

PUTTING ON YOUR OWN CONCERT

Here are some things you have to consider: Following these points will not make a successful gig but it might help in avoiding some of the pitfalls.

Music - If you want to promote your own music, you should choose the best musicians available. Poor musicians will take up your time and if they can't play something they may blame you as the composer/arranger for not writing it right. So go for the best. You can probably find other bands to play your music but do realise that if you do, you will not have control over the music or how often or thoroughly it is rehearsed. Make sure the parts are well written-out (unless you intend to do it without written music). Scruffy odd bits of paper with crossings-out and hand-written comments can make it difficult to play. Try to make the music interesting to play and try and give the players a chance to do their own thing wherever possible. Record the rehearsals if you can so you can go through them yourself and correct anything that is faulty and make the recordings available to members of the band.

Target audience - Who do you want to appeal to? What kind of audience - young, middle-aged, elderly, jazz fans or non-jazz fans, fellow musicians or others? Trying to mix styles to please people with different tastes can leave everyone unhappy if it doesn't come off.. You should be aware that you will need to have built up a bit of a following as no-one will come to the gig otherwise. That means getting your music played by yourself and others for some time so that you begin to build up a fan base. Playing a concert of original music is asking a lot of the audience who cannot relate to something they don't know. But it can be done. I usually get away with it because people come to hear certain members of the band whose playing they like - another reason to choose really good players. I also explain what each piece is about and how I've tried to create the effect I want. It helps. Don't get over-excited if certain people say they'll be there. Sure as not they won't come.

Venue - Find a venue that is suitable for the gig. If it's a hard rock band, you won't be able to put on a gig in a quiet residential area. If it's a soft type of music you want to perform, don't go for a noisy bar. The size and shape of a venue is important for obvious reasons as is the lighting, and the seating arrangement. The cost of hiring venues can put you off choosing certain ones. The availability of good venues should not be taken for granted. Try and hire them early as they can easily get booked up. If you can't find any suitable ones, you might be able to put a concert on outside, for instance in a park. But playing outside can make the music dissipate and you will not have any built-in reverb that buildings have. Hearing each other, particularly those in other sections can be difficult too.

Publicity - Try every angle to advertise the gig. Handing out fliers, putting up posters, issuing press releases, sending out mailing lists, using social media websites, putting on a flash mob or publicity stunt. Local broadcasting media (TV and radio) are seldom interested in jazz but you still have to include them in your publicity releases. Probably the most effective is social media these days, and paying for an advert in a newspaper that has wide circulation. And don't forget word of mouth - tell people personally about it and ask them to spread the word.

Sound system - Make sure it can cope adequately with your requirements and be of good quality. Work out how many mics you might need and where to position them. The person who is operating the sound system should know about the music beforehand so they can boost solos and mix the sound to your satisfaction. You may have to pay quite a lot to hire someone to do this. Try and find someone who likes and knows a bit about jazz. Failing that, hire a sound system and get a musical friend to man it for you,

Tickets - You don't want tickets to be too pricey, but you do want to cover expenses. You can sell tickets on the door or use an agency which will take some of the profits for doing so. If you sell them on the door you will need a float. A few complimentary tickets for local dignitaries, music promoters, and the partners of band members should be considered.

Money - You will need to invest quite a lot in your concert. Hiring venues can be very expensive as can things like copying posters, paying guest artists and the members of your band - don't expect them to play for nothing. Expect to be out of pocket afterwards. Can you really afford to do it, ask yourself.

Deps - Don't rely on band members to always remember the dates of rehearsals. Some people are better organised than others. It's best to send everyone a reminder when one is coming up. Not everyone can always make it to a rehearsal, so you'll need plenty of other people who can dep. If you don't personally know all the good players in the area, ask someone who does. Don't be afraid of asking them. Sometimes it can be difficult to know if they say they can't do a rehearsal whether they sincerely can't or whether it's an excuse because they just don't want to. Beware of potential deps who do not reply to emails/texts, phone messages or letters fairly soon. You can run into problems if you hang on waiting for them to get back to you only to find that they tell you at the last moment they can't do it. Give them a while and then try and get someone else.

