

THE BRENT SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA: THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS



THE ORCHESTRA'S HISTORY IN BRIEF

In March 2011 there was standing-room only in St James's Church as the Brent Symphony Orchestra celebrated its centenary. The programme covered the gamut from Stravinsky's comic opener, through two popular favourites, a new commission and Mahler's massively-scored First Symphony.

***Brent Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Levon Parikian
Saturday 19 March 2011 at St James's Church, West Hampstead***

Stravinsky: Greetings Prelude

Haydn: Trumpet concerto

Crispian Steele-Perkins (trumpet)

Mendelssohn: Hebrides overture

Mahler: Symphony no. 1

Chonon Lewis: Scoring a Century

This is how we got there from our rather less polished beginnings.

The early years: 1911-1940

There was a lively musical scene in the Harlesden area in the forty years or so before the First World War. 1911 saw well-attended performances by the Harlesden Choral Society, the Willesden Green & Cricklewood Choral Society, the Willesden District Choir, the Harvist Orchestral Society (which boasted more than 50 members) and the Milman Operatic Society, as well as several organ recitals at various churches and a number of musical events at St Matthew's, Willesden, under the direction of the Rev. Noel Bonavia-Hunt.

In October 2011 alone, St Matthew's was the venue for a performance of Alfred Gaul's cantata *The Holy City*, conducted by Noel Bonavia-Hunt, while its fine new church hall was used for the annual parish social which included songs written by the energetic young clergyman, one with words by his sister Dorothy. That month also, a record attendance was attracted to St Matthew's hall to hear "a singularly delightful concert provided almost solely by the talent of the Bonavia-Hunt family," which included not only Noel as composer and musical director and Dorothy as vocalist and writer of lyrics, but also the musical star of the family, their sister Ethel, a former pupil of Clara Schumann who had returned from Berlin to play Scharwenka's piano concerto no. 4, with a second piano filling in the orchestral parts.

1910-11 was the Harlesden Choral Society's 24th season. In February 1911 it was announced that Frank Greenfield, "a well-known local musician", would be forming an orchestra to accompany the chorus, and the first concert given under the name of the Harlesden Choral & Orchestral Society took place on 5 April 1911. The first two parts of Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* were presented, with some miscellaneous works in the second half. The chorus's usual conductor, Dr W Phillips, took charge, with Frank Greenfield leading the orchestra. Dr Phillips ran the choral rehearsals, which were held on Wednesdays – at 3 p.m.! – in the Wesleyan Hall, Harlesden High Street, while Frank took charge of the orchestra at 6 p.m. on Wednesdays at the Croft in Harlesden High Street.

The Creation was followed in December by a concert performance of Edward German's opera *Merrie England*. This, the *Willesden Chronicle* reported, was "in the main musically successful." The chorus continued steadily to improve, and the newly-formed band was "a splendid asset to the Society". However, the reviewer took issue with the use of a piano to reinforce and often double the orchestra, which ruined the colouring in the quieter moments.

Frank Greenfield had been billed to appear but was unavailable on the night, and although he had an “extremely well qualified substitute”, there were obviously problems in following Dr Phillips’ lead. “He is a watchful, thoroughly reliable choral conductor, and now and then his strings get a tip from him; but the rest of the orchestra seems to us to jog along merrily (and merrie-Englandy) with scarcely a cue to guide them; and it is one of the wonders of Harlesden that they manage as well as they do.”

This may explain why Frank Greenfield was on the podium for the next concert, on 20 February 1912, and for 40 years after that. Frank lived a few doors away from Noel Bonavia-Hunt in Harlesden Gardens, and the Bonavia-Hunt connection featured strongly in the programme of his debut concert, held at the hall of the church where Noel was Assistant Vicar.

**Harlesden Choral & Orchestral Society, conducted by Frank Greenfield
Tuesday 20 February 1912 at St Matthew’s Hall, St Mary’s Road, Willesden**

Beethoven: Prometheus overture

Schubert: Ballet air in G (Rosamunde)

Wagner: "O Star of Eve" (Tannhäuser)
Mr Frederic Copping

Godard: Idylle and Allegretto for flute and orchestra
Mr Everard Winter (flute)

Noel Bonavia-Hunt: "The Land of Otherwhere"
Miss Lilian Goodson

**Scharwenka: Piano concerto no. 4 –
2nd & 3rd movements**
Miss Ethel Bonavia (piano)

**Haydn: "London" Symphony no 104 –
3rd & 4th movements**

Godard: "Angels guard thee"
Mr Frederic Copping

Sibelius: Valse triste

Järnefelt: Praeludium

Teresa del Riego: "Sink Red Sun"
Miss Lilian Goodson,
accompanied by Mr T Sampson

Victor Williams: Valse Gracieuse

Ethel (who performed under the name of Bonavia) reprised the Scharwenka concerto which she had played in the family concert, having in the meantime given the first British performance of the complete work at the Pavilion, Brighton. *The Land of Otherwhere* was one of the songs written by Noel and Dorothy which had previously been performed at St Matthew’s Hall. Everard Winter, who was to perform Edward German’s saltarello for unaccompanied piccolo at the February 1914 concert, was the orchestra’s first flute.

