

REMINISCENCES on a THEME of BACH

My first acquaintance with the Birmingham Bach Society (as it was then known) occurred on a raw January evening in 1960. After work I had eaten at the long defunct Universal Restaurant in New Street, and then went on to the old church in Carrs Lane, where I found the choir in a very draughty upper room. A group of thirty or so singers had assembled with their conductor, Hamish Preston, a recent successor to Willis Grant following his retirement.

The Choir was rehearsing for a Lent concert; to be performed - as most of the concerts were in those days, in Birmingham Cathedral. The programme contained Allegri's haunting 'Miserere', and my first impressions were of the first soprano's clear and resonant top 'C'. This solo part was sung by 'Miss Elizabeth Morton' (we were all addressed with such formality at mat time). I have then a recollection of a summer concert in Great Witley Church - before the beginning of the local music festival - with the approach to the church porch through a yew-lined path and then the impact of the amazing rococo gilt interior. The choir at this concert numbered not more than twenty, so we fitted into the choir stalls without difficulty! The music - Purcell - probably 'My Heart is Inditing' - was performed, together with a Bach motet, possibly 'Der Geist Hilft'. Memories are imperfect, and unfortunately I did not keep these early programmes.

Typically concerts consisted of a pre-Easter Bach Passion - the St. Matthew or the St. John (no London Bach Choir in the Symphony Hall to rival us then); with the Christmas Oratorio in Advent, and a lighter, usually 'a cappella' concert in the late spring. During one of our St. Matthew performances I remember the robust, Clara Butt-like voice of Mrs. Midgley, an elderly white-haired lady of whom Gordon Clinton (at that time Director of Music at the Birmingham School of Music, and bass soloist in the Passion) said - "She has a magnificent voice and never missed an entry!" Early music featured strongly at that time - Palestrina, Byrd and our favourite Purcell. It is interesting to reflect that, some thirty years on, as Paul Spicer jocularly remarked at one rehearsal, maybe we should be called the 'Purcell Choir!' Hamish left us quite soon (I think we probably raised his anxiety levels too much!) to become an educational music adviser, and was succeeded by Roy Massey, a conductor with a more robust style, enthusing the choir, despite his tendency to single out erring voices (especially in the bass line) during rehearsals, and un-nerving habit of 'cliff-hanging', although the choir usually pulled it off! Choir rehearsals moved downstairs to the basement of Carrs Lane as the choir expanded. Choir members aren't always the easiest of singing-fellows and I do remember a certain degree of friction amongst the sopranos!

My first Mass in B minor was sung with Roy in 1966; a vivid memory, as I was uncomfortably pregnant at the time but determined to fulfil a life's ambition. After the performance, the counter-tenor soloist, Grayston Burgess (with whom, incidentally, I had sung previously in a small choir in London) remarked that he had not realised what a good choir we were.

Following Roy's departure, later in 1966 due to 'increasing commitments in Croydon', and ultimately to become choir-master and organist at Hereford Cathedral, a slim and earnest young man arrived from the BBC to become our next conductor. His name was Richard Butt. Richard was soon able to communicate his own sensitive appreciation and love of Bach and baroque music to the choir. At one rehearsal he told us that when he met St. Peter at the pearly gates his first request would be to be introduced to the great J.S.! I was absent on maternity leave for Richard's first two concerts - a Haydn/Handel programme (including The Nelson Mass and a Chandos Anthem) in October, followed by Bach's Christmas Oratorio in the December of 1966.

On my return to the Choir in February 1967, the Choir was already rehearsing for a Lenten Concert; Bach's Motet, 'Jesu, Meine Freude' contrasting with a setting of the same words by Buxtehude.

From then on the Choir progressed to a period of growth and expansion with Bach, of course, as our 'raison d'être', but with an increased and varied repertoire. Stated 'Aims and Objectives' of 1972 were: " to give and promote performances of the music of J.S. Bach and his contemporaries in a style, and with forces most suited to a true interpretation of such works. Music of earlier and later times will also be performed or promoted, the choice of such music being that it shall be of high artistic merit."

