the two-year gap, the Loughborough Orchestra was back with a full and rich programme on 22 Jan, at Emmanuel Church, Loughborough. Rossini’s Thieving Magpie Overture provided a rousing start, with its powerful, martial opening, array of great tunes for strings or woodwind, and exciting full orchestral developments.

Then, a World Première: conductor Trevor Lax’s A Walk in the Park, a jazzy and energetic piece for brass, woodwind, basses and wood block. A very agreeable piece, and well worth hearing again. Whether, with its rhythmic challenges, it was a ‘walk in the park’ for the players or not, they pulled it off superbly.

Next, it was the string players’ turn: the stately Sarabande from Grieg’s lovely Holberg Suite, written deliberately in the eighteenth century style. As the string players continued, the piece grew in warmth and strength.

Then Mozart, and his Flute Concerto No.2 in D, with Ruth Neiland as flute soloist, playing with grace and positive vibrancy. In its three movements, the Concerto was very uplifting (Rudolf Tillmetz’ cadenza played well); then lyrical and flowing; and finally faster, virtuosic with characteristically Mozartean twists and turns.

The concert concluded with one of the all-time greats: Dvořak’s New World Symphony. Written in and inspired by the USA, came four truly great movements, all played with assurance. The first movement with its big canvas, and evocative melodies; the second, with the most famous tune of all on the cor anglais; and the scherzo, with its energetic, perky cross-currents, were all played confidently; with the powerful finale bringing the whole evening to a triumphant end.

Anthony Thacker

**January 2020 - Trinity Methodist Church**

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For its winter concert (25 Jan, at Trinity Methodist, Loughborough), the Loughborough Orchestra made a strong start in Ruslan and Ludmilla, the most popular piece by Mikhail Glinka, Russia’s first truly great composer, playing this energetic and vibrant overture with confidence and zest.

What followed was the Clarinet Concerto by Carl Maria von Weber, contemporary of Beethoven, a piece which was new to me. Soloist Emily Wilson played with a lovely tone, and gave us an assured rendition of both the virtuosic and atmospheric elements of this more classical piece, drawing us in, as she played with sensitivity and magnetism. Within the second movement came evocative pastoral sections where the clarinet was soloist in a wind quartet, together with a trio of horns, while the final movement gave us a perky repeated theme, played with pizazz and bounce.

Weber wrote his piece for clarinettist Heinrich Bäermann, and Emily Wilson together with the front desk of the strings gave us an encore by Bäermann himself, a moving Adagio, showcasing the clarinet’s lyrical power.

Finally, we returned to the Russians, with Rachmaninov’s masterful Second Symphony, a serious piece with drama and power, for which the orchestra was expanded with piccolo, cor anglais, bass clarinet and glockenspiel, providing a rich palette of tone and timbre. There are many challenges in this piece, with its emotional intensity, and especially in the electric speeds in the final movement, always on the move, but purposeful. Conductor Trevor Lax skilfully managed the many changes in pace, and the Loughborough Orchestra proved up to the challenge.

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Anthony Thacker

**June 2019 - Emmanuel Church**

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The Loughborough Orchestra’s June concert was different, with some of the repertoire’s best loved arias at its heart. But first came Rossini’s Tancredi Overture – the first piece of music I loved as a young child, played on our old 78s! The players nicely captured the fun, energy and excitement of the piece.

David Morris sang the arias, with a classic tenor voice, varying from Handel’s ‘Largo’ (in Xerxes), movingly performed and exquisitely conducted by Trevor Lax, through two Mozart arias, from Cosi fan Tutte and The Magic Flute, played with polish and charm and sung flawlessly, to those Italian masters, Verdi, Donizetti and Puccini, of which the great tune-smith Puccini (E Lucevan le Stelle from Tosca), provided a tenor aria to break the heart: fabulous singing. And there was even time for an orchestral interlude from Mascagni, and an encore with the ever-popular Return to Sorrento.

The second half saw a major work, Schumann’s 3rd Symphony, (the ‘Rhenish’, inspired by scenes of the Rhine). This picturesque symphony began in lively mode, the orchestra making a confident and excellent start, with a strong lead by the violins and orchestra. A scherzo followed, which built well, as the contrasting contrapuntal phrases grew. I liked the viola leads that came within the third, slow movement, and the orchestral well captured the grand, powerful solemnity of the fourth movement, with glorious brass, and subtle contrasting strings. The lively finale – which for me provided echoes of Beethoven and pre-echoes of Brahms – was played with strength and conviction. A great movement and rousing conclusion.

Anthony Thacker

**January 2019 - Trinity Methodist Church**

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The Loughborough Orchestra continued its progress as conductor Trevor Lax stretched the players with a couple of fun, twentieth century pieces.