The *Willesden Chronicle*’s reviewer enjoyed this rather more than the *Merrie England* concert. The “well-drilled band” demonstrated “quite a Queen’s Hall flavour”, and “both conductor and orchestra kept level heads through some terribly tricky syncopated passages” in the Scharwenka. “Miss Bonavia is a beautiful player. Her technique is academically perfect, of course, for she is fresh from her pupillage; but she has much individuality, and an intensity that will make its direct appeal to the sympathies of her audiences.” The reviewer was less impressed with her brother’s piece. Miss Lilian Goodson “did her best” with *The Land of Otherwhere*, which although well-written and melodious was overloaded with “distressingly busy orchestrations”. However, the review noted that Noel was not responsible for the orchestration.

Frederic Copping’s arias were “carefully sung, but lacked the required passion,” while the solos of Everard Winter, the orchestra’s first flute, were “quite up to his well known high standard.”

“We congratulate Mr Greenfield most heartily upon the excellent work of his little band. He has not been alphabetically belabelled by universities or schools of music, but the great advantage of this conductor is that he can conduct. He has played for years under Sir Henry Wood, and knows exactly how things ought to be done.... Mr Greenfield's orchestra has distinctly 'arrived', and we earnestly trust that nothing may occur to check its steady development on art lines, or deny to the musical public of Harlesden the joy of at last possessing an amateur band that can present high-class orchestral music with credit to the composers, themselves and their most capable conductor.”

The orchestra seems to have had no more than 25 players in the concerts conducted by Dr Phillips. It may be that the piano accompaniment was used because the orchestral forces were incomplete, but the programme for the February 1912 concert, the first the orchestra undertook without the choir and the first under the baton of Frank Greenfield, listed 40 names – a complete chamber orchestra. From the second concert onwards there were more than 60, and as the numbers grew so did the ambitiousness of the orchestra's repertoire.

In December 1912 the *Willesden Chronicle* expressed disappointment that the Harlesden Philharmonic had “not attempted anything more serious than a miscellaneous concert”, but that was about to change. The main work in a second concert, held on 10 April 1913, was Schubert's “Unfinished” Symphony, “played with a delicacy and certainty of touch” and ending with “an exquisitely true chord”. The musical circle of Harlesden feared that Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture would prove over-ambitious, but although there were signs of nerves early on the performance was “an unqualified success”.

The programme also included Beethoven's *Fidelio* overture, Boccherini's minuet in A, and Boëllman's *Variations Symphoniques* for cello and orchestra, played by a professional soloist, Mr Norman Attwell. Norman Attwell joined Frank Greenfield and the pianist Miss Jessie Attwell for Mendelssohn's D minor piano trio, and there were also songs by Tchaikovsky (*Je vous bénis forêts et prés*) and Richard Strauss (*Zueignung*), performed by Miss Christian Keay. These songs may not have been to everybody's taste: vocal items continued to feature for some years, but they were invariably songs by British composers with titles like *When you are sad* (by local composer Philip Baker), *Lad o'mine* (Herbert Oliver), *In a fairy boat* (Cyril Scott), *The lilac cotton gown* (Dorothy Hill), *O that we two were Mating* (Nevin) and *The beat of a passionate heart* (Montague Phillips).

In the 10 April 1913 concert the orchestra was billed for the first time as the Harlesden Philharmonic Society, but just 19 days later it made its final appearance as the Harlesden Choral & Orchestral Society. This was another choral concert conducted by Dr Phillips. The main works were two Mendelssohn cantatas, the *Hymn of Praise (Lobgesang)* and *Lauda Sion (Praise Jehovah)*, and between them the orchestra performed Smart's Festive March in D.

This concert was spoilt by the deafening noise from a rival concert taking place nearby. “Violent and unrehearsed effects” and “occasional bizarre quality of tone” emanated from a “barbaric chorus and orchestra against which no known musical society could ever hope to pit itself.” It is scarcely surprising therefore that the Harlesden Choral & Orchestral Society's performance lacked pianos and pianissimos. The soloists in the Mendelssohn works were of varied quality, ranging from “acceptable” to “fresh and beautiful”.

That was the last time the chorus and orchestra performed together, the chorus subsequently reverting to the reliable piano accompaniment of Miss Amy Paffard. Like previous Choral Society concerts, this event was held at the Furness Road Council Schools in Harlesden. Meanwhile the Harlesden Philharmonic continued to play at St Matthew's Hall until early 1915, when the hall was converted into one of six military hospitals in the borough.

The HPO then moved to Furness Road, which became the usual venue into the 1920s, though the first postwar concert, in December 1919, took place back in St Matthew's Hall.

German music was a favourite. The first concert of the second season had featured an all-Wagner first half, with lighter fare after the interval. (Modern concert practice places the weightiest music last, except at the Last Night of the Proms, but this is a reversal of the way things were done in those days.)

