



Hemiola

St George's Singers

SASHA JOHNSON MANNING VICE PRESIDENT

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We were delighted that Sasha Johnson Manning, composer of the recent commission War's Embers, accepted the Choir's invitation to become one of our vice presidents. Sasha recently gave an interview for Hemiola.



What was your first contact with St George's Singers?

I had known Stephen Williams [Musical Director 1996–2006] from the BBC Daily Service. It was a great place to meet others on the Manchester 'singing circuit'. Stephen and I just used to laugh together the whole time! Then in 2001, the Choir commissioned me to write a piece for them, which became a three-movement setting of Psalm 91. Later I was asked to write a piece for Christmas; I based it on Wendy Cope's poem *The Christmas Life*.

Tell us a little about your early life and the influences that shaped your musical direction.

I was surrounded by music at home all the time. My mother was a music teacher at Withington Girls' School (WGS) and she would play the piano every night. At the time, WGS was a small school, a two-form entry, and the girls were given the opportunities to blossom. I would write all the time in lessons, using manuscript paper kept in my pencil case. Never in maths, English or French because I had to concentrate! I started composing at the age of seven, when Mum taught me to notate music. I've still got the first piece I ever wrote. *Manning's Waltz*, for my recorder group at school. That was the start of it all.

At the time I was slightly jealous of my brothers who were choristers with associated opportunities; there were no girls in such choirs in those days. So when Mum found that St Mary's Church in Bowdon welcomed girls into the choir, in 1972 I started singing in it. This church has had a significant effect on me. It remains my beating heart, a place where I watched kids grow up and become my mates. It sometimes feels like the best thing in my whole life. The choir are my family. They have supported me through interesting times, and I stayed as Musical Director just as long as I could.

Gordon Stewart, organist at Manchester Cathedral for many years, was one of my choirmasters. He was very encouraging, gave me solos in my teenage years singing in the choir in St Mary's and the Altrincham Choral Society.

Any early ambitions for composition and performance?

I've done a lot of singing which has been a delight. But I have never been ambitious.

That's why I didn't stay in London. I enjoyed the Academy and knew that it would be an extraordinary part of my life, but I did not throw myself into it wholeheartedly because I missed home so much. I didn't really mix with the rest of the students, I just kept company with my duffle coat. I took it as compliment when another student on the course asked me if I played the French horn; I was delighted she didn't think I looked like a singer, not conforming to that image. That's why I came home from London; I missed Mum, I missed my home and I missed my choir. I thought, 'Why should I not do my music where I want to be?'

What were the highlights of the Royal Academy of Music?

At the time I was there, all the first years had to sing in a chorus. The first thing we ever did was *Dream of Gerontius*. That was when I realised the power of this singing thing – something I could not put into words, wanting to cry. I had not experienced it before; my spirit was touched.

ST GEORGE'S SINGERS

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Marcus Farnsworth MA ARAM

VICE PRESIDENTS:

Sasha Johnson Manning
Susan Roper
Stephen Threlfall
Stephen Williams

MUSICAL DIRECTOR:

Neil Taylor

ASSISTANT MUSICAL DIRECTOR:

Robert Brooks

ACCOMPANIST:

Peter Durrant

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Sunday 31 March 2019
The Monastery, Gorton, M12 5WF

Mass in B minor
Johann Sebastian Bach

Soprano Rebecca Lea
Soprano Eleanor Garside
Alto Joyce Tindsley
Tenor Richard Dowling
Bass Marcus Farnsworth

St George's Singers
Conductor Neil Taylor
Northern Baroque

Tickets: £16, £14 concessions
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NB coach from Poynton
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I can never quite put out of my mind my brother's recounting of oncoming disaster in the scene of a horror film. A frightened female homeowner loads her van in readiness to flee.

Or, as JSB might put it: 'Eth, in terror, packs her minibus.'

Peter Marcus, bass, former Chair of the Choir and (possibly) former wit

Bach's seal used throughout his Leipzig years. It contains the letters J S B superimposed over their mirror image topped with a crown.

