

The following article was written by Glenn James, Press Officer for the Newcastle under Lyme Festival for Music, Speech and Drama, after exploring the Festival across the two weekends when it was staged during March 2017. This Odyssey explores the festival for both the affectionately familiar and the new or uninitiated explorer, and finds heart and excitement for all. It was distributed to the press and submitted in support of the SOT City of Culture bid.



“Barnstorming!”

The 86th Newcastle under Lyme Festival for Music, Speech & Drama

By Glenn Martin James 2017

Across two weekends every March the Staffordshire town of Newcastle under Lyme hosts an event which has become a cultural landmark for the region, the Festival for Music, Speech and Drama. Beginning in 1931 this celebration of creativity has a venerable history, and is a major cultural influence in the region. A dual event, devoting one weekend to Speech and Drama, and the following to Music, the festival attracts performers from far and wide and has a team of formidable adjudicators, dispensing much sought advice, and awarding well-earned trophies to the lucky winners.

This is a much loved event, supported solidly, and with enormous loyalty and an admirable warmth shown by performers and fans alike. Many of the performers, individually or in their choirs and orchestras return annually to

take part. This event has a following and support which is enviable to say the least, as many of the dedicated team of volunteers who run it took part and competed in the events when they were children themselves. With an unspoken but obvious affection they became involved as adults, taking over from parents to carry the torch onward, and now have adult children and grandchildren looking to do the same thing. The Festival is a part of life here, and as valued as sunshine or a favourite book.

As looked forward to as Christmas, and as anticipated as presents under the tree. There was a real sense of occasion in the air as the car park filled up with the competitors arriving and the public flocking in for what they knew was going to be a real treat. On that opening weekend, the Speech and Drama heats were held at Newcastle under Lyme College, a huge and well-appointed building with thoroughly modern architecture. It was a wet Saturday in mid-March, cold and gloomy, but the warmth inside the building was perceptible, and noticeable at once. There were groups of children gathered throughout the building, mostly excited or filled with a performer's Adrenalin, almost bouncing on invisible springs. Some of them had already performed and were filled with energy, having left the spotlight, others were filled with the nervous energy of those about to step up and do their thing. They had rehearsed and rehearsed, learnt their lines, practiced and polished. This was the big day.



Pause for thought: Adjudicator Carol Schroder (Far left) committing her ruling to paper after a performance.



Echoing chambers: Newcastle under Lyme College, elegant venue for the Drama and Spoken Word heats of the Festival.

In the media suite a performance has just ended and the applause has only now died down. Again there is that expectant Christmas Eve-like feeling in the air, as the Adjudicator is now writing. The silence when an adjudicator is writing is not unlike that of a library, except for the fact that the room is collectively breathing quietly, and respectfully keeping silent. There is a rapt attention and anticipation from everyone present, all trying not to break the silence in case it disturbs their concentration. There is a good sized congregation gathered in the room, and all eyes are discreetly focused on the pen in Adjudicator Carol Schroder's hand, almost as if absently trying to read the words as they emerge and the ink marks them down on the paper.

Where minutes ago all eyes were focused on a youngster in the heat and fire of a fresh performance, they now bask in the following sunset, waiting for the official judgement. And there is a formidable repertoire on display: Shakespeare, Anne of Green Gables, a sequence from Frankenstein, there is an enormous and delicious variety of the best culture has to offer selected for the performance menu, and the talent on display is, quite simply, stellar. These young performers are in love with words, and they do them admirable justice. Youngsters enunciate clearly, project, and a fire of confidence burns clearly behind their words. The works of playwright and author dance from their tongues, and these kids breathe life into Frankenstein and Shakespeare as if it were written yesterday.

It's hard to believe that nearby Stoke-on-Trent and this area of Staffordshire are areas frequently brought up in the media because of the issue of literacy. The evidence of bright and eloquent children from all over Staffordshire is hard to ignore, and clearly there is a passion for words and learning which this Festival, in particular, has fueled and cultivated for the best part of a century.

There is an excellent spirit of camaraderie amongst the competitors, and although each of them has the bright eyed hope that THEY will win, and a passionate desire to succeed, none of them are affected by any negative vibes.

This event is not marred by petty rivalries or the spites which can flare up in a competitive hot-house atmosphere. This isn't a flashy excuse for a talent show, an end of the pier fight to the death like Britain's Got Talent or The Voice. There is touch of real inspiration here, a touch of the speculating muse, dipping in and out of respective heads, and as such there is a genuine respect between the gladiators.

