



Epsom Christmas Concert Triumphs After Last-Minute Conductor Crisis

What could have been a genuine crisis for Epsom Choral Society's Christmas Concert on Saturday became a remarkable story of teamwork, professionalism, and musical courage.

The day began with unwelcome news. Early in the morning, Musical Director, Julian Collings, phoned to say he had been struck down with flu and was unable to conduct that evening's concert. This was to be no ordinary performance: it was completely sold out and featured two world premieres, making cancellation unthinkable.

From his sickbed, Julian immediately set about trying to find a replacement conductor for the evening. His first call was to Neil Ferris, conductor of the Leith Hill Music Festival. Unfortunately, Neil was unable to step in at such short notice, but he suggested a name: Victoria Ely. Crucially, ECS Chair, Helen Phillips, was able to recommend her with confidence, having seen Victoria in action when she took a rehearsal for Neil at one of the Leith Hill Music Festival rehearsals last Spring.

Victoria Ely, who had never met the choir before, bravely agreed to conduct the concert with just four hours' notice.

Meanwhile, Julian faced another formidable task. From home, he painstakingly scanned all of his marked-up scores – 20 different pieces, the parts for the brass quintet, and his detailed annotations and introductory notes. These were sent at speed to the ECS's Concert Management team, who rushed to print everything so it could be placed in Victoria's hands as soon as she arrived and so the brass had something to play! It was a race against the clock, but by 1pm everything was in place.

That afternoon's rehearsal was necessarily intense. Rather than imposing her own methods, Victoria immediately showed her musicianship and collaborative spirit by asking the choir to demonstrate how each piece had been rehearsed. She listened carefully, adapted quickly, and worked with the choir's established approach, creating a sense of trust and calm despite the extraordinary circumstances.

By the time the evening concert arrived, what might have felt like an emergency substitution instead felt like a confident partnership. Victoria conducted with assurance, clarity, and good humour, guiding the choir through a demanding and varied programme. Her warm presence and engaging manner extended to the audience, who responded with enthusiasm and obvious enjoyment.

Against all odds, the concert was not merely rescued, it was a resounding success. For Epsom Choral Society the evening became a powerful reminder of the strength of its musical community and the generosity of fellow professionals. Thanks to Julian's determination, Helen's quick thinking, the Concert Manager's efficiency, and above all Victoria Ely's courage and skill, a potential disaster was transformed into a memorable and uplifting Christmas celebration.

Nina Kaye

From Ukraine to Epsom: How Music and Kindness Struck the Right Note

When the Ukraine National Opera arrived in the UK on tour in early 2022, none of its musicians could have imagined how the world, and their lives, were about to change. Two weeks later, Russia invaded Ukraine. Many members of the orchestra, seeing the escalating conflict at home, made the painful decision to remain in the UK and claim asylum. Among them was clarinettist and saxophonist Vlad Voloshyn.

Now living in Epsom with local resident Nina Kaye, one of the founders of the Epsom & Ewell Refugee Network, Vlad has continued to rebuild his life through music. Together with five of his former orchestra colleagues, he formed a brass ensemble called Freedom Pulse, which performs Ukrainian and classical repertoire across Surrey and beyond.

Alongside his performing career, Vlad is in his final year at the British Institute of Modern Music (BIMM) in Fulham, where he studies music and sound production and hopes to work as a sound designer after he graduates.

Recently, an extraordinary act of local generosity brought his story full circle. Vlad had long hoped to buy a tenor saxophone, an instrument essential for his expanding repertoire but out of reach financially. By chance, his host Nina, who also volunteers for



Nucleo, a London-based social action charity that helps children from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to music, received an email offering a donated tenor saxophone. Nina runs Nucleo's National Instrument Bank, which matches donated instruments with musicians in need.

The offer came from a donor in the Lake District. Determined and hopeful, Vlad took the long train journey north to collect what he thought was a tenor saxophone. Only on the journey home did he discover it was actually an alto sax, an instrument he already owned. Disheartened, he returned to Epsom unsure how to continue his search.

A few days later, Vlad was performing at a Ukrainian Music Evening in Epsom, attended by His Worshipful The Mayor of Epsom & Ewell, Councillor Robert Leach. Sitting beside the Mayor, Nina recounted Vlad's misadventure with the saxophone. Without hesitation, Councillor Leach said, "I've got a tenor sax at home which I haven't played for 30 years and he would be welcome to have it, if I can find it."

True to his word, after the concert Vlad was welcomed to the Mayor's home and given the instrument which left him both astonished and grateful.

What began as a story of loss and exile has become one of connection and kindness. From the national stage in Kyiv to community halls in Surrey, Vlad's journey shows how music continues to build bridges where politics and geography divide.

When Vlad plays his tenor sax in Freedom Pulse's performances, he will know that even in times of war and displacement, the power of human generosity, and of music itself, resonates far beyond borders.

Nina Kaye

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The 13th Ukraine Music Evening took place on Saturday 25th October at Epsom Methodist Church, organised by Lionel Blackman with the support of the Epsom Refugee Network and Surrey Stands With Ukraine. Extra seats were brought in as the Church filled to the brim.

The Worshipful Mayor of Epsom and Ewell, Councillor Robert Leach (RA Nonsuch), opened the event with words of welcome and appreciation for the town's ongoing solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

For the first time, the programme featured a Ukrainian dance ensemble — **Stephania**, choreographed and led by **Alina Luts** — whose performances introduced vibrant movement and colour between the musical sets.

The modern section of the programme offered a change of mood. Epsom-based performers **Helin Konyar** (vocals), a graduate of Epsom's Laine Theatre Arts and **Vladislav Voloshin** (saxophone) presented three songs: *Almost There* (Anika Noni Rose), *Dream a Little Dream* (Robbie Williams) and the Ukrainian favourite *Stari Fotohrafii* by Skryabin, combining contemporary and national influences with confident stage presence.

The evening continued with **Vadym Perig**, an alumnus of the nearby Yehudi Menuhin School, who travelled from his new home in Vienna to perform **Robert Schumann's Violin Sonata No. 1**, accompanied by the accomplished Ukrainian pianist **Svitlana Kosenko**. Their expressive partnership recalled the high standard of the first Ukraine Music Evening in 2022, in which both artists also appeared.

Pianist **Maria Zhornikova** returned to Epsom with a refined interpretation of **Enrique Granados' Eight Poetic Valses**, followed by **À Giverny**, a short composition by the organiser Lionel Blackman. Projected images of Monet's gardens accompanied the performance, and the Mayor's purchase of the sheet music contributed to funds for Surrey Stands With Ukraine.

Further performances by **Stephania** included traditional Ukrainian dances such as *My Kyiv*, *Polka*, and *Chycheri*, performed by a talented ensemble of soloists.

As is now tradition, the evening concluded with the **Renaissance Choir** under the direction of **Nataliia Zadorizhna** and conductor **Dana Kuhlyk**, singing the Ukrainian National Anthem and a selection of beloved folk songs — *Oh, in the Cherry*



Orchard, Why Didn't You Come, Why, Why, My Land, and Hey, Falcons.

All proceeds from the concert went to support the professional musicians who continue to share Ukraine's rich artistic culture with audiences in Epsom.

Nina Kaye