**Harlesden Philharmonic Society, conducted by Frank Greenfield
Thursday 18 December 1913 at St Matthew's Hall, St Mary's Road, Willesden**

Wagner: Huldigungsmarsch

Offenbach: Barcarolle (Tales of Hoffman)

Wagner: Rienzi's Prayer (Rienzi)
Mr Gwynne Davies (tenor)

Verdi: O don fatale (Don Carlos)

Wagner: Overture, Die Meistersinger

Grieg: Suite no.1, Peer Gynt

Wagner: Elsa's Dream (Lohengrin)
Miss Lucie Lever (soprano)

Leoncavallo: On with the motley (Pagliacci)
Mr Gwynne Davies (tenor)

Wagner: Träume

Elgar: Pomp and Circumstance March no. 4

Wagner: Spring Song (Die Walküre)
Mr Gwynne Davies (tenor)

Wagner: Prelude to Act III, Lohengrin

The tenor soloist, Gwynne Davies, had been making gramophone records since 1906. He returned in December 1913 to sing some less elevated songs, including two of his own composition – *Violets White and Violets Blue* and *Going to the Fair*.

The Wagner concert was a sell-out, with “scores of people” turned away. It was the first to offer really substantial pieces, and the *Willesden Chronicle's* review makes it clear that the orchestra's standards had risen somewhat. From then on, there were no more performances of isolated movements from symphonies and concertos.

The *Chronicle's* reviewer was never afraid to deliver a harsh judgment when necessary, but “having been in close touch with music in this district for nearly a quarter of a century”, he (or she) found it “well-nigh incredible that a combination of local amateurs, assisted by a mere half-dozen professional players at the most, should even attempt, and do decently, a Wagner orchestral programme. The executant members of the Harlesden Philharmonic Society did more than ‘decently’, they did *excellently*.” The Offenbach and Grieg numbers also came in for high praise, though the hard-to-please reviewer noted that while *In the Hall of the Mountain King* was “the triumph of the whole evening”, the reprise of that movement as an encore was a “comparative failure”.

The first wartime concert took place on Thursday 17 December 1914. It began with “the National Anthems of the Allies – Russia, Belgium, Japan, France and Great Britain. Remarkably, the first two pieces were by Germans – Mendelssohn's *Ruy Blas* overture and Schumann's song *Two Grenadiers* – and the main work was the Mendelssohn violin concerto. There was a martial aspect to the second half, which included Tchaikovsky's *1812* overture and Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* March no. 1, and proceedings concluded with a second rendering of *God Save the King*. The programme reported that seven playing members of the Society had joined His Majesty's Forces.

The Society seems to have been in some doubt as to whether it could continue to function effectively during the War, but “encouraged by the success of last season, in spite of adverse circumstances,” it announced that the first concert of the 1915-6 season would take place on 15 December. Just two concerts a season was the norm during this period.

In 1915, playing members paid a subscription of 6/- (30p) per season. This also entitled them to one reserved seat per concert at half price. Intending members, at the invitation of regular members, could play at two early rehearsals, but with no guarantee that they would be allowed to join the orchestra.

Alongside the playing members, the Society also had subscribing members. In those days before the BBC came into existence, and when listening to gramophone records wasn't a wholly satisfactory musical experience, amateur orchestras were a much more important part of people's musical experience than they are nowadays. Subscribers of 6/- were entitled to two reserved seats for each concert; 10/6 (52½p) bought them three reserved and one unreserved seat, and one guinea (£1.05) bought six reserved and two unreserved seats. Tickets were normally 2/- (10p) or 2/6d (12½p) if reserved and numbered, and 1/- (5p) unreserved.

It is difficult to compare prices then with present-day values, as tax rates and consumption patterns are so different, but on the basis of the retail price index, £1 in 1915 was worth about £47.50 today. Using average earnings as a yardstick, £1 then would be equivalent to some £310 now.

Short pieces composed by members of the orchestra featured from time to time, a tradition which continues today. In addition, composers were invited to perform their own works with the Harlesden orchestra. In April 1915 Mr Thorpe Bates sang Herbert Oliver's *By the galley fire*, accompanied by the composer, who also conducted the first London performance of his *New Suite for Orchestra*. There was another London premiere in December 1915, when Eric Coates conducted his suite, *From the country-side*.

Franz Xaver Scharwenka's piano concerto at that first concert in February 1912 was another first London performance, albeit not involving the composer – it was only written in 1908 – and Frank Jephson's pastorale received its first performance anywhere in February 1914.

28 February 1931 was one of the highlights of the orchestra's interwar years. The *Willesden Chronicle* commented that “it may be taken by readers to show lack of originality if one repeats that the orchestra played better than ever, but it is the truth. Since the last concert they have gained in the direction of delicacy of technique, and it must be an inspiration for some of the more recently joined members to belong to one of the finest amateur orchestras in or near London.” The reviewer praised “the fine rich tone of wind and strings” in Mendelssohn's *Ruy Blas* overture, Dvorak's *New World* symphony was “magnificently played” (though the third movement was omitted because time was going on apace), and Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* “was played with almost fiendish truth of expression”. The second half began with some well-delivered songs with piano before the highlight of the evening, Max Bruch's violin concerto and two encores played by none other than Albert Sammons, one of the finest violinists of the age. And the Harlesden Philharmonic “proved themselves wholly worthy of the privilege of playing with that great artist.”

The last season proper before the Second World War ended with a concert on 30 March 1939 in which the star turn was Sylvia Berkeley, a soprano with a voice of “singular charm and purity, and with remarkable power”. Miss Berkeley had been a *prima donna* with the Berlin State Opera company until 18 months previously: German-born, she had anglicised her name on coming to this country. She performed *Elsa's Dream* from *Lohengrin* and a

number of songs “calculated to appeal to the ‘middlebrow’ English audience – popular numbers from Italian operas, sung in Italian, English and German.”