Announcements - Audiences like to be told something about the music and who is playing a solo. If you are doing the announcements yourself, you may suffer from nerves but the more you do the easier it gets. I always write down the names of the players as I once had the experience of forgetting someone's name. Making announcements also builds up a rapport with the audience. To my mind nothing is worse than long gaps between numbers with the band talking amongst themselves. This merely encourages the audience to do likewise and chatter. Then it's hard to get them to keep quiet for the next number. I tend to write out programmes too for the audience so they have something to consult and take home with them. If you don't want to do the announcing yourself you can get someone else to do it for you. But they may like the sound of their own voice, say the wrong things and want a lot of money. A local celebrity might bring in some extra people, but they will want the spotlight on them for a good deal of the time.

Organising things - They always say you should delegate tasks. Having been on a lot of committees I know a bit about this. You can delegate someone to do something, but will they? Usually they forget. Ask a busy person if you want something to be done, but make sure they can really afford the time. Sometimes it is best to do everything yourself wherever possible. Sorry to go against the grain. As someone who has the biggest stake in things you also have the most to lose if someone else screws things up by not doing a specific task. Make sure you yourself have the time it takes to do what is necessary.

Other eventualities - Some things to keep you awake the night before: bad weather, someone in the band gets sick, you get sick, the venue catches fire, you or one of your band members forgets to bring the music, the sound system goes wrong, someone's instrument gets damaged, there are disruptive traffic delays, no-one comes to the gig. You can help avoid some of these things by communicating a lot with the band - better to be an old woman than risking someone will forget something. But there are other things you can't predict. Not sleeping will not help (easier said than done, I must admit).

CASE STUDY

At the end of 2013, I decided to give up music entirely. That didn't make much difference to me with regard to playing gigs as I had very few of them, mostly solo piano ones. But it also meant that I had to fold my big band which was a tough decision,, especially as it was a wonderful group of musicians and we had just done a great gig after a run of gigs which were not very successful. However I had already made up my mind by this time.

In November and December I spent a lot of time playing sudoku, and looking for other things to do which might benefit the community. Surprisingly, I didn't find anything interesting or beneficial to do at the time.

By January though I decided to put the band together again - fortunately everyone was willing to come back, with one exception and that was purely to do with changing work schedules. In the time I had off, I had thought up the idea of writing another suite and as the ethos of One World was something very dear to me, I had thought up the possibilities of using aspects of other genres of music within a jazz setting. To make it sound more authentic I added a guitar player as guitars and other strummed instruments are found all over the world..

He wasn't the only new addition to the band. I had been using a dep for one of the sax players who couldn't make the autumn concert so instead of getting rid of the dep I kept him on, giving me a sax section of 6. The dep was a superb flute player (an instrument that I love) so that gave me 2 and sometimes 3 flute players when I wanted them.

I also wanted something special and that was the idea of having a guest musician from another country which would put the idea of One World into practice, and would attract more of an audience than just another gig by my big band. My thoughts immediately went to a Hungarian contact I had made some years ago, a brilliant player if there ever was one. He was positive about the whole thing and we settled on a date.

So by the first week of January, I had settled on a title and a theme for the suite, augmented the band, fixed a date for the gig and a guest artist. Next I had to find a suitable venue. The guest star wanted to put on a master class on another day so that was two venues to find. To make it worthwhile him coming over here I also got in touch with a friend who runs a jazz club in London and he gave him a gig on another day. Accommodation for him was also fixed - he could stay with me.

A hitch occurred when he informed me soon afterwards that another big concert he was doing had had to change dates so the knock-on effect meant we had to change too, so we brought everything forward a week. That meant that the original venue for the gig was no longer available but I looked around and found another venue which would seat a lot more people - a church.

By the middle of January then I was getting a bit panicky as the only thing we hadn't got was the music itself. For the next six months I worked fast and furiously writing charts. It took a bit of getting used to adapting to 6 saxes plus a guest sax player. That many saxes can become rather heavy-sounding so I made do with using soprano saxes and flutes in various combinations with the rest of the saxes. I also wanted the saxes to be able to play the arrangements with or without a guest part. The additional part was therefore an add-on, playing unison lines with others or playing solo lines which could also be played by another of the saxes when he wasn't there. Obviously the guest player would have a lot of soloing to do, but I also wanted as many of the rest of the band to have solos too.

