

We'll be back! The CBSO Weathering the Covid-19 Storm by John Quinn

On 4 March 2020 I went to Symphony Hall, Birmingham to hear the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the CBSO Chorus give a fine performance of Brahms' *Ein Deutsches Requiem* conducted by the orchestra's charismatic Osborn Music Director, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla ([review](#)). Though the Coronavirus alarm bells were ringing ever more loudly by that point, little did I imagine that this would be the last time that I would be able to hear the CBSO during their 2019/20 season. I had plans to review several more of their concerts, most notably their planned performance of Britten's *War Requiem* on 20 June. Not long after that Brahms concert, though, the UK was put into lockdown and the orchestra was obliged to cancel future concerts on an incremental basis, including a 12-concert tour of Germany and Austria. Eventually, on 30 April, they bowed to the inevitable and cancelled the remainder of the season.



The orchestra and its choruses have remained silent ever since. The announcement of the 2020/21 season has been delayed and already it has been announced that a projected tour of the USA in October 2020, vital for revenue- and profile-raising, has been put back to autumn 2022. All of this is deeply disappointing for the CBSO's audiences, but our disappointment is as nothing compared to the worrying uncertainty hanging over the heads of the CBSO's musicians and administrative staff, more than 100 hundred of them in total.

The plight of Britain's musicians has recently started to attract public attention. A [long article in *The Guardian*](#) started alarm bells ringing loudly about the precarious financial position that some orchestras face. Two of the UK's leading conductors, Sir Simon Rattle and Sir Mark Elder, wrote a [letter to *The Guardian*](#) warning of the artistic and financial threats faced by our orchestras and this was followed by another [letter to *The Guardian*](#) signed by many prominent figures in choral music, drawing attention to the existential threats posed to Britain's choirs; the signatories included Simon Halsey, the long-serving Chorus Director of the CBSO Choruses. The CBSO's own Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla is one of several conductors of British orchestras who have also written recently to *The Times* calling for substantial financial aid to give UK orchestras a fighting chance of survival.

It's abundantly clear that the sector is in the midst of an existential crisis and part of the trouble is that, as Rattle and Elder said in their *Guardian* letter, the nation faces so many pressing problems right now that it takes some courage to press the case for classical music – or, indeed, for the performing arts in general. However, Britain's orchestras employ hundreds, if not thousands, of people – backroom staff as well as musicians – and indirectly give work to many others besides. The sector generates significant tax revenues, not to mention overseas earnings every time an orchestra tours abroad. So, there's a strong economic case for the government to help the orchestras, especially since their existing income from public money is not substantial. It's also the case that Britain has developed some world-class orchestras and if standards deteriorate due to a prolonged layoff the ground may not be easily made up.

This crisis could not have come at a worse time for the CBSO as it was in the midst of a two-season celebration of its centenary – the actual anniversary will occur in autumn 2020.

I wanted to explore the challenges faced by Britain's musicians so I turned to Stephen Maddock, Chief Executive of the CBSO since 1999, to try to understand better the impact of the emergency on the CBSO. But I was keen also to learn how the orchestra plans to fight back and recover the lost ground.

Anyone who has read [Richard Bratby's absorbing history of the CBSO's first one hundred years](#) will know that the orchestra has faced, and come through, a few serious crises in the past but I suggested to Stephen Maddock that this present crisis dwarfed all the others. As he reminded me, there were several periods of serious stress documented in Richard Bratby's chronicle of the orchestra, and when Stephen joined in 1999 the CBSO's finances were in a perilous state with a deficit of between £1.5m and £2m. However, the lockdown is the longest period that the orchestra has been obliged to go without giving a concert since the end of World War II; indeed, it managed to play throughout most of the War.

Without concerts, this has been a most unusual crisis. The thing that "keeps him sane" is that usually, no matter how taxing the working day, there are the concerts to apply balm and provide comfort and motivation. "This is a very unusual crisis in the sense that we have lots of the frustrating things about the job but none of the good things."

By the time we get to the end of August the CBSO will have lost 28 orchestral concerts in Birmingham, 7 more UK concerts, 11 smaller scale and ensemble concerts and 13 concerts which they were due to give on overseas tours. In all likelihood, much of the 2020/21 season will also be lost. That's a serious hit to the revenue stream because, as Stephen explained, the CBSO generates some 25% of its total annual income from the concerts which it promotes in Symphony Hall, Birmingham and it also receives fees for 'run-out' concerts in the UK and abroad. The overseas tours alone can generate up to another 25% of revenues. All in all, more than 50% of the CBSO's income is earned from the concerts it gives. This is a very different business model compared to many European orchestras. The subventions that the orchestra receives from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council are very welcome, but account for less than 25% of the CBSO's turnover (with some other UK orchestras the figure is around 30%). Public funding in the UK is nowhere near the level of 70% to 80% of turnover that many major European orchestras typically receive. Stephen is at pains to point out that the very generous financial support announced by several EU governments for their orchestras comes *on top of* the existing public subsidies. That's why, he says, some concert halls in Europe have been able to open, even with socially distanced audiences. The disparity in public funding means that it's "a much more vulnerable and difficult situation that is being faced in the UK than anywhere else, with the exception of the USA where there is *no* public funding for the arts". It's very ironic, he says, that the CBSO and other British orchestras have been working very hard for some time to reduce reliance on public money but now, with ticket revenue cut off, "the things that you thought you were doing to make you more resilient have made you *less* resilient".