And so it was. In addition to regular performances of the Passions, there were periodic presentations of the Mass in B Minor, the Magnificat, the Motets, the Christmas Oratorio and other Cantatas. There was Palestrina, Purcell, Monteverdi, Gabrieli, Haydn, Handel, (The Messiah, of course, besides other works), and Vivaldi, as well as Brahms, Bruckner, Britten, Vaughan Williams, and other composers that I cannot now recall.

We were fortunate in enlisting soloists and artistes of exceptional ability and talent- Emma Kirkby, Brian Kay, George Malcolm (all of whom were later to have a closer association with the choir in other capacities as Patrons), James Bowman, Martyn Hill - to mention a few, and the 'incomparable' Peter Pears.

I shall never forget the Mass in B minor of December 1969, when after a successful dress rehearsal in the Cathedral, it became clear that Philip Ledger, the harpsichordist, would not be permitted to play at a public performance with the Orchestra da Camera, since he was not a member of the Musician's Union. There was ensuing disarray and dismay, with some of the orchestral players in tears in the vestry, and hasty decisions being made as to whether the performance should take place and the audience's expectations honoured. In the event, the performance went ahead with Peter Pears, the tenor soloist, the other soloists and choir, ably supported by Roy Massey, who attempted to compensate on the organ for the lack of orchestral accompaniment. I am sure that we, in the choir, sang as never before, determined to make some sense of, which was, inevitably an incomplete representation.

Other memories abound. Tallis's marvellous 40 part motet, 'Spem in Alium' sung in concert with the Leicester Bach Choir, both in Leicester Cathedral and our St. Paul's in the Jewellery Quarter in 1969, which with its very good acoustic, became a regular venue for concerts, and a setting in due course for the annual Christmas Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols.

In 1970 we sang the Mozart Requiem, a first time for me, and especially moving, as it followed the death of my own father.

We gave occasional concerts outside Birmingham; the Haydn 'Nelson Mass' as part of the Pershore Abbey Festival in 1967; a varied programme of Bach, Beecham, Bruckner, and Palestrina in St. Mary's Church, Banbury in 1969; and other performances at Leamington, Sudbury, and Tewkesbury Abbey (1974) where we sang the impressive Purcell 'Music for the Funeral of Queen Mary II'. We also had two privileged visits from the Kings Singers who gave us a summer concert in St. Paul's Church in 1975. Most of these memories are in the mists of time, and await a more systematic history than I can provide.

I recall Richard saying that he found it difficult to persuade the Choir to travel far; we were obviously much more conservative in those days! However, the opportunity to take part in the Aldeburgh Festival, at the invitation of Peter Pears, was too great a privilege to be missed and we all went to Suffolk to meet him and Imogen Holst. Unfortunately we were not able to meet Benjamin Britten, who, I believe, was ill at the time. We sang Palestrina (Stabat Mater) and Bach motets in the lovely Blythburgh Church in the summer of 1972.

With the demolition of Carrs Lane Church, rehearsals moved to Nelson Street School, and our then accompanist, Richard Silk left, to be succeeded by Nigel Argust, with his unfailing sense of rhythm and whimsical humour. During these years the Orchestra da Camera, who had till then accompanied us at public concerts, was replaced by the Birmingham Bach Society's own orchestra, led by Christopher Hirons, and with whom Richard had a special rapport.

Dress for the ladies in those days was long black, but I do note a mention of lounge suits for the men in 1978. There were some disagreements over the formality of concert dress, which I seem to recall resulted in the unfortunate resignation of several valued choir members. Richard favoured dignified dress, and the uniform of 'black tie' soon prevailed. I remember well carrying out a mission for him, together with a soprano friend, Sylvia Newnham, which involved collecting his 'tails' from Moss Bros, in Temple Row after a morning rehearsal in the Cathedral. How long ago this seems now!