I fixed rehearsals every month with fortnightly ones (every two weeks) nearer the date. Each rehearsal was recorded and the recordings I put on Dropbox for my guest player and the rest of the band to hear. The playing was not as polished as it would become later but the general idea was there. I also sent all of the parts in pdf format to my guest. This was necessary as we would not be able to have a proper rehearsal with him and the rest of the band before the gig. Band members also took their parts home to practice by themselves.

To try and avoid pitfalls which often occur when players have a lot of bars rest and get lost and come in in the wrong place or fail to come in when they should, I wrote cue notes in the music so everyone would know where they were. To save time at rehearsals I made out a set-list for each one and put the parts in order beforehand.

I had a few problems in relation to the personnel. Early on, the former dep sax player who was now in the band left the area to take up a job a long way off. He had to be replaced. Then the second tenor player emailed me to say he couldn't make it to one rehearsal saying he had to have tests in the hospital. We learned soon afterwards that he had pancreatic cancer and only had months to live. In fact he died within a few weeks. I did manage to find some really excellent replacements for these two fine players but losing them both was a hard blow.

Obviously with a big band there are occasions when people can't come to a rehearsal. At one rehearsal almost the whole sax section were missing. Finding depts can be difficult. I was blessed with getting hold of some great players who were willing to dep and didn't object to not being on the gig itself, bless them. It's best to do without a chair if you can't find someone who can read well, but sometimes the harmonies can sound a bit strange without one of the voices.

Another problem arose after a few months. The venue I had chosen informed me that on account of other bands being too loud and audiences disrupting local residents when they left, the concert had to finish at 10pm instead of 10.30pm as planned. That would have given me just half an hour for the second set and a lot of the music would have to be taken out. They also said that a decibel limit of 95db had been imposed. Now I have no idea what 95db sounds like and I didn't want the electric supply to go off if we exceeded the limit.

I therefore chose to cancel the booking and find another venue. After a lot of scurrying around I got a new venue, also a large church. It has the highest roof of any church in the country. The people from the church couldn't be more accomodating and helpful. I was a bit concerned about the size of the venue which had seating for 400 or more. However a recent concert by another local band had attracted 300 people and they had to turn people away, so I assumed we might have a similar attendance.

My other concern was that the church had a very very high ceiling (the tallest church in England) so there might be a lot of echo. We would have to see or rather hear for ourselves. The other consideration I had to bear in mind was that the original venue had a sound system, unlike the new one, so I have had to hire someone to do the sound - a former band leader of mine, as it happened

Publicity is a hard nut to crack. Years ago I would just take posters around to local shops for their windows. Nowadays, very few shops accept posters and some accept them but do not put them up. Furthermore, in other towns and villages they do not accept posters for events somewhere else. Also, some shops do take posters, but only if they are selling tickets. I wrote to local newspapers and radio stations, most of whom ignored me.

I also took some posters along to the local university as I am conscious that there needs to be more young people interested in jazz. The lady from the students union refused to take them but someone else gave me permission to put up a couple. I was pretty annoyed at this. Not only was I an ex-student of the university, but several of the pieces in the programme were written specifically about other former students. (A few years ago I offered to write a suite to commemorate an important anniversary of the founding of the university. It was turned down flat.)

I put on the posters and in the press releases that the prices would be £10 full and £5 for students and unemployed (because these 2 categories are the poorest). In some of the websites that used my press release the word unemployed was changed to unwaged (which is shorter). The Guardian Guide to gigs also did the same thing. However unwaged can also refer to people who are retired, some of whom - particularly those who had white-collar jobs - are quite comfortably off. Anyway, because of this change of wording, I felt obliged to alter the ticket prices so that the lower cost ones also covered retired people.

By sending posters to people who ran jazz workshops I had assumed they would inform those who came along to them, but I learned afterwards that they didn't. I must remember never to make assumptions.

