

CW AGM 2024 Chair's Report

The activity, outreach and impact of the Festival has grown considerably in the last year and much more potential on the horizon. With that in mind, I want to thank each and every person who has contributed to this success and not least our Board: colleagues who support and deliver for the greater good. I've very much appreciated their efforts and friendship over the last 12 months.

I particularly want to thank the outgoing Officer Bearers: Anne Boylan, Elise Crean and Patricia McAlister – Vice-Chair, Secretary and Treasurer. Their work has been invaluable.

The 5th Charles Wood International Song Competition took place on Saturday 11 March, following the last AGM. We were delighted to welcome the internationally-acclaimed soprano, Dame Felicity Lott, to Chair the Jury, alongside Dame Fionnuala Jay-O'Boyle, Carolyn Dobbin and Paul Farrington. The Competition attracted a lot of interest, with entries from the USA and Portugal. The Senior Category was won by the Scottish baritone Colum Donovan-Paterson, with Laura Coppinger Runner Up. The Irish Prize was awarded to Aimee Kearney – former member of the Charles Wood Girls' Choir and winner of the Junior Competition in 2020. The Junior Category was won by the Irish soprano Aimee Banks, with Samantha Brady in 2nd place.

2023 marked the 30th Charles Wood Festival and this offered several opportunities for celebration and development. The 30th Festival programme was launched in the Council Chamber of the Palace on 22nd June, with a bespoke logo and events offering real variety. This was attended by the Friends, local organisations featuring in the programme and Council officials.

On 29th June we were delighted to host an evening at the Chapter V Restaurant in Moy, to acknowledge distinguished board service. This had been postponed for various reasons, including the Covid Pandemic. Roger Nesbitt, Robert Cardwell and Eleanor Flack were in attendance, as was our former Administrator, Heather Bloomer. Presentations were made to each and a delicious meal was enjoyed by all.

The 30th Festival ran between 20-27 August and featured over 30 events. We were delighted and relieved to once again obtain Arts Council NI Funding through their Lottery Programme, and ABC funding following vast and detailed

work by Daniel Clements our Administrator, Elise Crean and myself. Invaluable Trusts and Foundations awards were also obtained by Didier Rochard, a professional fundraiser, on our behalf and the Ulster Carpets sponsorship of the Girls' Choir again proved essential. These elements, combined with the core support of our Friends, enabled us to be ambitious and bold.

The Festival saw the return of the Charles Wood Girls' Choir, for the first time since the Covid break. This was conducted by Ian Keatley, with Luke Bond – Organist at St. George's Chapel Windsor – their accompanist. The girls' course began on Saturday 19 August, due to the accommodation availability at the Royal School, and concluded with the Friday Gala Concert. 30 took part and they were drawn from a wide range of areas across the island of Ireland.

Recruitment for the Charles Wood Singers was lead by Sarah Rennix. 8 professional singers were again fixed to lead the SATB sections. 25 singers took part in total, with tenors being particularly difficult to source. The resulting forces were excellent and achieved the standard required for the breadth of work undertaken – particularly through broadcast exposure.

Several key events made the 30th Festival stand-out as exceptional: a Come and Sing given by our Patron John Rutter; the delivery of the first Charles Wood Song Competition adjudicated by John Rutter, Bob Chilcott and David Hill; a Sing Hallelujah concert profiling local choirs and attending by the Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Steve Baker MP; the World Premiere of a new commission "Let All The World In Every Corner Sing" by Bob Chilcott for BBC Radio 3's Choral Evensong; and an electric performance of John Rutter's Gloria, with organ, brass and percussion, at the Friday Gala concert

The opening concert attracted a large audience, with the Priory Singers from Belfast and Canadian organist Isabelle Demers. Isabelle was Chair of the Northern Ireland International Organ Competition which also returned to Armagh for the first time since 2019, further complementing our programme.

Outreach and education were central to the 30th Festival programme, with a lecture from Professor Jeremy Dibble, a Hymn Society event, a 2nd development day for local music teachers, an expanded range of visits to care homes across the ABC Council area and an open-air concert on the Mall.

We are extremely grateful to the full range of churches across the city – and to St. Mark's Church in Portadown – for their continued welcome, be that for services, lunchtime concerts or other events. The breadth of PR provided by the ABC Council also warrants a special mention, not least for the flags displayed at key locations in the city advertising the 30th Festival.