Towards the end of the seventies with the choir's reputation well established in the Birmingham musical scene, Birmingham Post reviews mentioned a 'choir of 60 voices at the peak of form-flexible, balanced, and singing with warmth of understanding'. In 1980, Richard decided to take a break, I daresay much needed after his hard work in shaping up amateur singers for whom music perforce was not the first priority in their lives! His 'sabbatical' which lasted two years, proved to be refreshing both for him and for the choir, who were conducted during his absence, by Andrew Millington, now organist at Exeter Cathedral. Andrew, a relaxed and likeable young man and an encouraging conductor, took us to Gloucester Cathedral, where he was then deputy organist, to sing 'Spem in Alium', which we also performed in Coventry Cathedral. Concerts were held in Birmingham Cathedral carrying on the tradition of Bach, Handel, and Britten. I remember clearly our soprano Ros Bradley as soloist in Handel's 'Dixit Dominus'.

Richard returned in 1982, with even greater style and dignity and a little more weight! He and the choir and orchestra settled down to a decade of happy and productive music-making. The choir moved again to rehearse in St. George's Primary School in Edgbaston, which from then on became our base. Wednesday evenings were the high-light of the week. Some excellent voices augmented the choir with regular auditions ensuring the maintenance of quality. Soloists at concerts were often choir members. Without meaning to make invidious comparisons, some names come immediately to mind: Roger Brotherton's mellifluous tenor; the strong alto voice of Alan Palmer, whose other talent was to make us all laugh, and later on, other accomplished singers such as Rebecca Harrison of the clear boyish soprano, the stylish Jenny Crawford; David Jones, Simon ? and Jonathan Spencer amongst others. Regular features were socialising in the coffee breaks - organised on a rota basis by members of the choir, Nigel's spontaneous renderings of 'hit' musical comedy numbers of earlier decades, and Richard's wry humour and shaggy dog stories. There was a friendlier atmosphere in the choir and the Dinner in January became an annual event, not to mention gathering in the pub after rehearsals, and the occasional jumble sales.

The continuing success and viability of the choir, of course depended on successful administration and financing; and although I did not take part in any of this, we ordinary members were aware of the enormous amount of work undertaken by the Committee. Individuals again come to mind; Michael Palmer, outstanding Secretary and Chairman over 23 years; Celia Potts, Honorary Concert Secretary, loyally at the 'seat of custom' - and still there (*edit: retired in 2009*); Linda Gresham; Clare Thomas, for many years Choir secretary; David Hickman-Smith; Philip Kingdon, Pat Crockson, Ruth Massie; Ray Jones; Pat and David Jones; Frances Buchanan, our resident artist; to name but a few. Even earlier recollections are of David Barclay, Secretary when I joined; Reg Egerton, Treasurer in the 70s; Margaret Ridsdale, always cheerful despite her disabilities; Janet Axten, who framed our pictures and raised money for the Society; Paul Wilson, sadly to be killed in a road accident in 1992, and so many more.

I remember the shock and sadness we all experienced on learning of the death of Helga Mosey, a young soprano, in the Lockerbie air disaster in 1987, and the moving Memorial Service organised by her KEHS teachers in the Summer Row non-conformist Church. A small group of us represented the Choir and I recall sitting next to Sarah Dent, as I often did at rehearsals under very different conditions, sharing in the grief of her friends and family. Much later, Sarah was to spend time in India, become Tattya Gyani and leave Birmingham to start her own Yoga School in the west of England.

Michael Palmer contributed so much to the Choir's financial viability and success over the years. His dapper figure would appear (and disappear during business trips abroad) and keep us informed of the state of play - awards, grants from various bodies, appeals, sponsorships etc. As something of an appreciation of his commitment and work on our behalf a small number of the choir sang at his wedding in

1987 in his parish church of St. Alphege in Solihull, with Nigel Argust at the organ. Naturally Bach featured prominently with the Gloria from the Mass in B minor during the signing of the register!

