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Leanne Nicholls has been key to the City Chamber Orchestra's first decade, writes **Sam Olliver**

# Notes in the wilderness

**W**hen oboist Leanne Nicholls landed in Hong Kong from Australia in 1989, she felt she had drawn a very short straw. Her medic husband had arrived the previous year to work at the University of Hong Kong while she completed postgraduate studies in Germany.

However, she felt embarrassed rather than exhilarated about her move here. While friends from her native Adelaide joined better-known orchestras in Europe, Nicholls faced Hong Kong's reputation as a cultural desert.

"In the early years I was almost embarrassed to say I was pursuing a musical career in Hong Kong because really there was nothing," she says. There had been an inkling about the situation when her husband wrote to ask Anne Boyd, the then head of the HKU's music department, about employment possibilities.

"I wish I could be more optimistic about the prospects for an Australian oboist in Hong Kong," Boyd replied. "Alas, I cannot."

Having faced such adversity, it is to Nicholls' credit that the City Chamber Orchestra of Hong Kong, of which she is the founder, artistic director and principal oboist, will celebrate its 10th anniversary at a concert next Sunday. The event bears all the hallmarks of her initial vision: to have about 30 accomplished players deliver imaginative programmes to persuade audiences that there's life beyond the standard classics.

Nicholls attributes the orchestra's success to "innovative programming". "Compared with other chamber orchestras, we've been quite daring; there's a bit more spice," she says, citing guest



appearances last season by German male soprano Jorg Waschinski and glass harmonica player Thomas Bloch.

In the decade preceding the founding of the City Chamber Orchestra, Nicholls established her niche for seven years as an oboist with the Hong Kong Sinfonietta.

"I think practically everything

I earned from playing in the Sinfonietta went into setting up the orchestra," she says. "I invested a lot of my own savings to get it off the ground." Since that first speculative step a number of milestones have marked the orchestra's progress: winning the Arts Development Council's (ADC) Rising Artist Award in 2003; moving to limited company status and securing a one-year grant from the ADC in the following year; introducing subscription booking in 2006 and appointing Jean Thorel as chief conductor last year.

The orchestra's anniversary concert also marks the opening of its 2009-10 season of 12 concerts, six of which will be directed by Thorel. As a newcomer, the Frenchman says the local art world's perennial problems with insufficient government funding and venue bookings are "surprising for an orchestra of our calibre."

Dovetailing with his players, however, has been an easy fit, he says. "One special quality I feel is that there is no room for routine work." Thorel says. "Rehearsals are all about the music and it is so enjoyable to see such open and

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Leanne Nicholls, founder, City Chamber Orchestra

co-operative musicians." Thorel says. Virtuoso recorder player Michala Petri will perform concertos by Vivaldi and Richard Harvey at the anniversary concert. She first appeared with the orchestra in 2000, when some critics thought it was risky to programme recorder concertos, but Nicholls' instinct paid off. "There were children lining up at 11pm to have their programmes signed by her," she says. "That was a musical peak and a great satisfaction to see those kids just buzzing around."

Harvey's concerto will receive its world premiere; titled *Concerto Incantato*, it was commissioned by the City Chamber Orchestra. Himself an expert recorder player and a composer of film soundtracks

to *The Da Vinci Code* and *Death of a President*, Harvey regrets that the instrument was overshadowed by the flute for two centuries. He says he wanted this work to be the recorder piece he would have loved to have tackled as a youngster.

"I've tried to introduce some of the fun that's often been missing from the recorder's repertoire," Harvey says. "This is the result: a concerto for the Harry Potter generation with, of course, a liberal sprinkling of fairy dust."

Several artists are making their Hong Kong debut during the coming season: Britain's early music soprano Dame Emma Kirkby, Italian cellist Giovanni Sollima and the young Singaporean violinist Loh Jun Hong.

The orchestra also plans world premieres later this month of new works such as Therese Brenet's *Seuls Tes Yeux Demurerent* (as part of the annual Musicarama organised by the Hong Kong Composers' Guild) and local composer Samson Young's multimedia production, *Electric Requiem: God Save the Queen*.

"The Queen appears through

a video, almost like a ghost of past times," Nicholls explains. "Queen's Pier, Queen's Road, Queen's Cafe - hence the use of the word requiem."

The orchestra's anniversary celebrations also highlight its past challenges. While most have involved financial worries, one particularly stressful period was during the SARS outbreak in 2003, when Nicholls refused to cancel a concert.

"Thank you for bringing a bright light into Hong Kong at this dark moment," said one appreciative customer. Nicholls was forced to watch the concert from the audience, however, because she had developed Bell's palsy, which

paralysed one side of her face and threatened to end her playing career. (She has since recovered.)

When her husband returned from work one day, he circumspedly suggested she shouldn't go out with their newborn son. With her face out of kilter, Nicholls wasn't arguing. What she didn't realise was that her husband and his team had just discovered the coronavirus behind SARS but couldn't yet speak openly about it. The comparison was neatly drawn. "His work is about saving lives," says Nicholls, "but music is about improving them."

Michala Petri & CCOHK  
Oct 11, 7:30pm, City  
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Leanne Nicholls (far right) says she invested a lot of her own savings to establish the City Chamber Orchestra (top). Virtuoso recorder player Michala Petri (above). Photos: Oliver Tsang