The Festival week itself brings a lot of heavy lifting. With so many events, requiring detailed planning and budgetary control, we very much appreciated the work of our Administrator Daniel, our Choir Manager Kerry Magee, all staff and board members. The 30th Festival also introduced our first Piano Intern and that role was fulfilled by Orlaith Sharkey.

In October our Daniel Clements tendered his resignation from the post of Administrator, taking up a more finance-based role with Sing Ireland. We are grateful to him for his time with the Festival and also the support of his mum and dad at a range of events.

Following a time of appraisal and assessment of the Festival's ever-expanding portfolio, it was decided to rename the post as Festival Manager and increase the associated salary, before advertisement. After a competitive range of interviews in November, Louis Fields was appointed to the post and we are delighted to have Louis on board. He is already bringing great dynamism to the post and we wish him well in it.

The Charles Wood Festival was delighted to feature as part of Georgian Day in November. We provided a quartet of singers who performed 1-hour programmes at 2 city centre locations, increasing awareness of the Charles Wood brand, enhancing our year-long programme and further building our relationship with the Council.

In February this year we returned to the Palace for a concert in the Council Chamber, featuring 3 prominent young Northern Ireland musicians: clarinettist William Curran, soprano Mary McCabe and pianist Frasier Hickland. This was provided free to us, as a Charles Wood event, thanks to an Arts Council award received by William Curran and the ABC Council provided a complementary reception. This event met with strong approval from the Arts Council and very much built on our Young Performers' Showcases down the years.

The 6th Charles Wood International Song Competition took place on 9th March, in the Church of Ireland Cathedral. In advance of this we were honoured to name Dame Fionnuala Jay-O'Boyle as the Competition's Patron and to introduce the Dame Felicity Lott Song Prize, awarded for the best performance of a Charles Wood song, and adding to the event's prestige. The Competition again attracted wide interest, Winning it clearly means a lot to young professional singers. Building an audience for the event will be a priority in 2025.

The Senior Competition was won by the English soprano Ellen Pearson, with baritone Clemens Seewald from Vienna runner up and winner of the 1st Dame Felicity Lott Song Prize. The Irish Prize was won by baritone David Kennedy. The Junior Competition was won by another English soprano Gigi Casey, runner up Rosie Cameron – a member of the Charles Wood Singers in 2023 – and the Charles Wood Song Prize to soprano Sophie Whelan from Dublin. £1,900 in prize money was awarded on the day.

The world-renowned opera and recital star, Sir Thomas Allen was the celebrity member of the jury, also comprising Dame Fionnuala Jay-O'Boyle, Carolyn Dobbin and Paul Farrington. Sir Thomas also gave an illuminating masterclass for the 3 Junior competitors following their competition in the Cathedral's Music Hall.

At this point in time I would say that the Charles Wood Festival has become a victim of its own success. It is a busy, thriving organisation with even more potential. We need more helpers on the ground to support events, we need more money to sustain the appetite for our events, and to keep pushing out create new initiatives which mark us out as cultural leaders. Business sponsorship presentations are currently being prepared and professional photos/film footage of our work need to be captured. More now than ever, we need your support and contacts. If you have business leads, please tell us. We are also in consultation with Arts and Business NI to explore opportunities.

I also want to thank Rodney Spence and Anne Boylan for looking after Gift Aid claims on behalf of the Festival. The importance of Friends – be they new ones or those who want to move up some of our tiers – cannot be underestimated and Anne, particular thanks to you in this area. It costs over £100,000 to fund our annual programme.

This year we were particularly sad to hear of the passing of our former board member and friend, Billy Greenaway. Billy was a gentleman – reserved and hugely supportive – and we were so touched to receive a £1,000 legacy from him just a few weeks ago. We are also so sorry to lose another friend, Phyliss Terrins – dear mum of our board colleague Fiona. We know just how much she will be missed.

The 2024 Charles Wood Festival is taking place 11-18 August – 1 week earlier than usual, due to accommodation restrictions at the Royal School. We look

forward to creating many more standout moments for singers and audiences alike.

Finally I want to thank Elise Crean who joins Louis and I every Friday morning for a Festival meeting. She lends of her expertise generously and quietly, and provides me with a steady source of sanity, as my own personal and work commitments have ramped up. It is much appreciated.

Richard Yarr MBE DL (Chair)
March 2024