

THE ENGLISH CHAMBER CHOIR — A BRIEF HISTORY

The English Chamber Choir began life as a splinter group from the London Symphony Orchestra Chorus. In the early 1970s André Previn was the LSO's Principal Conductor but, despite his Hollywood background, he was not that keen on taking on the Orchestra's more 'commercial' engagements, so Principal Second Violin, David Measham, who was looking to pursue a conducting career, stepped up to the podium on occasion. At the time the LSO Chorus was in a state of some friction too (it finally became self-governing in 1976) so David had no difficulty attracting singers to a new choir to do some of the commercial engagements and also to work with him on the classical choral repertoire.

So, right from the start, David's singers had a foot in both the classical and commercial worlds - a position which the ECC has retained to this day. At first it was an ad hoc group, but over a couple of years it acquired its own identity and sang for the first time under the name 'English Chamber Choir' on 12 March 1972. Among its first engagements were the live stage shows of *Tommy* with The Who, and Bruckner's Mass in E minor. With David as its principal conductor, the first chorus master was Andrew Parrott (who also came from the LSO Chorus). He soon moved on and was replaced by Guy Protheroe, who assumed the role of conductor and artistic director when David Measham relocated to Australia during the 1970s, and who will celebrate his own 50th anniversary of first working with the Choir later this year.

And, contrary to popular belief, the ECC has never performed with its close namesake the English Chamber Orchestra (ECO). The closest the two have ever come is to feature together on an album with the cruise singer Jane MacDonald, although the orchestral and choral tracks were recorded in separate sessions!

A history of the Choir is due for publication later in the year, but meanwhile here are some facts and figures which will give an idea of the range and variety of the Choir's activities.

VENUES - UK AND ABROAD

The ECC has sung in all the major London concert halls, including all three halls at the South Bank, at the Barbican, and the Royal Albert Hall; it has given concerts in all the major London churches including St John's Smith Square, St James' Piccadilly, the Temple Church and St Martin-in-the-Fields - the latter as a 'resident' choir with the Belmont Ensemble since 2002. It is no stranger to cathedrals either, having performed in St Paul's, Southwark and Westminster Cathedrals, and also Westminster Abbey. It has entertained members of the Royal Family in Buckingham Palace, St James's Palace, Windsor Castle and Hampton Court Palace. It has toured extensively around the UK and in Europe, with three visits to Belgium (including Brussels and Antwerp Cathedrals) and three to Switzerland. It has sung in the Megaron Concert Hall in Athens, and more recently in the Sacred Music Festival on the Greek island of Patmos, and has also visited the historic city of Plovdiv in Bulgaria. It has visited the South of France, singing in cathedrals and wine domaines, and this summer is off to Tuscany.

COMMERCIAL SUCCESS IN THE STUDIO AND ON THE ROAD

The Choir first appeared on the same stage as Rick Wakeman during the performances of *Tommy* in December 1973, when Rick was playing keyboards in the band. In January 1974 the Choir featured in the Royal Festival Hall performance (also recorded) of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and it has continued to appear with him ever since in a variety of albums and programmes. *Journey*

has continued to crop up, with a UK 40th anniversary tour in 2014 and a supposedly 'final' concert performance at the RFH in 2019. There was also *Six Wives of Henry VIII* at Hampton Court in 2009 and a revival of the *King Arthur* album, re-recorded in Abbey Road Studios and performed live at the London O2 Centre in 2016.

Another long relationship was that with Vangelis Papathanassiou, beginning with the album *Heaven and Hell* in 1976 (also live at the RAH) and embracing several other albums before concluding with the soundtrack to Ridley Scott's Columbus film *1492: Conquest of Paradise* in 1992. Other collaborations have included recordings and live shows across the decades with numerous international artists including Black Sabbath (and the recent tribute band, Emerald Sabbath, with some of the original artists), Procol Harum, Gene Pitney, Christopher Lee, and Eric Levi (originator of the ERA project). Film and TV soundtracks include *Band of Brothers*, *Inspector Morse*, *Les visiteurs* and a commercial for Three Telecom filmed in Wookey Hole caves in Somerset. In recent years the Choir has taken part in a number of 'live music to film' performances at the RAH, including *Gladiator*, *Close Encounters*, several of the Harry Potter films and last year The Muppet Christmas Carol.

COMMISSIONS AND FIRST PERFORMANCES

The ECC does not regard itself as being at the forefront of promoting 'new' works, leaving that to some more specialist ensembles. But it has commissioned many works over the years, and also some composers have written for it without a formal commission. These include John Tavener, Ivan Moody, Christos Hatzis, Rick Wakeman, Barrington Pheloung, Paul Reade and Peter Wiegold. The ECC has introduced many works to audiences in the UK for the first time, in particular composers from Greece and the USA (including Michael Adamis, Mikis Theodorakis, James Sellars). It has also championed the revival of works from earlier times - the 17th-century monumental *Te Deum* by the Portuguese composer Teixeira at the Brighton Festival in 2012, the music of the 9th century Byzantine Abbess Kassiani (the Eastern equivalent of Hildegard of Bingen) and more recent works inspired by her, and little-known Tudor masterpieces by John Sheppard (including his *Media Vita*, another monumental work) and his contemporaries. In 2016 the ECC was the first European Choir to programme the re-discovered *Passion Week* by the Lithuanian-born Jewish-Russian composer Maximilian Steinberg - a pupil and later son-in-law of Rachmaninov.