This is a meritocracy, a festival where striving for excellence is recognised. Some of the youngsters have been competing for a couple of years, confident veterans at the age of 12 who have been taking part since they were 6 years old. The youngsters greet each other delightedly in the sprawling terracotta painted halls of the college, cheerfully wishing one another good luck. And the thing is, they really mean it. A lot of the competitors look forward to seeing each other every year as they know they will be taking part together. Some of them are at the same school as each other and happily flag one another down, as well as friends from elsewhere. All decked out in smart clothes and ready for the important moment, hands slightly damp from anticipation and damming up words which will soon burst forward, they are fired up with confidence. Yet this is wholly inclusive, with newcomers welcomed warmly. This is no local festival for local people, and all are welcomed with equal enthusiasm.

The Festival is dedicated to helping improve literacy, confidence, and the chances for children in life, tying the subject matter which will be performed to the schools syllabus. This of course redoubles the confidence of the performers to pass their exams and to succeed in life and their careers, and the Festival has a proud history of propagating success.



One such dedicated performer is Zaghham Farhan, (pictured left) a very eloquent 12 year old who has just been elected the member of the Youth Parliament for Newcastle under Lyme. Zaghham is a veteran of the Festival, having been competing since he was seven years old, and having won two years ago. The recipient again today of a trophy, and understandably delighted, he gave his thoughts on the experience. "I'm feeling very good, and I've found it great taking part again. My teacher Mrs Walker was really encouraging over taking part, and it really went from there. I have to say that the Festival helps hugely with the curriculum and vice versa, as we can study the same texts for our exams as the

festival. It's a really good experience, just make sure you know what you are doing, and its best if you approach performing as self-assured and confident."



Equally enthusiastic was fellow competitor Daniel Alexander Sidhom, another young veteran to likewise be returning home with a well-earned trophy: "I really enjoyed taking part! It's an increasing challenge every year! I have ambitions to be an opera singer or an actor, one or the other (or both!) and the festival really helps to move things along. It offers the chance to pursue both goals."

And his advice was simple and encouraging to anyone else contemplating taking part, "You should go on and do it. It doesn't matter if you don't win, it's an excellent opportunity to build your skills, and this is where you start." Wise words from an experienced hand.

A triumphant family win was experienced by the Hood Family, (pictured below) whose sons Tristian Hood (aged 11) and his brother Marcus (aged 6) both won their heats and returned to their delighted parents with official cups



for their performances. Tristian has taken part since the age of six, and his younger brother, having seen what Tristian has been doing and how much he enjoys it, now takes part himself.

Tristian won the “Own Choice” section with a sequence from “Dragons of Autumn Twilight” by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, (and would go on the following weekend to win an additional trophy for a spirited rendition of “The Gasman Cometh” by Flanders and Swan, in the Music Festival heats). Tristian gave a spirited performance of his text, and said “I think this is excellent to take part in, but I didn’t realise I had to do the introduction! I crossed over with my brother as we were learning our texts, and were prompting each other if we needed it while learning.”

Young Marcus (aged 6) added that he “Really enjoyed taking part, and I took part because I really like speaking.” He admitted that at first he was a little nervous of reading in front of everyone, and performed “I’d Like to be a T-Bag!” by Peter Dixon.



Their father David Hood made no bones of how he felt, “I am immensely proud of both of them, standing up before an audience. It’s a marvellous opportunity!”



The festival has an impressive team of Adjudicators, whom are internationally renowned authorities whose opinion is highly sought. This year the team includes Frances Colyer, Chris Marlowe, Pricilla Morris and Carol Schroder for Speech and Drama, and Daniel Chandler, Doctor. Andrew Padmore, and Kathryn Page for the Music competitors. They compile their thoughts after each person completes their performance and deliver their ruling for them individually before awarding the prizes. They

also provide a written adjudication for the performers to hold onto, the advice of which is solid and much prized. When compiling their thoughts the adjudicators write their opinions with gravity and the silent concentration of a monk at their devotions. Inscrutable as a Cossack and as collected as a statue are they during the process, and only when their pens cease to move and they rise does the atmosphere change to one of expectation and excitement. When they start to speak a pin can be heard to drop. Their words are listened to keenly and their observations noted by everyone present. It is sage advice.