BACH MASS IN B MINOR CONCERT PREVIEW

In 2008, in his first performance at the Bridgewater Hall, Neil Taylor took St George's Singers under his baton for the Choir's performance of this extraordinary work. A work of both great power and subtlety, the Mass in B minor is a monument of the baroque era, a musical setting of the complete Ordinary of the Latin Mass, considered by many to be J.S. Bach's greatest achievement.

A full Latin Mass in 27 sections, there are majestic versions of the *Gloria*, the *Crucifixus* and the *Credo*. The Mass was too long to be performed in an ordinary service and was never played in its entirety during Bach's lifetime; the first documented complete performance took place over a hundred years after the great composer's death in 1859 in Leipzig.

One of the many interesting aspects to the piece is why a Lutheran Protestant decided to write a Catholic Mass. It is possible that originally he was touting for business. On 1 February 1733, Augustus II the Strong, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, cast off this mortal coil and died, thus creating the need for not only a successor but also music to reflect on the sadness of a grateful nation. The *Missa* section of this work may well have been written during a time of mourning for Augustus II, as a bid by Bach to get employment from the King's successor, Augustus III. Johann eventually got his title: he was made court composer to Augustus III in 1736.

Whatever the reasons for compiling this work, Bach's Mass in B minor is possibly the synthesis of his life's work, drawing on decades of composition and creating a masterpiece designed to live on through the ages. His Mass displays the highest skill

as a composer for solo instruments, solo voices, chamber ensemble, virtuoso chorus and large orchestral forces. It assimilates styles that are both ancient and modern. It creates both introspective and extroverted moods, with dance-like choruses leading to music that reference the earliest beginnings of faith.

Friedrich Smend (theologian and musicologist 1893–1980) was among the first to analyse the autograph score of the B minor Mass and conclude that the raw material for the work was actually composed in different stages over several decades. He put forward the notion that Bach had intended this compilation to be an anthology of sacred music rather than a *missa tota* – a unitary whole. The length of the work made it unsuitable for ecclesiastical use in the Roman Catholic liturgy and the use of the Latin Missal text would have excluded it from the Lutheran service.

However, since Smend's publications, subsequent theorists generally suggest that, whilst he asked all the right questions, he reached the wrong answer. Although large sections of the Mass were refashioned from earlier models, they were purposefully arranged to create 'a coherent musical narrative'. Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel referred to his father's four consecutively numbered autograph folios collectively as 'the Great Catholic Mass' in family correspondence. Although the *Kyrie–Gloria* (1733) and *Sanctus* (1724) were in fact performed as stand-alone works, there would seem to be little reason besides a *missa tota* to have set

the final movements of the Mass during a time of failing health.

John Maclay, musical director of The Choral Society of Grace Church states,



The painting above, entitled *Young Johann Sebastian Bach*, was painted in 1715 by J.E. Rentsch the Elder. However, some art historians, such as Teri Noel Towe, have argued that this portrait is probably not of Bach

'The care with which Bach compiled the Mass, the intensity of his labour on missing sections (especially the *Symbolum Nicenum*) during the final years of his life, and the internal coherence of its musical layout can all be read as evidence of his intention to create a glorious whole.'

In extensive preparation notes for his choir, John Maclay draws attention to the structure of the collection of texts in the Mass Ordinary. 'The texts are a spiritual journey leading from the pre-Christian (the *Kyrie*, left in its original Greek language) to the birth of Christ (the *Gloria canticle*, begun with the famous text from the Gospel of Luke), to the central creed of Christ's church (the Nicene Creed), reward for the faithful the (*Sanctus* – looking on God in the flesh) and ultimately a vision of the Lamb of God at the last trumpet (*Agnus Dei*).'

Maclay draws his choir's attention to the decisions Bach made in setting the text of the Mass. 'The division among the movements, the instrumentation, tonality, style – all those decisions reveal "a calculated awareness of its central narrative". It is with good reason that Bach is called "the Fifth Evangelist".'



