

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

BARBER
CONCERTS

Celebrations Reflections Memories

BARBER
CONCERTS

— 1945-2020 —

75



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**Peyton and Barber Professor of
Music Anthony Lewis conducting
in the Barber Concert Hall**

Introduction

In this the 75th anniversary year of Barber Concerts we have been overwhelmed by the love and support that people have shown for the series and the Barber Concert Hall. It goes without saying that 2020 has been the most challenging year in our history, and we hope that, through sharing people's experiences and memories of Barber Concerts that we can transport you back in to the splendour of the concert hall, and reignite some of your own memories.

Programming the Barber Concerts series remains a core part of my role as Head of University Music and Concerts at the University of Birmingham, and my own involvement dates back to 2004 when I was initially appointed as Concerts and Marketing Administrator for the series. It has been a joy to work with the Barber and Peyton Professor on the artistic programming of the series and welcome world class artists and some of Europe's finest emerging artists to the hall, whilst also ensuring that our own students form part of our programming with events such as the Summer Festival Opera and our weekend student concerts.

My first experience of the Barber was as a fourteen-year-old on a school music department visit. My GCSE Music class visited for a Friday lunchtime concert, which I recall was a piano recital - though memory sadly fails me in remembering the artist. I recall feeling that the Barber was indeed a special place, the hall intimate, and the proximity to the artist making the experience all the more captivating. I remember the acoustics, thinking how amazing it was to hear such detail sitting in the back row (as I was often prone to do with anything school related). I felt sure that I would make a return visit one day - and did so during my time as a student at Birmingham Conservatoire.

As I sit in our concerts now - on the same back row - in a position that allows me to make my usual pre-concert announcements and sneak back in to the rear of the hall afterwards - I view my role in the Barber as a huge honour. I feel privileged to share our programming with such engaged audiences. I take pride in all that we present, and know that the series provides a valuable lifeline to many of our patrons amid the complexity of modern life. Though I share your sadness that we have had to pause live concerts in light of the Covid Pandemic, I know that you will welcome us back with open arms when time allows, and we too will be here to welcome you, share more exquisite music, and continue the legacy of our founder, Dame Martha Constance Hattie Barber (1869–1933). It would also be amiss to go without acknowledging the support of the Henry Barber Trust who are huge supporters of the concerts in the Barber, and it is through their funding that we can ensure that the Barber remains 'for the study and encouragement of art and music' as stated in the original trust deeds.

We hope that you enjoy reading through some of the memories, and that the series of photographs, archive material, and performances that we are sharing for our 75th year offer a reminder as to why Barber Concerts are also special to you.

Jo Sweet
Head of University Music and Concerts

**I remember a
terrific Baroque
trumpet concerto in
the entrance hall, to
take advantage of the
reverb. Must have
been 1969 or 1970.
Happy days!**

Memories

I loved Friday.

It started with jotting down circles around every Friday on my calendar, stating 'Lunchtime Concert, 1:10pm.' On Friday morning, I tried very hard to finish up housework as soon as possible so that I would be in time for the time with our neighbour.

She was the lady who has taught us British ways of life from A to Z since my husband and I arrived in the UK in April 2018. She was a recognised teacher of the University of Birmingham.

One day, she showed me the brochure of the Barber Institute saying we should have a look, as there were gorgeous art pieces upstairs and music occasions downstairs. It was at about the same time that my husband was recommended by his colleague to visit the art gallery, just across the road from the Birmingham Business School where he was undertaking his research. He also told us where to look around in Birmingham and other places like Stratford Upon Avon when we felt nervous.

When we stepped in there, I just couldn't believe my eyes to see all these stunning works were there, on campus. It was like they popped out of the textbook I had seen in my school days. It couldn't possibly happen in Japan. We also found out that there were lunchtime concerts on Friday. That would never happen in my country, either, having free concerts every week as well as evening and weekend concerts on campus.

Our neighbour and I walked from our flat, finding cherry blossoms on the way, and a home away from home feeling came upon me. I had lunch at the Noble room with my husband. 'Fish Friday' was the theme as I remembered fondly.

My poor husband had to go back to his studies after lunch, but the two of us were off to the Barber Institute to take the left-side seats so that we could see the player's fingers moving swiftly on the piano.

