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### Newsletter Editors

Josh Salter and Kathy Weston

[editor@londoncellos.org](mailto:editor@londoncellos.org)

### Contact us

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Ben Michaels

an Interview with Kathy Weston

In autumn 2022, the London Cello Society awarded the inaugural Keith Harvey Memorial Award to Ben Michaels, a British cellist based in London. Ben began learning cello with his father, Joel Michaels, and after a brief hiatus to take a Natural Sciences degree at Cambridge, returned to music to study with Felix Schmidt and John Myerscough at the Royal Academy of Music.

Since graduation, Ben has established a career as a freelance cellist and has started to commission and record an album of contemporary cello music, written exclusively by cellists. The 2022 Keith Harvey Memorial Award will enable him to complete this project.

Here, Ben talks to Kathy Weston about the excitement of commissioning and playing new music.

#### What is it that attracts you to contemporary music?

The same thing that attracts me to other good music. I also play a lot of baroque music, and one of the nice things about baroque and contemporary music is that interpretation very much depends on the player, perhaps more so than in other periods. So, if you play a baroque bass line very straight, it's going to sound rubbish – you have to be aware of your role in the music and the harmony, and push something forward. In the same way, on the other end of the spectrum, if you're given something new that no one else has set an interpretation for, you have to engage with it.

If I play new things, I'll always try and take it to the composer, if they're available and might be willing to listen. It's great talking to composers about their music – it's amazing how flexible some of them are about what they want, and how they encourage you to find your own interpretation. It feels like a much better engagement than I used to have at the conservatoire trying to play a really good Schubert Arpeggione or something like that. It's a lot more about offering something of yourself in the music rather than just trying to do it as it's

written. It's very freeing. Also, the sounds are crazy in modern music – you can get away with a lot more.

### **Do you think it's harder to engage an audience with a contemporary piece?**

I agree, it can be quite confrontational, but I think every type of music should be performed and listened to, and it's your responsibility as a performer to make it accessible. After all, music would stop without new music, wouldn't it? Of course, there's a lot of bad new music too, but if it's good music, there should be something affecting and accessible about it.

Your understanding and appreciation of pieces always improves with listening and, with an entirely new piece, it's good to try to help people over the barrier caused by unfamiliarity. Talking to the audience about the music first can be a good way to soften the actual piece when it comes – even just playing a couple of themes or recurring motifs that people can listen out for. But good music shouldn't take much explaining.

### **The Keith Harvey Award is allowing you to complete a project to commission and record new music specifically written by cellists. What motivated you to start this project?**

It's fun to see what new things you can do on an instrument that's been around for a relatively long time, and cellists are the best people to compose in this way for the cello. There's precedent after all – virtuoso cellists like Popper, Duport and Piatti wrote some great stuff; some of it was really groundbreaking in terms of developing new techniques to stretch what the cello and cellists could do. There's something quite special, not only about trying to get more music into the world, but also in showing that the cello is still a developing instrument.

### **So what's on your list?**

I've commissioned six solo acoustic pieces. In selecting the composers, I simply asked cellists whose music I admired – some were already friends, but not all of them. I also felt strongly that there should be half women and half men. Beyond that, I tried to get a selection of different types of music, because so many people do so many different crazy things on the cello.

### **Can you tell me who you've asked?**

Yes, of course – Colin Alexander, Kit Downes, Jakob Kullberg, Zoë Martlew, Laura Moody and Ayanna Witter-Johnson. It's an amazing line-up,



*Ben Michaels*

and I'm pleased they've all agreed to be part of the project.

### **How many pieces do you have already?**

I have two, one more is coming very soon, and a couple more are in the pipeline after that; they should all be with me by the end of the year.

The two I have already are pretty interesting. Kit Downes, who's a fantastic cellist but mainly plays jazz piano, has written a collection of three miniatures. They're very beautiful and concise, as I guess you might expect from a jazz player. And my lovely friend, the cellist and composer Colin Alexander, who only started composing for the solo cello during lockdown, has given me a four-movement mini-sonata. It's based on the sort of music he improvises for himself, but that he never normally writes down.