BACH'S ALTOS

Matthias Harbers, Flickr



The glorious 6-part *Sanctus* was composed for the Thomaskirche, Leipzig for Christmas Day 1724. This would have been considered a worthy successor to the 1723 *Magnificat* (BWV 243a) composed for his first Christmas as Thomaskantor, in which role Bach was required to write a cantata a week.

As a boy, Bach was said to have had a lovely soprano voice. In Leipzig, Bach composed for a choir whose mem-

bers were aged up to 23, so young men as well as boys.

Bach's altos could have been boys or men singing in falsetto range, as boys in the 18th century were able to sing in the treble range until they turned 17 or 18.

But evidence is inconclusive as to which high voices were Bach's preferred choice. The American Bach scholar Joshua Rifkin notes the standard practice in the German courts of the time was to use adult males to sing

alto. But even if this is the case, and Bach's altos were men, they may have sounded very different from today's countertenors, possessing different tone production, declamation and phrasing. Some conductors today also prefer to feature female voices, the argument being that they possess greater musicianship and technical maturity.

The Choir are so pleased to have Joyce Tindsley joining us for the Mass; always a Choir favourite, Joyce will be singing alto and taking those parts that other countertenors try to reach.



Joyce Tindsley, alto

TORTOISE OR HARE?

Half a century ago the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, at the beginning of a ballet rehearsal, looked over at the dancers and asked, 'What shall it be today? Too fast or too slow?'

Some critics might apply the same question to tempo fashions in Bach's choral music and specifically in the B minor Mass. In 1968, Nikolaus Harnoncourt led the first period-instruments recording of the Mass. Since then, no fewer than 21 more equally 'historically inclined performers' (HIPs) have done the same. The fastest of the 'mainstream' B minor Mass recordings, that of George Solti, is on average slower than the slowest of those recorded by these HIP maestros, that of Gustav Leonhardt. Many learned musicologists and experts have mused on whether the faster HIP tempos are closer to Bach's own, or whether they simply reflect nothing more than a change in taste, a reaction against the speed or 'monumentality' of some of the previous interpretations.

Some have argued that using period instruments and smaller



The Terminator's day job

choruses naturally gives rise to faster speeds but some conclude otherwise. For example, Andrew Parrott, in his 1985 recording, using only two singers per part, takes the *Kyrie 2* and *Gratias* as slowly as the more mainstream recording by Otto Klemperer.

Those readers who attended the opening night of the Southwell Music Festival last year would have heard Marcus Farnsworth's interpretation of the B minor Mass, with a small chamber orchestra facing a smattering of ten vocalists who were able to produce a volume and clarity of sound which Bach would be proud to call his own.

There is a wealth of material on the interpretation of time signatures chosen by Bach and the relative tempos implied by these choices. And, equally unfathomable is the study of 'proportional' tempo relationships from one movement to the next.

Very interesting no doubt, but what has become clear to the Choir is the ever present need to **watch Neil** rather than discuss it amongst ourselves. We will leave it for him to do the studying and us to continue the learning. And we trust that, in the surroundings of a Franciscan monastery, we will be able to transport our audience from the angst and dissonance of the opening *Kyrie*, through the weeping lyricism of the *Crucifixus*, to the *Dona Nobis Pacem*, the vast expansion of chorus and orchestra, a view from the mountain top!

The citizens of Leipzig stand for this final chorus in the Thomaskirche, in silent tribute to the world's greatest musician, a man who created music as strong as his faith.

Sasha Johnson Manning on the B minor Mass

'In my humble opinion, I would say that I don't think any music that's stood the test of time, been loved by so many, and performed many times, ever started in an over structured way. It may end up that way, but it has to come from a human heart.'

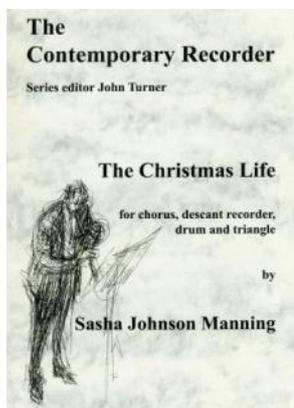
'Bach, we know, had a deep Christian faith. The B minor Mass (and all other works of Bach) have a visceral quality to them. From right within.'

