

CHAIR REPORT 2025

Every year that I confront this task I am acutely aware of how many similar festivals are ceasing to exist in this country due to changes in education away from the arts and the acute lack of people willing to offer their time to support such organisations. We are extremely fortunate to have a dedicated and focused workforce, particularly in our basic disciplines of music, speech and South Asian arts, and have a financially sound backdrop. However, we must not become complacent and, worse still, lower our standards to achieve prolonged existence by absorbing a more cut-throat attitude towards competition at the expense of providing a platform for gaining performing experience and developing life-skills associated with performance and artistic endeavour. It is becoming increasingly important to remember that CPAF's mandate is to provide a platform for developing performance skills and learn and not to narrow the perspective and become solely competitive and commercial. The quote from Vijay Venkat on the Home page of the website sums up succinctly everything that is valued about CPAF by our participants.

Many festivals that focus fully on music and/or drama are facing a frightening number of heckling and abuse incidents due to the activities within televised talent shows and we must be wary of that happening within our events. It is therefore of great importance that we should play down any suggestion of being in any way too competitively focused. I am aware of two festivals and three adjudicators that have ceased to work due to these unpleasant incidents. Dance festivals tend to prefer a more competitive approach, but we must be on-guard for that behaviour to sour the friendly and educative atmosphere that we have carefully and successfully established, and which becomes our attraction point.

As many of you know, I spend all of July and August in South Asia as I have a strong working and advisory connection with the Sri Lanka Festival which, this year, increased in size from 5 weeks of music and 8 weeks of speech in 2024, to 7 weeks of music and 11 weeks of speech in 2025. I also have strong advisory connections with the Con Brio project in India which is expanding throughout that country at a great rate since its 2011 inception. Comparing that with the current UK context it says more about our changing attitudes and values than theirs!

Comparing our entry numbers with colleagues from other similar festivals around the country we were fortunate that our total number of performers and entry fee receipts held up to similar levels to that of 2024. However, it is important to keep in mind that we are not intent upon pricing performers out of taking part and, as we are fortunate to have invested wisely, we must not become too obsessed with income levels through entry fees. Unlike most festivals, we must remind ourselves that we are not reliant upon entry fee income and we must keep intact our policy of not charging for audience admission or the programme.

There were variations within the various disciplines with speech, wind and brass slightly down on entry numbers and vocal quite dramatically down, especially in junior age groups, but strings increased as did harp.

Piano and South Asian Music numbers held firm and, excitingly, South Asian Dance almost extended into a further day.

Our largely non-competitive approach gained favourable comments and, as a result, we hold a unique place within the local festival environment for this workshop-style approach in Music with our unique diploma recital classes attracting performers from considerable distances. One point to note for the future is that we must find sufficient manpower resources to annually advertise our valuable Coleridge-Taylor Prize around the conservatoires again. Our pool of volunteer helpers held firm, and we managed to cover the necessary stewarding responsibilities more easily than in 2024 and, as the weather remained largely favourable it was encouraging to see so many audience members

wandering around the relaxing campus of Royal Russell enjoying their time with us. However, Royal Russell have requested that in 2026 we recruit more marshalling help within the areas outside of our 3 performing venues.

It is important for us to reflect upon the valuable quiet contribution that Chris Harman brought to our events, and we shall greatly miss his involvement following his sudden passing last Spring.

Following the main section of the festival we organised a more solid infrastructure to lessen the workload of myself and we hope that this sharing of responsibilities will help us move forward as a team supporting the efforts of the Trustees. I am grateful to Rachele for identifying suitable people and then assembling them into a Working Committee with each section having now a named coordinator, like the way the festival was run prior to 2015.

A delicate point that needs raising for discussion at the AGM – at least, delicate for me to raise – is whether I am still seen as being suitable for the role of Chair and taking the festival forward. We need to resolve this because doubts about my suitability were raised in January and, from my perspective, they contain a strong element of credibility. My term of office, according to the Constitution, is soon to end but I am more than happy to stand aside earlier if a suitable candidate is proposed and needs to get “their feet under the table”. I have been assuming a caretaker role since February and can easily continue similarly until this point is resolved. According to the Constitution, my third and final term of Trusteeship expires at the 2026 AGM, and I am obliged to have a year away before standing for office again. At this 2025 AGM Chris Hutchinson sees his 2nd term of office lapse, and he is seeking re-election for a third and final term.

