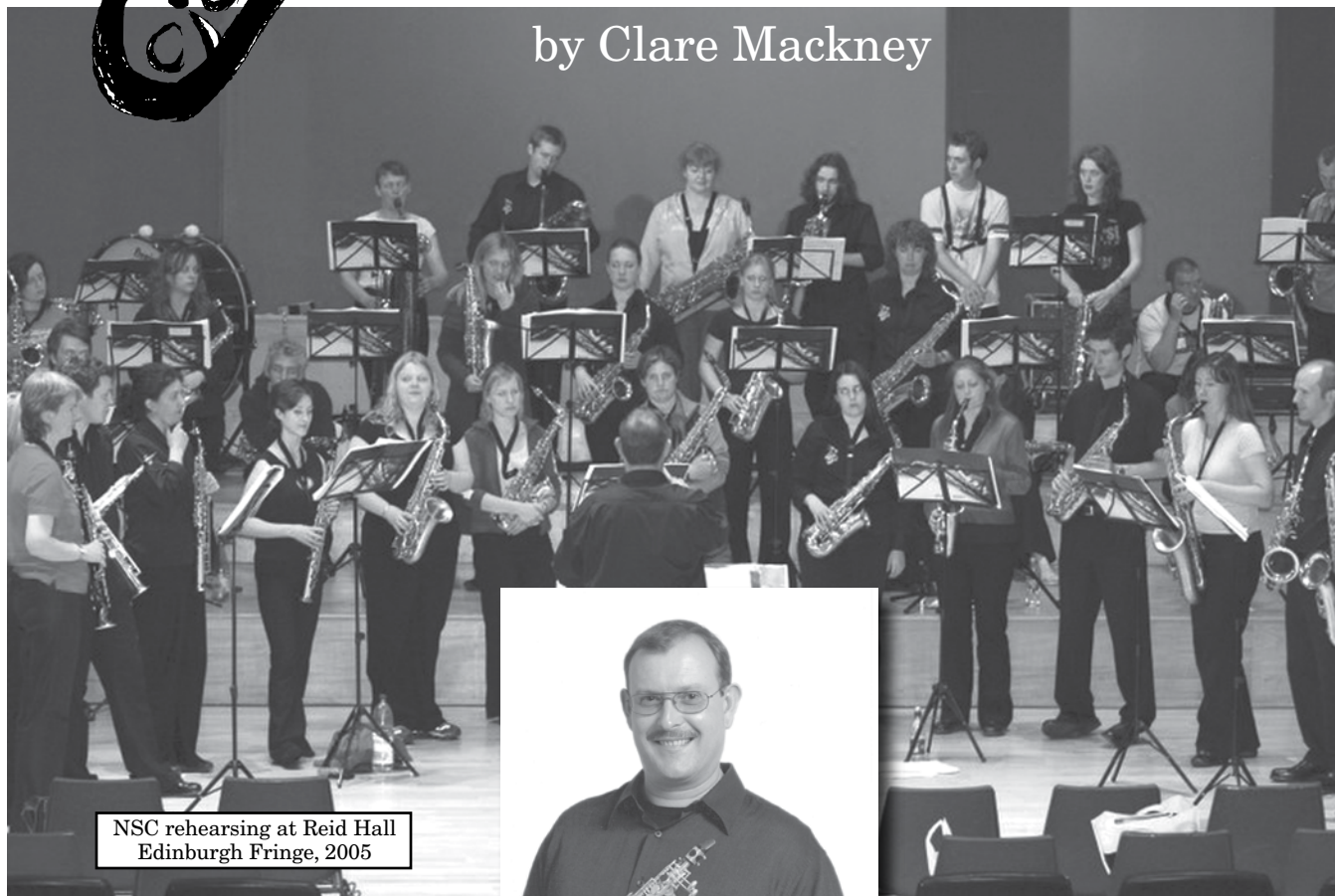


THE National Saxophone Choir OF GREAT BRITAIN

by Clare Mackney



NSC rehearsing at Reid Hall
Edinburgh Fringe, 2005

Nigel Wood

Many popular accounts of the saxophone chronicle its history in terms of individual performers making high profile soloists responsible for remarkable developments in technique and expressivity. But essentially the saxophone is an ensemble instrument. Is this a controversial claim? Not really. Inventor Adolphe Sax presented an extended family of no fewer than eight different saxophones in his 1846 patent, and it was the sax sections of military, later concert, dance, and swing bands that first got the instruments established in the public consciousness. Even on the classical front, saxophone quartets are more familiar in the UK than solo recitals. Does the National Saxophone Choir of Great Britain (NSC), with its forty players, represent the ultimate realization of Adolphe Sax's dream? Nigel Wood, the choir's founder and Musical Director, would certainly like to think so. "As a

saxophonist who's also a composer, writing for the sax choir feels like the ultimate challenge and privilege," he explained from his home in Birmingham, the UK's second city. "There's such a vast sound world to explore. Each instrument has its own character and timbre, and in the choir where there are multiple parts for each one, the potential is awesome."

Nigel started recruiting for members for the NSC in 2002, via the web page of his specialist saxophone music publishing business, Saxtet Publications. "The response was brilliant," smiles Nigel, "and new members are coming forward all the time. Their commitment is overwhelming. Many are music students and young professionals with very demanding schedules, and yet every month they come from all over the country to Birmingham, at their own cost, are worked to the bone for up to five hours, yet they still seem to enjoy it!"

The enthusiasm isn't surprising, given that there are so few opportunities to play in ensembles of this scale. The saxophone choir wasn't even part of the saxophone's history until recently. Over the past few years there have been regular record breaking, or charitable, sax extravaganzas, yet given these concert events, the flowering of the saxophone choir phenomenon has been largely restricted to schools, colleges, and universities. Nigel is unreservedly enthusiastic about all these projects, but is adamant that the NSC is something rather different.