'The B minor, it's a tough sing, but you feel renewed.'

SASHA JOHNSON MANNING (CONT)

'Sasha Johnson Manning's tunes are like a gift from heaven. The melodies range from hauntingly moving laments to catchy expressions of festive jollity, moving through innocence, tenderness, and foreboding, to hope and reassurance. As melodies, they stand as equals alongside the best of Warlock, Howells, Darke, Hadley, and Rutter.'

Paul Vallely, *The Church Times*



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A similar sensation was stirred in the last performance with the Academy; Mahler's Symphony No 3 in the Albert Hall. It was the end of this extraordinary part of my life. Her Majesty the Queen was in attendance and the Royal Box was on my direct eyeline. Across the vast expanse of space between us I could see the twinkling of her tiara!

What about your experiences of and life with the Daily Service in Manchester?

For a while this was my 'beating heart'. At the time of the audition I was part of the BBC Northern Singers. I passed and got a part, but think that I mimed the first concert as I was utterly terrified! There were two voices to a part and Alison Barlow was my partner. Stephen Wilkinson later said of the performance that 'there was a phenomenal blend to the singing'! Hmm. But that would be the best singing I ever did.

When the BBC Northern Singers were dropped by the BBC, we carried on and became the Britten Singers. Then, in 1993, the Daily Service came north, and we got the opportunity to audition. You asked about ambition. I think as a kid my highest ambition, if any, was to sing hymns on the radio. So I auditioned, was successful and joined an institution that became another significant part of my life. I met so many good friends there; Marcus Farnsworth also sang in the service.

I remained for over 20 years. Initially we moved around churches, but then it settled in Didsbury Church. My voice type is what they were looking for. I know it will blend easily, and I have good diction (from days as a girl chorister!) and I am a good [sight] reader. So I landed a lot of the plum jobs, perhaps four a week. My voice was a bit Julie Andrews; it worked well on long wave, not colouring the sound too much.

Recently the service has moved to Media City, with not much live work. Singers are required for three hours and used extensively during that time! The centenary recording was made live; it had a real sense of 'the old days'.

What about your work with early music?

I don't think of myself as a 'specialist', it's more that I do so much of it. I'm part of a group, Partita. We do a lot of fundraising concerts. We've performed at the Buxton fringe for twenty-odd years. We are never going to get rich, but we just love the playing. I think I put the 'earthiness' into the performance – a Jack the lad. When this music was written, it was for houses, ordinary people – a lot of the highbrow stuff that you hear now is utterly beautiful but it didn't start life like this!

How do you start writing commissioned work?

People are usually direct in what they want, e.g. a request to set a



Partita with Sasha Johnson Manning second from right, providing earthiness in soprano singing

particular text, or something for Midnight Mass.

As with *War's Embers*, having the Gurney poems makes it easier. You still have to do justice to the writing which comes first, and the mind behind the words, the life experience behind them. But when the stimulus is not word-based, I do flounder a little.

Ideally I would work at my piano, with slippers and PJs on; a place of absolute relaxation.

How did your residency with St Louis Chamber Chorus come about?

The start of this goes back to when I was a treble in the church choir. The head chorister, Philip

Barnes, made an impact. He grew up just around the corner from where I lived but moved away to America to teach there. Years later, in 1997, one day he turned up to Evensong in Bowdon. I used to make up unaccompanied trios and had just made a cassette with my best friends. Philip and I were chatting in the pub later, and he was happy to accept a copy of the cassette. He then commissioned me. 'Would you write a little anthem for my church choir?' And then, after another commission, I was offered a residency with the choir. Once I realised I didn't have to go to live there, I thought I would take a gamble on this. And he was clear that he was taking a gamble on me!