### **Silly question, but do you think you're going to get anything that you can't play?**

Yes, I already have! Colin's a very fine cellist, so he's given me plenty of things I can't play – yet. Colin has these crazy techniques of fluted harmonics. I've been sitting down with him, and he's been showing me. The score for his piece is pretty intense; Colin told me he composed it in about three or four weeks but then physically writing it down took another two months – a couple of hours for every bar! There are separate



*Ben Michaels and composer Colin Alexander onstage at Duke's Hall after the November première of Vers la Flamme*

staves, one for the sounding pitch and one for what your left hand is actually doing. He hand-wrote it and it's absolutely beautiful to look at, and also to play – very cool and meditative.

**When will you première the pieces?**

I've already performed Colin's piece *Vers la Flamme* at the LCS "Cello Gold" concert in November 2023, but I hope to perform all of the pieces this year, perhaps as a set of six if they work together well. I'm hoping to record them too, and I'd love for them to be published somewhere to give other cellists the chance to play some fantastic new pieces.

**Do you compose?**

No, sadly! I did think about writing something to put in the group, but I think it would have cheapened it. If I write something good at some point in the future, then that would be nice. I'd love to be able to compose, but I don't think I'm very good at it!

**The London Cello Society thanks Kim Mackrell for her years of devotion to our nascent Amateur and Adult Learner Division, which blossomed under her watch.**

**As head of this division, she brought stimulating and enjoyable courses twice a year to our membership and took pleasure in interacting with the various participants across a wide range of ages.**

**We wish her well in her future endeavours.**

**Selma Gokcen, Chair  
On behalf of the Executive Board**



# Of Special Interest

The Rite by Heart

with Peteris Sokolovskis

**Latvian cellist Peteris Sokolovskis is a regular player with the Aurora Orchestra, renowned for playing by heart. Their recent performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* was described as 'one of the most breathtaking Proms in history' by Times reviewer Richard Morrison. Here, Peteris describes what's involved in preparing for Aurora concerts.**

This is my version of how I go about memorising an orchestral work. Everyone has their own methods and probably secrets, but for me there isn't a mystery to how this gets done – it always takes quite a bit of time and dedication.

I think anyone can memorise anything if they give themselves enough time to do it. I try to think like a child when I tackle these projects. I never thought about how I memorised music when I was seven – I was told to repeat things over and over and was happy that in the end I didn't mess up. There's some comfort in treating it like this.

The first time I saw the Aurora Orchestra was at the BBC Proms about six years ago, when they performed Shostakovich's *Ninth Symphony*, and it blew me away! The most impressive part of the performance was how slick the presentation of the symphony was – players easily moving about the stage without having to think where to place the music in front of them and, as if by magic, knowing exactly which excerpt of music was needed in the pre-performance talk and demonstration. After a quick stage move (very quick because, of course, there were no music stands) the stage was left bare, only chairs for cellists and stools for bassists. Even before the performance begins you are faced with an unusually empty stage which is not something you are used to, so the level of anticipation is already increased.

Before seeing the orchestra this first time, I had heard my former flatmate swearing at the top of voice at his failed attempt at a passage from a Beethoven symphony he was memorising. This is some years ago but it has really stayed with me as a reference point for how frustrating it can be to memorise large orchestral works. Funnily enough

I do also find Beethoven surprisingly difficult to memorise, perhaps even more so than Stravinsky. However, I got very lucky with my first ever memorised project with Aurora: Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*. I had played this piece extensively in youth orchestra so had largely learned it by heart already. It still took some time for all the notes to go in, but I didn't find it very difficult.

When you arrive at the first rehearsal with Aurora, you notice the biggest difference from a normal orchestral rehearsal is that you know that everyone has gone through the same process as you have. You also already know which part does what, when. It's important to note that even with the printed music on the stand, you memorise what goes on around you – where you might take time, or which instrument should be let through the texture. It's not always necessary to write everything into the part.

So, *The Rite of Spring*. I have been lucky again by having played this piece in youth orchestra and probably a dozen times professionally. I knew the music, but now needed to get it off the page and into my head. I was going to give myself a month to memorise it but the way things worked out, I did the biggest chunk of memorisation a week before the first rehearsal. Luckily for tutti cellos, the first page of the *Rite* doesn't involve us. We have three minutes to enjoy listening to the winds, so we're off to a great start: 10 per cent has already been learned! After the opening, the cello part has a few pages of relentless repeated rhythmic cells that do not appear to have a logical pattern to them. I try to memorise the music in little chunks: it can be as little as one bar at a time and then I'll add another one and so on – the biggest frustration comes when I try to tackle chunks that are too long. When you feel like you have it memorised, you might play along to a recording and, more often than not, you will have to give it another go. In a nutshell, that's what it takes.