I also wanted to avoid selling tickets through an agency so I gave my own home telephone number for people to ring to find out more information and to reserve tickets. Although I could not accept payment over the phone, it would be easy enough to just put a reserved notice on certain seats. This was not accepted by the Guardian or by those websites which did advertise the events for me and they put another one which meant tracing down the other phone number to pass on the information I wanted to give out.

In desperation that the press did not want to know about the gig, (the Guardian printed the basic facts but not that there was a guest player or that it was my big band) I took out an advert in one newspaper. I hoped it would be worth the money. I also asked band members to put it on their Facebook pages (I am no longer on Facebook.) I think I did all I could do to advertise the gig, apart from riding naked into town on a white horse accompanied by hundreds of vestal virgins, singing nuns and meercats.

I also contacted the jazz critics of some national newspapers. But nothing which happens outside of London is of interest to them. And no-one who doesn't have a big name is worthy of being mentioned in their columns.

A gig is a gig. Nine month's work for a 2-hour gig is a lot of time. So I decided to get the gig videod to make it more worthwhile. We could sell the videos afterwards. Fortunately I knew someone who makes very professional videos and is not overly expensive. It's always worth keeping a record of the gig for various reasons.

A few weeks before the gig, my wife had a minor stroke and a heart problem was detected. She was not

left paralysed but just woke up one morning feeling very confused. This gradually passed after a few days although she was left with fatigue and had to rest a lot. So I tried to do as much as I could do to help out at home. Fortunately she recovered in many respects within a short time but continued to feel tired most of the time. However she is a bit of a perfectionist about certain things and can go "over the top" in planning things. The short stay by the visiting musician became a major enterprise for her, at least in her mind. So the idea of having guest musicians over to play with the band, which I was thinking of continuing with in the future, has had to be limited to just this once. Had her stroke been more severe I would simply have had to cancel the gig - a thought which did strike me a few times. "The show must go on" might apply to show business types, but it is sometimes more sensible to make alternative arrangements, especially in the jazz field.

Then, less than a week before our guest was due to arrive, my cat became poorly and had to have some treatment at the vets. Nine of her teeth were extracted, poor thing. We had to keep her inside at night for 48 hours which she did not like at all and we had to give her various tablets and sprays and she got over it very well. When I've had dental treatment there's not been any after-care like this. In the next life I want to come back as a cat or a dog.

It's hard to concentrate on putting on a concert in the face of illness. Fortunately most of the preparations were already done. Mind you, there is always something more to be done.

What to wear? Some bands have special uniform - but that is costly and you have to have a lot of gigs to make it worthwhile. At formal dances, bands tend to wear dinner jackets. But this was not that kind of gig. A lot of bands now dress in black shirts and trousers. This has the advantage of everyone in the band looking as if they are in it together and is a cheap way of doing it. But I don't want all of my players to look the same - drab. They are all unique players and I am happy for them to look different from one another. So I asked them to wear black trousers and a colourful shirt of their own choosing. Who wants to look at a collection of funeral directors, apart from a fellow funeral director?

In drawing up a programme for my guest musician, I thought it would be nice if he could meet some of the members of the band socially before the gig. So I walked around Lewes, about 8 miles from Brighton and only 4 miles from where I live to find a suitable pub where anyone could come along and meet him on the same evening as the Masterclass. I didn't want to go all the way back into Brighton again as it would take up time and the parking there is not easy. I settled on a place called Shelley's Hotel and checked with the people on the desk if it was possible. On the night itself when we arrived there there was a notice on the front door saying the hotel was closed to non-residents that evening as someone had booked the whole hotel for a birthday party. I've never heard of that happening before. I left a message with the grumpy receptionist that if anyone came we would be at the nearest pub. But no-one joined us there and keeping an eye out the window I didn't notice anyone from the band in the street.

A few days before the gig, one of my star trumpet players told me he had been offered a gig worth a lot of money in Italy. I understand musicians have to take work when it comes up so I didn't make a fuss. Fortunately there were other trumpet players in the band who could take over some of the solos and a very good dep who had come to many of the rehearsals took his chair.

