**SACRED SITE AND SOUND FESTIVAL, TINTERN 18-19 JULY 2014**

**REPORT AND EVALUATION**

**Background and vision**

The Tintern Group was founded to organise regular events to support the cultural life of Tintern and region, and had decided to organise, in co-operation with the Tintern Festivals Association, an ambitious event in 2014 whose aim would be to celebrate the two sacred places of Tintern, the ancient abbey and the even more ancient parish church of St Michael, and at the same time to create concerts of sacred music of a high quality which would both involve the local community and at the same time aim at prominent standing within the cultural life of Wales.

Following early meetings with Anthony Hose, Conductor of the Welsh Chamber Orchestra, with the Welsh poet Grahame Davies, and with Celia Harper of Sulis Music, this broad aim led to the conception of two distinct musical events in Tintern Abbey and St Michael’s church respectively. The Abbey event, taking advantage of its international repute, would concentrate on relatively large-scale works based on an orchestra and a choir of high national standing, performing major works of the sacred genre. The St Michael’s event would have a more intimate, contemplative quality, involving local performers, composers, and poetry, taking advantage of the position of the church within the beautiful and historically celebrated Wye Valley.

In addition it was felt that in order to give the theme of the festival more cultural breadth the two events should be accompanied where possible by other related activities, whether initiated by us or from elsewhere.

**Management and personnel**

The festival was managed and run by a committee comprising Prof. John Clarke (convenor and festival director), Vanessa Dodd (artistic and programme director), John Livermore (treasurer and finance director), Gill Wilkey (publicity and marketing director), Fiona Frank (poster and leaflet design), Winifred Baker (digital media publicity), Rev. Nora Hill (consultant for event in St Michael’s church), Barbara and Herbie Girardet (event logistics and house management), Nick Day (technical advisor), and Andrew Reid (computer advisor). All are unpaid volunteers

Close co-operation was maintained throughout the project with the Abbey Custodian Pascal Bidois, with CADW the operators of the site on behalf of the Welsh Assembly, with Rev. Nora Hill vicar of St Michael’s parish church, with Paul Robertson the Founder of the Medici String Quartet and a close associate of Sir John Tavener, and with Martin Redfern a BBC producer with expertise in sound production and recording in large spaces. In order to carry out the complex project in the Abbey effectively we commissioned Soundbase UK, a company experienced in large-scale open-air events, as Site Managers responsible for staging, lighting, sound and catering. We also commissioned Annabel Hughes, professionally experienced in the world of print media, to assist us with communications with the local and regional press.

Regular committee meetings were held, but in order to economise on the time of volunteers we kept these at a minimum and supplemented the main committee with small working groups in areas such as finance, IT, marketing, artistic and musical arrangements, and the logistics of the two main events. As the project developed, and especially during the period of the two major events, the management team was supplemented by a number of volunteers from the local community who assisted with house management, stewarding, box office, programme selling, parking, furniture conveyance, and clearing the sites.

**Finances**

The budget was prepared by the artistic and programme director in consultation with the treasurer. Some monies were left over from a previous festival, but the bulk of financing for the project was obtained through grants and the sale of tickets. The main support for the Festival came from the Arts Council of Wales and also from the Tintern Community Council, from the New Grove Trust, the Welsh Church Fund, the Sustainable Development Fund, and from Adventa. Full details of funding are contained in the festival financial statement which is in the process of being finalised.

**Partnerships and co-operation**

As the project unfolded we developed a network of partnership and co-operative initiatives with other organisations, including the Lower Wye Valley AONB who were concurrently organising the Wye Valley River Festival and with whose programme our own event was associated, with Ceridwen who are concurrently working in the area on the Sharing Treasures Scheme funded by the Welsh Government, with Chepstow Museum who are holding a major exhibition of paintings inspired by Tintern Abbey, with the Scientific and Medical Network who have strong links with Sir John Tavener and who are concerned with the development of spiritual aspects of science and medicine, and with Adventa which supports community festivals in Monmouthshire.

Several local businesses were involved in the project with respect to overnight accommodation and catering for both events, as well as for printing and IT.

**Publicity and marketing**

For general publicity purposes we developed a webpage on the Tintern village website which provided a quickly accessed and easily updateable source of information about the festival. The strategy we adopted was both to focus on our usual local targets, but at the same time, and in the light of what we considered the wide appeal of the festival events and the well-established reputation of Tintern, to expand our target area much more broadly. Therefore, in addition to the use of posters, banners and newsletter adverts for local consumption, we also produced flyers for distribution over a much wider area including places such as Hereford, Bristol and Cardiff, we created Facebook and Twitter accounts, and made contacts with and distributed materials and press releases to newspapers and other media outlets in the region.