We've enjoyed various fields of music, from contemporary to classic, instrumental to solo recital, choir to solo singer. We held our breath, looked at each other, with our eyes wide open. I especially loved the lecture recitals of Kenneth Hamilton. My husband was later on impressed by the performance of the Berlin Philharmonic String Quintet for the evening concert before Christmas. It was such an amazing experience. I can't thank you enough for the opportunities we've had in the Barber Institute.

Another cherry blossom season came around, we came back to Japan in March 2019. Now I miss Friday so much.

Kaori Shiraki

Celebrations

My friend and I have attended the Friday lunchtime concerts reasonably regularly for some years. We have heard some amazing performers and some of the most outstanding have been Stephen Hough and Kenneth Hamilton. We know that we have to be early when Kenneth Hamilton is the artist because if not then it is standing room only! Their concerts have provided the most interesting programmes which remain very memorable. We also look forward to the performances of the various choirs of students from the Music Department at the University. They sing beautifully and communicate the enthusiasm and joyfulness of youth no doubt instilled by their equally enthusiastic lecturers and teachers. What a joy to see the next generation of music makers developing and growing so well.

As well as these there have been brass band performances and accordion players which were so different and entertaining.

Well done and thank you to the Barber for providing us with such experiences. Hopefully it won't be long before we can hear some of these remarkable and talented people again.

Doris Macdonald
Barber Association

CONCERTS 2002-3

ALEXANDER IVASHKIN *cello*

COLIN LAWSON *clarinet*

KENNETH HAMILTON *piano*

Wednesday, 19 March at 7.30 pm



GLINKA *Trio pathétique in D minor*

RAKHMANINOV *Cello Sonata in G minor*

CASTELNUOVO-TEDESCO *Clarinet Sonata*

ZEMLINSKY *Trio in D minor*

BARBER
CONCERTS

{ 'The most perfect piano
playing conceivable' }

The Guardian

{ 'A virtuoso who begins
where others leave off' }

The Washington Post



STEPHEN

PIANO
HOUGH

WEDNESDAY 7 MAY, 7.30pm

BARBER CONCERT HALL. TICKETS: £15, £12 CONCESSIONS, £8 BARBER FRIENDS, £5 STUDENTS

Schoenberg
Six Little Pieces, Op. 19
Strauss
Träumerei

Brahms
Seven Fantasias, Op. 116
Stephen Hough
Piano Sonata No. 2

I remember a few years ago bringing five children and two staff from Anderton Park School every Friday lunchtime to absorb the music and beauty of the Barber. We wanted to show everyone the wonders of Birmingham, the gift from Lady Barber, free, stunning.

Memories

My memories of Barber Concerts go back almost as far as the founding of this wonderful enterprise!

I came up to the Department of Music as an undergraduate in 1966, and was immediately immersed into the heady mix of offerings provided by world-class performers at the Barber Concerts. One of my first memories, for example, was of the peerless Borodin String Quartet.

We undergraduates were always on a three-line whip to attend these concerts, not that we needed any coercion, such was the quality of the events. Somehow the secretary of the Music Department always knew who was going out with whom, so we had tickets allocated together.

I was also involved in performing in many student lunchtime concerts, playing percussion in Walton's *Facade*, and conducting, among other things, Schubert's Fifth Symphony, Haydn's *Le Matin* Symphony, and Mozart Serenades (where we daringly used the stageside steps as well).

There were also Anthony Lewis' amazing operatic presentations, in which I served as scene-shifter, props master to Dame Janet Baker, and singer in the chorus. When I became a reviewer for the Birmingham Post there were too many joys to remember, though I do recall the piano collapsing during an avant-garde recital given by Malcolm Troup.

Every time I step into that gorgeous art deco auditorium I experience a thrill, and can see the me of over half a century ago -- and I wonder if today's students feel the same frisson.

Christopher Morley
Chief music critic, Birmingham Post
Midlands correspondent Opera magazine and Musical Opinion,
editor www.midlandsmusicreviews.com



“The distance of the Institute from the city centre is of no consequence: to attend such concerts as these any true-music lover would eagerly face many miles on foot in bad weather through rough country, including the ascent of a considerable rock-face, without ropes”

J.F.Waterhouse, 'Barber Concert a Musical Luxury – Four Works by Bach'
The Birmingham Post, 29 October 1946.