"We're independent," he states, "and we're permanent. We have three very clear objectives: repertoire development, audience development, and providing challenging new opportunities for talented saxophonists. We're open to players of any age or musical background, as long as they pass our audition. Musically we're aiming to create a whole new dimension in saxophone sound."

This objective is reflected in the choir's eight sax line up, which is unique in the UK.

This format is still evolving, but is currently based on three principal parts for each of the four 'core' instruments (soprano, alto, tenor and baritone) with two players per part, plus a more flexible 'tutti' section of these instruments, and one principal player each on bass, soprano, the massive tubax, and tiny soprillo. Nigel reflects on some of the implications of such a large ensemble:

"With forty or so players we can easily produce a sound that's massively rich and powerful," he explains. "It's very heady. Collective control is more of a challenge. Our altos and tenors are the size of an orchestral string section, but play on instruments which aren't designed to produce quiet dynamics without effort. A pianissimo marking in a saxophone choir context requires very fine control indeed."

"Honing articulation, rhythmic precision and listening skills on such a large scale also presents new challenges, but the quest contributes to the cutting edge feel of the choir. We have numerous guest conductors, including such well-known names as John Harle, and Gerard McChrystal, and their contribution to the development of these new skills is invaluable."

Musicianship is clearly at the heart of the choir, but what about the hardware, and particularly the eye and ear-catching tubax and soprillo? The Eb tubax is a narrow bore and relatively compact contrabass which uses a baritone mouthpiece but sounds an octave below, while the Bb soprillo is a piccolo sax sounding an octave above the soprano.

Nigel explains, "Originally we were generously lent the tubax by John Packer Ltd., one of the few UK stockists of the instrument, but unfortunately it was sold to someone who heard us using it in a concert! Naturally I was intrigued, so I tracked down the purchaser and persuaded her to play in the choir, so we now hear that wonderful subterranean resonance in every rehearsal. It's a talking point, and a great addition to the tonal palette of the choir."

