

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON CHAMBER MUSIC CLUB

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2022

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2021-22

It is customary for the Chamber Music Club's Secretary to present a report to the Annual General Meeting. This year however the Club has not had a Secretary, so as Chair I offer this report, focusing in particular on the Club's two core activities: concert-giving and the provision of facilities for members.

Membership

At the time of writing there are 191 paid-up members of the Club, comprising 135 students and 56 staff and others. This represents a strong recovery after the covid-related near-cessation of activities in 2020-21. The Club also has three honorary life members.

Concerts

After the curtailment of the 2019-20 season and the limitation of the 2020-21 season to online concerts of pre-recorded items, the resumption of live concerts in 2021-22 has been very welcome. This season we have presented twelve concerts, eight at the usual early-evening time of 5.30 pm, four at lunchtime. This is slightly fewer than in earlier, pre-covid years, and covid – specifically the emergence of the omicron variant – was indeed the main reason: the scheduled Christmas concert had to be cancelled owing to UCL's restrictions on large gatherings, and it was not practical to start presenting concerts again until February 2022. The pandemic was also responsible for various last-minute changes to programmes and for the regrettable cancellation of a concert in March.

Fortunately some of the music originally intended for the Christmas concert featured in the final concert of the season; if the performance of a 'Christmas concerto' in late May seems like innovative programming, neither the performers nor the audience were particularly bothered by this! Concert repertoire in general has been quite varied: as well as the choir and string orchestra of the end-of-season concert, there have been solos (mainly piano), duos and ensembles, with music ranging from the Baroque to the present day. The content of programmes depends to a great extent on what members wish to perform, but from time to time concert organisers (who are committee members) have their own ideas about programming and will seek performers to realise these. On the whole it has been possible to strike a balance between 'themed' concerts and those with more miscellaneous programmes. One significant initiative was to begin tackling an undoubted imbalance in programming by including music by at least one female composer in each concert of the spring term. This was successful, and two of the summer term's three concerts also contained works by women composers. Members were invited to suggest items for inclusion on a resource base in connection with the project.

Performers have of course mainly been Club members, but there have been occasional appearances by guest musicians, and it was particularly gratifying to include a contribution by our Honorary President, John Irving, in the Club's 70th birthday concert on 3rd May. As usual, a lunchtime concert in the autumn term was allocated to student performers from the UCL Music Society. It should be stressed that there is no requirement for members to have reached any particular level before taking part in our concerts: this year we have enjoyed musically accomplished performances of pieces of widely varying degrees of difficulty.

Attendance at concerts has generally been satisfactory, with audience numbers in the region of 20-30; perhaps the best attended was the closing concert of the season with an audience of about 40. (But even if all attendees were current members this would only represent a relatively small percentage of the total membership.) A disappointment was the exceptionally low turnout for the concert on 21st March. Contributing factors may have been its taking place on a Monday – not one of our usual concert days – and in the last week of term – a busy time with deadlines and the UCOpera production; in fact it had been hoped to have an earlier date for this concert but we were constrained by the availability of the Haldane Room.

Eventbrite is used for audiences to book 'tickets'; this was introduced for our online concerts in 2020-21 and has continued successfully this year for live concerts. Of course, not everyone who had booked turned up, and there were occasional late, non-booked arrivals, but the system seems to be worth continuing: in principle it enables us to control (if necessary) and record audience numbers.

A word of thanks is in order to the porters who set up the Haldane Room for our concerts. In my experience, at least, their pleasant, co-operative and efficient approach goes a long way towards easing the stress of concert organisation and performance.