But first, a confident, powerful start, with Berlioz’s Roman Carnival Overture, its counterpoint played with accuracy and elegance.

Second was Malcolm Arnold’s Four Scottish Dances, a lovely playful set, nicely realised. The opening dance was strong, with the rhythmic ‘Scotch snap’ scored for muscular brass, as befits a trumpet-playing composer. The second dance was energetic contrasted with the amusingly languid bassoon, the harp and strings shaping the third, and then a sparkling finish.

Then came Ole Olsen’s Trombone Concerto, which was new to me. Late romantic, with pleasing, lyrical tunes, well worth a hearing. The soloist, Rhiannon Symonds, played this confidently, and with polish, style and subtlety. Vibrant when the music demanded it, but quite capable of playing with gentleness and feeling, so that she achieved a wonderful balance with the orchestra.

After the interval we were treated to one of the major works of the repertoire, Mendelssohn’s Italian Symphony (No.4 in A). The familiar opening theme on the strings was finely played, and the orchestra proficient in its performance of this ever-popular symphony. The expressive Andante, with its leading phases from violas, oboes, bassoons, and answering from the rest, gloriously underpinned by cellos and double basses, was movingly played. The third movement, in 3/4 time was an elegantly performed minuet. And the last movement was taken at quite a pace by conductor Trevor Lax, conductor and players succeeding in providing an exhilarating finale.

Anthony Thacker

**June 2018 - Emmanuel Church**

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A packed house, with even the gallery used at Emmanuel Church, saw Loughborough Orchestra pull off its ambitious programme on 16th June so well that a musician in the audience commented on the Rachmaninov, ‘You could close your eyes and imagine it was a professional orchestra playing.’

First was Schubert’s Rosamunde Overture, its dramatic contrasts played confidently and expressively from the start.

The two main works had one soloist, Jeremy Kimber, in Rachmaninov’s hugely popular Second Piano Concerto, and as organist in Saint-Saëns’ celebrated Organ Symphony: the audience was treated to a masterclass. Somehow, he made Rachmaninov’s fiendishly difficult piano part look easy. Revealing his great experience as accompanist, he helped ensure piano and orchestra were in perfect synchronicity, through all the dramatic changes in tempo, with conductor, Trevor Lax, drawing the best out of the orchestra.

Saint-Saëns’ Symphony No.3, popularly known as the Organ Symphony, because of vital addition of the organ to the orchestra, is my personal favourite 19th century symphony, and I appreciated Kimber’s highly effective use of the instrument undergirding the sound in the quiet sections later in the first movement, as well as in the crashing sounds later in the second. In the orchestra, the brass well realised their melodies underpinning the constant bubbling energy. In the second movement, Trevor Lax ensured the orchestra captured the urgency, playing with bite. And from the orchestra, Nina de Salis Young and Edward de Salis Young emerged from the bassoons and violins respectively to play the shimmering arpeggios on the piano that add another layer to this magnificent work, and the orchestra powerfully realised the symphony’s rousing finale.

Anthony Thacker

**January 2018 - Trinity Methodist Church**

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There was a packed house at Trinity Methodist Church for Loughborough Orchestra’s concert on 27th January, and justifiably so, as the orchestra again raised their game.

Borodin’s charming *In the Steppes of Central Asia* provided a strong start, the music portraying the Russian Empire completely at ease with itself, Borodin’s atmospheric music skilfully blending its equally evocative Russian and Asian themes against the haunting landscape, presenting the ideal union of the people – a wonderful ideal not matched by political reality in 1880!

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**Then, for Dvořak’s Cello Concerto, we saw the welcome return of Will Robertson, whose assured, lyrical playing lifted Dvořak’s popular work, with its rich melodies, pastoral episodes, and wonderful contrasts. These effortlessly flow through robust, full orchestral sections, delicately written chamber interludes (where the strong woodwind section and especially the flutes shone), and of course Robertson’s expressive solo cello, in both cadenzas and in dialogues with one or two contrasting instruments – and back once more to dramatic orchestral passages.**

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There was more: the soloist treated us to one of J. S. Bach’s Sarabandes for solo cello, as an encore; and in the second half he encouraged the orchestra as he joined the cellos in the final piece of the night, Brahms’ Second Symphony, whose rich tones, dramatic interludes, dancing modulations and glorious textures draw the best out of the different sections of the orchestra, making strings, wind, brass and percussion each add wonderfully to the whole.

This maturing orchestra demonstrates its growing competence and confidence, with conductor Trevor Lax well in control, and the orchestra responsive to his well-judged changes in tempo and dynamics.

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Anthony Thacker

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**June 2017 - Emmanuel Church**

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A  capacity audience enjoyed an accomplished concert by Loughborough Orchestra at Emmanuel Church on Saturday June 17th 2017.

