

» Christmas treats Anastasia Bow-Bertrand

Inspired by the Ukelele Orchestra of Great Britain, the Massive Violins are putting the cello centre stage in a rock and opera extravaganza

Britney Spears and Queen as you've never heard before

» The Massive Violins are a seven-strong, all-singing, all-bowing company of cellists shaking up the local music scene with their reinventions of popular hits and rock anthems.

As I head to their Crouch End base to hear them rehearse, I half expect to be greeted by enormous blow-up stringed instruments. However, nothing quite so strange greets me and I am told the idea behind the group is really very simple.

"There is an element of humour in the things we do," says founder Richard Chatto, explaining that the name derives from cellists suffering terribly tired sizeist jokes from fellow musicians. Hearing the Ukelele Orchestra of Great Britain hit a chord with founder Chatto and he realised this style – of featuring one instrument with multiple voices – could be the fresh angle on musical entertainment he was longing for. He not only founded the band but, using his skills as an in-

strument maker, made most of the cellos in the group, including one that can be played as a drum.

The group's membership came from close to home in Priory Road, Hampstead. Christmas party-goers, daughter Grace's university friends and old-time orchestral peers were enthusiastic cellists keen to be involved. Last year, the Massive Violins was created: seven players all motivated to "show people what the cello is capable of, while having fun and entertaining people," says Chatto.

Varied

"The music we make is really just a selection of songs we love and want to play," says group member Jess Chandler, a graduate of the Junior Royal Academy of Music. "Our repertoire is a combination of everyone's tastes." The Massive Violins do not cite any particular musical influences but they seem to like to take a



■ The Massive Violins will be bringing their lively brand of music to Cecil Sharp House tonight

Picture: Ruth Chatto

well-known tune from almost any genre and rearrange it for cello and vocals.

Their range includes a reworking of Britney Spear's Toxic, operatic classics, a selection of easy listening Beach Boys and Queen greats. There are no limits – just a fun proviso. "We want our audience to smile and laugh and dance. We think of ourselves as an entertainment act as much as a musical one," re-

veals Chandler.

Each member brings a different quality to the group. Some have formal musical training, while others are pub gig enthusiasts with assorted day jobs at the Royal Opera House and as freelance and screenwriters. One thing they do have in common is that they relish the opportunity to hear songs in a way you've never heard before.

"So far, the reaction has been fantastic," enthuses

Guido Martin-Brandis, who thinks there is something for everyone in their performance – with the age range of their last audience being from eight to 84. Their Christmas concert at Cecil Sharp House promises a mixture of Massive Violins favourites and festive crowd pleasers in a new musical costume.

"Everyone we play for seems to love it – so I hope we can just reach more people," says Martin-Brandis.

The hope is that the Violins will become massive in popularity as well as in every other sense. Leaving their rehearsal, I have a feeling that they could be really huge.

■ The Massive Violins perform at Cecil Sharp House in Primrose Hill tonight (December 15) at 7.30pm. Tickets are available at www.wegotickets.com/event/142012. Details on www.massiveviolins.com.

Provocative take on the 20-something generation

HERDING CATS
Hampstead Theatre Downstairs
Swiss Cottage
★★★☆☆

Herding Cats is a brutalising 80 minutes of drama examining the lives of a progressively isolated generation with a strong belief that it was robbed in utero of the right to have everything easy.

At its heart is Justine, a fizzingly furious 20-something with her eye on the top job and unable to deal with any challenge to her authority. She shares a flat with Michael who earns his living providing phone sex to male punters – one of whom is a paedophile he calls "Daddy" and for whom he puts on a little girl's voice before suggesting that he gets to his knees and provides Daddy with happiness.

Funny

We build up to this point, of course, and to much worse, carefully phrased and elegantly presented but nonetheless difficult to watch in between episodes where Justine's clearly sexual interest in her new boss is developed through pithy and

very funny narratives of fast, furious flirtations across desks.

Disjointed? That's the point, though an intriguing thread winds through both stories – the use of Justine's underwear and body to draw "Daddy" in as Michael is himself seduced by the fantasy, becoming dependent on his client for comfort.

Coxon's script is sharp but undramatic which limits action on a stultifying set – a giant white sofa on a big white rug. References to Christmas and a silly Santa scene feel as if they are randomly thrown in to provide seasonal focus. The observations are sharp, painful and provocative. The problem is that observations don't have a natural end point and so the ending is meaningless.

Olivia Hallinan bristles as Justine, Philip McGinley is a damaged Michael and David Michaels is a scarily seductive "Daddy". The cast expertly takes us to the cutting edge without tipping us over it, though for many that would be a relief.

Until January 7.

Shyama Perera



■ Olivia Hallinan bristles as Justine

Picture: Simon Annand

Choir takes change in its stride

FINCHLEY CHORAL SOCIETY
St Mary the Virgin, Primrose Hill

St Mary the Virgin is a strangely down-at-heel building of chipped paint, age-settled dust on white-washed pillars – and a broken organ. But it has the feel of a congregation that puts its ministry before appearance.

Scheduled to provide accompaniment, the organ failure meant that Richard Harvey was instead given a wonderful Bechstein piano. There was also a last-minute substitution as the brilliant Elizabeth Poole took over the soprano roles and, following a gloriously Happy Event on the eve of the concert, the regular conductor Grace Rossiter handed her baton to the multi-talented Patrick Russil.

In the first piece, the wonderful Amens of Mozart's Sancta Maria, mater dei had the audience's hairs standing on the back of our collective necks. His much better known Ave Verum Corpus managed in just 46 bars to delight everyone. So much so that we forgot to applaud!

The two Mendelssohn works were welcome. The choir's rendition of his Prayer for Peace supported Robert Schuman's descrip-

tion of the work as "a uniquely beautiful composition ... this little piece deserves to be known the world over".

By Schubert's Mass in G, the choir was clearly fully recovered, in great voice and thoroughly enjoying the noises they were making. Their whispered Kyrie was soon joined by Elizabeth's remarkable soprano voice. Hayden's Te Deum was delivered with a fine, animated start – crystal clear and with strong purpose.

Memorable

The lack of orchestra placed Finchley Choral Society firmly centre stage. They worked hard and delivered all that the stand-in conductor asked. But it was hard to avoid the conclusion that the presence of an orchestra, however small, would have added greatly to the enjoyment of the evening. Despite all this, the choir really lifted itself to deliver a memorable series of performances demanded by this well-chosen programme.

■ For details of the society's concert on March 24 in Hampstead Garden Suburb, visit www.finchleychoral.org.uk.

Dave Winskill