



▲ In concert and community: The LMP turns 70

# All aboard

As the London Mozart Players celebrates 70 years, Toby Deller finds out how the orchestra has adapted to changing circumstances and finding a home in the community in the process

It was some 30 years ago that the London Mozart Players (LMP) put down roots in Croydon. Lured by the acoustics of the Fairfield Hall and the prospect of financial support from the council and locally based business, the orchestra set up its headquarters at the venue in 1989.

Then, a quarter of a century later, came two announcements that could have thrown things off course. 'It's funny how things sometimes happen,' recalls Julia Desbruslais, the LMP's executive director. 'The closing of Fairfield Halls for refurbishment coincided with a time when our funding had been removed by the council for lots of very legitimate reasons – they had no money. And we had to think: is this an opportunity?'

Unable to replace managerial staff because of the cuts, and unwilling to see the orchestra wind up, the players decided to take all the artistic and administrative affairs into their own hands [see <https://bit.ly/2Mbzo3f>]. This freed them up to make the kind of creative

decisions about their future that they might not have done otherwise. This was especially evident with the temporary loss in 2016 of their base.

Salvation, in part, came at Upper Norwood in the northern part of the borough, away from Croydon's busy town centre. 'It was through the generosity of this amazing man, the Reverend John Pritchard at St John the Evangelist, LMP's co-principal cellist and a member of the orchestra for some 30 years,' explains Desbruslais. 'He had been to see Paula Murray, who's the creative director in Croydon. He said: I've got this incredible space, I'd love it to be used. Paula said to me to go and have a look at it. I went thinking that it might do for the next six months but I walked into the building and thought: there's an inspiring, incredible journey we could take here.'

The spacious gothic revival building, with a raised platform at its centre and movable seating and ecclesiastical fixtures,

was immediately suitable for concerts and, crucially, could also accommodate the orchestra's back office needs. But the orchestra sensed it needed to look beyond its walls.

'The thing we knew right from the beginning was that to come and plonk ourselves in the community and not find out about them, we wouldn't last five minutes. We spent our time really getting to know what makes that community, what makes them tick, where the strengths are, where there are things that are missing. Finding ways to bring children on board, all different sorts of community groups, groups with people who are mentally fragile, all sorts. And building our concerts so they really serve the community.'

These were an immediate success. 'The launch concert we did there was a free concert. People made donations and we broke even in that first concert. We now have a patron who donates every year to the series; Croydon council now help us out with it, the church give us our rent back and we put that money



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towards those concerts. And then obviously we have really great audiences.'

The ensemble's base at the church has led to connections with nearby schools, with players going in to give tuition and the orchestra providing side-by-side opportunities. But it has not been only younger musicians who have benefited. LMP's 2017 Christmas concert led the homeless charity Crisis Skylight Croydon to get in touch.

'One of their homeless people had had to sell his flute because he had no money, and that was the way he made his money. They came to us and said: could you find us a flute? Anyway, we did and we got it mended free of charge, then we invited him to the church to do a recital. And he came and played. It was a lovely connection we made, as a result of which this autumn we sent a songwriter into Crisis. Now we're talking about running a project that has a much longer lead time, really working with these people.'

Other projects have included programming a 150th anniversary concert for another nearby church. 'We spent ages finding ways to illustrate their history by using music that had been performed at the Crystal Palace, composers like Gordon Jacob, who lived

down the road, and Mendelssohn, who lived in Crystal Palace for a while.' And the Arts Council gave money for LMP On The Move to help the players search out other non-specialist performance locations in the area while the Fairfield Halls were unavailable.

For all her self-confessed enthusiasm for the local work, however, Desbruslais is keen not to overlook LMP's ambitions elsewhere. 'We want to be playing in the very top places with the very top artists. We're back on the Southbank this year [on 31 March and 9 June] and the following year, that's all in the diary, with big soloists.' And as well as its return as residents to Fairfield Halls, which it will be re-opening with a gala concert later this year, LMP has a tour to Japan and Hong Kong lined up. The second in successive years, this will combine concerts and side-by-side mentoring.

It also continues its Piano Explored lunchtime concert series at St John's Smith Square, one of the first projects it set up as a self-governing ensemble. Fronted by pianist and conductor laureate Howard Shelley, this year's programme features some of the orchestra's principals in solo roles, a special feature to help mark the orchestra's 70th

birthday (the 13 February concert centres on the Mozart concerto the orchestra played in its very first concert in February 1949). As part of the birthday season, former chief conductor Jane Glover returns for an evening concert at St John's Smith Square on 11 April. And LMP is adding to its extensive recording catalogue with one release featuring Shelley and another dedicated to Parry's oratorio *Judith* that it will perform at the Royal Festival Hall on 3 April.

Heading back to Fairfield Halls will not mean cutting the community ties it has established, of course.

'We have two arms of the LMP,' says Desbruslais. 'There's LMP in the community and LMP in that concert hall, and those two things completely link up. You can't separate them, it just shows different facets of this orchestra. We are the orchestra that's resident in Croydon and the Fairfield Halls is our concert hall. So it's very clear. We're going to be both.'

Tickets are available for the LMP's concert 'Mozart's Women' conducted by Jane Glover at St John's Smith Square on 11th April. For further information visit [www.londonmozartplayers.com](http://www.londonmozartplayers.com)