The whole financial situation became more difficult with the reduction in grants from official organisations, escalating costs in mounting performances, and competition with other choirs, it seems incredible looking back (and for this information and more I am indebted to Cathy Atkins, a loyal member of the Choir for many years, and who is now the only person I know who preceded 1960) that at the St. Matthew Passion in Birmingham Cathedral conducted by Willis Grant on 28th March 1953 the following comment appeared on the programme:- "After allowing for a grant from the Arts Council, the Bach Society must still find over ONE HUNDRED POUNDS to meet the cost of this performance. We need a contribution of FIVE SHILLINGS from every member of the congregation to meet this expense." By 1965, Tickets for a performance of the 'Christmas Oratorio' in the Cathedral were on sale for 7/6d, and in 1979 charges were roundabout £2.50 per ticket for major concerts. By 1985, tickets were selling for between £5 and £7. Comparison with the price of present day tickets should tell us something!

During these years we continued to give concerts at Birmingham Cathedral, but they were less frequent with the opening of the Adrian Boult Hall, which became our principal venue for large works. We sang in an increasing number of churches in and around Birmingham. There was St. Paul's, of course; St. George's Edgbaston, whose 150th anniversary we celebrated in 1988 with a very eclectic programme together with the Cambrian Brass Quintet from Praetorius to Vaughan Williams; St. Alban's Highgate, where we sang in their music festivals and recorded the Vaughan Williams G minor Mass, revelling in the acoustic of Pearson's Gothic-like vault; and Lichfield Cathedral, as part of their Festival. We celebrated the Bach-Handel Tercentenary in 1985 at Packington Church with Emma Kirkby as soloist. She was a frequent visitor during the 70s and 80s; her crystal clear soprano well suited to the timbre and sound of the choir.

Our repertoire expanded and diversified with both earlier and later works - from Byrd. Palestrina, Purcell, Bach, Handel, Monteverdi, Mozart, Schütz, to Brahms, Liszt, Vaughan Williams amongst others The sombre Fauré Requiem was contrasted with the gentler, more serene Duruflé. I especially enjoyed the 'Five Mystical Songs' by Vaughan Williams in 1983, and wondered why we never repeated them, We presented modern works, particularly those of our local friend and supporter, John Joubert, whose 60th Birthday we celebrated at St. Paul's in 1987 with the composer conducting his own motets, and Paul Spicer's 'A Darling of the World' - a setting to music of a Christmas poem by Robert Herrick and dedicated to Richard himself.

The crowning event of the decade must surely have been our visit to East Germany in 1989, at the invitation of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Choir, and initiated by Ulriche Birkner, a German pastor who sang with the Choir whilst she was in England. We were sponsored by the Birmingham Post whose music critic Christopher Morley accompanied us, and we also received a grant from Birmingham City Council. For the rest we financed ourselves. We were pleased to have our President, Denis Martineau and his wife Mollie with us; Denis carrying out a delicate political role in discussion with the German authorities. We were hosted in great style in a newly built five star hotel - the Merkyr - where from the window of our room on the tenth floor Valerie Foster and I could see the city spread out below; the Trabants in the car parks, the belching industrial chimneys and the Gewandhaus itself. On arrival we set out to place a floral wreath on Bach's tomb in the accompaniment of a Chorale from the Christmas Oratorio: 'Break forth, O beauteous heavenly Light' (in German, of course!)