Fortunately, the CBSO, as a salaried orchestra, has been able to take advantage of the UK government's generously supportive furlough scheme. Stephen described the scheme as "essentially a life-saver for us". However, it can't be overlooked that this scheme will soon begin to taper off and this will have an impact, since it doesn't look as if the CBSO will be able to generate meaningful concert revenues any time soon. The job retention scheme, he saw from the outset, would get the CBSO through the short term but "the longer the gap between the ending of that scheme and a resumption of something like normal earned income, the bigger the problem." It's clear, he says, that an alternative scheme will be needed for businesses that can't earn properly by November. The Culture Secretary said as much in a recent *Evening Standard* interview but no one has yet seen what such a scheme will look like.

Happily, over recent years the CBSO Board and management have worked hard to build up solid financial reserves. Stephen told me that the Board has authorised a capped amount to be drawn off reserves over the next year or two to sustain the orchestra. That's good news, though Stephen agreed with my thought that, just as for any business, when more normal conditions return it will take time to replenish whatever has been drawn off reserves. Stephen estimates that unless a vaccine is rolled out by the end of 2020 – which looks possible but unlikely – the CBSO will lose more money in 2021 and will need to draw further on its reserves.

An optimist by nature, Stephen is hopeful that a deal will be struck in due course under which further financial support will be provided for the music industry. However, he worries whether it will be directed in the correct way. Whilst financial assistance to organisations such as the leading orchestras will be vital, just as important will be what Stephen refers to as the "supply chain". By this he's referring to the indispensable people in the music business, such as artists' agents and PR agencies. These are mostly small businesses and the role which they play in facilitating musical performances shouldn't be underestimated. They need help, and so too do the concert venues. The CBSO's home is Symphony Hall, Birmingham which receives little or no public money. The money that the CBSO pays to perform there a couple of nights per week isn't sufficient on its own to sustain the operations of Symphony Hall or comparable concert halls. Unless these buildings can operate at good capacity levels, they won't be able to open; and no concert halls means no concerts. It's unsurprising that Stephen is concerned that whatever government help is forthcoming, probably via Arts Council England, is targeted in the right ways – and widely. Well-directed distribution will be essential. The key to everything, Stephen is adamant, will be getting concerts going again in a meaningful way; that will get the "supply chain" moving once more. And he warns that the slower we are in getting a proper level of concert activity moving again in the UK, the slower will be the sector's recovery.

By coincidence, our Zoom conversation took place on the day after Boris Johnson announced some relaxation to the lockdown restrictions, effective 4 July. Unfortunately, the relaxation gives no real help to the performing arts. As Stephen ruefully observed, it will be possible to perform without an audience or to have an audience without performers but you won't be able to have performers entertaining a live audience. Even when live performances are permitted once again there will be challenges to surmount. Definitive guidelines are awaited from Public Health England and things are fluid at present. However, it's possible that not only will UK orchestras have to contend with observing social distancing among the players but also that the permitted numbers of woodwind and brass players will be severely restricted to a point where even much of the core classical repertoire of, say, Mozart and Haydn will not be feasible. A lot of that music requires 10 or 12 woodwind and brass while the draft guidelines suggest a maximum of just 8 such musicians. Stephen believes that there will be some excellent programming opportunities involving small forces. Programmes combining Mozart, Haydn or Beethoven on the one hand with twentieth- and twenty-first-century music could work extremely well from an artistic point of view. However, significant curbs on the number of wind and brass players would be a major set-back to any such plans. He reminded me, though, that the pre-crisis CBSO already had in place a vigorous programme whereby both tutti and principal players, working together, do a

significant amount of small ensemble and educational work in the local communities of the West Midlands; such ventures ought to be feasible even under social distancing requirements.

One issue connected to concert resumption could be audience nervousness. Stephen and I agreed that there is certain to be a thirst among music lovers for live music-making once again. However, my experience of Symphony Hall concerts is that there's a certain demographic profile to the audience, many of whom, like me, celebrated their 60th birthday some time ago: might older concert patrons be nervous about attending large scale events, even when allowed to do so? Stephen acknowledges this could be a concern, certainly until a vaccine is available, but he points to two mitigating factors. One is the wide range of CBSO activities: family concerts and others which appeal to a younger demographic might not be affected by such nervousness. In addition, the CBSO has been keeping close to its regular patrons in the last few months and the audience research they've done suggests that confidence is slowly returning as people are getting out more – but there will be a time lag on that.