Tchaikovsky's Marche Slave was an ideal opening choice, combining as it does, excellent string passages and crisp percussion and stirring brass. The orchestra handled particularly well the slow crescendo which depended upon good dynamics between the strings and percussion; the difficult flute passages were handled sensitively during the counterpart themes of the Russian national anthem, known from the 1812, and the counter theme held by the strings. It was an impressive and rousing start to the concert.

Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E minor followed and there was an expectation of enjoyment here as the well-liked Yulia Nortridzh returned as the soloist in this hugely popular piece. A possible lack of acoustic balance during the opening few bars of the concerto (taken at a great lick!) meant it was difficult to hear her clearly, however, once her impressive cadenza had been faultlessly rendered, the balance was excellent; her lyrical playing during the andante was really moving. The Allegro Molto Vivace was very fast indeed and Yulia Northridzh's delivery was full of well-articulated fast runs and arpeggios and here the difficult balance between soloist and orchestra was again well-maintained. There was well-deserved great acclaim from the audience at the end of the piece.

The second half of the concert comprised Sibelius' Symphony No. 2 in D major.  This extremely difficult piece is by turns brooding, lush, sinister and dramatic. It  seems to be more a selection of motifs as in a tone poem rather than a main theme or secondary theme that might be developed and recognised that you would carry away with you from the concert, as you undoubtedly would from the Tchaikovsky and the Mendelssohn.

There were impressive facets of this Symphony that do stay in the mind: the unusual pizzicato opening of the second movement, the disturbing tonal fragments reminiscent of Benjamin Britten's 'Peter Grimes' and the gradual climb to the Romantic crescendo in D major.

Trevor Lax and the orchestra are to be commended for the hard work that obviously went into this enjoyable concert.

Bob Nunn

**January 2017 - Trinity Methodist**

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I was taken back to the age of seven, and my first love in classical music, Rossini, with the opening piece of the Loughborough Orchestra’s latest concert (Saturday 21st January, at Trinity Methodist Church), the overture from The Barber of Seville. And it was great to hear it given a strong, confident performance, with Rossini’s classic, powerful, emotional build-up well realised, in which I was struck especially by the effective trombone contribution.

Brahms followed, with the first of his atmospheric Hungarian dances, in which his glorious orchestration rang through strongly and reliably with true passion.

Next came Mozart’s well-loved fourth horn concerto, with orchestra reduced to strings plus a couple of oboes and horns, giving the solo horn wonderful clarity against the backdrop of the strings, while the wind gave extra depth and colour to the orchestral replies. The concerto showcases the strings, and the string section was clearly on top of this piece, playing at their best. Soloist David Tollington played with a smooth, reliable tone in the first two movements, and in the third movement, acquitted himself very well with its familiar galloping theme.

For the second part of the concert we were treated to Borodin’s second symphony. Changes of speed in the piece were well realised by conductor Trevor Lax and the orchestra, as were the changes from full orchestral sound, in the first movement for example, to the delicate work of harp with clarinet, then horn, in the third. The piece reached its zenith in the final movement, with its buoyant music, propelled by the versatile percussionists, and exhilarating orchestra.

Anthony Thacker

**June 2016 - Emmanuel Church**

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Loughborough Orchestra’s latest concert on Saturday 18th June, at Emmanuel Church, conducted by Trevor Lax, began patriotically with William Walton’s filmic Spitfire Prelude and Fugue, taking us back to the ‘few’ who saved us from the Nazis. Walton’s fugue provided momentum and energy as it built up, but there was contrast with Zosia Cocker’s lyrical violin solo.

Love of country continued in folkish mode with Vltava fom Bedřich Smetana’s Ma Vlast (My Homeland), picturing the Czech river from its source to the Elba. Fluttering flutes, then rippling strings catch the movement, with first violins playing the grand tune and second violins providing the sense of rapid movement underneath, with delicate decoration from triangle and effective percussion.

With Brahms’ Academic Festival Overture, the orchestra were really into their stride, and the warmth and fun of Brahms’ piece shone through. The strings especially played with confidence, accuracy and strength.

For the second half, the orchestra was joined by the Newtown Linford Choral Society, who were clearly very well rehearsed for Mozart’s Requiem: choir and orchestra were well-matched and well-balanced.

This was Mozart’s final piece, and by this stage Mozart had fully integrated baroque forms into his unique classical style, and the effect of this in the opening Requiem and Kyrie was truly glorious, wonderfully realised on the night.

Four soloists joined the choir, and proved equally effective in their solo work and when blending together in harmony. Bass Clive Hilton was rich and strong; John Williams was a classic and clear tenor; Christine Hall’s alto had mezzo-like strength, and Bethan Williams’ Soprano had the idyllic, bell-like sound the voice should have.

We felt we wanted more, but were grateful for what we heard.

Anthony Thacker