What keeps you motivated is that first rehearsal, when you see the collective struggle of your friends and colleagues come together. There are still musical decisions to be made as an orchestra, but it feels like the piece is ready to be performed from day one.

# Cello Talk

## Lambeth Youth Symphony Orchestra • Molly McWhirter



Molly McWhirter

Since 2014, the London Cello Society has been engaged in a collaborative partnership with In Harmony Lambeth, helping their orchestral cellists with individual and collective work.

In Harmony Lambeth launched in 2009 in Stockwell community, inspired by the Venezuelan *El Sistema* programme, using the pursuit of musical excellence to enrich the lives of children, young people and the wider community. In Harmony Lambeth works with over 900 students each week through its in-school and after-school programmes.

We are very pleased to announce the receipt of two grants, one from the Harrison – Frank Family Foundation for £4000 and a matching grant for the same amount of £4000 to continue this partnership. One of the aims of this new funding is to provide some private instruction which the current tutor (Molly McWhirter) identifies as crucial for a couple of the gifted youngsters.

I have had the privilege of spending my Thursday evenings over the last four years teaching the outstanding students aged 11–18 at the Lambeth Youth Symphony Orchestra (LYSO).

There is something very special about this particular young ensemble. The students bring

a certain energy and passion to rehearsals which often has to be painfully coaxed out of a youth orchestra... well, not at LYSO! This means that we have had an amazing opportunity to tackle some core orchestral repertoire, for example, Felix Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture*, Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* and Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet Suite* (to name a few!). It has also allowed space for some chamber music exploration, opportunities for solos and for the composers from within the orchestra to write and workshop their pieces for LYSO. Chamber music provides the essential opportunity for the students to experience managing rehearsals, work on communication, learn to read scores and listen in a uniquely deep manner. These are things that solely playing in orchestra under the direction of a conductor just does not demand in the same way or offer the time to focus on. The effects of this level of listening and independent thinking are apparent when the students return to the full orchestra rehearsal during the second part of Thursday evenings at Brixton Hill Music Centre. Some of the repertoire we have explored so far has included string quartets by Fanny Mendelssohn, Mozart, Beethoven and The Beatles. We have also explored wind ensemble repertoire and Vivaldi's double cello concerto.

Solo opportunities have provided some of the LYSO students the chance to take the reins and confidently become the soloist with the orchestra. This is such amazing practice for the future, even if some of the students do not go on to study performance. The level of confidence, focus, self-awareness that this demands are all invaluable skills that we all need throughout all parts of life. We also plan to ask LYSO alumni to return to play concerto repertoire with the orchestra.

Furthermore, recognising and celebrating the composers within the orchestra has been a central part of our work at LYSO. The student composers have brought their sketches to workshop and conduct with LYSO, which they then take away, reflect and bring back to try out with new and improved ideas. We even performed one of the compositions at our last concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

The students have met all of these challenges with nothing but enthusiasm, determination and hard work.

There are some students I have been teaching since they had just started high school, and it has been a privilege to hear them grow into inspiring, independent, motivated and passionate musicians. There is one cellist in particular who initially was very shy and didn't seem happy to be at LYSO. I have watched him become more and more inspired throughout the years, getting more and more involved; so much so that he recently joined the 'Youth Voice' committee initiative at LYSO. This is a platform for the students to lead in the choice of repertoire we play, the kind of concerts and where, how rehearsals are structured, dress code and so on. He has just left for university, and I was so happy to see him off as a confident, inspired and wonderful musician. I could not be more grateful for the job.