Ticketing for the St Michael’s event was done through local outlets. For the Abbey event we made use of Eventbrite, and for both events tickets were available at the Chepstow Tourist Office and at the door. Original artwork, produced for the occasion by participants in the festival, was used in the posters and flyers.

**Programme**

The programme mainly featured two concerts. The first, on Friday 18th July, took place in St Michael’s parish church, with solo violin and soprano, local choir and local string quartet, performing commissioned and other original works, with Welsh poet reading his own work in both languages, followed by a reflective oration in the churchyard decorated with candles laid out in astronomical patterns, and with the launching of lanterns on the River Wye. The second concert, on Saturday 19th July in Tintern Abbey, featured a distinguished line-up of orchestra, choir and cello soloist, accompanied by a commissioned artistic visual display. A locally based group, the Parva Springs String Quartet, playing a work

In addition there was a concurrent conference held locally by the Scientific and Medical Network on the subject of ‘Sacred Sites and Sounds’, a public debate the previous Tuesday organised by the Tintern Philosophy Circle on the subject ‘Is nothing sacred any more?’, and a commissioned exhibition by a Cambridge artist displayed in the Abbey cloisters inspired by ancient sacred sites in Brittany.

The programme notes were produced as a detailed celebratory document covering the whole of the festival, original artwork being contributed by participants in the festival.

**Feedback**

Feedback forms were distributed to all attendees at the two concerts and the art exhibition, and 34 written responses were received out of an approximate attendance in St Michael’s of 95, and in the Abbey 311. Comments ranged from very good to superlative, with special emphasis on the quality of the performances and on the inspiring atmosphere evinced in both locations, though there were some doubts about the appropriateness of the final item of the programme in the Abbey, a surround-sound recorded installation with visual accompaniment, and some criticisms of the catering facility in the Abbey and of the uncomfortable seating in St Michael’s. A representative selection of the comments received is attached below as an Appendix.

**Reflections**

*Conception*: The overall vision built around the idea of celebrating sacred local sites with music and poetry worked well judging by feedback from audience and performers, though in spite of our efforts we regret not being able to feature a distinguished poet at the Abbey event. This vision was helped, serendipitously, by the concurrent project of Ceridwen and Chepstow Museum to mount a unique exhibition of works inspired by Tintern Abbey, and by the more theoretical contributions of the Scientific and Medical Network and the Tintern Philosophy Circle. The vision and overall theme might in future lend themselves to a much more comprehensive set of events, and to many varieties of location and programme.

*Finance*: Our original budget, and the consequential bid to the Welsh Arts Council, had to be trimmed, and despite generous grants from other sources we were obliged to cut back some of our original plans. As a result of this, and certain unexpected costs that arose late in the project, we found it necessary to exceed our budget. The overrun was fortunately taken care of through being underwritten by some individual donations, but this difficulty pointed towards the need to be more realistic and more flexible in our preliminary budgeting.

*Management and personnel*: The system of committee plus working groups operated well enough, especially given the fact that the personnel of the Festivals Association were particularly busy this year with other large-scale projects as well. However, we clearly underestimated the amount of sheer busywork that the project would entail, and in spite of unstinting support from both volunteers and professionals the scale of the project extended our limited human resources and became exhausting for some of us.

*Programme*: On the whole the choice of music at both events, including mainly original works in the St Michael’s programme, seemed appropriate and reflected admirably the overall theme. However, the final work at the Abbey, *Towards Silence* by Tavener, though well conceived per se, was perhaps too difficult for some and was felt to overstretch the length of the programme. Nevertheless, our aim of producing high quality works and performances was, we feel, justified by the reaction and size of audiences.

*Community*: Although the project was conceived in terms of universal interest in the idea of sacred places and sacred music, and was projected towards a wide audience, its support from and impact on the local community has been considerable. We were pleased that the concert events were attended by many local people, as well as being supported financially by the Community Council, but also that many people from the village were either involved in the preliminary organisation or gave willing and voluntary help to the task of staging the events.

*The sites*: Both sites had their disadvantages, especially in terms of lack of the sorts of facilities taken for granted in concert halls and the vulnerability of the Abbey to the vagaries of the weather, and inevitably these factors necessitated an unduly burdensome level of planning, management and sheer hard slog. However in both cases these difficulties were certainly offset by the charm and uniqueness of the settings and the spiritual quality they convey which judging by the feedback has a universal appeal beyond religious creeds and denominations.

