



PRESS RELEASE

13 February 2026

Celebrating the 10th Anniversary of the National Youth Folk Ensemble

- **2016-2026: 95 young people have been part of the National Youth Folk Ensemble, English Folk Dance and Song Society's flagship youth initiative.**
- **Freshly announced winners of the ABO Impact Award for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the Association of British Orchestras Awards 2026.**
- **A tenth anniversary series of gigs to kick off at Liverpool Philharmonic with a joint concert with New-Folk trio Tarren and culminating at summer folk festivals.**
- **'Celebrating 10 Years of the National Youth Folk Ensemble' Photography Exhibition launches at Cecil Sharp House in London.**

In 2016 the English Folk Dance and Song Society launched the National Youth Folk Ensemble, with the purpose of raising the profile of folk music amongst young people, music educators and others whilst providing real-world experience to a group of young musicians and enabling them to develop into the folk performers, educators and leaders of the future.

To date 95 young people have been part of the National Youth Folk Ensemble (NYFE) with nearly 800 young people taking part in Open Days. In ten years, the Ensemble has given over 40 performances at 30 venues and festivals across the country, and online, to an estimated audience of nearly 25,000.

Each year, up to 25 young folk musicians from across England are selected to join the Ensemble. Creating and performing new arrangements of folk music, since 2016 the musicians have received expert tuition from leading folk artists to deliver residential courses. These include Nancy Kerr, Rob Harbron, Miranda Rutter, Sam Partridge, Grace Smith, Sam Sweeney, Hannah James, Archie Churchill Moss, and from beyond the English folk sphere: Brazilian percussionist Adriano Adewale, composer and tabla performer Kuljit Bhamra MBE, Haitian artist Germa Adan and kora play Suntou Susso.

Most NYFE alumni are currently performing or working in music, including Owen Spafford (2016-19) and Louis Campbell (2016-17) Folk Album of the Year 2025 nominee for Spafford Campbell; Elye Cuthbertson (2018-22) the first Future Makers Champion, Royal Albert Hall, 2022; and Ellen McGovern (2016-18), audio engineer, winner of Women in Live Music's Sound FOH Award, 2023.

Last week, the National Youth Folk Ensemble received the 2026 ABO Impact Award for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at a ceremony at the Southbank Centre (4 February). It was recognised that the Ensemble has significantly increased Global Majority representation through projects such as its Bhangra Ceilidh collaboration with Kuljit Bhamra MBE, reaching over 6,000 people. By placing creative diversity at the heart of its work, the Ensemble is shaping a more inclusive and innovative future for folk music.

Darren Henley, Chief Executive of Arts Council England said: *“For a decade, the National Youth Folk Ensemble has nurtured the energy and talent of young musicians and enriched the folk traditions of our country with new diverse voices, while championing the future of our musical heritage. Arts Council England has been proud to invest in an ensemble that has supported so many aspiring folk musicians and inspired such vibrant and creative music-making.”*

Led by Jo Freya in her final year as Artistic Director, the Ensemble will perform special anniversary concerts at Liverpool Philharmonic (18 February) together with New-Folk trio Tarren, Cecil Sharp House (2 April), FolkEast (21/22 August) and Purbeck Festival (23 August). At the Cecil Sharp House gig, Jo Freya will be awarded a Gold Badge by children's author Michael Morpurgo. The Gold Badge is the English Folk Dance and Song Society's highest award and recognises important contributions to English cultural life.

As part of the ten-year anniversary, 'Celebrating 10 Years of the National Youth Folk Ensemble', a free photography exhibition launches at Cecil Sharp House on 16 February. Looking back at the past ten glorious years of the future of folk, the exhibition features never-seen-before imagery of past Artistic Directors plus candid and playful shots of every cohort musician by regular photographers, Camilla Greenwell and Roswitha Chesher.

In May, the Ensemble are running their annual free open days – Cecil Sharp House (27 May), Exeter Phoenix (28 May), Leeds Conservatoire (30 May) – offering young people their first taste of English folk and an immersion into its traditions, and to recruit next year's Ensemble.

Jo Freya, Artistic Director of National Youth Folk Ensemble said: *“It has been a fabulous honour to be Artistic Director of NYFE for the previous two cohorts and now, for my final term, which is the tenth year of this amazing project. This has been inspiring, validating and glorious. The privilege of sharing knowledge with, introducing a diverse body of tutors to, and providing the tools for our young people to use to create their own arrangements of this wonderful genre called folk music is a journey I feel truly proud to be part of.”*

LISTINGS

Performances:

Liverpool Philharmonic: Wednesday 18 February. Tickets:

<https://www.liverpoolphil.com/whats-on/contemporary-music/tarren-and-the-national-youth-folk-ensemble/9808>

Cecil Sharp House, London: Thursday 2 April. Tickets:

<https://www.efdss.org/whats-on/26-gigs/15583-nyfe-2-apr-26>

FolkEast: Friday 21 or Saturday 22 August. Tickets: <https://folkeast.co.uk/>

Purbeck Festival: Sunday 23 August. Tickets: <https://www.purbeckvalleyfolkfestival.co.uk/>

Photography Exhibition:

'Celebrating 10 Years of the National Youth Folk Ensemble' at Cecil Sharp House: Monday 16 February until Thursday 27 August, free.

Information: <https://www.efdss.org/whats-on/15861-photography-exhibition-celebrating-10-years-of-the-national-youth-folk-ensemble>

National Youth Folk Ensemble Open Days:

Cecil Sharp House: Wednesday 27 May

Exeter Phoenix: Thursday 28 May

Leeds Conservatoire: Saturday 30 May

To register, musicians must be aged 12 to 18, live in England and be able to play confidently on their chosen instrument. Free to attend; register:

<https://www.efdss.org/learning/young-people/national-youth-folk-ensemble/open-days>

IMAGES

For interview requests, more images or review tickets for Cecil Sharp House (2 April):

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NOTES TO EDITORS

About the National Youth Folk Ensemble

Founded in 2016 and run by the English Folk Dance and Song Society, it is one of 15 designated National Youth Music Organisations funded by Arts Council England. The Ensemble comprises up to 25 young musicians aged 14-18 years who create original arrangements of folk music together and perform at venues and festivals across England. Alongside this is an Engagement programme working with music education hubs, schools and cultural organisations, and paid traineeship opportunities for alumni.

About the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS)

As the national development organisation for the folk arts, it delivers a national and local education programme. It runs the National Youth Folk Ensemble. It supports folk artists through an artists' development programme. It manages the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library – England's national folk music library and archive. It is a membership organisation of c25000 and runs an arts centre, Cecil Sharp House in Camden.



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