

## **JOHN FORSTER**

**(Music Director, 1981—2007)**

It was with great sadness that we learned in February 2013 of the death of John Forster, who was Music Director of the Farnborough Symphony Orchestra for 26 years. John was the orchestra's first professional conductor, taking over from John Cotterill at the start of the Diamond Jubilee Season in 1981. He steered the orchestra through times of considerable change in the latter part of the last century and made an immense impact on the quality of the orchestra's musicianship and reputation. His enthusiasm, humour and gently challenging approach were valued by all who worked with him.



John was a highly accomplished pianist and violinist and was associated with the Royal College of Music for many years, both as a student and, initially under Sir David Willcocks, on the teaching staff (in fact being the youngest professor ever appointed). He also worked extensively with the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra, as violinist, pianist and conductor. However, aside from his professional credentials, it was his passion for working with amateur musicians and his commitment to 'training' that made him the best choice as conductor of the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) Symphony Orchestra.

In his first season with the orchestra, John's influence was immediately felt in the improving standard of music-making. The concert programmes were exciting, combining popular classics such as the Beethoven Violin Concerto and Brahms' 1st Symphony with more unusual pieces such as Vaughan-Williams' Tuba Concerto. Although musically the orchestra went from strength to strength under John, its association with the RAE, which had continued on a more or less similar basis for 70 years, came to an end during his tenure. Consequently he worked tirelessly with the committee to set up the Farnborough Symphony Orchestra as a new independent

charity. The transition to FSO took place in the orchestra's 75th anniversary year and the anniversary concert, over which John presided in April 1997, was a great success, including in the programme Schubert's Unfinished Symphony and Brahms' Violin Concerto.

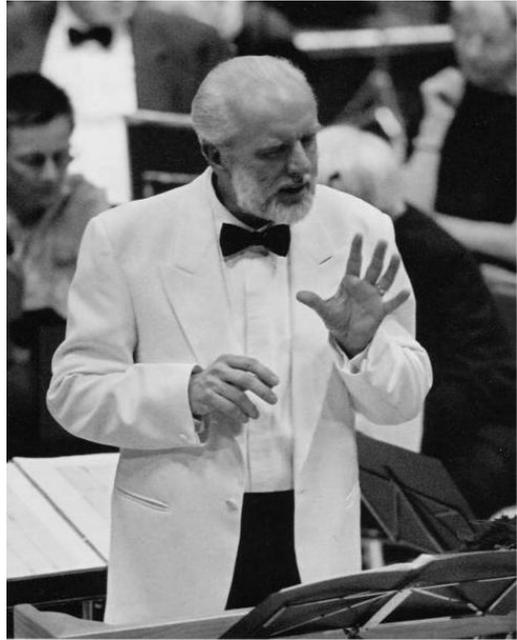
Aside from his time as conductor of the FSO, John's musical career away from the orchestra had also blossomed. He was awarded a Fellowship of the Royal College of Music (FRCM) and worked alongside names such as Vladimir Ashkenazy, Sir Colin Davis and Sir Charles Groves at the National Centre for Orchestral Studies. He also broadcast on radio and television, appeared at the Royal Festival Hall, the Royal Albert Hall and the Barbican, and gave concerts with the Bournemouth Symphony and



Ulster Orchestras. His work was increasingly taking him all over the world and, in 1998, he took up an appointment as Chief Conductor of the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra. This made attendance at FSO rehearsals and some concerts somewhat difficult and, at John's recommendation, the orchestra used a number of guest conductors. Overall this proved an enriching period for the orchestra but it was with great enthusiasm that John was welcomed back full time at the start of the 2001/02 season.

Over his musical career, John built up a large number of contacts, particularly through his work at the Royal College of Music. As a result, the orchestra enjoyed not only soloists of the calibre of Hugh Bean and Peter Katin, but also a significant number of young, up-and-coming instrumentalists at the outset of their careers. Notable amongst these was Romanian violinist, Corina Belcea who, as founder of the Belcea quartet, went on to establish a significant reputation with a number of recordings to her name. Another violinist whom John introduced to the orchestra was Eloisa-Fleur Thom, a local girl who attended Calthorpe Park School in Fleet. She first performed with the orchestra at the age of 12, later going on to perform the Mendelssohn and Dvorak Violin Concerti with the FSO to considerable acclaim.

Around the start of the new millennium, the orchestra sought to build its relationship with its local audience, identifying itself as 'their orchestra'. John was at the forefront of this initiative with his characteristic introductions delivered at the beginning of concerts. Although initially reluctant to introduce the music in this way, John soon warmed to the task and many will remember his informative and humorous anecdotes which helped him build a rapport with audiences. One of John's favourite stories concerned a concert where an off-stage trumpeter was required. In rehearsal both conductor and player decided that the best effect was achieved when standing in the lift with the doors open. Unfortunately, during the performance, someone pressed the button for the lift!



John's tireless service spanning 26 seasons will long be remembered as a golden era for the orchestra and his consummate musicianship has been appreciated by audiences, soloists and orchestra players alike. John's contribution to the FSO was epitomised in the January 2006 concert by his masterful performance and direction from the keyboard of Mozart's 24th Piano Concerto (a particular favourite of John's) in celebration of the 250th anniversary of the composer's birth. We will all miss him.



*Rehearsing the Orchestra in 1982*