

21 and counting for Lions Youth

Nigel Birch recalls a special concert celebrating the 21st anniversary of one of the UK's busiest and most successful youth bands.

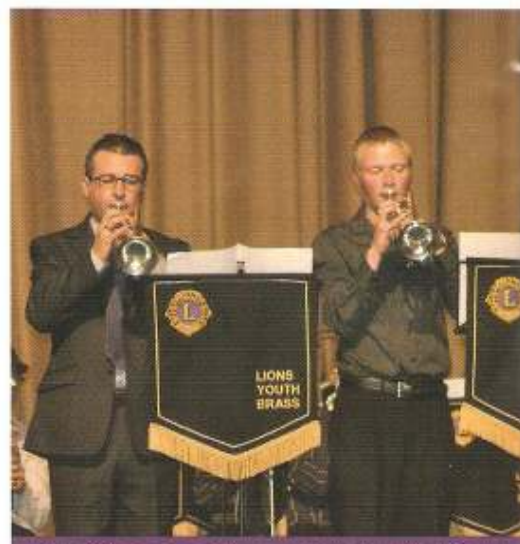


Nigel Birch addressing the audience before the finale of the concert

On Saturday 9 July at the Oakley Centre in Crewe, one of the country's leading youth brass bands celebrated its 21st birthday. In an evening packed with nostalgia and great entertainment, Lions Youth Brass, from Sandbach in Cheshire, had a great evening with many old friends and invited special guests. The day had taken much organising with perhaps the hardest task being contacting former players to come back and form a Lions reunion band for one night, but at 12.15pm, the worries were over, as 43 past members struck the first note of *Star Lake* and began their rehearsal for the evening concert. Following the rehearsal, at 3.30pm, there was a grand reception at which all players past and present came together with invited guests to talk about the great achievements of the band and also to catch up on what players had been up to after they had left the organisation. There was a tremendous buffet organised by the Lions Committee, who work so hard for the band, as well as a great display of memorabilia. Also, Paul Darlington had set up a large screen, which showed performances from all the bands over the last few years.



Mark Wilkinson gives a masterclass in cornet solo playing with Lions Youth



Mark Wilkinson leads the guest cornets in their feature

At 5.00pm, it was time to cut the celebration cake and toast the band's anniversary. As the Youth Band's current Musical Director, I was presented with a marvellous book of photographs that had followed my career with the band, which had been put together by our Treasurer, Ruth Jenkins. It was obvious that a great deal of time and effort had gone into making this very special present.

The concert began at 6.00pm with Lions Youth Brass on great form. The band has had a very successful year, with our superb second place in the Advanced Section of the National Championships and, at the same time, I was presented with the Brian Hicks Memorial Trophy, which is awarded annually to someone considered to have given outstanding service to youth brass bands.

The programme began with *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Steel Skies*. Following those opening pieces, we welcomed our special guest soloist for the evening, Mark Wilkinson, principal cornet of Foden's Band. Mark is a regular visitor to Lions, as he has tutored many of the players from time to time, and has also set up many workshops for the organisation. He showed why he is so respected in the brass band community with a fantastic performance of the cornet classic, *Hailstorm*.

One of the two guest conductors for the evening was Mike Fowles, Associate Conductor of Foden's and also Musical Associate of Lions Youth Brass. He directed the next two pieces - Mark's encore, *Share My Yoke* and the Tom Jones hit, *Sex Bomb!* Mike Fowles is also a regular visitor to Lions and has helped to direct the band both musically and artistically over the past three years. The first part of the programme was completed with Nigel Birch directing the Youth Band in *An American Trilogy*.



The Youth Band then made way for the Beginners Section, but during the reorganising of the stage, Neil Barnett, who presented the concert very professionally, interviewed Ruth Jenkins, who gave a great insight to what goes on behind the scenes and also shared some of her own special memories with the audience. The Beginners Section, directed by Christopher Thompson, consistently has around 30 members and it began its spot with *Tromp of the Romans*. Even though the band has an average age of around nine years, it played with an assured maturity you would not expect from players of this age.