Jessie Rose was the soloist in Boëllman’s *Variations symphonique* for cello and orchestra and in smaller pieces by Gluck, Nin and David Popper. She had recently played at the Albert Hall and Wigmore Hall, and impressed with her subtlety, polish and exquisite bowing. The orchestra played Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* overture, Stanford’s *Irish Rhapsody* and Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Capriccio Espagnol*, but the main work was another performance of the *New World* symphony, again with the scherzo omitted. This was “a very competent, if not inspired rendering”, with poor wind attack and “some ticklish moments” in the winds throughout, though the horns came out well.

The orchestra did better at its next concert, on 24 March 1940. Though only bits and pieces were played, the first and last movements of Beethoven’s Fifth were “most beautifully and expressively played”. The venue was Harlesden Presbyterian Church, and the second half of the concert was given over to choral music sung by the church choir, and organ pieces composed and played by Mr Harold T Scull.

Things were winding down as wartime preoccupations took precedence, and instead of its usual concert, the HPO invited patrons and friends to its final rehearsal of the season on 4 May. The hour-long programme consisted of Beethoven’s *Fidelio* overture, three movements from Brahms’ Symphony no. 2 and two movements from Bizet’s *L’Arlésienne* suite, “a fitting conclusion to a tasteful and utterly charming programme”. “Great credit must be given to Mr Greenfield who, despite the obvious tremendous difficulties [had] succeeded in keeping the orchestra at so high a level.” The HPO would not get together again until early 1946.

The early postwar era: 1946-1955

The Harlesden Philharmonic’s first postwar concert was given in June 1946. Frank Greenfield received a great ovation when he mounted the podium, and “introduced an air of cheery comradeship” by explaining the theme of Brahms’ “lesser-known”(!) Symphony no. 2 and humming it to his listeners. A nice touch to include a piece from the orchestra’s last meeting before disbanding in 1940 – but this time the Brahms was performed complete. For this and the next few performances, the Harlesden Philharmonic was advertised as “a full orchestra of 50” – fairly small for a symphony orchestra, but enough to get the job done.

Harlesden Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Frank Greenfield Thursday 27 June 1946 at Willesden Presbyterian Church, Nicoll Road, Harlesden

Mozart: Don Giovanni overture

Haydn: Symphony no. 7 in C (“Le Midi”)

Handel: Largo in C

Handel: Organ concerto no. 4
Norman Swann (organ)

Walford Davies: Solemn Melody
Gladys Workman (cello)

Handel: Leave me radiant light
Cyril Kershaw (baritone)

Wagner; Hans Sach’s monologue (The Mastersingers)
Cyril Kershaw (baritone)

Brahms: Symphony no. 2

The next concert took place at Willesden County School on Saturday 12 October. This consisted mostly of short pieces such as two of Brahms’ Hungarian Dances, Sibelius’s *Valse*

Triste and vocal works by Gluck, Bizet, Richard Strauss and Frank Bridge, sung by the contralto Thelma Williams. *Le Midi* again featured: until the orchestra really found its feet again in the mid-1950s, items from one programme were often repeated in the next. The Willesden Chronicle reported that the standard of orchestra playing was not on the whole up to that shown at the previous concert, though the Prelude from Act III of *Lohengrin* “sent listeners home on a wave of Wagnerian excitement”.

From March 1947 onwards, some of the Harlesden Philharmonic’s concerts were sponsored by Willesden Borough Council. The Council had been providing sponsored entertainment since 1920, and in the early postwar period its entertainments programme was one of the largest in the country. At one time the music played had to be approved by the borough engineer, but we can assume that by 1946 engineering expertise was no longer a requirement for programme selection!

The orchestra was at a low ebb in the early 1950s. It gave no public concerts in 1952, and in December of that year Frank Greenfield announced that on doctor’s orders he would have to retire. He died in May 1953. Douglas White, the orchestra’s timpanist and Treasurer, took temporary command of the baton but conducted only the second half of one concert. This was the Coronation concert held in June 1953, which was shared with the Willesden Light Opera Company.

***Harlesden Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Jules Fordham and Douglas White
Wednesday 10 June 1953 at Wykeham Primary School, Aboyne Road, Neasden***

Montague Phillips: The Rebel Maid (excerpts)
Willesden Light Opera Company and soloists

Elgar: Coronation Ode
*Betty White, Ethel Huntley,
Robert Turner, Gerard Pinnock
Conducted by Jules Fordham*

Beethoven: Prometheus overture

Schumann: Piano concerto - 1st movement
Doris Berry (piano)

Debussy: Jeux d'eau
Doris Berry (piano)

Haydn: Symphony, La Reine

Gounod: Faust - Ballet suite

After two years of near-silence, the Harlesden Philharmonic resumed regular concert-giving in December 1953 under its new conductor, the legendary Harry Legge. The musicians played with “enthusiasm and feeling” in Beethoven’s *Egmont* overture, *The Gods go A-Begging* (a Beecham arrangement of Handel’s music), some songs performed by the soprano Lettice Walsh, Haydn’s Symphony no. 97, Schubert’s *Rosamunde* overture and Walford Davies’ *Solemn Melody*. The concert deserved a bigger audience, thought the *Willesden Chronicle* – and the next concert the following March was indeed much better attended.