Reflections

The Barber Institute

It is hard to consider the concerts without first reflecting on the good fortune of the University on receiving the Barber bequest. The bequest required the construction of the Barber Institute—a combination of art galleries and concert hall rare, if not unique, in this country—and provided funds for the acquisition of works of fine art and the provision of concerts of music. The Institute proclaims the values of art and music to all members of the University and the people of Birmingham and beyond.

Refurbishment of the Concert Hall

With a seating capacity of about 350 and excellent acoustics and sight-lines, the Barber 'music room' is one of the finest small concert halls in the country. As a venue for chamber music, it is hardly surpassed, not even by the Wigmore Hall. It was opened by Queen Mary at the start of the Second World War (1939) and started hosting Barber Evening Concerts at the end of it (1945).

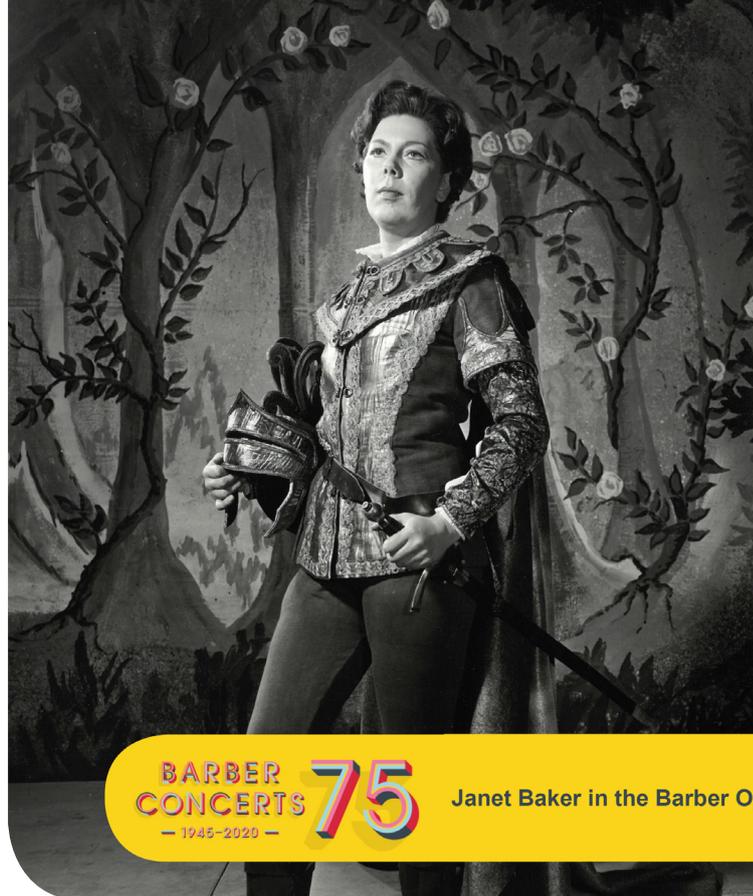
After over six decades of use, the hall was in desperate need of refurbishment. A stray foot had made a hole in the ceiling, which had temporarily been patched. The veneers on the walls were grimy and, in many places, had split and come away from the structure beneath. The upholstery of the seating was stained, torn and frayed; the horse-hair stuffing smelt musty, and in some seats the springs had completely given way – eloquent testimony to frequent use. The floor of the auditorium was worn, especially at the edges of the steps, and even the floor of the stage needed attention, particularly as the pit cover was higher than the rest.

All these matters were addressed. The first requirement was to empty the space. The seats were unscrewed from the floor and removed; the metal frames were retained and repainted, but all the stuffing and upholstery materials were completely replaced. While the seating was out, the floor of the auditorium was cleaned, restored and rewaxed.

Before work could begin on the veneers, however, a week was spent on hoovering 30 cm of dust out of the coving that runs round the top of the walls. The veneers were then cleaned and fixed back on the walls, care being taken to repair the splits. The ceiling was invisibly mended and repainted in its original colours, and the pit cover was adjusted so as to create a safer, larger and more flexible stage.