What followed was perhaps the most moving and exceptional experience of my years with the choir - our performance of the Mass in B minor in the St. Thomas Kirche, Bach's own church. The Mass has always been central to my love of Bach and it was almost incredible to be singing in a church full of some two thousand people of all ages with the Leipzig Radio Orchestra and German soloists including the conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Choir, Christoph Biller, as bass soloist. Perched in the gallery of the church we could see the audience below and sense the expectant atmosphere. The utter poignancy of the 'Crucifixus' was unforgettable. Afterwards we were congratulated and fêted by a people who rarely applaud at such

concerts, and were received and entertained by the Mayor of the town who spoke in defiance of the East German government, anticipating what was to happen in a month or so when the Berlin wall came down and East Germany was declared 'free'. I had very mixed feelings when we were shown, by a Communist guide, the ruins of Dresden left by Allied bombing in the second world war; no attempt had at that time been made at re-building.

Other reminiscences of the Leipzig visit were of wandering round the city, window-shopping and marvelling at the scarcity of food, especially fresh fruit; poor quality clothing and then coming upon a book-shop where we were able to buy beautifully printed and bound copies of Bach's works at surprisingly low cost. Eating out in the Peoples' Restaurants was not to be recommended but we eventually found an atmospheric restaurant which served a tasty goulash and spent a convivial evening eating and drinking German style. The journey home was memorable for the disappearance of my suit case which was mysteriously returned by taxi to my house two weeks later after being taken to Moscow on a Russian plane.

The concerts of 1991 and 1992 were especially apt in view of Richard's impending retirement as conductor - Bach motets at St. Augustine and St. George's churches, Edgbaston, including my personal favourite 'Singet dem Herrn', which was perhaps a fitting tribute to his twenty five years with us, and recorded for posterity in 'A Birthday Celebration' by Tony Wass, in cooperation with a team from the choir. Richard laid down his baton in May 1992, and we celebrated his departure at a concert in the Oratory with the Cambrian Brass Quintet playing Bach, Schütz, Purcell and Vaughan Williams, and a lunch in Ruth Massie's lovely house and garden in the Lickeys, thanking him for twenty six years of deeply satisfying and memorable music-making. Ruth commemorated the occasion with a magnificent embroidered montage of Bach Choir insignia (*edit: as a cover for the conductor's stand*). As we bade farewell to his venerable and now portly figure it was indeed the end of an era.

In the autumn of 1992 Paul Spicer succeeded Richard as conductor of the "Birmingham Bach Choir" not "the Birmingham Bach Society", as it had previously always been known. Paul had played the organ in some of our concerts and already had a 'feel' for us, but his style was inevitably different. Here was a conductor in the fast lane, who, with his dynamic energy, perfectionism and ambition, and his personal tastes in music, particularly of the present century, led us into relatively unfamiliar areas and to sing music unknown before. Howells, Finzi, Tippett, and Rachmaninov joined the staple fare of Bach, Handel, Monteverdi and Purcell. I think we wondered what was happening to us when, shortly after his arrival we had a recording session of Christmas Carols in the Oratory which went on until nearly midnight!

His eclecticism was reflected in concerts of early music; 'Romantic Choral Music' which included Elgar Mendelsohn, Brahms, Grieg, (the joyful 4 Psalms Op.74); 'Bach (Motets) to Britten' (Hymn to St. Cecilia) at Warwick, besides a performance of the Mass in B minor at Lichfield Cathedral as part of the Lichfield Festival, where he was Director. In 1996 we sang Rachmaninov's Vespers with its thrilling harmonies and climaxes, at the Cheltenham Festival and in the sympathetic acoustic of St. Chad's Cathedral; the Bach Magnificat and Haydn's Nelson Mass.

Singing Handel (Coronation Anthems and Dixit Dominus) in the Symphony Hall - in 1993 at a Gala Charity Concert featuring Frederick Kempf) was a most interesting and awe-inspiring experience - in addition to the choirs we joined in that setting to sing at Raymond Gubbay Christmas concerts.

