

From forums to concerts: online friends take to the stage

Since their re-launch in 2003, the discussion forums at www.abrsm.org have evolved into a vibrant online community of over 4,800 teachers, students, parents, composers and performers – all keen to share their love of music and to learn from one another.

For some dedicated members of the forums, 2005 was a landmark year. Not content with simply discussing music, they decided to get together to make their own! In February, forums member Katyjay organized the first ever Adult Learners' Concert in Chertsey, Surrey. A second concert for adult learners followed in July, this time master-minded by Sbhoa and held in Stalybridge, Manchester. And in September, forums members of all ages gathered for a concert in Woodford Green, Essex, organized by Jo.clarinet.

The performer's tale

So, what was it like to take part in one of these unique concerts? Ros, who performed in the Woodford Green concert, shares her experiences.

■ "But I'd pictured you as a blonde" and "I thought you were a man" were some of the greetings that could be heard as participants arrived. Reading online posts can lead to a certain amount of licence when it comes to picturing fellow forums members.

People had come from as far a field as Scotland and Northern Ireland to take part in the concert,

which included solos, duets and trios as well as a choir, a recorder ensemble and a grand finale featuring all performers, and some percussion-playing audience members.

Despite pre-concert nerves, the standard of playing was excellent; several players could be seen munching bananas as they followed advice offered on the forums to eat a banana before performing to combat nerves!

Behind the scenes

To find out how and why these unique concerts came about Christine Morris, the Associated Board's Marketing Manager, talked to organizers Katyjay, Sbhoa and Jo.clarinet.



*Katyjay
and
Sbhoa*



*Jo.
clarinet*

Congratulations on three successful concerts. What made you want to organize one?

■ **Katyjay:** Some younger forums members were telling us about concerts they were doing and the solos they were performing. A number of the adult learners were a little envious of that opportunity and felt a bit left out. By following a weblink I'd discovered an adult learners group in the US that puts on concerts for members. I thought it was a great idea and put a speculative message on the forums asking if anyone was interested in starting something similar here. No one answered for 24 hours. Then I was swamped with responses, and the concert was on!

■ **Sbhoa:** When I read about Katyjay's concert I thought it would be good to have something similar in the Manchester area. My teacher said "why not go ahead and organize one?" So I did!

What were the challenges involved?

■ **Katyjay:** It was a little daunting to start with, but I had some fantastic advice, particularly from DaCapo and MaggieMay on the forums. I set up a website to administer the concert, despite the fact I'd never set one up before and had almost no idea how to do it! Then there was the challenge of finding a venue with a piano and a decent acoustic. Shortly before the concert I discovered that the piano hadn't been moved off the stage or tuned, so we brought along my Clavinova for people to play if they preferred.

■ **Sbhoa:** As someone who just lets things happen and leaves things until the last minute, I found it a challenge. Finding an affordable venue was the hardest part. Not many places have pianos and the ones that do don't always look after them. At Stalybridge Methodist Church we had the use of four rooms for rehearsals and a hall with a good acoustic for the concert.

■ **Jo.clarinet:** The biggest challenge was organizing the day so that soloists had time to practise with accompanists and so that the recorder group, choir and grand finale ensemble could rehearse. Everyone met for the first time on the day so there was a lot to do in a very short time.



Stalybridge performers

What has the feedback been like?

■ **Katyjay:** Everybody enjoyed the chance to socialize and meet other adult learners, as well as the opportunity to perform to a friendly audience. Amber had the brilliant idea of setting up 'feedback envelopes' for all the participants so that the audience could send messages of appreciation.

■ **Sbhoa:** Very positive. Most people have shown interest in making it a regular event.

■ **Jo.clarinet:** Everyone thoroughly enjoyed

themselves. The various ensembles were particularly appreciated. Several people who played in the recorder group have now started to play regularly in recorder ensembles as they enjoyed it so much.



The grand finale

What were the highlights of the day for you?

■ **Katyjay:** The whole day was one long highlight! There were some super performances and a lot of people conquered their nerves brilliantly. There was such a buzz – no one wanted to go home.

■ **Sbhoa:** I feel privileged to have made it possible for everyone to get together and share their music. During the rehearsals it felt as though the whole building was alive.

■ **Jo.clarinet:** I was delighted by how good the grand finale sounded, considering the unusual combination of instruments and the range of players involved. It was lovely to see forums members chatting like old friends when a lot of them had only just met in real life!

So, are there plans for any more concerts?

The answer? A resounding 'yes' from all three organizers. Concerts are already planned for Surrey (18 February), Leicester (22 April), Manchester (July) and Essex (September). There's even talk of a virtual Christmas concert!

What would you say to anyone reading this who is interested in coming along?

■ **KatyJay:** It's a brilliant opportunity to meet other adult learners. We can feel isolated when a lot of the focus of music making in the UK is child-centred. And, of course, there's the opportunity to play in front of the most supportive audience imaginable.

■ **Sbhoa:** If you are nervous about coming along to play then this is the right place for you. It's not about virtuoso performers showing off their talents but about adults at all levels sharing experiences.

■ **Jo.clarinet:** Do come and join us. You can always watch or take part in an ensemble if you don't want to do a solo. The atmosphere is always friendly and extremely supportive.

Joining the discussion forums

If you're not a forums member already, why not take a look now. Registration is free and you can:

- make contact with other teachers, performers and students
- discuss your musical interests with others and share tips and ideas
- find out about future forums concerts

To visit the forums go to:
<http://forums.abrsm.org>