

Cornwall, for so long the poor man of England, with its geographical isolation, poor internal communications, and collapsing industries, seems at last to have discovered the secret of reinventing itself in the best possible way – by building on its strengths and adapting them for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Eden Project, Tate St. Ives and the like are the outward and visible signs of this turnaround, and the news this year that the government and the EU are for the first time going to contribute significant sums to promote the Cornish language somehow comes as no surprise: Cornwall is now a county in which heads are held high.

This is nowhere truer than in the sphere of music education and youth music. The Cornish Music Service (CMS) has received a number of accolades in recent years at the annual National Music Council Local Education Authority Music Awards. In 2003 it was awarded the prestigious Major Trophy Award after being selected as the ‘most successful music service in Britain’. And last year its charismatic Head, John Harries, received on its behalf a fifth special Diploma of Merit in recognition of the Service’s outstanding contribution to music education.

Within Cornish banding this has been a landmark year, too. The Cornwall Youth Brass Band (CYBB), the oldest County Youth Band in the United Kingdom, is celebrating its first fifty years with a flourish that suggests it is now going from strength to strength. The Mount Charles Youth Band are holders of two important national titles as National Youth Brass Band Community Champions of Great Britain and National Music for Youth Champions 2005. (Their next challenge is to secure the title of ‘South West Youth Champions for the eleventh consecutive year in November). Camborne Youth Band, under the direction of Alan Pope, retained their National Junior Champions title in Manchester earlier this year.

For this article I spoke to a number of people who have played a crucial role in creating the right conditions for the emergence of this flourishing youth music scene. From these conversations I learned that there are two significant factors at work in Cornwall. One is the way that Cornish musical life is

energised at so many different levels. The other is how much the route to recovery has so often depended on a particular person, or group of individuals: the right person or people in the right place at the right time.

John Harries is a prime case in point. When he joined CMS back in 1990 he found a traditional music service comprising 333 full time equivalent staff teaching 1700 people in individual lessons. Within a few years he had transformed it into one that is praised by the National Music Council for its innovatory approach and which is seen as a model for other music education services. The latest National Music Council report states, for example: “It is a testimony to the high quality of the Music Service staff of Cornwall that they should be involved in the delivery of INSET to six other LEAs.”

The reasons for the success of John Harries’ team’s approach seem to narrow down to three main elements – the fact that they concentrate on group teaching; Harries’ insistence that there is ‘only one music’; and his belief that teaching should ‘let creativity lead.’

“When I first came to Cornwall I made myself unpopular by saying to my staff – ‘You are superb instrumental operatives, but you are not music educators’. Between us we set up a three year development plan to ensure that by the end of the three years a vast majority of the children in Cornwall would be in a group teaching situation.” He puts the success of CMS’s group teaching down to the fact that it has a philosophical basis, whereas some other authorities were forced to adopt this method in the mid-nineties purely because they were strapped for cash:

“Their teachers were struggling because they had not had the staff development to prepare them for group teaching,” Harries believes. “Whereas I firmly believe that the quality of teaching is better in a group: learning is moved forward by stimulating conversation between the students, and by peer support.” He has even seen it at work in his own family:

“My son plays the trumpet and was asking me how to play a C sharp. I hadn’t the first idea, so he rang one of his trumpet-playing friends and found out. Another of his friends was planning to give up playing, but the group persuaded him not to. That’s how it works.”

However, the system does not rely on group teaching alone, as John explained:

“Even for the very able children group lessons are still useful because the less able aspire to be like the more talented ones, and the really able ones can always elaborate and do more complicated music-making on top of what the others are doing in a simple way. But at the same time, it is our duty to identify ability in a child to both the parents and the school.” Students who show particular talent are given individual lessons as well.

Recently John Harries - who seems to have a genius for making the Service’s money stretch through creative partnerships - also found funding for a visiting professional/mentor scheme. Top rank performers such as trombonist Christopher Mowat (BBC Symphony Orchestra) and Philippe Scharz, the principal trumpet of BBC National Orchestra of Wales, visit once a month on a regular basis to give the more talented students masterclasses and lessons. These are recorded and the results given, with notes, to the students and their teachers.

Whatever the Cornish students’ ability, they are all introduced to a wide variety of musical experiences, thanks to Harries’ strong belief that “there is only one music, therefore there is only one music education: Albeniz, Albinoni, rap, pop... they should all be in there, and there shouldn’t be any difference between a head of department in a secondary school and a primary school facilitator.” The extraordinary diversity on offer was one of the aspects to receive particular praise from the judges from the National Music Council: “There can’t be many young persons in England with as many opportunities to play and record R&B, heavy metal, funk, pop and so on as has become the norm in Cornwall’s Service.”