"I also got in touch with the German manufacturer, Benedikt Eppelsheim, and as soon as I heard that they also produced a piccolo sax, I immediately wanted one. Benedikt kindly lent me a soprillo which I later bought and I now assist him by providing player feedback. It really is an extraordinary little instrument, with its octave key in the mouthpiece, and so small that even half a millimetre can make a difference. But it's certainly



NSC performing
Edinburgh Fringe, 2005

not a toy, and I like to think that it adds a genuinely musical extra sparkle right at the top of the choir."

Talking about such extreme instrumentation naturally raises the issue of repertoire. The enormous six-octave range provided by the family of eight saxes and the richness and variety of their timbres means that the choir has already built an unusually diverse play list of almost four dozen items, made up of arrangements (including Bach, Mozart, Ravel, Moussorgsky and fun compilations) and new works. These encompass an eclectic range of styles from the cutting edge and exploratory through rags, jazz, rock, and Celtic to neo-classical, minimalism, and the genuinely unclassifiable "genre-bending," as choir publicity dubs it. No music comes ready formatted to fit the choir's unique resources, which means that Nigel spends a great deal of time arranging and re-scoring:

"It's always exciting," he exclaims, "but also a bit daunting too. There's just no point of reference for the soprillo, for example, so I just experiment to see what works. So far I've taken solo on it in two pieces by Philip Buttall, Eclogue and a very inventive and funny reworking of the Waltzing Matilda theme in various guises, Waltzing Soprillda. The public loved both, and it's enormously satisfying that such a tiny little instrument should find a musical home amidst the massed ranks of a sax choir."

Despite the successes, Nigel admits to some frustration: "We have no regular funding so we can't buy scores or commission new works. The music from my business Saxtet Publications comes free of course, and provides a good source of works that I can relatively easily adapt for the choir. I'd love to produce an entirely new piece, but with monthly or more frequent rehearsals, I just don't have time. We've got a dedicated slot in our rehearsal schedules for new works, but there's just not enough high quality material coming forward, and until recently, that's left the choir rather too dependent on me. Now some of the players are coming forward with their own arrangements, which is great."

"We've also been able to track down some exciting new stuff on the web, especially through www.sibeliusmusic.com, which has given us a very welcome international dimension and provided our first premiere, a lovely, lyrical piece called Egloga by Rod Moulds from Baltimore, MD."

Other premieres include a delicate, exploratory piece called



Chimes by Ben Palmer, a young composer at Birmingham University, and two works presented at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August last year, *Harlequin Dances* by the choir's principal guest conductor Keiron Anderson, and Nigel's own *Orphanata* which he scored for tenors, baritones, bass and tubax. *Waltzing Soprillda* was premiered more recently in January this year, together with a bittersweet love ballad by Patrick Bouchard, *Without your Love*.

An attempt to garner further new music has prompted the NSC and Saxtet Publications to hold a competition to find a significant new work for presentation by the choir. Writing for such substantial and unfamiliar forces must be daunting and to date interest is slow, but the choir is hoping that there will be a winning score which merits being premiered by the NSC at one or more of its appearances. The amount of energy Nigel spends sourcing, composing and arranging music is enormous, but he is equally passionate about the NSC's second core objective of identifying new audiences for the sax. "I'm all for presenting demanding and experimental music which takes some serious risks," he says determinedly, "but I'm equally clear that playing accessible, entertaining music for general audiences is worthwhile too."

This attitude helps explain why the NSC's first few gigs were street performances including the Birmingham BullRing, Europe's largest and internationally acclaimed new shopping centre, and appearing at the city's 2002 and 2003 ArtsFests, outdoor festivals packed with vibrant, multi-cultural events. Nigel believes that playing to such non-captive audiences keeps players on their mettle and brings home the benefits of good presentation, especially memorizing music. Even at longer, indoor concerts with their more substantial and demanding programmes, a lot of attention is paid to stagecraft and lighting, so audiences always get a dash of theatre with their music.