This is a festival of two parts, and the Music Festival was held the following weekend. Lucky enough to have two venues, the Festival moved then to Clayton Hall Academy, a large former grammar school built around a charming Georgian Hall, and with the move to the new venue the sun comes out.



Elegant: Clayton Hall, centre of the academy which has grown around its venerable walls.

The sounds of classical music being played by a sure hand echo out across the lawns, a sophisticated and appropriate melody for such a setting. It's the first real flush of warm spring weather for 2017, and a ravishing blue sky stretches above the clean white Georgian lines of the hall, and the enveloping arms of the school it has become. The library of the old house is a fitting location for the



pianoforte sessions, and a gleaming black ebony grand sits elegantly in the room, whose walls are a combination of burnt orange and white. The bright sunshine gives the place a Mediterranean feel. Firmly settled in its second home, the Festival takes place across two days, the 24th and 25th of March, and both days see the same ravishing weather. The main assembly hall of the school plays host to the larger choirs and orchestras, and a smaller more intimate room is an ideal venue for solo performances and singers in the opposite annex. There is a buzz in the air and all the car parks are full.



The Music days of the festival have seen a 38% rise in competitors this year, and all the rooms are busy, packed with audiences, competitors and musicians of all ages. This proves to be a busy and hugely entertaining two days, with newcomers mixing with a warm welcome from all. In the assembly hall the orchestras sit together across the rows, holding their instruments close, and waiting for their turns to compete. Smartly decked out in the colours of their respective organisations, this is an occasion of great pride, and self-discipline is evident amongst them all. Going up into the balcony above there is an excellent view of the hall below, well and truly filled with an expectant

audience, and the Stafford Grammar School Orchestra are just about to play. Delightfully, as I reach the very front of the balcony and lean on the rail to look



down, they strike up a medley of James Bond themes, beginning with the famous Roger Moore version so notable for its brass section. A loved piece of music like this, played so well, should make the hairs on the back of your neck bristle and the rendition they play does so with a vengeance. This is a

performance that Ian Fleming and Cubby Broccoli would have applauded unreservedly, and it proves to be the first of a series of virtuoso performance by the orchestra in question, the Stafford Grammar School Orchestra.

Bond theme: The Stafford Grammar School Orchestra with a medley of Bond themes.



They were followed by the University Hospital Orchestra, playing Jerry Brock's themes from “Fiddler on the Roof”, another barnstorming turn by a practiced and passionate orchestra which made the hair stand on the back of your neck, and sent a tingle down your spine. Dressed in black tie they cut an elegant and appropriate sight in the environs of the house and looked utterly at home in the setting.





Festival Revisited: The University Hospital Orchestra in the hall of Clayton Hall Academy, looking very elegant.



The venue is packed and constantly busy, with new groups arriving by fleets of cars or in single coaches, making their way into the hall. There is a constant traffic to and fro, but much like the previous week, there is the same camaraderie amongst all the individuals taking part. Rival choirs or competing orchestras cheered loudly and sincerely for the winners in exactly the same way that the youngsters had a week before with the speech and drama competitions.

Nowhere was this camaraderie more noticeable than in the library of the Hall, the chosen room for the piano recitals. The competing maestros all knew one another very well, and were on friendly terms with the Adjudicator Kathryn Page, so much so that there was a feeling of genuine affection in the room, and almost an air of an annual homecoming. But again, newcomers were

welcomed with a genuinely convivial warmth, and accepted into the throng. The skills of the respective pianists were quite breath-taking, and yet they took it in turns to sit beside one another, turning the pages of the music scores to assist whomever was playing.



Caressing the ivories: Pianists extraordinaire (from Left to right) Ian Roy, Anne Collard, Mrinalini (Minnie) Chakrabarty, Rebecca Bazlov, April Victoria Durnin, and Richard Abel.

Young Maestro: Winner of the Piano Open Naomi Bazlov and Adjudicator Kathryn Page, at the piano with her trophy.



Not afraid to test themselves or stretch themselves in what they could achieve, all of them tackled fiendishly difficult pieces by Prokofiev and Chopin, Bach and Debussy, equating themselves with skill and jaw-dropping dexterity. Particular stars being youngsters Naomi Bazlov (aged 14, pictured left) and Rebecca Bazlov (aged 8)

who's skill at the keyboard was absolutely breath-taking, in a room filled with formidably skilled peers. And a continuity was refreshed with Naomi being informed, with a warm smile, that someone present today had won this same Ridgway Memorial trophy in 1969 and was here to see her receive it today. The Adjudicators had a decidedly tough job.



