



## *Potted History 1910-Present*

It is not easy today to imagine what life in Maidstone was like in the early 1900's. The transport system relied more on horses than petrol, central heating was virtually unknown and music was something that you created with your family around the piano in your own home.

Then Maidstone Choral Union came into existence in 1902, with members of the singers' families providing the orchestral accompaniment required for public performance of the great oratorios, and by 1910 there was a demand for an orchestra to play proper symphonic music, instead of just accompanying others. So the Maidstone Orchestral Society started and gave its first concert, performed with great enthusiasm in the Corn Exchange and greeted with delight on April 24th 1911. At that time it relied more on professional musicians who came down from London or the Medway towns rather than on the amateur musicians who lived in Maidstone.

The local musicians were not used to playing in an orchestra and for a decade one concert each year was all that they could manage. Indeed it was wonderful that they managed as much as that, for the Great War started in 1914, with all the implications of players being called up for the army and the pressures applied to those older people who were able to stay at home. The programme for May 1917 states "Invitation Concert to Wounded Troops", while the May 1918 concert was in aid of the Kent Prisoners of War Fund, grim reminders of those tragic days. Frederick Cole was the founder conductor but in 1922 he left the town and the Orchestra nearly foundered.

For a year there was no conductor to be found, until at a meeting called to wind up the society, somebody suggested the name of Hubert Foster Clark, "Because he can't be worse than having nobody!" He was the son of a local businessman and within a decade rose to become the conductor of the BBC Northern Orchestra. He rescued our orchestra and changed it from being an orchestra of professionals hired for the day (assisted by amateurs) to one of amateurs assisted by professionals. To drive the point home he changed its name to Maidstone Amateur Orchestral Society, and he increased the number of concerts from one to two each year.

Under Hubert Clark the orchestra made great strides, but by 1936 his professional engagements required him to give up the Maidstone Orchestra. However, he continued to influence it as Musical Director and in April 1939 the legendary pianist Solomon was the soloist in the Tchaikovsky *Concerto No.1* - definitely the most prestigious concert up to that time. It was conducted by the new conductor who had taken over the year before, Reginald Siggers, a local dental surgeon. This may sound very "amateurish", but in fact dentistry was

his second career, having been a violinist in the Scottish Symphony Orchestra under John Barbirolli and later leader of the Carl Rosa Opera Orchestra. He took the orchestra through the difficult years of World War II with two concerts a year, often using members of the orchestra as soloists, but in 1947 he was taken ill and died very suddenly, his place being taken by Dr Leslie Russell who was the Music Director of Sutton Valence School. After five years Dr Russell left and he was replaced by none other than Hubert Clark.

Hubert had resigned his BBC appointment and volunteered for the Army in 1939, only to find after seven years out of the limelight that his services were no longer required in the professional world. He set about reorganising the Maidstone Orchestra with enthusiasm, built up its audience, established the Society's Constitution and generally put it on a post-war footing, but by 1955 he was ready to retire to Malta where he ended his days 30 years later. David Cutforth, Head of Music at Maidstone Grammar School, became the next conductor, being introduced by Hubert Clark when they shared a concert in December 1955. He had obtained a 1st class Music degree at Cambridge University, as well as another in Natural Sciences, and then went on to study conducting at the Royal Academy of Music.

In 1966 the Orchestra left its home in the Corn Exchange and had the Communal Centre at Oakwood College for its venue. This was a great improvement in many ways - 720 seats instead of 450, better seating, better lighting, better air conditioning and space for serving refreshments and being sociable. Only one thing was worse, and that was pretty basic, the acoustics. Since its daytime job was being a dining hall, it had acoustic tiles in the ceiling to deaden the sound of a thousand knives and forks, but it deadened the music too. In fact it must have been the driest hall ever conceived and the situation was only redeemed when we invested in an acoustic screen to reflect the sound forward. It transformed the hall from being awful to being moderately good, and probably prevented the audience from drifting away for ever. At this time the Maidstone Orchestra increased the number of its concerts from two to three each year, and the Society commenced its policy of promoting concerts by outside orchestras. It was also decided that the name of the Society's own Orchestra should change to the Maidstone Symphony Orchestra.

