A Lifetime in Harmony: Sheffield Chamber Orchestra Celebrates 75 Years of Music-Making

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This year marks a remarkable milestone for Sheffield Chamber Orchestra — its 75th anniversary — and few can tell its story better than Mike Jackson, MBE, who has been part of the ensemble for almost all that time. Now aged 90, Mike joined the orchestra in 1957 and has watched it evolve from a university ensemble into one of Sheffield's longest-standing musical institutions.

"I had played in orchestras at school and university," recalls Mike, "but this was a totally different ball game."

The orchestra was founded within the University of Sheffield's music department, under the direction of Professor Stuart Deas, a man remembered for his exacting standards and exhilarating tempos. Under his leadership, the orchestra performed an ambitious range of repertoire, often featuring contemporary works and attracting major soloists such as Clifford Curzon, Marisa Robles, and members of the Amadeus String Quartet.

Mike remembers vividly the excitement (and terror) of performing under Deas:

"He had the engaging habit of conducting the finales of Haydn symphonies at a speed never achieved in rehearsal – a hair-raising experience for yours truly!"

As the orchestra grew, so too did its community. When the Lindsay String Quartet arrived in Sheffield, their players took leadership roles in the orchestra's string sections, bringing a new level of artistry. Dedicated members like Roger Hayward, who chaired the orchestra for over 20 years, helped to build a sustainable organisation run by its players — a tradition that continues today.

When Mike succeeded Roger as Chair in the early 1970s, he worked alongside conductor and composer Chris Wiltshire, a partnership that brought fresh ambition and creativity. Together they premiered new works, including Chris's own *Concerto for Orchestra*, which he jokingly described as designed "to test the abilities of every member to the utmost."

The orchestra also launched its long-running "Accent on Youth" programme, giving talented young musicians the chance to perform major concertos — a legacy that continues to this day. Mike recalls one amusing rehearsal:

"We were preparing Mozart's Clarinet Concerto with three secondary school pupils, when a young lady came in quietly. I rushed to reassure her we were ready for her big moment — only to be told, 'Actually, I'm the clarinet teacher!'"

Financial challenges have always been part of the story, but so too have acts of generosity. A legacy from music lover Arthur Humphrey provided stability in lean years, while today, the orchestra is supported by loyal Patrons and season sponsors such as Agincare and Turner Violins.

Successive conductors — Harry Malpass, Robin McEwan, and now Laurence Perkins — have each left their mark, nurturing the orchestra's signature blend of professionalism, warmth, and community spirit.

"It's remarkable," says Mike, "that in 75 years, only five people have served as Chair. The loyalty and dedication of our members is extraordinary."

With Julie Ryan as current Chair, Laurence Perkins as Music Director, and Ralph Dawson as Professional Leader, Sheffield Chamber Orchestra continues to perform to packed audiences, offering "first-rate public performances of a wide range of musical experiences."

Mike received an MBE "for services to the community in Sheffield" in the 2024 New Year's Honours List. Now celebrating both his 90th birthday and his 68th year as a playing member, Mike shows no sign of losing his enthusiasm:

"The thrill and commitment of our wonderful orchestra continues to inspire. It's been a privilege to be part of it — and long may it continue."

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The orchestra's next concert is at 7.30pm on Saturday 29th November at All Saints Church, Ecclesall, featuring works by Mendelssohn, Wagner and Telemann, and the world première of a new work by British composer Dominic McGonigal.

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