During the performance, Chris paid tribute to the other members of his team - Hayley Scott, Andrew Felton and Matthew Darlington, who unfortunately was taking part in his last Lions event for a while due to his forthcoming studies in Newcastle for the next 12 months. The Beginners Section finished its set with *Colours Suite*, which was written for it by the organisation's Composer-in-Residence, Ian Raisbeck, for its debut performance at the National Youth Championships earlier this year. The Junior Band was next up and while the audience was getting ready for it, Neil Barnett interviewed Katie Raisbeck, one of the great success stories of Lions Youth Brass. Katie started playing the cornet at the age of 15 and after a few lessons from Nigel Birch, decided cornet was not for her and changed to the baritone. Within ten years, Katie has studied at the Royal Northern College of Music under David Thornton and progressed through Roberts Bakery, Wingates and Fairey bands before joining Black Dyke, with which she recently won the English National Championship and will go on to play at the European Championship next year - a great achievement and one of which all at Lions Youth Brass are very proud. The Raisbeck household is a very busy one, as Katie's husband, Ian, who is another great Lions success story, is a front row cornet player with Foden's, Lions Youth Brass Composer-in-Residence and Musical Director of the Lions Junior Brass.

The band began its programme with *Eye of the Tiger*, and the standard of the performance was extremely high. Ian has worked wonders with this group of young players and is constantly producing some talented performers for the Youth Band. Following *The Roman Wall* by Stuart Johnson, Catharine Flanders was featured in the hymn tune, *Nottingham*. Catharine is only ten years old but is already showing that she could be a star of the future. After the ever-popular *Floral Dance*, the Junior Band finished in great style with *La Bamba*. The second half belonged to the Reunion Band and, on just over two hours rehearsal, it set off in cracking form in Eric Ball's *Star Lake*. It

followed that up with Andrew Lloyd-Webber's *Love Changes Everything*, which featured Michael Pollitt on cornet, who since leaving Lions has become principal cornet of Roberts Bakery Band.

Lions Youth Brass is run by a very hard working committee of parents of players both past and present and is superbly led by Jane Stubbs, who earlier this year was awarded the honour of Citizen of the Year, for services to the local community, by the Rotary Club of Sandbach. The following piece was a special request for Jane of one of her all-time favourites, as Ian Raisbeck showed off his considerable talents in the *Post Horn Galop*. Following *The Glenn Miller Special* it was time to welcome the second guest conductor of the evening, Paul Andrews, who has a long association with the organisation as he conducted the band for a short time in the late 1990s and is also responsible for all the repairs and maintenance of the organisation's instruments. Paul directed the premiere performance of an arrangement of *Hey Jude* by Ian Raisbeck, which had been commissioned for the evening, and also Mark Wilkinson's final solo, *The Lazy Trumpeter*. Paul Andrews' final piece was *Buglers' Holiday*, which featured Mark Wilkinson, Ian Raisbeck, Tom Hancock, Michael Pollitt and Amy Ball. It was good to see Paul Andrews taking the band once again and also share his banding experiences with the audience.

At this point in the programme, I made a presentation to Neil Barnett for professionally keeping the programme running all evening and also to Amy Ball, the current Youth Band principal cornet, who richly deserved her Bandsperson of the Year Award. I then returned to the podium to conduct the final part of the evening, beginning with an old favourite, *Instant Concert*, before Alex Holsgrove, who has gone on to be principal euphonium of Roberts Bakery Band, gave an outstanding performance of another classic solo, *La Belle Americaine*. *The Pirates of the Caribbean* is a very popular film at the moment and the music from it was enjoyed by all the audience. Before the finale, it was my pleasure to pay tribute to everyone who had taken part in the concert, as well as to everyone who had made this anniversary special and a great success. I also pointed out that Lions Youth Brass has reached some very high points in its history, but it must not stop here. The organisation wants to continue to develop and continue to provide young people with great opportunities and provide a happy musical and social environment.

The concert finished with the audience on their feet following all four bands' performance of the band's flagship piece, *Can Can*, and also in recognition of an outstanding evening of nostalgia and great entertainment.