"The reaction is terrific," says Nigel. "Audiences love the excitement and spectacle, but they're also amazed that the sax can be so versatile and subtle. Even saxophonists can be sceptical about the impact of so many saxophones. At the Gala Concert of the CASS (Clarinet and Saxophone Society of Great Britain) Sax Congress in February 2005 some listeners seemed to expect nothing but volume, and were genuinely impressed with the uniqueness and depth of the sound. Gilad Atzmon, who appeared with us at the Congress, said he'd never heard anything like it! We'll be facing even more discerning audiences when we go to the 14th International Saxophone Congress in Slovenia this July."

Impressing an existing audience at a specific concert is one matter, but establishing a committed following and more sax-awareness is a much longer-term challenge. The choir's appearance in the Reid Hall at last year's Edinburgh Festival Fringe was its biggest test. "This was an exciting, terrifying and crazy project," exclaims Nigel. "We had five days of appearances with two concerts per day (classical at lunchtime, sax spectacular in the evening), and we were competing with about 1,800 other Fringe shows. We called the show 'Sax in the City' which is also the title of the CD we recorded in just one session beforehand, showcasing most of the music to be featured in our Edinburgh programmes."

So was it all worth it? "Absolutely, because it's wonderful when people react so positively to the sound and spectacle of forty saxophones and it

confirms that the sax choir concept has real popular appeal. Playing to a capacity audience on the final night and being voted top show that day in the Fringe's new text voting system was the perfect end to the run.

The choir also benefited enormously from the experience in that standards rose appreciably with such an intensive playing regime, individuals took on much more music and administrative responsibility, and we all saw our work on presentation pay dividends while at the same time a lot of social bonding went on.

In Nigel's words, "I hope that I've also learned some logistical lessons. I probably underestimated the demands Edinburgh imposed on the choir's voluntary and incredibly hard-working committee, and would aim to get basic structures (sponsorship, program) in place earlier in the future. With members scattered all over the country, the organization simply would not have happened without our amazing website through which we manage programs, rehearsals, attendance, correspondence, and music. It was built by our talented soprano player, and I hope we can develop the site even further in the future. The generosity of fellow musicians, guest conductors, soloists, and composers was another vital ingredient."

In all, the 2005 Edinburgh Fringe seems to have been something of a watershed for the choir. Its first concert of 2006, in Bristol and well off its 'home' patch, attracted a near-capacity audience, and it has just appeared, by invitation, as the heart of the 100 saxes required for Italian Salvatore Sciarrino's *La bocca, i piedi, il suono*, part of a prestigious and ambitious project with the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. With plans well underway for the 14th World Saxophone Congress, a return to the Edinburgh Fringe and a concert in one of London's best known chamber venues, St John's Smith Square, the NSC is pushing its profile ever upwards.

What are Nigel's thoughts on progress to date? "I think it's fair to say that our achievements are genuinely impressive. The choir is established, it's maturing musically and there's a constant, almost overwhelming, stream of interest from new players. We've attracted a lot of interest in the saxophone world, we've got a working repertoire and a reassuring number of successful gigs under our belt. Once we've met a challenge, the Edinburgh Fringe and CD for example, they're no longer so daunting. We're confident about a return to the Fringe and we're hoping there'll be a new NSC CD, plus a soprillo CD that will also involve the choir. Generally we feel that we're on a

bit of a roll: we get invitations back to venues we've visited and suggestions for new ventures (even possibly China), management is more efficient and attracting press attention isn't so difficult.

On the wider front, at Saxtet Publications I've noticed a significant growth in demand for sax ensemble music. I'm not suggesting that the sax choir is entirely responsible for that, but it does suggest the choir reflects a burgeoning interest."