I asked Stephen how the orchestra will get back on track; though individual musicians will have been practicing privately, there's no substitute for playing together as an ensemble. He acknowledges this is an issue. As the orchestra's Music Director, Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla discovered during a recent guest conducting engagement in Germany, an orchestra can't just pick up where it left off pre-lockdown; an amount of rehearsal time is needed simply to hone the players' ensemble again. In the case of the CBSO, as soon as management get the green light to gather the orchestra together again, a significant amount of extra rehearsals will be scheduled simply to give the musicians the opportunity to reconnect as an ensemble, especially if seated further apart.

I mentioned to Stephen that I had seen a short video message on the orchestra's website from Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla in which one particular comment caught my attention. She referred to "a lot of ongoing brainstorming and discussion about Birmingham's future and culture" and indicated that these discussions involved many cultural institutions other than the CBSO. What artistic opportunities does Stephen see arising from these difficult times? Stephen explained that the orchestra has for quite some time played an enthusiastic part in the close working together that is a feature of the cultural sector as a whole in Birmingham. The city's size is just right for such collaboration; organisations can collaborate rather than competing against each other. That's happening already, and he sees this trend escalating in a post-Covid world. As an example, he's excited about the potential for Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla to work with Carlos Acosta, Director of Birmingham Royal Ballet, especially in 2022. There will be plenty of ways in which the West Midlands will be in the future spotlight: there's the CBSO's own centenary (of which more in a moment); Coventry's role as UK City of Culture in 2021; and Birmingham's hosting of the Commonwealth Games in 2022, when there will be a major cultural festival. So, there's lots to look forward to and to celebrate in the future. In addition, he foresees a surge of enthusiasm for live performances once these are permitted.

Mention of the CBSO's centenary celebrations was a painful reminder that this lockdown couldn't have come at a worse time for them. Some mouth-watering events in the 2019/20 season – such as Edward Gardner conducting *The Dream of Gerontius* and Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla on the rostrum for Britten's *War Requiem* – were cancelled and who knows what intended treats in the 2020/21 season might be impacted. I asked Stephen about this. What was then the City of Birmingham Orchestra gave its first concert – a popular concert – on 5 September 1920. The inaugural symphony concert, conducted by no less a luminary than Sir Edward Elgar, was given a few weeks later, on 10 November. The CBSO had planned a gala event in Symphony Hall to commemorate the orchestra's September 1920 debut and something special was also planned to mark the centenary of that Elgar concert. It must be doubtful that either event will be able to go ahead on schedule, and certainly not as originally envisaged. However, the orchestra is actively exploring alternative ways to mark those two key dates. Stephen is not dwelling on the disappointment of losing those concerts after so much work and time had gone into the planning. He remains very hopeful that it will be possible to stage certain of the key celebratory concerts at future dates. In addition, the CBSO has commissioned twenty new works to mark the

centenary, many of which have already been written. All of these will be played over the next couple of years, even if it's not possible to fit all of the premieres into the actual centenary period. So, the intention is to make the CBSO's centenary an extended musical party: a great solution, I think.

Several orchestras in North America – the San Francisco Symphony is perhaps the most high-profile example – have announced the cancellation of all concerts to the end of 2020 and, in some cases, well into 2021. It hadn't escaped my attention that the CBSO has held back the announcement of its 2020/21 season. However, Stephen is keen that this delay shouldn't be perceived negatively. The 2020/21 season was all but finalised when the lockdown was announced and in normal times the details would have been announced at the end of April. Stephen tells me that all his bookings of soloists and guest conductors remain in place for now, but he feels it would serve no useful purpose to announce concert plans at the moment only to be obliged to alter or cancel them. When the government authorises the resumption of concerts and other events involving an audience – and under what conditions – the CBSO will review its season plans and announce as soon as is feasible what programmes it can offer. Crucial to future plans will be when and under what conditions Symphony Hall and other concert venues are able to reopen.

The CBSO family includes not only the orchestra itself but also its superb affiliated choirs. The CBSO Chorus, founded in 1973, has won itself an international reputation and is surely one of the finest choirs in the UK. Subsequently, the adult choir was joined by the CBSO Youth Chorus and, more recently, by the CBSO Children's Chorus. As someone who sings in a choir myself, I know how much amateur singers are missing their regular 'fix' of choral music. Simon Halsey has been Chorus Director of the CBSO Chorus since 1983 and he was the obvious person to ask about the impact of lockdown on the choirs.