In broad terms, then, we feel that the Festival fulfilled our vision of an event of high cultural standard, which not only appealed to and drew in the efforts of the local community, but which also achieved a significant profile in the region and represented an important contribution to the cultural life of Wales.

**Appendix: Selection of written comments from visitors at both venues**

I congratulate you on what was a tremendous effort in organising the Sacred Site and Sound Festival and it is very much appreciated. I thought both concerts were lovely and of an extraordinarily high standard. The atmosphere at both was great and I do know how much work you must have put into it. Thank you. It is lovely to have such things happening locally and all due to huge effort.

St Michael's Church proved itself to be an excellent venue for the opening event of the Festival of Sight and Sound and it was good to see a local church being celebrated in this way and used for a community event. The programme itself was varied, unique and well constructed allowing time for reflection and generating a feeling of peace and tranquility.

St Michael's is a gem of a building in which to reach out to the sacred and I loved the Welsh!

I particularly enjoyed The Parva Strings rendition of Reveries of a River Journey and would like to have heard more from them. The inclusion of poetry, an underused form of communication, added an extra dimension to the programme.

The conclusion of the evening was a highlight with Nora Hill's Meditation on the cosmos, and the Candlelight flotilla. Maybe in the ticketing process people could have had the opportunity to purchase a lantern to dedicate to somebody.

St Michael’s – Very uncomfortable! But lovely people, violin, singer and quartet. Candles and outdoor meditation.

We thoroughly enjoyed yesterday evening’s “Sacred Site and Sound” festival concert at Tintern Abbey.  The setting for the choice of music was admirable, with an excellent selection of choral and orchestral music fresh to us.  It was evident that the choir had been superbly trained, and the orchestra played gloriously under their conductor.  It was a joy to be able to hear instruments and words so clearly.  Tintern Abbey is a superior “concert hall” to several cathedrals and abbeys where we’ve also attended concerts. It added to our evening’s pleasure that the concert was so well organised and stewarded.  Parking, refreshments, being directed to where we should place our chairs, all was easy and smooth.  Strawberries at a modest price during the interval was a delightful thought.

Remarkable evening THANK YOU!! Seemed very well organised, layout in abbey grounds for eating etc. Ease of access everywhere. Programme booklet excellent, beautifully produced, even lavish. Well written and illustrated. Really appreciated ‘Protecting Veil’. Felt so privileged to hear that excellent cellist. Could choir sit in front instead of going back and forth? Lovely choir coming in singing “Come Holy Ghost our souls inspire…”

The concert last night in The Abbey was amazing.  Very interesting musical work, and the choir were outstanding.  The setting of course gives the event a very special atmosphere and meaning. The bar and food services were unexpected but very welcome.  Even the weather brightened up .The highlight of the evening was John Tavener The protecting Veil.  Kathryn Price was one of the best performers I have ever seen.  What an awesome performer.  She deserved the standing ovation she received.

We particularly enjoyed the first half: Part, Britten and Tavener set exactly the right mood in the context of the stunning abbey ruins.  As a choral singer myself, I particularly enjoyed the *pp* singing of Cantemus.  The cello playing of the Tavener in the second half of the concert was brilliant.  We actually believe the concert should have stopped there: 'Into the Silence' made the whole concert too long: we fancy we weren't the only ones who lost concentration before the end. But the whole evening was excellent value.  Lighting of the stonework was attractive.  The setting of course is beautiful, with the stage in the best place.  Refreshments were excellent, parking was helpful and close-by.

Thank you for a wonderful evening; food and bar excellent (and very reasonable) and the concert itself was superb.  My only slight criticism would be the installation/recorded music at the end.  It made the evening too long; it detracted from the experience of a live concert and I wonder if it belonged in a different event altogether. All in all, though, please take this as an overwhelmingly positive feedback.

More variety for orchestra and choir. More music of the time of the Abbey eg Tallis Allegri, hymns etc. First hymn was perfect. Choir should have been sitting in three rows. Organisation – be more linked for tickets, seating etc. Very confusing.

Just wanted to tell you I thought it was an amazing event, thank you so much for organising and have been telling everyone its a must on their calendar. Cycled ten miles to see it was not disappointed.

Let’s have more in such a wonderful setting….somehow the sound installation was a bit of a let-down after the real thing. The food was a bit disappointing

Art exhibition – Interesting, and beautiful colours. Interesting work by John Clive.

Art exhibition. A novel way to display art. Some very distinctive pieces and I really   
enjoyed looking at them. Fitted in well with the theme. Very much in tune!!