The MOS Chairman of those days, John Seward, realised that extra concerts were a valuable asset to the Society attracting more people to become members and book for the whole season. By the end of the 1960's the Society was enjoying an annual concert by the London Mozart Players under Harry Blech, an arrangement that was to last for 20 years, bringing the total to four. Shortly afterwards a fifth annual concert was added, given by the Kent Sinfonia under its founder, Dr Béla de Csilléry, who as County Music Advisor had founded the Kent County Youth Orchestra. In 1970 David Cutforth left to take up an appointment in Essex (just like his predecessor Frederick Cole nearly 50 years before), and Béla de Csilléry took over. Born in Hungary, his pre-War training as a violinist at the Budapest Academy and conducting at the Berlin Conservatory had equipped him with a love and mastery of the classical German repertory, which were evident from his choice of programmes and his ability as an orchestral trainer and conductor. His teachers included the celebrated composers Zoltan Kodaly and Paul Hindemith, and the renowned conductor Ernest Ansermet.

All the great works from the 19th century were grist for Béla's mill and there was never a year without the name of Beethoven somewhere in the brochure! He drew on members of the Youth Orchestra to 'stiffen' the Maidstone Symphony Orchestra, especially when playing works that the KCYO had recently performed. The young pianist John Lill had been a soloist with the Kent County Youth Orchestra at the Royal Albert Hall in the New Year 1970, and Béla and he had become friends. What could be more natural therefore than that Béla should choose this brilliant and gifted artist to be soloist at the first concert of his first season in the autumn of 1970? But during that summer John had gone to Moscow to enter for that most prestigious Tchaikovsky Piano Competition - which he won and instantly became the most sought after pianist in the country. His agent overrode our date in favour of a professional orchestra, but when John heard about it, being the great hearted gentleman that he is, he offered to come instead on the day after (Sunday). So he did, every seat was sold and there were 200 standing, making it the biggest audience we ever had at Oakwood College. Needless to say John Lill returned to the Society on many subsequent occasions, and in 1980, after the resignation of Sir Charles Groves, agreed to become MOS's President.

As with Hubert Clark nearly fifty years before, Béla de Csilléry's policy was always to train amateurs to rehearse and play together, and to keep to a minimum the need to import professionals just for the concert day. He maintained that his way produced a better 'ensemble' and there is no doubt that the standard of orchestral playing went up by leaps and bounds. Béla's reign lasted for 20 years and his achievement is that the MSO became recognised as one of the two best orchestras in the NFMS (Making Music) South East region of Kent, Surrey and Sussex.

In that week of October 1987, remembered as the week of the Stock Market crash, and also the Hurricane, another event took place that was equally earth shattering in its (local) way. At a meeting of the Maidstone Area Arts Council Jeffrey Vaughan Martin reported that Maidstone Borough Council intended to build a new Leisure Centre in Mote Park, but that it would contain no provision for the Performing Arts. He felt that this was a contradiction in terms and suggested that we organise a petition. Within 10 days we had secured over a thousand signatures asking that the proposed sports hall be built in such a way that it could be converted to a concert hall holding a thousand seats, with special consideration being given to the need for good acoustics. This was accepted by the enlightened Leisure Services Committee of the day, and subsequently approved by the Council. Mote Hall is not externally the prettiest of buildings, nor is the interior comparable to a purpose built concert hall, but acoustically it is vastly superior to any other hall in the area.

Béla de Csilléry retired in May 1990 and so was destined not to conduct the MSO in its new hall, which opened a year later.

His place was taken by Brian Wright, who was born in Tonbridge. His wife Sue was brought up in Maidstone, so they were local people coming home to their roots. Brian had been a double bass player in the Kent County Youth Orchestra under Béla, had then trained as a conductor and been Assistant to André Previn with the London Symphony Orchestra as well

as Associate Conductor to the BBC. He is the longstanding Music Director of Goldsmiths Choral Union in London.

Brian's personality and style of conducting immediately appealed to a much bigger pool of players who live within a radius of Maidstone and this has enabled the orchestra to tackle a larger repertoire of more complicated works which lie beyond the scope of most orchestras that are not fully professional. Indeed, since 1996, Maidstone Symphony Orchestra has performed all five concerts of the MOS season, instead of three as hitherto, without the need to engage outside orchestras.

After 25 years of Brian's leadership the orchestra has grown in stature, both musically and numerically, having today over 80 regular members. Brian recently reported to the Kent Messenger; "These days MSO sounds every bit as good as most professional regional orchestras of my youth, and often very much better!"

***David King / Vice President, MOS***

From his book "David King's Memoirs of Maidstone Orchestral Society", published by MOS in 2014.