One feature of this emergency has been the extent to which musicians and other artists have made innovative use of social media platforms. I asked Simon whether the CBSO choruses have held any online rehearsals and discovered that there has been a great deal of such activity. There have been extensive online meetings with all the Choruses. Films have been made containing songs and exercises for the Youth and Children's Choruses and for the Community Chorus, SO Vocal. The CBSO Chorus itself meets every week for virtual rehearsals, which Simon says are visited faithfully by a large percentage of the members. "We do vocal exercises, rounds and songs led by Julian Wilkins [Associate Chorus Director] and David Lawrence [Associate Conductor]. We've had interviews, quizzes, competitions and news. We've been visited by Mirga, [CBSO Associate Conductor] Michael Seal, Stephen Maddock and Roderick Williams. And every week I take a short rehearsal online before giving everyone the chance to sing along with a recording at home. We have also done three virtual choir performances - one was a collaboration with my choirs in Barcelona and London - and contributed to the CBSO podcasts." So, any idea that the CBSO choruses have been twiddling their thumbs in frustration during lockdown is clearly far from the truth.

Despite all that activity, I asked Simon how long he believes it will take to get the choruses 'fighting fit' again once the green light is given to resume conventional rehearsals. Simon's answer was positive and very reassuring: "It won't take that long to get fit again. Just a few weeks. And then perhaps a year of re-polishing our sound. It'll come in stages. But I'd expect we could perform pretty soon - if allowed to."

He was equally reassuring about the mindset of all his singers "Morale is fine so far. Despite the fact we've lost four tours, many centenary concerts and the Proms! But we're all in this together and I'm tremendously proud of our frontline members." He pointed out that in normal times the choruses would soon be starting a six-week summer break until the end of September. "When we return, we shall hope to have new plans in the diary and something to work for. At that point we shall have issued a roadmap to recovery. It'll be tentative and open to change but slowly - ASAP - we shall begin to

rehearse however the science advises us! The choruses are extraordinarily strong and committed. We shall be back as soon as it's allowed. And we shall sing at whatever events are possible."

Generally speaking, the CBSO choruses are accustomed to performing alongside the CBSO in large scale works. I was curious to learn, therefore, what contingency plans Simon has for the resumption of concert-giving if large-scale choral/orchestral performances aren't feasible. I wasn't at all surprised to learn that he has plenty of ideas, including the possibilities offered by the whole *a Capella* repertoire. He's also excited by the possibilities of investigating "lots of new music we've never had the opportunity of singing". In addition he reminded me that there are a good number of important choral pieces that can be performed very successfully – and authentically - with piano or organ or just a few instruments in support, including the Brahms Requiem, Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, the Requiems of Fauré and Duruflé and the Mass in D of Dvořák. It's even possible to perform Orff's *Carmina Burana* without the customary huge orchestra. As Simon put it, "A choir will always find plenty to do."

Currently, we have limited ideas of what concert programmes may look like, at least in the short term, in a post-Covid world, It seems almost inevitable that we shall have to wait awhile before the CBSO and its choruses can put on performances such as their thrilling Mahler Eighth last January ([review](#)) – that seems light years away now. However, it's clear that both the orchestra and the singers who work so closely with it are determined to emerge strongly into the post-pandemic environment.

Despite all the difficulties of the last three months and the uncertainties around when the CBSO will be able to resume its activities, Stephen Maddock remains positive. For all the difficulties currently faced by the sector, he firmly believes that the Arts in the UK have a 'can do' attitude. The sector never has enough money so people have learned, he says, to be "super-creative". I was encouraged to learn that during the lockdown the CBSO has had a good deal of fundraising success. Even more encouragingly, this fundraising has not been of the emergency kind; rather, as Stephen describes it, the fundraising has been on the basis of "here's something we can do [as a future project]; will you help us to make it happen?" Donors have got right behind that message.

My conversations with Stephen Maddock and Simon Halsey have confirmed the extent of the challenges that concert music faces in the UK. The seriousness of these challenges means that it's vital the pressure is applied to the government to recognise the sector's importance and to offer meaningful financial support as a matter of urgency. However, I came away from these interviews feeling significantly reassured by the can-do approach that's being taken in Birmingham – and, I'm sure, elsewhere. Indeed, that determination to succeed surely confirms why the sector *deserves* to be supported by the government. The CBSO is a great presence in the cultural life of Birmingham and the West Midlands. It's one of the UK's finest orchestras and further evidence of that came just recently when it was listed as one of the ten international orchestras – and just one of two from the UK – nominated for Orchestra of the Year in *Gramophone* magazine's Classical Music Awards for 2020.

Once live music can resume I think it will be a long time before any of us, audiences or performers, will take concert-going for granted in the way that, with hindsight, we have all done. One thing's for sure: I have no doubt that as soon as the CBSO is able to return to the stage at Symphony Hall, the music lovers of the West Midlands will give them the warmest of welcomes. That day can't come soon enough.

[John Quinn](#)

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