And what about the future? "As musical director, musical standards are always a first priority," states Nigel. "Improving quality is a never ending quest, but I'm very confident we're moving in the right direction. What worries more in the longer term is the lack of funding and substantial new music. We've never let lack of money stop us doing anything, and we've been as imaginative as we can about raising it, but financial security would make such a huge difference to us musically, like buying a bass, for example, or subsidizing more rehearsals, that it's difficult not to dwell on it. It would also allow us to commission some really exciting new work all leading to shere bliss!"

So was it all worth it? "Absolutely! We all believe that the saxophone choir is a rich and versatile musical resource with huge untapped potential but we're biased of course, and it's wonderful when people react so positively to the sound and spectacle of forty saxes. It confirms that the sax choir concept has real popular appeal. Playing to a capacity audience on the final night and being voted top show that day in the Fringe's new text voting system was the perfect end to the run."

In addition to managing and rehearsing the concert programs, two premieres, promoting a CD and hustling street performances, there is a daunting amount of logistical and promotional organization involved. "The amount of work has forced me to focus on the way the choir operates," Nigel says, more seriously, "and I think I could offer ten 'top tips' to anyone trying to set up a comparable ensemble elsewhere."

WANT TO FORM A SAXOPHONE CHOIR?

NIGEL'S TOP TEN TIPS

First, playing in an all saxophone group of this size is a new musical challenge in itself. Intonation and awareness of others doesn't come without effort so listening is the key.

Secondly, in a group this size it's vital that every single player retains a very strong sense of personal responsibility. Discipline in rehearsal and practicing parts at home are vital.

My third tip involves guest conductors, and we've found ten prominent figures on the U.K. saxophone scene (Gerard McChrystal and John Harle for example) to conduct the NSC. Figures of this status are invaluable in providing encouragement and constructive criticism too, so if you can get musical support from outside sources, grab it!



"Arty Altos"
Edinburgh Fringe, 2005

My fourth, and very heartfelt piece of advice is, never, ever, underestimate the time it takes to organize a group of this size. Encourage a co-operative ethos and exploit your players' non-musical skills. We've got an incredibly dedicated committee of six, plus several other helpers, whose professional expertise includes management, I.T., accounting, journalistic promotion, finance, and even medicine!

My fifth recommendation is to use the internet as much as possible for repertoire, communication with members, distributing

parts, and promotion via a website links and email. It's a great way to contact other musicians.

Sixth, try very hard to get the money thing sorted out early, because constantly having to negotiate and think up cost free ways of doing things adds enormously to the administrative burden. Be brazen and not afraid to ask any source you possibly can (businesses, charities, institutions, friends, and relatives), and think up creative sponsorship packages.

Seventh, and this is really the flipside of the previous point, is don't actually wait for the money or you'll never get going. Support 'in kind' is invaluable. We'd never have got off the ground without instrument loans, guest conductors, composers, and soloists who waived fees, no to forget free rehearsal space from Birmingham Conservatoire.

Eighth is to get your repertoire from www.saxtetpublications.com! Seriously, there's not much high quality stimulating music for sax choir, so tempt composers with the promise of premieres and search as widely as you can (the internet, students, composers, libraries, other ensembles). Adapt, arrange, and compose yourself, and encourage players to do the same."

Ninth is to be very kind to those hard to get bass, contrabass and sopranino players.

And tenth, never be afraid to think 'outside the box.' Rely on your committee to tell you if you're just being plain crazy!

And finally, there are now two direct flights from New York to Birmingham, so if any readers would like to turn up for a Sunday rehearsal you will be most welcome, but check our audition requirements first, at www.saxchoir.com." §

Useful Website Addresses

Benedikt Eppelsheim, www.eppelsheim.com
 Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, www.bcmg.org.uk
 Clarinet and Saxophone Society of Great Britain, www.clarinetandsaxophone.co.uk
 Edinburgh Fringe, www.edfringe.com
 National Saxophone Choir of Great Britain, www.saxchoir.com
 Saxtet Publications, www.saxtetpublications.com
 Sibeliusmusic, www.sibeliusmusic.com
 Soprillo, www.soprillo.com
 World Saxophone Congress, www.worldsax.net