The upward trajectory: 1956-1984

In 1956 Harry Legge took part in – and almost certainly initiated – a move that would transform the fortunes of the orchestra. As the Willesden Chronicle put it, “as a group of persons drawn together to make music rather than to listen, [the Harlesden Philharmonic had] survived into a time when mere listening and looking have become the chief leisure occupation of millions... It survived even the loss of its veteran conductor, acquired the enthusiastic support of Mr Stanley Pratt as President and the skill and inspiring leadership of

Mr Harry Legge... But having got that far, the orchestra was still up against all the difficulties – finance not the least of them – that dog amateur music-making.”

Thus the minutes of the Willesden Borough Amenities Committee meeting of 12 March record that the Harlesden Philharmonic Orchestra had approached it for sponsorship along similar lines to the support given to the Willesden Borough Choir and the Willesden Borough Operatic Society. The orchestra had been associated with the Council in presenting concerts in the past and in providing musical accompaniment for presentations by the Borough Choir more recently. At a special meeting, the orchestra had agreed to be disbanded under its present name, but should the Council withdraw its support within a year the orchestra asked for its equipment to be returned.

The Amenities Committee recommended that the Council sponsor the orchestra, which would be renamed the Willesden Municipal Orchestra, and take over “the instruments and valuable library of music, together with other equipment and property, with the exception of cash which [would] be held in trust on behalf of the playing members.” It further recommended that a liaison committee be set up from the orchestra consisting of the Conductor, Leader, Secretary and two other playing members, that Stanley Pratt be made President of the Willesden Municipal Orchestra and co-opted onto the liaison committee, and that the Mayor be invited to become Patron, as with the Willesden Borough Choir and the Willesden Borough Operatic Society. The Amenities Committee added that the sum allowed in the estimates under the vote “Borough Choir” would be sufficient to meet the anticipated expenditure involved in sponsoring the Orchestra.

The Times considered this development important enough to be worth a brief item in its 17 March issue, adding that the Amenities Committee intended that after what it described as a takeover the Orchestra should be expanded to some 60 musicians.

The inaugural concert of the Willesden Municipal Orchestra was held in December 1956. The orchestra was just 40 strong, including four professionals. The start of the concert was “a little shaky”, but the orchestra steadily improved and it brought the show to a triumphant conclusion with the Grand March from *Tannhäuser*.

***Willesden Municipal Orchestra, conducted by Harry Legge
Saturday 8 December 1956 at Willesden College of Technology, Denzil Road***

Mendelssohn; Symphony no. 3

Mozart: Il Seraglio overture

Mozart: Exultate Jubilate
Gwen Catley (soprano)

Senallé: Allegro spiritoso
Eric Howard (bassoon)

Rossini: Una voce poco fa (Barber of Seville)
Gwen Catley (soprano)

Verdi: Nannetta's aria (Falstaff)
Gwen Catley (soprano)

J Strauss: Laughing song (Die Fledermaus)
Gwen Catley (soprano)

Wagner: Grand March (Tannhäuser)

“To try to compare Willesden Municipal Orchestra’s performance with the near perfection we are accustomed to on records and radio would leave a critic floundering between fulsome insincerity and unfairly severe comment. No friend or member of the orchestra would wish me to attempt such a thing,” wrote the Willesden Chronicle’s reviewer. “But it is fair to say that as an amateur orchestra its standard is above average. It is worthy of the support given by the Council, and of a lot more from the public. All who heard the programme on Saturday

look forward keenly to the next and are confident that by then something better will be achieved.”

Boosted by the Council's support and Harry's leadership, the orchestra went from strength to strength under various names. It was soon renamed the Willesden Symphony Orchestra, and after the London Borough of Brent came into existence it gave its first concert as the Brent Symphony Orchestra in November 1966. From December 1967 the orchestra's regular venue was Brent's magnificent Town Hall.

Brent Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Harry Legge
Sunday 10 December 1967 at Brent Town Hall, Forty Lane, Wembley

Mendelssohn: The Hebrides overture

Borodin: Polovstian Dances (Prince Igor)
Willesden Operatic & Choral Societies

Beethoven: Symphony no. 5

Rachmaninov: Piano concerto no 2
Moura Lympny piano)

The London Borough of Brent continued its predecessor's policy in providing a wide-ranging programme of municipal entertainments, promoting its own events at Brent Town Hall. Under that regime, the Orchestra was engaged by the Council to give three concerts a year, with the promoters (the Council) paying for the conductor (Harry), soloists, the leader, any extra players required, publicity (posters, leaflets and advertising) and use of the rehearsal and concert venues. Thus, the BSO were not involved at all in the finance and management of the concerts.

With this level of support, the BSO was able to engage internationally-renowned soloists such as the pianists Shura Cherkassky, Peter Frankl, Peter Katin, John Lill, Moura Lympny, Denis Matthews, Semprini and Craig Sheppard, violinists Iona Brown, Raymond Cohen, Erich Gruenberg and Nigel Kennedy, cellists Robert Cohen, Stefan Popov and Paul Tortelier, clarinetist Jack Brymer, horn-player Alan Civil, trumpeter John Wilbraham and singers Elizabeth Connell, Linda Esther Gray, Felicity Lott, Forbes Robinson and Richard Van Allen.

