



THE MIDLAND YOUTH ORCHESTRA COMPLETES FULL CIRCLE WITH THE CBSO

The Midland Youth Orchestra (MYO) was founded in 1956 by professional violinist and conductor Blyth Major, then General Manager of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO). He was concerned at the poor knowledge of core repertoire and weak sight-reading standards of would-be CBSO candidates of the time, and resolved to create a youth orchestra to address these difficulties.

The MYO was one of the first regional youth orchestras - the beginning of the Youth Orchestra movement in the UK. It drew its players from the best young orchestral instrumentalists all over the Midlands. The MYO offered them the opportunity to experience a high standard of orchestral playing, and a wide range of works from the symphonic repertoire, to prepare them for a career in music or to provide a valuable leisure pastime. It also provided a platform for the best of young Midlands soloists to perform works from the concerto repertoire.

Blyth Major believed that it was only by offering his services without payment in conducting and directing the MYO that he could give his best to the young players before him. His inspirational belief remained the philosophy of the orchestra throughout its 48 years, with everybody from its music director, sectional coaches and administrative staff freely volunteering their services. The MYO had only four music directors in its lifetime: Blyth Major, then James Langley and Stephen Williams (both founder players) and finally Anthony Bradbury (also a former MYO player). Rehearsals were weekly, with courses and regular sectional rehearsals taken by professional players giving up their own time to attain a consistently high standard of musical performance. Many of these professional tutors were CBSO players (some of whom had themselves been MYO players), maintaining the link between the MYO and the CBSO over all those years.

The enduring friendship, romance and happiness generated by the MYO was one of its hallmarks. Rehearsals were about the joy of making music together, to the highest possible standard; young players became members because they wanted to, not because they had been coerced. Many voluntary helpers came forward to fill vacancies for Hon. Secretary and Treasurer, Trustees, and the Management and Parents' committees. Most were parents who continued to help years after their own children had left the MYO. It says much for their regard for the MYO's work that so many committed themselves to the orchestra for so long.

The MYO was financially independent from the CBSO and local authorities, with support sought from local and regional charitable trusts. Its voluntary ethos made relatively slender financial resources go a long way, enabling the MYO to take part in big international festivals such as those run by the International Festival of Youth Orchestras. It enabled its young members to perform in concert halls all over the country, including the most prestigious venues in the Midlands (the MYO was one of the first youth orchestras to perform at Birmingham's new Symphony Hall in 1991), and raised many thousands of pounds for worthwhile charitable causes.

The MYO archives will enable members of the public interested in the MYO and the history of the Youth Orchestra movement to see documentary evidence showing how the MYO was run voluntarily for 48 years, how it operated in an age before email and the internet, how it always maintained its links with the CBSO, and what it achieved in that time to benefit hundreds of young orchestral players and soloists, scores of whom used their experience in the MYO as a springboard into the world of professional music-making.

The archives also touch upon some of the difficulties the MYO began to experience during the 1990s. Some of these were the result of alterations in music education policy, some were due to cultural change. In the late 1990s discussions began between the MYO and the CBSO directors concerning the possibility of the MYO returning to the 'CBSO Fold'. On 11th July 2004 the MYO gave its last concert in the Adrian Boult Hall, Birmingham Conservatoire, and the next time its players performed there was on 31st October 2004 as members of the wonderful new CBSO Youth Orchestra, with Anthony Bradbury (the MYO's final Music Director) and Sakari Oramo (the CBSO's then Music Director) conducting.