Then the trombone players told me to alter the set-up of the band so that they would stand behind the seated trumpets so they could hear themselves better. At the sound check, the trumpets said they wanted to stand up themselves. As a result, the sound of the trombones was very muffled (to my ears anyway) as they were playing into the backs of the trumpet players. Now there's an idea for a new brass mute.

Another problem which I should have controlled at the time of the sound check was the mic-ing of the horns. I wanted it to be a mainly acoustic sound because the venue was a very high-roofed church where all the sound was naturally very loud and very echoey. I wanted the mics to boost the soloists during their solos. When the saxes were sitting down for section or ensemble playing the mics would be at a higher level, but when they stood up to take a solo they could blow into the mics. But they were far too high for this to work or so it sounded from where I was sitting. I had thought originally of getting soloists to come out front to solo and written rests before and after their solos to allow them to get to and from a mic. But there was not room to be able to do this.

The masterclass

Although this had been advertised in an online jazz magazine several times beforehand and I had put posters up in music shops and some people had put it on Facebook, we only attracted 3 people. I had booked a good rhythm section for it, so it was a big disappointment and very embarrassing for me. There are lots of people learning jazz in the area but they either could not make it or decided not to come. A great pity! It was very informative and the guest artist and rhythm section played really well.

The gig

I think there may have been less than 100 in the audience, but several of those had complimentary tickets, including my own local member of parliament who plays in a band himself. It's always great when dignitaries come to a gig. Unfortunately, the MP for that part of Brighton did not reply to my letter and a previous email I sent to invite her. I suppose she thought it was not important enough for her. You have to ask yourself what support would jazz get if her party got into government? The shame of it all is that she is a good MP and it is the party which I myself support.

As a result of the small audience, I lost a good deal of money. I was expecting to lose some anyway, but not quite that much.. Why didn't more people come? They may not have heard about it. And knowing that I was involved might have put some people off. (I am not highly regarded by the local jazz community in Brighton.)

The band played very well indeed but there were a few glitches in some numbers. I have already mentioned the problems in the sound check which I should have sorted out. Maybe when I hear the end results they will be fine. The music was very echoey but we did get used to it. In some pieces it added a lot to the music, in others it was a hindrance.

The guest soloist did a wonderful job and played magnificently. For the morale of the band, it was great to have him play with us. And of course, it was a great treat for the audience to hear such a good player. It was a real honour for him to play my music.

The audience responded well to the music and everyone I spoke to said they enjoyed it. but I decided afterwards to abort the video which was filmed at the gig. Videoing a live gig can be great, but if things go wrong you have no second chances like you do in a CD recording. A few days later I changed my mind and decided I might go ahead with the processing of the video. What I do about some of the problems is something which concerns me. Maybe they won't be as noticeable with the passage of time.

There are plenty of lessons to learn from this saga.. But at the moment I am still suffering from "post-natal depression". My inclination is to give up completely, but at the same time I have just written a new tune for a follow-up One World gig. I can't afford to repeat this experience, that's for sure. The band and the guest soloist as well as a lot of the audience thought it was a great concert, but in the future I'll stick mainly to rehearsals with the odd gig in a much smaller venue.

A few weeks later.

Ever so often I woke up in the middle of the night feeling thoroughly depressed by it all, particularly by the way I was cold-shouldered by the local jazz community and ignored by the media. There's nothing I can do about that. That leaves me with a choice. I can either continue churning out stuff that hardly anyone is interested in, or call it a day. But that is a dilemma faced by most jazz musicians. The latter option seems the most rational, but I still feel the need to write music, so I have thought up a third option. I will continue writing for the band, but mainly for the sake of the enjoyment of the band itself. I'll hold a few open rehearsals if anyone wants to come along and listen, but for this next year I will not actually put on another gig.

Later

Two other factors why so few people came to the concert have been drawn to my attention. The other big band gig which was attended by several hundred people which led me to believe that I would get similar

numbers along to mine featured a suite by a terminally ill highly-repected and much loved local person. Many people apparantly came along to show their last respects to him.

