

Surrey Brass – 2006 – A Year of Possibilities

I look back at what we have achieved during 2006 and I must admit that on the whole I am impressed. There have been some excellent ideas behind the concerts with, for me, the highlight being the Brass Massive concert at the Menuhin School – what could have been better than combining the youth of Surrey with the age of Surrey Brass?

The opening concert of 2006 was the Galactic Fantastic collaboration with the Bourne Concert Band. Considering the problems we had deciding upon repertoire (and having to cope with no conductor for the final rehearsal on the day) I think we did a superb job. The venue is definitely one that likes the brass sound and it would be nice to return there if finances allow. The idea of collaborating with another group is definitely one I think we should explore further. Not only did it mean that we were not taking the full financial burden of the concert, but it also introduced Surrey Brass to a wider audience. How many of this audience then followed us to any further concerts is unknown, but if even a couple did I think it would be worth repeating, if the opportunity was to arise again.

A few weeks later saw Surrey Brass taking part in the Guildford Festival and producing what I would consider to be one of their finest performances to date. The music was a great mixture of styles and it gave four of the group the chance to take centre stage (which they all did fantastically, of course). According to a straw poll taken amongst the students in the audience, Iain came out as the favourite soloist – which can only be a good thing for the next generation of tuba players. For me, this concert stood out as easily the best organised. We knew who was conducting, who was playing and what we were playing in advance of the concert (the joy of someone else printing the programmes – we HAD to be organised). This meant that we all knew exactly what each of us needed to work on BEFORE the day of the concert. This is definitely something I feel we should work harder to achieve in the future. Special mention should be made of Tom Hammond's excellent rehearsals leading up to the concert.

The Brass & Organ concert was a new venture for Surrey Brass – new venue and a new soloist. The venue is one that definitely that we will be returning to – a great acoustic and one which provided a good audience. Admittedly, the audience might well have been there to listen to their local soloist, who performed very well and certainly added a new colour to the tonal palette of Surrey Brass – nice one Adrian for not just the playing but also the venue.

Just a fortnight later saw possibly one of the most ambitious events in Surrey Brass' history so far. A joint collaboration between Surrey County Arts, Trinity College of Music, Surrey Brass and Rex Richardson. The day events featured Surrey County Arts staff working alongside Roger Argente and Rex in a couple of workshops for the students. Both of our masterclass leaders put on fantastic events for the young people present and the comments coming back from the young people involved have been excellent ever since. The lunchtime concert was an excellent suggestion from Cyril and made a potentially boring moment a continuation of great music for the young students involved. The chance to then chat with the Trinity students was something that I know many of the younger players liked.

The concert was severely marred, for me, by the absence of Pictures and the incredibly rushed reprogramming of other pieces. One of the many things we should take from this concert is that a piece like Pictures needs more than 3 hours of rehearsal. In hindsight, we shouldn't have programmed the piece at all, but hindsight is always 20/20.

Rex playing Rising Sun was a natural showcase of truly incredible virtuosity. I think I can speak for all the trumpet section when I say that it was a lesson in how these instruments can be played. The effect it had on the students was even greater.

There were many problems on the day and in the lead up to it, but the concert did go down well with those that were there. Listing these problems wouldn't solve anything, but a lot of it boiled

down to certain decisions being made without everyone involved in the day being fully consulted. Should we ever participate in such an event again we need to do FULL planning with all of those involved, preferably more than a couple of months in advance. The problem of not everyone being on email 24 hours per day is certainly one that needs to be accounted for when dealing with the planning for this kind of event.

If funding allows, future concerts like this are a great way to introduce Surrey Brass to a yet wider audience, not to mention the chance to work again with players of Rex's calibre. The problem is definitely the finance.

After a much needed summer break, we came back in September ready to prepare for the, now annual, Film Concert. A pile of new arrangements appeared and we were able to present a concert with nearly the whole programme being new to the audience. The trombones section's joint rendition of The Acrobat is something that we will have to repeat at some point.

Once again this concert suffered from great ideas being planned and then having to be changed at the last minute. Part of this was due to certain items not being available until the last minute (for which the arranger apologises – but he can only do so many in a certain time), part was due to a possibly over-ambitious original programme and there was the ever-present problem of not knowing exactly who would be at any particular rehearsal and the concert.

Again, mention must be made of Tom Hammond who stepped into the breach at the last minute to cover this concert and again produced some excellent results on very minimal rehearsal.

The year ended with the annual Christmas celebration concert. It was good to see some new repertoire being added to this concert (Christmas can get a little stale), but I think the pieces that are becoming traditional favourites shouldn't be lost from the future of this concert. Festive Cheer might be a collection of cheese, but it works and always goes down well with the audience. Something I feel we must be very careful with in the future is what to do with the children's choir. Even a large adult choir is in danger of being drowned out by a 10-piece brass ensemble, a small children's choir doesn't really stand much of a chance.

Quite why the audience was down on previous years I don't know. This is something that we need to address – without a decent audience we cannot afford to put this concert on with the same groups.

2006 has seen some of the best that Surrey Brass can produce, yet it has also had moments where I would consider that we have failed to achieve what we might have done. Due to various circumstances the organisation has not always been as good as we would like. Rehearsals have rarely had full attendance and it has become the normal state of affairs that the only time we actually get the players for the concert together is the concert itself. If we are serious about trying to perform at a high level, this is not a situation that can continue – it is impossible to work as a team when the team never meets up.

For me, the concerts which have worked best since Surrey Brass was formed have been those where the programme has been decided well in advance. It has meant that all the players have known what we need to work on, the conductor has known what needs to be rehearsed, the audience can find out what is on the programme (by checking the website) and it leads to a less stressful run-up to any concert. During the past year we have had concerts where the programme has been decided almost as we walked on stage. If we are intending Surrey Brass to be taken seriously, I would suggest that this is definitely one element that needs to change. Some plans are already developing for 2007 and beyond – these plans need to be firmed up as soon as possible, realistic programmes need to be sorted and then players can get on with what they are best at – playing the music.

Looking forward to a more organised 2007, with the playing staying at the high level we have established as the Surrey Brass standard.

Michael Chapple