In November 1977 the BSO gave the inaugural concert at the new Wembley Conference Centre. The programme explained that a wide range of music had been chosen to aid full acoustic testing of the hall – Walton's *Crown Imperial*, Delius' *Walk to the Paradise Garden* and three pieces by Tchaikovsky, the Theme & variations in G, the piano concerto no 2 (with Shura Cherkassky) and the 1812 overture (with the Band of the Blues and Royals).

Later concerts at the Wembley Conference Centre included a performance of Brahms' piano concerto no. 2 with Craig Sheppard, a programme of Wagner orchestral pieces which concluded with Paul Tortelier playing the Dvorak cello concerto, the Verdi Requiem and Mahler's enormous Symphony no. 2, before the BSO returned to Brent Town Hall at the end of 1979. Another memorable event was a concert performance of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in 1984, with members of the choirs of the Church of God of Prophecy, Wembley and Harlesden, providing both soloists and the chorus.

The financial struggle: 1985-2000

This halcyon period came to an end as local authority budgets tightened. By the mid-1980s the Council was looking to cut costs, and in any case the changing demographics of the Borough meant that classical music was no longer a priority. Brent Council stopped

promoting its own concerts after the 1984/85 financial year, leaving the BSO to put on its own.

In a note in the March 1989 programme, Brian Lasky, then President, wrote that these were difficult times for all organisations hitherto financially dependent upon the London Borough of Brent. "A year ago the future looked bleak and serious thought was given to the question of the orchestra's survival; the agreed plan of action was to seek local commercial sponsorship to compensate for reduced support from the Council." The first sponsors were Biro Bic Ltd, Barclays Bank Plc and Yamaha Pianos. BSO became a registered charity in 1990. "Like many similar organisations, it has become increasingly dependent on fund-raising and welcomes offers of sponsorship," wrote the President.

The Council did renew its support with the provision of a grant from 1989/90, but this subsidy was reduced from 1992/93 and finally stopped altogether after 1998/99. Now that the BSO had to manage a precarious budget relying upon players' subscriptions, ticket sales and fund-raising, it could no longer afford to hire Brent Town Hall and the orchestra has not played there since March 1995.

Thanks to Harry and Sue Legge's connections there, St John's Wood Church came to the rescue by promoting one BSO concert a year. This arrangement continues. These concerts are always well-attended, the acoustics are excellent and the Church makes us most welcome. For its other concerts, the BSO tried various venues within Brent, none of which was entirely satisfactory, and, sadly, we have not played within the Borough for several years.

The final concert of the second millennium was Adrian Charlesworth's first as leader and the last that Harry Legge conducted. Fittingly, it took place at Harry's own church at St John's Wood.

***Brent Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Harry Legge
Saturday 27 November 1999 at St John's Wood Church, Wellington Road***

Stanley Black: Overture to a Costume Comedy

Schubert: Symphony no. 3

***Handel, arr. Beecham:
The Faithful Shepherd suite***

Brahms: Violin concerto
Lorraine McAslan (violin)

Harry had played under many of the greats, and knew precisely what he wanted from an orchestra and how to get it without much fuss. He worked on the principle that if you speak as little as possible, and let the players play the notes as much as possible, eventually they become familiar with what you are trying to achieve. There were some who appeared once or twice at Brent rehearsals and then disappeared, frightened off no doubt by his ascerbic sense of humour. These were the people who hadn't noticed the twinkle in his eye. Once musicians had worked out what he was about, they stayed and developed a strong loyalty to Harry and the BSO.

After 46 years, a hard act to follow. The search for a successor could have been long and difficult, but in the event the solution just dropped into the orchestra's lap. Lev Parikian takes up the story:

"It is one of the quirks of the conductor's life that we don't see each other very often, what with there being only one of us required (sometimes even fewer) to keep an orchestra on the straight and narrow. Thus it was that I only met Harry Legge on a handful of occasions at the very end of his life.

“The first contact came through Katie Lang, the administrator of The Rehearsal Orchestra, Harry's great innovation that has now been running for over 50 years. She rang and asked if I would be interested in conducting the Brent Symphony Orchestra for a term, while their conductor was in hospital. I accepted, and soon my Wednesday evenings were spent in the dry acoustic of Mallorees School in Kilburn, attempting to fill some extremely large shoes.

“Harry was out of hospital quite soon, but not well enough to consider returning as conductor. He did, however, come along to rehearsals, and I was acutely aware that, while he sat, out of my sight, in the little kitchen behind the rehearsal hall chatting with Alastair Scott, he was also cocking at least half an acute ear to my rehearsal. His presence, to my ears, always made the players sit up that little bit straighter.

“At an early committee meeting I scored some brownie points by remarking that Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony would be less suitable than his Scottish, as it was more technically challenging. This (not particularly profound) insight met with his approval. ‘Quite right. It's too difficult.’ I have yet to programme the Italian with Brent or any other orchestra. I have, however, subjected them to pieces of far greater technical difficulty, which would no doubt have Harry shaking his head and asking ‘are you mad?’

The concert (Mendelssohn, Richard Strauss, Elgar and Beethoven) passed without obvious disaster, and I was invited to share the conducting of what turned out to be Harry's last Rehearsal Orchestra course. I would conduct An American In Paris, and Harry, Slaughter On Tenth Avenue. It was the only time I saw him conduct, and it was immediately obvious why he commanded such enormous respect - he had an unshakeable understanding of the way an orchestra works which shone through, in spite of his frailty.