One discussion item for this forthcoming AGM is whether to modify the Constitution to make the terms of office less rigid, with a view towards making the leadership more constant with fewer possibilities of disruption through any transition periods.

At the end of August Flynn le Brocq stood down as a Trustee due to moving away and accepting a new position at Uppingham School; we wish him well and all success and thank him for his contributions during a short single term of Trusteeship.

Another innovation of this year was the reintroduction of Dance within our affiliation to All England Dance. Although not as substantial as in the years before the pandemic, the numbers for this relaunch were encouraging and involved a full day of group dancers at the Ashcroft Theatre and 5 almost full days of solo dance at Royal Russell. This was held during the late May half-term week and an edited version of Louise’s report is below.

The return of CPAF All England Dance in May 2025, was a great success. We had 34 dance schools join us at The Ashcroft Theatre for group, trio’s and duet’s day, then five days of solos at Royal Russell school. With over 842 entries in Ballet, Modern, Tap, Global, Contemporary, Narrative, Lyrical, Musical Theatre and Classical Greek, the standard of work was extremely high, the community spirit between all the schools involved was great to see, it was a pleasure to be a part of this dance festival. The Ashcroft theatre with its amazing facilities, the Performing Arts Centre at Royal Russell, another wonderful performance space, really gave the festival a unique and professional feel for everyone to enjoy. Alison Forrester was our adjudicator who gave encouragement and great feedback to our many students; Alison thoroughly enjoyed her week. You will see via the CPAF social media the many happy students, who had a wonderful week: we have had lots of feedback from parents, students and teachers confirming this and that they will be returning to our next dance festival in 2027.

Although advertised under the CPAF name and logo, the Dance week was run as an independent event, and we must seek a way of making this event more integrated in terms of resources and personnel in the future. Of particular concern was the fact that our Members and Mailing List Subscribers, and especially the supporters who are primarily interested in our dance events, were unaware of the May Dance week because all information had been circulated via social media outlets, and this must be corrected before the next similar event.

In late August we were saddened to receive the resignation of Louise as a Trustee, due to personal circumstances, and we thank her for her strong contribution towards making the Dance week such a success.

Due to the uncertainty over my involvement with the festival I had not booked the dates and adjudicators for the 2026 events as early as usual, and this was delayed still further by some uncertainty over available dates within Royal Russell's own needs for the spaces. This proved a challenge because our way of doing things, especially in Music, does limit the range of suitable adjudicators as we need far more professional input than just knowing who the winner is. After a sustained period of contacting and cajoling the schedule was fixed for a similar period in early 2026 but a week later than in 2025.

In June, Rachele and I met to discuss the various amendments that we had requested from several interested parties, and these are reflected within the syllabus for 2026, especially in Speech and South Asian Dance, and coming to pass in the forthcoming festival. Added to our modernising of the music syllabus we can be proud of how we continually reinvent the format with the help of imaginative, knowledgeable and inspiring people within our midst.

At this AGM I am recommending that Members vote Pushpa Nagarajan onto the Board of Trustees. Pushpa has coordinated the South Asian Dance section for a few years, and, under her guidance, the numbers have greatly increased, and she has quietly brought new ideas into this very distinctive and somewhat niche section of our multi-faceted performing arts celebration. I am sure that some of her ideas can beneficially be brought into the overall festival more visibly and vocally.

Within the Board of Trustees, we now have all disciplines covered in terms of expertise, but we should be aiming to recruit 2 or 3 more Trustees to support our obligations in terms of governance and finance, so, any suggestions would be welcome.

As ever I am grateful for the volunteer work to support our efforts, and everyone has helped considerably over the year. On behalf of everyone I would like to put on record our thanks to Rachele for her incredible and unstinting efforts over the year and she has been, from my viewing point, an invaluable asset throughout some difficult and frenetic moments of the past few months, while, during some fraught months in early 2025 she was the glue that held us together.

As this may be the last Annual Report that I shall be writing I would like to take this opportunity of thanking all of you who have supported me and helped to put CPAF in such a strong position with high standards of integrity, friendliness and purpose and a sound financial basis. We have had several challenges over the past 13 years, but we have stuck together and come out stronger. I would ask you to offer the same level of support and commitment to those that follow and I shall enjoy standing back from authority when so decided and "mucking in within the ranks".