

CHAIR'S REPORT FOR 2026

The 2026 festival was fraught with timetabling problems at the outset but, all things considered, proceeded well and with some exciting performances. We were especially excited about the additions to our syllabus – Hindustani vocal and Kandyan drumming and dancing – which will develop further in the 2027 syllabus and onwards with the respective help of Debjani and Dinithi who were instrumental in introducing these art forms to our programme. We are also intent upon developing our syllabus regarding musicians that are often forgotten within the education and festival spheres, namely, rock musicians and individual singer-songwriters. Ophelia's knowledge of the local schools will, we hope, help us to contact this slightly private world.

We will also be offering a money prize class in collaboration with Words & Music – formerly the Association of English Song and Public Speaking – inviting performers to recite some English verse and sing an English art song in a themed 10-minute programme. This will be adjudicated jointly by our booked Speech and Vocal adjudicators.

One point of personal pleasure is being aware of how many of our regular performers take part in more than one discipline so this new collaborative class will help to underline that holistic aspect of our festival. At least one performer in 2026 took part in 3 different disciplines - percussion, vocal and South Asian music - and the list of these multi-talented youngsters is growing with an encouraging number taking part in Speech and Music and Speech and South Asian Dance, despite this presenting itself as a timetabling challenge to avoid clashes.

The 2026 festival also was supported by a stronger social media presence, and we thank Hannah Moss for her professional support in this respect with some imaginative video contributions and interesting photo collages. In terms of our online presence, we are grateful too to Arun for his professional input and knowhow in respect of the modernising of the website.

Considering the excited success of the various programmes it was demoralising to subsequently receive some unpleasant comments from various quarters that were unwarranted and unsettling for those that had invested considerable voluntary time and effort into the complex proceedings. These comments were received from parties involved with the Speech and South Asian Dance sections where entries are more focused upon their school loyalties rather than individual entries as in Music. These "tribal" loyalties must not be allowed to cloud our true focus upon providing a platform and encouragement for individuals whatever their connections or backgrounds.

The primary ethos of our festival, unlike that of many others in the country that maintain the Edwardian format of judging and comparison, is that everyone, irrespective of their ability level or experience, has the opportunity to use our platforms to develop their fledgling skills and heighten their self-esteem by being treated equally and without comparison or judgement. The careful selection of our adjudicators, and the time allowed for them to offer significant help to everyone who has performed, allows us to continue to guarantee that, and we cannot allow ourselves to sink into a world where methods of teaching or schools use our platforms to gain any advantage.

Two aspects of our organisation that need serious reflection and discussion are the venue confirming availability later each year and the expense of running our annual event.

The first point concerning the venue booking is that the school cannot let us know about the availability until the school's annual production dates are confirmed. The way in which we operate restricts our choice of adjudicators and many of them need booking, at least, twelve months in advance. We cannot move our dates because of clashing with surrounding festivals and finding an alternative venue with the same quality of performing space is very challenging. The struggle to find suitable adjudicators free for our needs is very time-consuming as we cannot simply just book someone to award first place as our approach is far more complex than that.

On the second point we all agree that avoiding the need for a Box Office and offering free programmes is the way in which we wish to continue because the friendliness aspect of the event is helped by this approach. However, the below figures from the 2026 festival accounts indicate that we are losing nearly £4000 each year and that cannot continue.

Printing costs, medals and badges = £1374

Adjudicator/accompanist fees and expenses = £3208

Venue charges (Only staffing and consumables) = £3251

Received entry fees = £3938

(£3895)

This year the Gala Concert of selected performers was held at Royal Russell School instead of Fairfield Halls as the audience at the latter venue had always been disappointing. This concert had representatives from all disciplines, except Speech which was a sad omission. The chosen Speech performers were unable to participate due to, in one case a booked holiday, but, in the case of the other two performers, their parents declined to allow the youngsters to participate because of the fallout between the rival speech schools mentioned above. We simply cannot allow these playground antics to interfere with the opportunities that we present for the performers. It is vital that we always remember that the performers are far more important than the reputation of others involved – parents, teachers and even the festival personnel. Therefore, we now plan to bring the Speech section into line with Music and dispense with the competitive element to avoid this demoralising and very upsetting behaviour.

Within that Concert we were very grateful for the valuable assistance of some highly responsible 6th Form students from Royal Russell, and we also awarded BIFF 10-year certificates and medals to Judith Dunworth, Trixie Muirhead and Barry Nicholson. As an organisation it is important for us to publicly acknowledge the invaluable and tireless assistance of the quiet members and supporters, such as these three long-serving volunteers, without whom we would not be able to function.