“After he died, I took over Musical Directorship of both Brent and the Rehearsal Orchestra. He is still talked of often and with utmost affection by those who were lucky enough to know him. I am privileged to count myself among their number, and, out of deference to him, I will never programme Mendelssohn's Italian Symphony with the Brent Symphony Orchestra.”

***Brent Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Levon Parikian
Saturday 18 March 2000 at the Free Church, Hampstead Garden Suburb***

Mendelssohn: Hebrides overture

Beethoven: Egmont overture

Elgar: Serenade for strings

Beethoven: Symphony no. 1

Strauss: Wind Serenade

Harry was not the type to hand over his cherished creations lightly, and the fact that Lev succeeded him at both BSO and the Rehearsal Orchestra speaks volumes. Sadly, Harry was unable to conduct the BSO again, but it was clear that Lev would provide a similar blend of superb musicianship, humour and an understanding of how to get the best out of a group of amateurs. After Harry's death in July 2000, the orchestra had no doubt who should succeed him, and was delighted when Lev accepted.

The Lev Parikian era: 2000-

Since leaving Brent Town Hall, the orchestra has played at the John Kelly Girls' Technology College in Neasden, the Free Church in Hampstead Garden Suburb, Kingsbury High School and St Andrew's Church in Willesden Green, but its main venues have been the Church of

the Ascension in Wembley and St Stephen's Church in Westbourne Park, before in 2009 the BSO settled on St James's Church, Sherriff Road, West Hampstead as its home. For the first time in many decades, the orchestra is now able to rehearse in the same place as it gives its concerts.

The appointment of principal viola Heather Raybould as Orchestra Manager marked a huge step forward for the BSO. Heather's attention to detail, tireless networking and insistence on the highest standards in everything we did meant that no job was unallocated, the orchestra had a constant influx of new recruits and Lev could focus on the music confident that he has the best possible back-up behind the scenes.

The orchestra still contains a number of loyalists from the Harry Legge era. Flautist John Matthews, who has also narrated BSO performances of *Peter and the Wolf* (three times), George Kleinsinger's *Tubby the Tuba* and Paul Patterson's *Little Red Riding Hood*, has been playing with the orchestra for over 40 years; the four soloists who performed the Schumann *Konzertstück* for four horns and orchestra at an open rehearsal in 1981 all played in the March 2011 centenary concert.

But there are also a large number of young players, many of whom found the BSO's lively social scene a great way of making friends when they first moved to London. We have several music college graduates and players from all over the world have joined us in recent years: from Australia, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, The Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland.

Many members live in the north London area, but a significant number travel in from other parts of London and from much further afield – the wilds of Hertfordshire and Essex, and even an ex-member living in Wales joins us for concert weekends.

Over the last decade, the BSO has performed a great deal of 20th century music – Malcolm Arnold (*Tam O'Shanter* overture and symphony no. 6), Britten (the cello symphony and *Soirées Musicales*), Copland (*Fanfare for the Common Man* and *El Salón México*), Delius (*On hearing the first cuckoo in spring*, *Summer night on the river* and *Sleigh Ride*), Gershwin (*An American in Paris*), Gordon Jacob (Suite no. 1 for small orchestra), Liadov (*The Enchanted Lake*), Lutoslawski (Little Suite), Paul Patterson (*Little Red Riding Hood*), Poulenc (the organ concerto), Prokofiev (*Romeo and Juliet* extracts, the violin concerto, symphony no. 7, *Peter and the Wolf* and the *Lieutenant Kijé* Suite), Ravel (*Mother Goose* suite), Shostakovich (symphony no. 5 and piano concerto no. 2), Richard Strauss (the oboe concerto, duet-concertino and *Four Last Songs*), Stravinsky (*The Fairy's Kiss* and the berceuse & finale from *The Firebird*), Vaughan Williams (symphony no. 5 and *The Lark Ascending*) and Walton (the viola concerto), as well as the more frequently played Elgar (the cello concerto, serenade for strings and *Froissart* overture) and Sibelius (the first, third and fifth symphonies, violin concerto, *Finlandia* and *Night Ride and Sunset*).

Continuing a tradition that goes back to our early days as the Harlesden Philharmonic, the orchestra has also performed new works written by members of the BSO – horn player Tom Kane's *Salute and Reflection* was played at our 90th birthday concert, and violinist Chonon Lewis, who wrote *Birthday Honours* for the same event, has subsequently given us *Twelve-Eight for the Brent Symphony Orchestra* (performed in 2003), *Overture in the Classical Style* (2006) and *Scoring a Century*, which was specially written for the centenary concert.

We try to put together a series of programmes with quite different characteristics. Last season, for instance, we started with the Walton viola concerto together with Stravinsky's take on Tchaikovsky and Britten's on Rossini. We then had a lighter Christmas concert, followed by a rather gritty Britten and Shostakovich concert before ending with exuberant Copland and Gershwin and Dvořák's much-loved *New World* symphony. Our November

2010 concert focused on the romantic mainstream, but even this contained a Dvořák piece which few of us had played before (The Noonday Witch) as well as Elgar's *Enigma Variations* and Brahms' symphony no. 1.