The refurbishment took place during the summer of 2008, and the hall was reopened in October with a special concert. The benefit of the renovation was felt as soon as one sat down and in the enhanced clarity and resonance of the acoustic. Among the many distinguished guests on that occasion was Dame Janet Baker. In the course of her perfectly judged speech to the audience she stressed how important the Barber had been to the development of her career: over fifty years earlier, when she was a virtually unknown

young singer, she had starred in some of the pioneering Handel opera productions that had been staged in the hall by Professor Anthony Lewis. During the course of the evening one member of the audience unfortunately became unwell and had to receive medical attention: improvements to ventilation had not been included in the refurbishment.



Concert programming

The programming of concerts in the Barber Concert Hall is constrained by several factors, among them the size of the hall, including that of the stage, and the context in which the concerts are promoted – that is, the musical life of Birmingham as a whole. Ideally, the concert-giving venues and bodies of the city should complement each other, but in practice it is hard to avoid overlap or competition. Another constraint is time. Most of my predecessors in the Peyton and Barber Chair had usually scheduled seven Barber Evening Concerts a year – three in the Autumn term, three in the Spring and one in the Summer. When these were added to the concerts given by students, the calendar seemed full enough.

My approach to programming could best be summed up by the word ‘variety’. I felt that Barber concerts should appeal to a wide audience, ranging from first-year students, whose knowledge of repertory might be limited, to senior citizens and regular concert-goers, who had heard all the ‘classics’ before. They should present a wide range of music, extending from the unknown to the familiar and from early to contemporary, striking a balance between vocal and instrumental, solo and ensemble, and, if possible, reflecting the special interests of the Music Department. It was difficult to achieve all this in a year, but it was hoped that Barber Concerts would enable a student, over the course of three years, to hear twenty-one contrasted programmes performed by first-class professional artists.

Memories

'Personal' is bound to become the watchword from this point on. Some of my fondest memories of Barber Evening Concerts date from my earliest years in Birmingham (I moved here in January 1973). The legendary violinist Ruggiero Ricci tossed off Paganini's 24 unaccompanied Caprices as if they were a morning exercise. The soprano Felicity Lott, who had endeared herself in 1977 as Cleopatra in Handel's *Julius Caesar* (conducted by Professor Ivor Keys), returned a couple of years later for a solo recital that included, if I remember rightly, some irresistible performances of songs by Mahler. One of the worst Barber concerts in my memory is a mandolin recital from around the same time: I am not sure whether my opinion would be higher if the mandolin had been audible.

I prefer not to single out 'better' or 'worse' concerts from the decades either side of 2000. Nevertheless, for one reason or another, some recitals stick in my mind more than others. For their performances of western classical music I particularly remember the cellist Stephen Isserlis, the pianist Richard Goode, the Jerusalem String Quartet and the tenor Ian Bostridge, whose interpretation of *Winterreise* was the first to persuade me that there is logic in the structure of the cycle. Schubert's chamber music, by the way, is my greatest 'discovery' from Barber concerts: it was in the Barber that I first heard his *String Quintet in C*, his Octet, his late piano sonatas and many wonderful smaller works. It was here, too, that the Ethos Percussion Ensemble opened my ears to the potential of their instruments, the trumpeter Håkan Hardenberger did the same for his, and a group of near-naked Aka pygmies from the Central African Republic, in one of their only three concerts in the UK, presented the beauties of their polyphonic folk music to a somewhat shell-shocked audience.

It was always a pleasure to promote concerts by young artists who went on to forge an illustrious international career. Two violinists spring immediately to mind – the Canadian James Ehnes and the Russian Alina Ibragimova. When they made their début at the Barber, several years apart, both of them, I think, were on their first visit to the UK.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to the young British soprano Louise Alder, who was introduced to me in 2008/9 when I was seeking someone for the role of Poppea in the next Barber Opera, Handel's *Agrippina*. Her performance impressed me—and everybody else—to such an extent that she returned in 2011 to sing the title-role in Handel's oratorio *Theodora* when I conducted it with the Birmingham University Singers as an Evening Concert, and she came back again with three compelling performances as Bradamante in Steffani's opera *Orlando generoso*, my swan-song in 2012. Although she has since taken principal roles at Glyndebourne, English National Opera and the Royal Opera House, she recently posted the following message (according to *Private Eye*): 'I am British. I cannot currently work in the UK because my industry doesn't exist. Last night I sang [at the Bavarian State Opera] to a socially distanced audience ... In Germany I am "viable". I choose to stay there.'