SINGING AND SOCIABILITY

There is an old saying that the ECC was formed in a pub (post-rehearsal)! Whether this is true or not is immaterial, but the Choir does have a special relationship with its membership and its audiences which has resulted in the combination of good music, good company and ample refreshment. In 1978 the Choir embarked on its first 'Away-Weekend', heading to Somerset where Guy's brother-in-law was vicar to a group of four parishes. The formula was compact - a concert on Saturday evening in the church, followed by supper for choir and audience afterwards and an informal cabaret. On Sunday morning there would be the usual church service, after which the Choir would entertain the local kids with a children's cantata like Horowitz's *Captain Noah*. Then there would be al fresco lunch on the vicarage lawn and ad hoc cricket, at which the singers were almost always beaten by the locals. Singers brought their families with them, local parishioners provided bed and breakfast for everyone and we know that even today some people are still in touch with their hosts from all those years ago! Over the years there were several return visits to Somerset, latterly to the village of East Coker where T.S. Eliot's ashes are interred, and also to Preston St Mary (Suffolk), Tenterden (Kent), Lechlade (Gloucestershire) and, several times, to

Ramsbury in Wiltshire, the last of which has become something of a favourite and a fairly regular haunt (the first visit there was in 1982).

Back in London there developed a tradition of an annual 'supper concert' in our home rehearsal Church of St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe in the City. This followed a similar format of a short concert without an interval, with supper and cabaret. There was also a glass of wine on offer on arrival, and the great value of this formula is that the Choir could sing virtually any repertoire it liked in the main recital and the audience would still turn up and enjoy it! Over a decade in this way we introduced many friends to music by Messiaen, Milhaud, Poulenc, Schoenberg, Richard Strauss, and many lesser known contemporary composers. Supper concerts traditionally happened in November. In recent years there has also developed a summer equivalent of concert plus picnic, notably most recently in Twickenham Parish Church where we can picnic in their Memorial garden right next to the Thames.

Quite apart from building relationships with our audience, the ECC is also justly proud of its social connections within its membership. It prides itself on being inclusive, welcoming singers irrespective of race or creed, and looking after each other when needed. At no time in its existence has this been more important than during Covid, when everyone managed to keep in touch via the Zoom rehearsal and chats, and also on social media.

OUR SPONSORS AND DONORS

When the Choir was founded, most of the grants available to such groups were from local and regional Arts Associations, plus foundations like the Ralph Vaughan Williams and Holst Trusts, the Performing Right Society and sometimes the Musicians' Union. The Choir's first commercial sponsorship came in 1982, when Philips Business Systems sponsored an Anglo-French programme at the Queen Elizabeth Hall (and then took their guests to dinner across the river at the Savoy afterwards!). Then in the 1990s the Choir was fortunate enough to attract sponsorship from a property management company, JSS Property Services, and at the time ABSA (Association for British Sponsorship of the Arts) had set up a 'pairing scheme' under which a company sponsoring an arts organisation for the first time qualified for matching funding. We rather suddenly had £5k a year from JSS and £5k a year from ABSA. It was a golden age of promoting concerts with our own orchestra, the English Players. So we performed major works including the Bach B minor Mass and both Passions, and *The Dream of Gerontius* by Elgar. Sadly our friend at JSS moved on and his successor wasn't really into music so we needed to look elsewhere.

Over the years, as detailed elsewhere, the Choir had acquired a reputation for performing music from the Eastern Orthodox tradition (predominantly but not exclusively Greek) and much of this was supported by Greek foundations including the A.G.Leventis Foundation, the Michael Marks Charitable Trust and the Hellenic Foundation.

In 2012 the Choir received support from the BBC Performing Arts Trust 'Choral Enterprise Scheme' towards its performance of Teixeira's *Te Deum* and the commission of Ivan Moody's *Sub tuum praesidium* both for Brighton Festival.

Apart from sponsors and donors, the Choir has been fortunate in that it earns its living largely from its commercial engagements, and these in turn subsidise the more unusual promotions. Sadly with Covid that particular income stream has all but disappeared.

REPERTOIRE

The ECC is not a 'church' choir. It did, however, rehearse for many years at St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe for no fees in return for singing services when required. And of course it has had its fair share of singing at weddings and funerals, christenings and memorials. So it has a broad range of sacred repertoire, from all areas of the Christian faith, and is well known to the general public for its promotion of music written for the Eastern Orthodox Church. It has sung and recorded much music from the Jewish tradition (both sacred and secular) in concerts in London and also recorded many works for the major US Milken Archive of Jewish Music.

There are several strands which have been woven together over the years to form the tapestry which is the repertoire of the ECC. These might be briefly described thus.

- A cappella choral repertoire stretching across six centuries, from Britain, Europe and America. Special areas of interest range from English Tudor pre-reformation music from the 16th century to choral song cycles by Parry, Finzi, Britten, Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc and the American composer James Sellars.
- Music composed for the Eastern Orthodox Church - Greek, Russian, Armenian, Serbian, Albanian etc, including British composers such as John Tavener and Ivan Moody inspired by the tradition of the Byzantine church.
- Works for chorus and orchestra from Baroque times to this century (Bach and Handel, Mozart and Haydn, Brahms, Elgar, Stravinsky and even Rick Wakeman - to name but a few). The Choir has its own orchestra, the English Players, which plays on either period or modern instruments as appropriate. It also performs many well-known works of this genre with the Belmont Ensemble.
- Music from stage and screen, including cabaret songs, solos and ensembles from both sides of the Atlantic with composers including Gershwin, Bernstein, Cole Porter, Lloyd Webber and Sondheim, and numbers made popular by artists including Edith Piaf, The Swingle Singers and, of course, numerous barbershop groups.