But one of the main highlights of the new millennium was a programme consisting of the music of one of the most-played of all composers – Tchaikovsky. On one day in July 2009, we performed all six numbered symphonies, the *Romeo & Juliet* and *1812* overtures, the *Capriccio Italien*, the Nutcracker Suite and arias from *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*. The 'Tchaikathon' raised more than £3000 for charity.

A complete list of concerts since 2000 can be found elsewhere on our website.

OUR CONDUCTORS

Frank Greenfield

Frank Greenfield (b. 1878) conducted the orchestra from 1912 until retiring on doctor's orders in 1952, the year before his death.

When he joined the Royal Society of Musicians in 1906, Frank described himself as a member of the Queen's Hall Orchestra, violinist extra for Richter's performances at Covent Garden, and organist at Cleveland Hall, West London Mission. After leaving the Queen's Hall Orchestra, Frank played in the second violin section of the London Symphony Orchestra from 1919 until 1935.



(Hans Richter, of course, was closely associated with Richard Wagner and had conducted the first complete cycle of *The Ring* at Bayreuth; he also conducted the first performances of *The Ring* in English at Covent Garden in 1909 and directed the London Symphony Orchestra from 1904 to 1911.)

Frank also taught the violin, piano and singing, and coached the children's choir at the Harlesden Odeon, which reached the national finals for cinema choirs.

When he announced his retirement in 1952, the *Willesden Chronicle* summed up the Greenfield era as follows. "Few people have championed the cause of presenting good music as ardently as Mr Greenfield.... When one meets members of the orchestra, their harmony, off the stage and on, was most impressive. The affection in which they held Mr Greenfield could be seen from the great distances many of them travelled to play under him."

The same could be said about our subsequent long-serving conductors, Harry Legge and Lev Parikian.

Douglas White

Although he had only a brief moment in the limelight before returning to the timps, Douglas White (b. 1899) probably had the longest connection with the orchestra of anyone. His father was a founder member back in 1911, and his wife was a member of the choir which was attached to the orchestra in its early days.

Douglas joined the orchestra in 1925 as a timpanist, and was Treasurer of the Philharmonic Society after the Second World War. He conducted it for a brief period between the retirement of Frank Greenfield.

After Harry Legge took over at the podium, Douglas returned to the timps and continued to play until 1983. Even after he retired from playing, he continued to attend the orchestra's concerts with his daughter until shortly before his death on 22 October 1996.

Harry Legge

Harry, a viola player in Sir Thomas Beecham's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra from 1950 until 1975, had conducted light music for the home defence forces during the Second World War and had conducted the Tottenham Municipal Orchestra for a year. While a member of the RPO, Harry conducted rehearsals for eminent maestri such as Rudolf Kempe and Sir Charles Groves, and he became the regular conductor of a number of municipal orchestras in the London area.



In 1957 he founded The Rehearsal Orchestra to give music students and top-class amateurs an opportunity to work and learn music at the speed they would have to produce in their professional lives. One of these was a teenage timpanist named Simon Rattle. From 1969-1989 Harry conducted the National (formerly British) Youth Wind Orchestra. In 1982 he was awarded the OBE for services to music, particularly with students and amateurs.

With his huge range of professional contacts and his role in developing promising young musicians, Harry was able to attract both soloists with an international reputation and promising young artists whom he had talent-spotted.

In addition, Harry had a considerable talent for orchestral administration and politics. His CV included serving as vice-chairman of the RPO from 1963-1973 – he was one of the main contributors to the orchestra's survival after Beecham's death in 1961 – and as chairman and later vice-president of the English Sinfonia (1984-2000), which he also helped save from extinction.

Levon Parikian

Lev's first musical influence was his father, the celebrated violinist Manoug Parikian, whose musicianship and experience as soloist, chamber musician and orchestral leader instilled in him a deep appreciation of the tradition of musical performance.

He studied at the Royal Academy of Music and worked for ten years as a freelance timpanist and percussionist. At the same time, he studied conducting with Michael Rose and David Parry and later with George Hurst. He completed his studies in St Petersburg with the legendary Ilya Musin, a major influence on generations of Russian conductors.



Since his return from Russia, Lev has pursued a freelance conducting career. He is much in demand as a guest conductor, working with the English Sinfonia, European Chamber Opera, the City of Southampton Orchestra and the Royal Orchestral Society among others. He is Principal Conductor of the City of Oxford Orchestra and Artistic Director of the Rehearsal Orchestra. Lev works extensively with students and youth orchestras, including the Royal College of Music Junior Sinfonia, the National Youth Strings Academy and Royal Holloway University of London, where he also teaches conducting.

He was assistant conductor to David Parry on Opera Rara's recording of Donizetti's *Zoraida di Grenata* with the Academy of St Martins-in-the-Fields, and to Benjamin Zander for his recording of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony with the Philharmonia Orchestra.

A keen champion of contemporary music, Lev was invited by Hans Werner Henze to conduct a world premiere at the Montepulciano Festival in Tuscany, and was Music Director of the Elektra Ensemble with whom he performed at major venues in London as well as broadcastings.

He was invited to be Guest Conductor at BSO's March 2000 concert, and made a great impression. When Harry Legge was too ill to continue with the orchestra, there was only one possible successor.