



## WHAT MAKES THE COBWEB ORCHESTRA ITSELF

This document is intended as a staging post in the development of the Cobweb Orchestra (as at March 2020). It tries to identify the essential characteristics of the organisation with examples, where appropriate, from our past history. We hope that it might also be used as a blueprint for the further progress of the orchestra that is not empty rhetoric, but actually relates to what we are, what we have achieved and sets out guidelines we might follow in the future.

The Cobweb Orchestra always strives to be:

- 1) **Open access.** Everyone is welcome. Any instrument, any level of experience or ability, any age. In addition, equality of access means making a special effort for some players, eg. providing large print parts for people with visual impairment, making arrangements with easy parts for players still getting to grips with their instruments, providing loan instruments for players who do not have them, with Cobfriends providing bursaries for people of limited financial means. For artistic reasons, some of our ensembles are for limited numbers of players (for instance the 35 strong Chamber Orchestra does not have trombones or saxophones), but the initial recruitment for such groups is always on a "first-come" basis.
- 2) **Non-competitive.** We do not hold auditions. Players are encouraged to rotate through desks. Players are not excluded from events on the basis of their experience or ability. It is only when the type of music or the size of the venue dictates the number and range of instruments that we limit participation. We do not take part in, or support, music competitions, e.g. the decision to not become involved with the BBC programme about orchestras because it involved a competitive element.
- 3) **Open-minded/receptive.** If a proposal comes our way, and fits in with our overall ethos, and will not cost too much, then there's a good chance that we will run with it. Playing for HM the Queen's visit to open the Tees Barrage was a good example. Making the most of professional players and conductors who just happen to be visiting the region is another. It is also forward looking and open to fresh ideas such as encouraging the development of new ensembles from within the orchestra.
- 4) **Tolerant.** We embrace players of all abilities and encourage all players to accept their own limitations and those of others with a good grace. There is more to being part of an orchestra than just playing an instrument: Knowledge of repertoire or style, technical skills such as instrument repairing, empathy, generosity, to name but a few. We believe that including people who have qualities in addition to their ability as musicians enhances our orchestra.
- 5) **Nurturing.** We aim to help players progress towards (and sometimes achieve) their personal goals. Many players have been given the opportunity of being soloists in concerti, or hearing their own compositions played. Others have participated in performances they would only ever have thought they would be an audience for. Yet more have had the chance to play in wonderful venues in this country and abroad. Some players go on to develop their musicianship in the many offshoots from the main orchestra such as Cobwebs Cabaret, the Baroque Group and various string quartets and wind quintets. The skills they acquire in these smaller ensembles enable them to become orchestral players who are better equipped to help and encourage those less experienced.

## ADDENDUM

Furthermore, over the first 20 years of the orchestra's existence, several other qualities have emerged which have become part of its distinctive character. As one guest conductor commented, "I've never experienced anything quite like it."

2:1) Each event aims to be a success in its own terms and we aim to make progress with whoever is there to achieve a pleasurable experience for all involved. We try to keep all players involved as much of the time as possible, for example, trombonists who are not required to play for certain movements of a symphony are encouraged to join the bassoon section instead.

2:2) Performances are an important part of our programme and we strive for the highest standards, but performances are generally viewed as a lower priority to that of playing music for the pleasure of the participants.

2:3) Progression and innovation. The Cobweb Orchestra gives performances of unusual pieces in unusual venues, e.g. the 'flashmob' performances of Ravel's "Bolero" and Verdi's "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves", which became very popular on YouTube. The Underground Orchestra project saw us play in tunnels, mines, a prison cell and a nuclear bunker.

2:4) It has become a supportive community. This is fostered by regular communal activities such as shared meals and travel. There is also a great deal of informal socialising and music making as a spin-off from the weekly groups. Cobfriends sends letters, cards and gifts to people who are ill or distressed.

2:5) It plays an enormous quantity and variety of music rather than focusing on a few pieces for performance. The repertoire ranges from baroque music right through to pieces written specifically for the orchestra (we do everything possible to encourage composers). One of the by-products of this approach is that Cobweb players quickly become very good sightreaders. Central to the repertoire is our unique library, which incorporates standard orchestral sets expanded to allow for extra numbers of wind instruments (with transposed parts whenever possible), alongside specially composed or arranged pieces with parts for less experienced players.

2:6) It is aspirational. Most Cobweb players aspire to become better players and are given the chance to engage with highly complex music, which might at first seem beyond them. We also hope that at the majority of our events, players and listeners will learn something that enhances their appreciation of music.

2:7) It is life enhancing. Every week, there are stories of players who thank the orchestra for being there to help them through difficult times. A combination of a strong sense of community and highly structured activity which requires enormous concentration seems to allow people to escape some of the troubles of life in a safe environment.

2:8) It is flexible, allowing it to respond positively to requests from participants or third parties, sometimes at very short notice, e.g. bringing players together for funerals, weddings, birthday celebrations, and retirement parties.

2:9) It is a charity which both supports music and the arts more widely and also works closely with other charities which have shared values and objectives.

2.10) Advocacy: The Cobweb Orchestra is supportive of initiatives to widen participation in music by adults. Several individuals from within the orchestra do this through committee work, taking part in panel discussions and representing CO at events in the UK and abroad.

2.11) Thus far, the aims and intentions of the Cobweb Orchestra have been somewhat (and sometimes deliberately) vague. This has allowed us to respond in imaginative ways to the challenges of creating opportunities for our players. It is to be hoped that this attempt to formulate what we do is largely descriptive rather than prescriptive or proscriptive and that the organisation continues to develop in all sorts of unexpected and exciting ways in the future.

2:12) Finally, here is a list of the activities that (as of March 2020) allow all of the above to take place...

Regular weekday rehearsals in 9 venues.

Weekend study days, performances and residential.

Recordings

Cobfriends

Foreign trips

Groups run directly by Cobwebs or developed by individual players (eg. Baroque group, Composers and Arrangers, Cobwebs Cabaret, Transposers' Group, Chamber Orchestra, Clarinet Choir, many and various chamber ensembles: string quartets, wind quintets, etc.)

The e-mail list of players

Regular communication with players by e-mail and the weekly Cobweb News.

Website with all our activities listed.

... and the mechanism that plans and facilitates it:

Programming by Artistic Director

Organisation by Administrator and three Residential Coordinators.

Trustees meetings 4 times per year, the work of sub-committees and the AGM.

Regular oversight by Chair, Secretary and Treasurer

Group leaders

The Library team

Group librarians

Group secretaries

Membership secretary

Event conductors, soloists and other professionals

Cobfriends Committee