Louise Alder in Handel's *Agrippina*
The Barber Opera 2009

My heart goes out at the moment to all professional musicians, whether salaried or freelance. I hope, for their sake and the health of the nation, that a way will soon be found for them and for audiences to return to our concert halls, opera houses and other venues where live music is made, experience is enriched and lives are changed for the better. I wish the Barber Evening Concerts a happy 75th birthday and every success as they move towards their centenary.

Colin Timms
Peyton and Barber Professor of Music 1992–2012

**Mozart's *Adagio in B-minor*
played at a lunchtime concert
some years ago... Sublime.**

Michael Driscoll

NME Concert, Spring 2017

Harry Hextall

Celebrations

Hearty congratulations on reaching such an important milestone; I've have had long and fruitful relationship with the Barber Concerts, and each time I visit, I'm always knocked out by the beauty of the hall and the amazing acoustic properties – it must surely number among the finest chamber music venues in the UK. I look forward to continuing the Presteigne Festival's important association with the Barber, each year showcasing contemporary music performed by young virtuoso artists.

George Vass
Artistic Director, Presteigne Festival



“Canadian
Brass



Amy Brown

Canadian Brass
Monday 9 October 2017

Memories

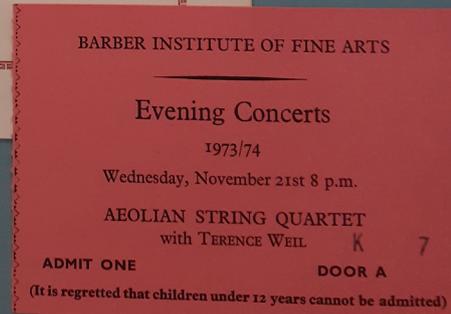
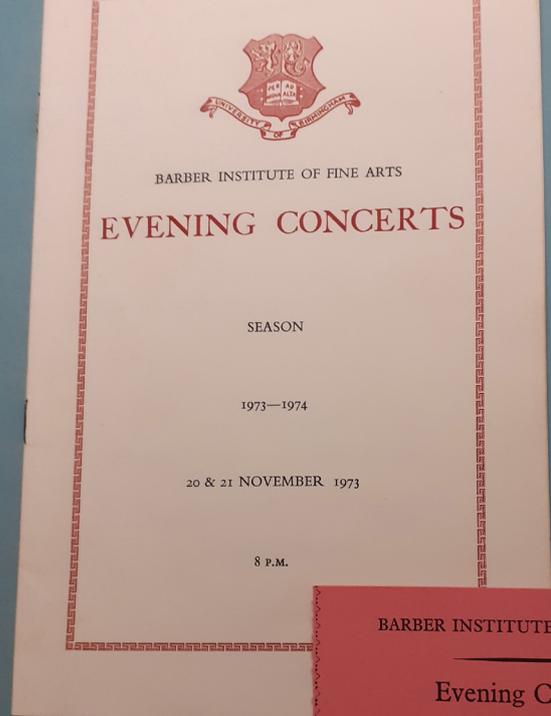
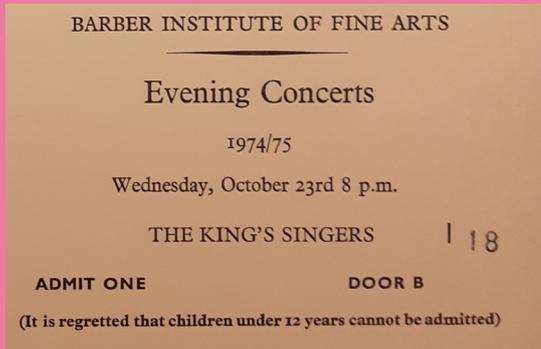
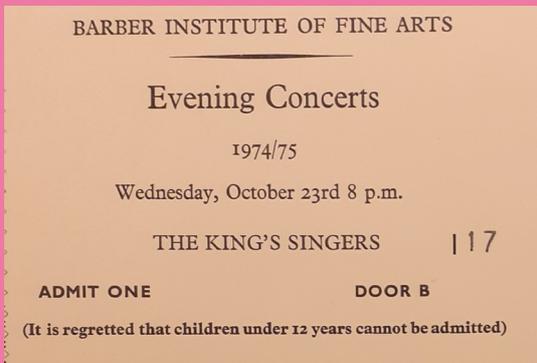
Evening concerts