However, none of this would be possible without the incredible teachers, pastoral and operations staff, and the programmes that Lambeth Music Service (LMS) run in schools all throughout the borough. Most, if not all, of the LYSO students began music in primary school through the Music Service's 'MX' classes, where every child has the chance to learn a musical instrument. This is done in a whole class setting, probably more commonly known as 'Wider Opps' classes. Students have the chance to try out different instruments, often switching year to year. If a student takes a shine to a certain instrument, they have the chance to receive subsidised one-to-one lessons with the plethora of LMS peripatetic tutors. Having taught MX in lockdown and, on Friday, 30 June 2023, taken part with LYSO in the In Harmony Lambeth end-of-year concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, I can safely say that I have witnessed the complete progression from MX classes to LYSO and Senior Ensembles. And let me tell you – every child was absolutely outstanding.

## Growing Young Cellists

an interview with Charles Sugden

### How do we grow young cellists in the countryside in UK?

Charles Sugden, a retired vicar, is devoting his energies to doing this through 'Little Cellos' in Chard, Somerset. He tells us about his aspirations in this interview.



### What is 'Little Cellos', exactly?

'Little Cellos' is still very much a work in progress. The ultimate aim is to nurture keen young musicians through introducing them to the cello. They meet for a weekly Saturday session in the town centre and have an instrument to use at home during the week.

### Where have you got to so far?

We have met for six sessions now and there are five young cellists who are on board, aged between 9 and 12. Their families heard of the opportunity through my visits to primary schools in the area and playing at community events, as well as busking in the streets. Subsequently, I have been interviewed on BBC Radio Somerset (12 September 2023, 10.40am).

### Was there a risk you might not have had any takers?

There certainly was a risk, but I suppose that when you believe in the rightness of something and the huge worth of what you have to offer, then it is OK to carry on risking for as long as possible. A good fun time, with all the safeguarding well in place and everybody feeling secure yet excited is what I hoped for.

### Tell us a bit more about where this vision for 'Little Cellos' came from.

For over 40 years, I have been a keen performer of chamber music on flute and cello and had my earlier spell of teaching on both instruments during the early 2000s. As I considered my retirement, I realised that as well as teaching those who are already on their way in motivated, musical families, I wanted to reach out those who have not yet had a chance. Hence the idea of helping low-income families especially (£5 per week can even be reduced if this is unaffordable). I'd love to give their youngsters an opportunity for a beautiful, life-changing pursuit.

### **Charles, some might say this is all a bit far-fetched. How would you respond?**

There have been some far-fetched visions which have come into being (El Sistema, for instance, and even Wendy Max's amazing vocational cello teaching career). The proof of the pudding is in the eating. So until this initiative is given a try, then it's best to keep an open mind.

### **Can LCS members help in any way?**

I'm used to asking for prayer! Seriously, if this is touching your heart somewhere and you're willing for it to succeed as an outreach, I'd love to hear from you and gain encouragement. I have been learning to be a renovator of instruments to some extent – thanks to specialists of Bristol Violin Shop for giving me some tips. I am certainly with L plates on. If anybody who is a top-level performer is reading this, I would love to imagine a performance in Chard, with special publicity put out to young families.

### **Is Chard already a very musical town?**

There is a ukulele group, some operatic groups catering for different age groups, and some primary schools have a good amount of music being offered. Nevertheless, among 300 primary school children, I have only yet heard of one cellist. There are centres of excellence in Taunton (e.g. Guildhall Young Artists), but while people describe Somerset as rich in agriculture, they may be more questioning of other 'culture' until they get to know ordinary people better.

### **So what's the next step for Little Cellos, do you think?**

At present, we are in Year One. There will be a Christmas Concert given for family and friends. Radio Somerset would like them all in their studio too, but this may be organisationally challenging! Quite soon, children and adults in our area will want a string band or a little orchestra to join. And I will be collecting more small-sized instruments, so I am ready for a Year Two intake.

How many sessions/year groups during the week? It's one year at a time, thankfully!

### **How can people contact you at the moment?**

I'm very happy for people to email me at: [chardmus@gmail.com](mailto:chardmus@gmail.com). My wife and I have a website which is [www.chardmusic.com](http://www.chardmusic.com). There, and through [www.musicteachers.co.uk](http://www.musicteachers.co.uk), you can read about my musical background, credentials and vision. I have already had the help of some LCS members, with special mention due to Wendy Max. If there are others who have walked a similar path and they have advice to give, I am always ready to take on board the wisdom gained through others' experiences.





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