Despite the many practical problems that Rachele and myself experienced during the preparations and organising of this Concert and despite us both approaching the day with serious concerns, the result was a resounding success with a galaxy of wonderful performers and stunning performances. Picking a highlight was impossible but I derived personal pleasure from the fact that so many spoke enthusiastically about the spectacular Kandyan drumming and Classical Kandyan dance as the inclusion was due to a chance meeting that I had and a 21-year-old photograph. The principals involved in this performance have subsequently been involved in developing our syllabus of Kandyan dance within the ever-growing South Asian Dance section.

Throughout the concert, Hannah took several photographs and these were subsequently sent out to the respective performers free of charge but with the option of donating and we are grateful to many of those performers for sending on generous donations to help cover our costs. The morale boost of receiving these donations helped to motivate myself into believing in the true value of the work that we are doing, despite all the negativity from other quarters.

However, despite the artistic success and the undeniable appreciation of those in attendance, we do have to seriously consider the viability of running a similar event in the future. The Box Office receipts were slightly below the venue charges, and the programme receipts were extremely disappointing and around £100 below cost despite only printing a minimal number. Despite our primary purpose being to provide a platform for performers there is a limit to how many events we can promote that fail to break even. Another consideration is to seek a sponsor but, frankly, neither I nor Rachele have the time to do that so, can someone else put their hand up and accept the task?

The old timers in the festival will recall that, prior to the pandemic, we had sufficient advertising within the programmes to cover the printing costs, so all sales were profit.

Looking ahead to the 2027 festival, we have several new classes, as mentioned above, and we had hoped to reinstate the Concerto class as Ophelia had made an introduction to the newly appointed conductor of the Croydon Symphony Orchestra, but a meeting to discuss this project has not yet been possible. We hope to add this flagship class back into the syllabus for 2028 in a slightly more condensed format than within the previous, and popular, relationship with LMP.

This AGM marks the official end of my Trusteeship, but a caveat was added to the Constitution last year allowing for annual extensions to third term service. Therefore, Members must consider carefully whether now is the time to extend my term or for the Trustees to nominate a new Chair. From my perspective, I have a “significant birthday” in 2027, which focuses the mind somewhat, and am, frankly tired of the responsibility, accountability, and having to continually bat for the festival on all fronts. Without the incredible help, moral support and encouragement of Rachele, I am positive that I would be simply buried alive under the multiple burdens of responsibility and preparations. The festival’s public events of both 2025 and 2026 presented new and totally unexpected challenges, many of which were unpleasant and very personal, that have made me question exactly why I invest so much time and energy into helping to provide this valuable platform for amateur performers. I am too committed to the festival to expect thanks, but I have clearly lost the ability to motivate others to help and have clearly lost the support of several key figures. Our festival needs new eyes, ideas and new energy at the helm. Perhaps, those that have been so critical of our approach and my involvement over recent times, would like to assume the responsibility going forward?

The continual onset of problems with the bank have also been very draining over the past 5 years when I have assumed the Treasurer role as well. The barriers that the bank has placed in front of us demands an incredible amount of my time and, having asked for help regularly and receiving little in response is extremely demoralising. We have regularly talked about these problems, with a mention in AGM Minutes over the past few years, but nothing has been done.

Having endured 5 years of obstacles placed in our path for smooth banking with our current providers we have decided that the simplest solution is to change banks. Therefore, an account will be opened soon with another provider and allowed to sit alongside our current accounts until such time as it is feasible to close accounts used for the 2027 festival and, hopefully, have a much more peaceful relationship thereafter within our financial operations.

Whatever the outcome of my continuation as a Trustee I simply cannot continue to fulfil the Treasurer's role as well: frankly, it is one or the other or neither in an official capacity although my involvement within the festival will remain undiminished.

My long-term involvement with the Lanka Festival also involves some extra work as 2027 will be its 30th anniversary and major events are planned, some involving members of the Sri Lankan government, with which I am committed to assist.

Regarding the other Trustees, Vamshi completes his first term of office this year and has indicated that his professional commitments restrict his time to contribute to the festival as fully as he would wish so, on behalf of everyone, I accepted his resignation. Vamshi has been a very important contributor to the festival as his unique expertise has allowed us to develop a syllabus for South Asian musicians that mirrors the other music disciplines perfectly whilst retaining its stylistic pertinence. I have asked him to keep in touch, and he has agreed to be always available for us with advice and answering queries.

Sadly, Ophelia has also chosen to stand down from the governance burdens as a Trustee but will continue her practical role within the festival as before.

Our January/February events – Music, Speech, South Asian Arts – will take place at Royal Russell School over the weekends of January 30/31 and February 6/7, while the Dance week will run from May 29th to June 4th at Fairfield Halls and Royal Russell run by Lucy Rodgers in collaboration with CPAF.