As Susan Wood (notice the name on one of the King's Singers concert tickets), I was the first Barber [Art] Library assistant to be appointed by the Barber Trustees. As a member of the Barber Institute staff, I was in an enviable position of being able to receive priority access to the much sought after Barber Concert tickets. At that point (1973) tickets were free but only available to members of the University. The first concert I went to was performed by the Tuckwell Wind Quartet on 31 October 1973; my second was the Aeolian String Quartet on Wednesday 21st November 1973, my seat number being K7 (see photo). After that, my regular pair of tickets were always numbers I17 and I18 (see photo) - a perfect position to see and hear the wonderful artists who performed at the Barber. I remember Margaret Costello (the Secretary, Music Department). She would fiercely guard and administer the allocation of the concert tickets. Woe betide anyone who failed to turn up and not return their tickets. It is said that she used to have a little book recording the names of those who committed the sin of not attending and not handing back the tickets. There was always a waiting list for the most popular concerts; more often than not, people would be waiting at the front desk for returns on performance nights. I seem to remember you surrendered your ticket stub as you entered the concert hall and were given a programme. Tickets stubs would be carefully checked by Margaret Costello the next day.

The Barber galleries were always open before the evening concerts. Concertgoers would leave their coats near the front entrance on the metal coat racks which had hangers attached - it's where the coffee area is located now. No-one had to worry about their belongings - it was a safe place to be, although occasionally the wrong coat was taken in error but quickly returned.

Favourite concerts

The concerts were not all devoted to highbrow classical music. I remember popular names such as the King's Singers and James Galway. Who can forget the rhythmic drumming of the Samul Nori (Korean Master Drummers) in 1977 - I was so taken by their music that I bought a tape recording and would often play it to drown out the pop music from my neighbours! Possibly my favourite concert was the Elgar Celebration Concert of 1st December 1976, performed by the Haywood Quartet with Ivor Keys at the piano, together with the University Motet Choir, conducted by John Joubert. The pieces I particularly enjoyed were Elgar's *Music for the Pauper Lunatic Asylum*, *Powick*, *I and II*. I had never hear anything like it before and probably never will, but can vividly remember Ivor putting his heart and soul into his piano playing.



Lunchtime concerts

I rarely attended the lunchtime concerts, the reason being that there was only the Librarian, Margaret Rogers, and myself in the Art Library, and of course we had to keep the place open. However, if the music was lively and loud such as Sousa's *The Liberty Bell*, I used to leave the door open and enjoy the concert, The lunchtime concerts were usually preceded by the Barber lunch. This was a buffet made by the music students in the Barber kitchen (in the basement area of the building) and gave the concertgoers (mostly University staff and students) the chance to grab a quick bite before attending the concert.

Barber Operas

I cannot believe how lucky we were to see, at close hand, such great artists such as James Bowman and Felicity Lott as they rehearsed Handel's *Julius Caesar* which was the Barber opera for 1977. The man who later became my husband, Arthur, had been a gallery attendant at the Barber before moving to a position in the civil service. I will always be grateful to Margaret Costello who allowed me to borrow (on his behalf) one of the former opera costumes for a fancy dress evening. The costumes used to be housed in an area in the basement beneath the concert hall. Those were the days. My favourite opera will always be *Così fan tutte* which was the highlight of the Barber's Jubilee celebrations in 1983, with guests invited to a lavish supper in the galleries beforehand.

Susan Briggs (née Wood)
Barber Library Assistant (1973-1991)

I was the Concerts Administrator from 2000-2004 and one of my favourite memories is picking up Pierre-Laurent Aimard from Birmingham airport and driving badly, whilst chatting incessantly to him and being slightly star struck. At least the car was French though!

I also really enjoyed getting involved in auditions and preparations for the Barber opera in 2000, *Steffani*.



Hermes Ensemble
CrossCurrents Festival 2016



Apartment House
BEAST FEaST 2019

[www.barber.org.uk/
concerts](http://www.barber.org.uk/concerts)