Rooms and instruments

Booking the Haldane Room for our concerts has been increasingly a matter of concern in recent years. In 2021-22 UCL Room Bookings allocated the room during term-time to the Students' Union for use by student clubs, societies and groups; we have had therefore to negotiate with the SU to secure our concert dates. We are of course not a Students' Union club. Fortunately the SU officials with whom we dealt were sympathetic to our situation as an inclusive UCL club with numerous student members and a piano in the Haldane Room, and it was possible for them to meet our requirements for concert dates with only occasional changes to our original requests. However, whereas in previous years we have been able to negotiate the whole season's dates with UCL Room Bookings at the beginning of the academic year, in 2021-22 booking has been done term by term, so we have had to wait until the end of one term before getting confirmation of the next term's dates. This obviously creates difficulties for forward planning and publicity. It was particularly unfortunate that the date of our 70th birthday concert, 3rd May, remained provisional until less than four weeks before the event. At present we do not know what the situation will be regarding Haldane Room bookings in 2022-23.

The practice room, with its new Yamaha piano, is undoubtedly a major asset in attracting members to the Club; it appears that many join specifically so as to have access to this practice facility. The room is in heavy demand during term-time; on weekdays in particular it is often fully booked. Booking is still in person, using the diary in the Security office, Foster Court. Work is continuing on the setting-up of an online booking system, but it is uncertain whether that will be operative in the near future. A safety policy for use of the room was developed prior to its reopening and appears on the website. As a covid-related precaution, and after consultation with a Club member who has professional expertise in the field of respiratory diseases, a half-hour gap between bookings was introduced to allow for adequate 'air exchange' (in conjunction with the window being kept slightly open); this may be reviewed in the coming year. Thanks are due to the security staff in Foster Court for their help in the smooth running of the booking system.

The practice room is the only rehearsal space under the Club's control. We also possess a piano located in room G15 of Chandler House. This room is only bookable for rehearsal purposes for an hour or so in the early evening, but it has proved a useful resource in preparing choir and orchestra

concerts, both this season and in earlier years. The Haldane Room, depending on availability, has also been used for such rehearsals.

As well as its use in our concerts, the Steinway piano is available at a modest hire charge to other groups within UCL (societies, departments etc.). For some years there has been an agreement with the UCL Music Society to allow them use of the Steinway for chorus rehearsals free of charge in exchange for our advertising in the UCOpera programme free of charge. This may be subject to review next year to ensure that the amounts which would have been payable on both sides remain roughly equivalent. The Steinway is tuned regularly, but a full inspection to identify necessary repairs and estimate costs has yet to be undertaken.

The harpsichord was lent at a fee to the UCL Music Society for the UCOpera production in March, and featured in our end-of-season concert on 26th May. The instrument is currently set up in the Provost's office, and we are grateful to the Provost for use of the space. However, from the Club's point of view the lack of a dedicated room for the harpsichord – a situation which has lasted for about ten years – remains clearly unsatisfactory. An estimate has been received for a repair to the lid, but the work has not yet been done.

Other assets and activities

The Club's library – a quite large collection of sheet music, kept in an alcove in the practice room – is underused. This is partly because access has to be individually arranged for anyone wishing to borrow materials, and browsing is not really practical. Another factor is the easy availability of much music online (though not necessarily in editorially reliable versions). Printing from the internet (and increasing, use of a tablet) seems to be increasingly preferred by performers. The collection has grown in a somewhat haphazard way over decades. If there were a librarian with experience and time some items could no doubt be disposed of or replaced, and some gaps in the collection filled. In principle it would be desirable to expand our holdings of music by women composers, but any significant enlargement would be hampered by limitations of space. The library's catalogue is accessible on the website.

Work has been undertaken to sort through and order the Club's archives of programmes, minutes and correspondence. This material is kept in a cupboard in the practice room. Years ago there was a suggestion that it could be offered to UCL Special Collections, but this has not been followed up.

There has not been an issue of the Club's Newsletter since July 2021 (when issue no.14 was published online) basically because of a lack of contributions. The Newsletter is a worthy but, it must be said, subsidiary part of the Club's activities, and given the various demands on the time of potential contributors it seems unlikely to continue as a regular publication. It would, though, be good to see issues appearing on an occasional basis.

Finally...

I would like to thank committee members for all their work and support not only this year but over the course of my chairmanship, through changing and challenging circumstances which could hardly have been predicted when I took office in June 2019.

Roger Beeson, June 2022.