I was very sorry not to be able to go back to Leipzig for a further visit in 1994, and to have the opportunity to sing in that vibrantly musical city, Prague. We were able to return some of the German hospitality by welcoming the Leipziger Vocalensemble to Birmingham where we made and renewed acquaintances over supper at Nick and Pam Fisher's home and had an enjoyable week-end of music with St. Paul's Church as the setting. We sang again the beautiful Fauré and Duruflé Requiems at Bridgnorth, and continued to combine early classical, romantic and modern music in our repertoire.

Of course there were other changes too. Nick Fisher had already taken over from Michael Palmer as Chairman in 1991; a blend of policing and scholarly erudition in the Morse tradition. With his interest and researches into the literary works of the Earl of Rochester he commissioned and collaborated with our friend and supporter John Joubert to produce the Rochester Triptych, which was first performed in

1996 at the Adderbury Church in Oxfordshire as part of the Earl of Rochester 350th Anniversary Festival. He also commissioned a work by Aaron J. Kernis 'How God answers the Soul', which we performed at Cheltenham in the composer's presence. With Nick's professional promotion outside Birmingham the Chairmanship passed to Nigel Whirling in 1995 - a great Bachophile and determined that we should turn our attention once more to performance of Bach Cantatas, and was successful in securing a lottery grant so to do. Lottery funding also enabled us to purchase staging which made peripatetic concerts a great deal easier and more practicable.

Nigel Argus our accompanist for seventeen years left us in 1992 to pursue his career elsewhere and subsequently to conduct the Lichfield Chamber Choir. He was succeeded by Darren Hogg, who was directing music at St. Alban's Church (edit: now at Halesowen Parish Church), and then in 1995, by Rupert Jeffcoat. Rupert was clearly not only musically gifted, but a man of many parts - able to accompany the choir and simultaneously read and eat his sandwiches! He left us in 1997 to become organist at Coventry Cathedral (*edit: now organist at St John's Cathedral, Brisbane, Australia*).

A significant break with tradition was the change in ladies' concert dress, skilfully carried out by Pat Jones with a group from the choir, who managed to win over differing opinions and arrange for a new 'uniform'. The 'long black' was replaced by an attractive blue dress, designed to suit all figures and a dream to launder!

Then there was the change in recording techniques and equipment; Tony Wass's large van gave way to a relatively small box; an instance of burgeoning 90's technology. I now have a permanent reminder of our performance in 1996 in Cheltenham to add to my other mementos.

I could go on, but most of the recent history is known to present choir members, many of whom have an astonishing record of loyalty over many years. Suffice it to say that this is an impressionistic and personal account of thirty seven years of immensely enjoyable, stimulating and satisfying musical experience. I hope I may be forgiven for the many omissions, and the lapses of memory which have resulted in historical or factual inaccuracies, and which may be overlooked or corrected (Michael, we await your authoritative history!).

I cherish my memories; the clear, true sound of the soprano voices; a tenor-line the envy of many local choirs (not to under-value the excellent altos and basses!); the happy social atmosphere; the many friendships made, and above all, gratitude for being able to contribute to so many years of marvellous choral singing.

Perhaps it was appropriate that in my last concert before leaving Birmingham in June 1997, the programme, which included pieces by two composers specially favoured by Paul - two songs by Howells and Finzi's lovely setting of Robert Bridges poems - as well as Britten's Gloriana Dances (sung many times over the years), Bax's eerie 'This Worldes Joie', concluded with Parry's 'Songs of Farewell'...

Bach Choir, I still look forward to many concerts from the other side of the platform, and send my congratulations on your Eightieth Birthday. Good luck for the Millennium, and warmest wishes for your celebrations of the 250th anniversary of Bach's death in 2000, and the continuing success of the Choir in future years.

Corinne Bennett

Soprano with the Bach Choir: 1960 to 1997

November 1999

Witney, Oxfordshire

Acknowledgements:

To Cath Atkins and Michael Palmer for providing information without which this article could not have been written; to Nigel Whirling, who gave me the original idea, and Celia Potts for her patience and support.