The third plank in John Harries' manifesto is that "we must let creativity lead." He avers that "the technique will follow because the child will want to be more creative. You've got to get to the bottom of music-making so the child can make their own voice heard right from the beginning. When I started music the first thing I had to do was draw 50 treble clefs. I very quickly knew the signature for F sharp minor, but I never played in it till years later. Now we ensure the teaching is all based around the child's development – it's all about aural work, practical music-making. They are given an instrument in the first lesson. By the end of that lesson they can play two or three notes and they are told to go away and make up tunes. By 6 or 8 weeks, or 12 if they are a slow learner, they can play simple tunes like *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* and then they can start improvising around that. Once they can already *do* music, then they start learning to read it."

David Frost, Team Leader in Brass and another key CMS person, gave me a few more details about their approach to brass studies for the very beginners:

"When I first started our work was concentrated in secondary schools and sixth form colleges. Now we have a Primary Music Centre and have been taking brass into primary schools over the last six years or so. Recently we have been starting to take Year 2 pupils. It's been a very interesting learning curve for the tutors! We have been writing materials for them which do seem to work, but we should be very interested to hear from anyone else doing this who would like to exchange ideas. "

Certainly they have already had some very exciting results. There are young players three years along the road who are already at Grade V standard plus, with a well-established sound technique to take them confidently into secondary school.

Of course, whatever the Music Service's philosophy, none of it could be achieved without the funding being available to enable young people to take advantage of it in a county where the average salary is a mere £14,500. John

Harries explained that charges are based on ability to pay. 27% of the lessons are heavily subsidised: some get lessons free, others get them for £2, and those who can pay £4.50. Instrument hire is also subsidised and currently costs only £12.50.

John explained how he brings home to parents the comparatively small scale of the cost:

“When I am talking to a group of parents in a deprived area they very often say they can’t afford to pay for lessons. When it’s time for the caretaker to close the school we invariably go down to the pub, where they insist on buying me a drink. Whereupon I point out that the price of a pint - £2.80 – is roughly the price of a lesson. That makes them think!”

Nineteen-year-old oboist Sam Baxter certainly endorses the importance that financial support being available. He is one of several beneficiaries of the CMS system to whom I talked who have gone on to pursue music at a higher level. Sam was a pupil at Carrington Community College and is currently in his second year at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM).

“I would not have been able to study an instrument if the school had not subsidised the lessons. It’s as simple as that. The county also lend out instruments and I just couldn’t have done it otherwise: I just would not have had an instrument.” Sam is typical, too, in that the Music Service’s approach enabled him to gain expertise on more than one instrument:

“I started to play the flute in Year 7: the tutors played pieces on various instruments and I liked the sound. Then in Year 10 I heard the oboe and I was attracted to the way it was played and my teacher encouraged me to try playing that.”

The trumpeter Jamie Prophet, who became Associate Principal with the BBC Philharmonic at an extraordinarily young age whilst still an undergraduate at the RNCM, is also grateful to the Cornish Music Service for the variety of experience it gave him. (He is one of a number of illustrious professional

musicians to have come out of Cornwall in recent years. They include the horn players Frank and David Lloyd, Byron Fulcher - Principal Trombone of the Philharmonia Orchestra, and Simon Dobson, composer of a number of pieces for Brass Band area finals). An accomplished pianist and guitarist as well as a trumpeter, Jamie jokes that he only went with the trumpet because it needed less practice. He certainly took advantage of every opportunity that CMS threw at him, particularly benefiting from interaction with the jazz trumpeter Bob Tinker as well as his regular tutors. "There may not be many famous teachers down there like there are in some of the other music services, but the level of teaching was very very good," he says. He played in the Cornwall Youth Jazz Orchestra, the Youth Orchestra and the Youth Brass Band, and the band from his own school in Bodmin distinguished itself at BASBWE gatherings in Manchester on several occasions. Like the others I spoke to Jamie emphasised the way that a rich musical life is inherent to Cornish culture:

"It is such a musical county, with its traditions of male voice choirs and excellent brass bands. The music-making at Truro Cathedral is some of the best in the country, too. The only downside to the place from a musical point of view is geographical: even though we have now got a good concert hall in the Hall for Cornwall in Truro, the place is still so much out on a limb that it doesn't attract any of the big orchestras."

Jamie Prophet himself will be putting something back into Cornish musical life at the Youth Brass Band's Christmas Course at the end of the year, when he will be Guest Soloist: "It is a great honour to be asked to do this in the Band's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year and it will be absolutely brilliant to go back."