The second factor is that it has become common place for certain other big bands in the area not to charge admittance fees for their gigs, but to pass the hat around for tips. That means that the musicians play for free or for the meagre share of the money in the hat. Considering that they have to pay for parking, petrol and possibly other expenses themselves, the musicians are in fact subsidising the audience. It's gone beyond the notion of playing for free. To me, this devalues musicians who have devoted years of practicing their instruments so as to perform in public. I always insist upon paying the musicians in my band, not much but I would not dream of them playing for free. Therefore to cover expenses - hire of venue, publicity, payment of musicians, etc. I do need to charge the audience. After all, they don't get their drinks for free, they have to pay for parking and petrol and just about everything else in life comes at a price. I would like to see accountants, solicitors,, bankers, civil servants - you name it - regularly work a few hours of their time without payment. So why should musicians?

The local Sussx Jazz Magazine helped to advertise the gig but they did not review it, unlike most other large-scale gigs that take place in the Brighton area. However Mihaly Borbely was asked to write a review for a Hungarian jazz on-line magazine. Click on the link below or paste it into your browser. to read it.

<http://www.jazzma.hu/hirek/2014/11/02/i-dont-believe-in-strangers-vagy-megis>

Some comments I've received since the gig

This account might seem rather negative, so to balance that, here are some nice comments I've had.

Cheers Paul and thanks for all the effort on your part, I think you wrote some great music there. - 1st tenor player

Hi Paul, a very enjoyable gig - it was great to be standing right next to the Main man - a real experience! But, my thanks go to you for putting it all together and writing such great music - it is a real pleasure making music with you and the guys - Thanks - 4th trumpet player

Thought Mihaly was an inspired choice - great player and such a nice guy. Pity to only have one gig with him. Many thanks for all the work that you put in too. - 2nd alto player

The gig was amazing.- 2nd trombone player

It was a real pleasure to play your material, and Mihaly was really wonderful, both musically and personally. Please give him my warmest regards before he leaves, and ask him to stay in touch. It was a great shame that more people didn't come. - bass player

Thanks for putting it on...I hope you aren't too badly out of pocket. It was excellent and I really enjoyed it. Everyone who came thought it sounded amazing. As you say, a pity there weren't more in the audience. - 2nd tenor player

Again thanks for last night, I very much enjoyed it and look forward to the next event. A member of the audience

Well done everyone, and especially Paul Busby! Paul I know you hate it when you get singled out for praise at gigs... But the personal applause for you at the end-and standing ovation from some! - was extremely well deserved. I had a great time last night. Fantastic music in a breathtaking venue, playing with great people. Thanks all.-1st flute player

I thought the music written was great! I'm proud to be on the team. - bass trombonist

Paul congratulations on so many things. Primarily the gig last night. I was sceptical about the venue but somehow, magically it worked. Also congratulations on seeing it through despite all those challenges and setbacks. 1st trombonist

Just to say I thoroughly enjoyed your concert last night. First class musicianship and the voice of your compositions! You must be chuffed really. I also appreciate how challenging it is to gather the audience attendance levels. The ones who didn't show really missed out. Though there were enough, for those to take with them the experience of those

magnificent sounds. I feel St Bartholemews did the band justice Etheric acoustics and all ! - a member of the audience

Just adding my twopennyworth! Yes, I think so too, I think it went really well. Well done Paul for all your hard work, put me down for the next lot, - guitar player

OH, THANKS! Not just a great band but nice people as well. Please forward my greetings to all - I really enjoyed that night with all of you:-) - guest artist

It was a pleasure to hear the band and some new compositions. You should definitely not give up. Not only your core audience but the band would be very disappointed if you did. - a member of the audience

It was a real privilege to be part of the One World performance on Sunday - the venue, Mihaly's playing and warmth and your fabulous music made it a special occasion. 2nd flute player

Just to thank you for the concert last night. Enjoyed your music and your playing. Had great and positive comments. Hope there will be some more opportunities. - 2nd trumpet player

We enjoyed listening to the lovely music today - a member of the audience

The gig at the church was truly wonderful . The music was sensational , as were the musicians - a member of the audience

I enjoyed your gig on that evening very much - a member of the audience

I like it (the video of Namzadi) because it sounds Eastern music - an Iranian.

There are now several videos of tunes from the concert on youtube. Go to my channel (Paul Busby channel with the photo of me holding my cat, Beanie) on youtube to see them.