Elegant skills: Winner Anne Collard receiving her trophy from Adjudicator Kathryn Page.

The standard in the Piano Class is especially high, and it forms a significant part of the Festival, with five qualifying classes: Baroque, Romantic (excluding Chopin), Classical period, Chopin, and music from 1900. The winner of each of these classes receives a trophy, and goes on to compete in the final for the Ridgway Memorial Trophy. Naomi was winner of the Piano Open this year and will be representing the Festival competing for the Emanuel Trophy Piano Competition in London later this year. Fellow competitors Anne Collard and Ian Roy will also be competing.



Adjudicator Daniel Chandler in full flow giving his judgement on an orchestra competing in the main Hall.



Festival Champions: The winning Choir of the 2017 Newcastle under Lyme Festival of Music, Speech and Drama Festival Trophy, The University Hospital Choir.

And so the weekend gradually wound to a close, with the bright early sunshine beating down on the hall and making a welcome touch of promising spring greet everyone emerging into the light, to enjoy their lunch outside in the warm. There was plenty of fresh homemade cake on offer and a full on range of refreshment which gave the whole event a welcome festive feeling, and which was much enjoyed by all. In the closing stages there was a really triumphant moment in the main hall when the prize for the winning choir went to the University Hospital Choir, a decision that raised the roof with glee on the part of everyone present, especially, it was a pleasure to note, by the other choirs which had been competing against them. There was a genuine joy in the air at this great achievement, and a few delighted tears shed as the trophy was collected. This encouragement, this sense of achievement, and this great hearted support by your peers is what the whole thing is about, and the Festival drew to a close for another year with something of a real flourish. There was a sense of accomplishment in the air, and a real tangible happiness.



It was over for another year, but there was not a sense of loss in the least at it being concluded, rather a very strong sensation amongst all concerned that they were hugely looking forward to NEXT year's festival. In his final remarks after awarding the Trophy to the University Choir, Adjudicator Dr Andrew Padmore thanked everyone for taking part, saying their participation was what made

the festival happen in the first place, but then he gave a hearty thank you to the volunteers: because the Festival of Music, Speech and Drama is organised and run by a dedicated and very hard working team of people, who devote their time and effort to making the whole thing happen. There was a solid and appreciative round of applause from the hall, which was well and truly packed by this point, for a group of quiet individuals gathered at the rear of the room, unobtrusively listening to the Adjudicator's remarks. Not a word was said amongst them during this round of applause, but the pride in their eyes at what had been staged across the last two weekends spoke volumes. And I, for one, was very proud to count myself one of them, for it was a proud accomplishment, and a fine 86th Birthday for a laudable event.



Born to the Purple: Talented youngsters the Young Lions Brass Orchestra.

Both I and my wife Angela are volunteers with the festival, and as professional authors we work with children in schools all the time, stoking and building the fires of literacy and performing. Both of us have always held that those creative fires, and that passion for words and love of music are well and truly alive and burning bright in Staffordshire. The Newcastle under Lyme Festival for Music, Speech and Drama has championed this understanding, and given it a stage, a platform to be heard, and the incentive and inspiration to build on accomplishment for almost a century.

As mentioned earlier in this article, the national media seems to revisit the issue of literacy in Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire on a semi-regular basis. Time and again we see reports in the national press about children's literacy levels, and concerns about education in Stoke on Trent. Yet, I am certain that one day spent at this festival would astonish and surprise one of these pundits, with the fierce love of words and their intelligent application shown by children from all over Stoke on Trent, Newcastle-under-Lyme, and the surrounding counties. As a region the Potteries finds itself hard at work building a new identity in the world, embracing its cultural heritage, and forging a new destiny, and there is clearly a passion and thirst for culture deeply rooted in the region. The Festival continues to encourage and nourish that appetite, and feed that intellectual fire every year. In staging another absolutely barnstorming Festival for 2017 the team have raised the roof proudly in the best possible way, and all I can say is here is to the next 86 Years.

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If you would like to compete in next year's festival, or become involved, check out the organisations website at <http://newcastlefestival.org>