The Christmas course is one of two residential courses held by the band every year, in which guest conductors (this December it will probably be Bob Childs) continue the work done at the monthly rehearsals. The latter – which include sectional rehearsals - are taken by a team of local tutors led by senior tutor David Loukes. The tutors are all conductors and players in Cornish bands and many of them are themselves former members of CYBB – yet

another example of the loyalty to roots that I came across so often in researching this article. At least sixteen different Cornish bands are currently represented among the players.

Leonard Adams, CYBB's Chairman, is a very influential figure in Cornish Brass Banding. He has been involved as player and conductor with many of the bands including Redruth, Bodmin, St. Austell, St. Denis and, in particular, Camborne. He is also the man behind the brass specialist shop Trevada Music, a brand name probably familiar to many Brass Herald readers. He feels the key importance of the CYBB is this way it brings people together:

“Bands are by their nature very competitive but through the Youth Band players – and conductors too - can come together in a non-competitive environment. Banding is what it is all about, and if what we do in CYBB raises its profile, then that will affect each and every one of the individual bands from which our membership is drawn.” Leonard stresses the great care CYBB takes not to interfere with the ‘parent bands’, with rehearsals and courses being carefully planned to avoid any conflicting loyalties in the players.

He also admits that it was quite a challenge to come up with something for the Golden Jubilee concert that measured up to the band's illustrious history. After all, this is a band whose list of past Guest Conductors reads like a Who's Who of the banding world, while other distinguished names associated with it in the past include Eric Ball, Dr Denis Wright, Sir Malcolm Arnold and current Music Adviser Dr Goff Richards. The Committee's solution was to commission a new work for band and choir by Philip Harper entitled *Beyond the Tamar*. The piece was not only ambitious musically, but required considerable choreography and stagecraft, with performers walking onto the stage from all areas of the Hall for Cornwall, where the concert was held in March at the end of the Easter residential course. Leonard – and the audience on the night it seems – was delighted with the results:

“It was a new challenge for them all. It was all about playing and entertaining, which after all is what music making is all about. I am sure that some of the

players involved would not have thought at the beginning of the course that they would be able to perform it and bring it off. But they did, and it was a terrific evening.”

The jubilee concert was a splendid affair, but entirely self-financed and the Band as a whole is financially self-supporting. Its affiliation to the County Music Service since 1997 has no doubt contributed to its current stability and Leonard Adams stressed how much they welcomed the association. This relationship is just one manifestation of the Music Service’s wish to work closely with bands in Cornwall. Another was to have been a partnership which brilliant euphonium player, Music Service Tutor and musical motivator Sean Camborne Youth Band’s conductor Alan Pope, who is one of the tutors on the CYBB’s books, is another great inspirer of music-making. Camborne, of course, are the current National Junior champions and the way in which Alan Pope has groomed them for success over the last six and a half years is a further example of what a difference one man can make. He has taken the band from pretty much rock-bottom to where they are today. As Alan himself puts it: “It’s just down to hard work, to someone having the vision,” but his success story serves to illustrate the way in which so many of the Cornish bands began to realise, a few years ago, that they needed to revitalise their youth sections. (Jill Davies singled out the following qualities as being the ones that helped put Mount Charles Youth Band back in pole position: “hard work, commitment and the enthusiasm to rise to a challenge” ).

Thomas was developing with the St Keverne Brass Band, tragically curtailed through his untimely death earlier this year.

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When Alan Pope was persuaded by the ubiquitous Leonard Adams, then conductor of Camborne Town Band, to work full time for the youth band at the beginning of 1999, its numbers were down to eight, while the beginners band stood at seven. He continues the story:

“I went into seven different primary schools and did a presentation on four different instruments including cornet and tenor horn for about 10 minutes. That was at the end of February. By May we had 87 children on the books! We could have had more but we ran out of instruments! Leonard and Trevada music were a great help in making sure the ones we did gather together – from our own cupboards and by trading in some of the bigger instruments we did not need - were in good condition. We could not have got off the ground without that “

Since that initial foray the band has never looked back with numbers staying at a steady 80 and members who first started back in 1999 forming the main nucleus of the current band. Running alongside the youth band Camborne now has a training band, and a B band that has five adult members, and Alan Pope is rightly proud that when the main band is short of players they come to the youth band for deputies, rather than going outside.

“Two youth band members got promoted to the senior band for the first time this year and there are more to follow. My ultimate aim is that every single person in the senior band will have been through the youth band”

With nothing breeding success like success, this not an impossible dream:

“The youngsters love all the gigs we get as the result of being successful. Earlier this summer we went to London and played at Canary Wharf on the same stage as the LSO. It felt quite special. Coming from where we do, with only one road leading out of Cornwall, going anywhere is quite an adventure, and they love being up there, and playing.”

Geography may still have a surprisingly big part to play in the strengths and weaknesses of all things Cornish. But with plenty of highly motivated musical enthusiasts at large in the county, it surely matters less than it did.