This choir do an enormous amount of work and commission from some well-known composers. The purpose of the commission was to write a requiem, covering a movement a year. We were due to start with the words of the *Dies Irae*. I was initially reluctant to include this as I believe in a merciful God. But there comes a point when you have to 'own' your sins and show that you want to grow out of them. I relented. The next was *De Profundis*, and the rest evolved. We included Emily Dickinson's *Let down the bars* as well as Oscar Wilde's *Sonnet: On hearing the 'Dies Irae' in the Sistine Chapel*.

The penultimate piece was Walt Whitman's *Toward the Unknown Region*. I have had this imagination of dying that I still hold, which I felt Whitman expressed. I wanted my music to bring out the idea of energy building, not subsiding; that our spirits are like a balloon growing. When you die it is as if we are released, that we burst forth. At times I struggle to express things in words, but the music to the Whitman poem remains the best representation I have created for my perception of our final passing.

Sasha on:

Originality – We must have heard most things many times before.

For example our speech, we chose the juxtaposition of words but nothing is totally unique or original.

Compositions – I don't want to go to bed on the sadness of a diminished chord; I want to sleep with something resolved.

New projects – I've started to learn Latin again! It's my 'precious little thing'; it makes sense of so many aspects of my life.

A HUNDRED YEARS ON REVIEW BY DAVID HOULT

2018 marked the centenary of the birth of the great American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein, and St George's Singers chose to mark the occasion with a performance of his *Chichester Psalms* at the Royal Northern College of Music.

Chichester Psalms was composed and first performed barely fifty years ago, in 1966, and in this concert it was accompanied by two choral works of even more recent origin. Howard Goodall's *Eternal Light* was composed in 2008 and first performed in that year by London Musici and the choir of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, of which Goodall is an alumnus. And *War's Embers*, by Manchester's own Sasha Johnson Manning, was receiving its world premiere at this concert.

Many choral societies will think twice about programming a concert consisting entirely of 20th- and 21st-century music, for fear of providing both their members and their audience with too stiff a challenge. But St George's Singers, admirably unfazed by any challenge, rose to the occasion with some excellent singing. Their audience, too, was similarly undaunted, and the RNCM concert hall was well filled with the Choir's loyal supporters.

The concert opened with the Bernstein, which was given a spirited performance, with plenty of precision and energy in the first movement. The clear, well-focussed soprano sound, so often a feature of this Choir, was evident throughout – the closing bars of the first movement were especially thrilling. In the second movement, soloist Joseph Judge sang beautifully, with just the right degree of lyricism and bluesy inflection in his phrasing. The final movement was rather tentative at the start, but when the 'Adonai' melody returned in unison it was warmly expressive, and the ending was powerfully atmospheric.

Chichester Psalms is a work which calls for an exceptionally wide dynamic range, from *pppp* to *tutta forza*, and dynamic variety was also a feature of the Choir's performance of the next work in the programme, Sasha Johnson Manning's *War's Embers*. The piece consists of settings of ten short poems by Ivor Gurney (1890–1937), a poet and composer who fought and was seriously wounded in the First World War. He is sometimes said to have suffered from shell shock (which would nowadays be called PTSD), and after the war he was diagnosed with mental illness, spending the last fifteen years of his life in psychiatric hospitals.

Gurney came from Gloucestershire, and his fine poetry deals with the brutalities which he experienced in the trenches, juxtaposing them, with heart-breaking poignancy, with glimpses of the Cotswold countryside: 'Do not forget me quite, O Severn meadows'.

The Finziesque modal lyricism of Johnson Manning's music is a fitting match for Gurney's poems. Of the ten settings, eight are for SATB voices and piano; the two exceptions are no 5, *Ballad of the Three Spectres*, sung with jaunty confidence by the Choir's tenors and basses, and no 7, a beautiful *a cappella* setting of *To his Love*, which was sung with simple but deeply moving intensity. In fact, throughout this performance there was a real depth of engagement by the

Choir – their commitment to this music was evident from the consistently warm and expressive phrasing which conductor Neil Taylor drew from the singers. This was a first performance, and there will surely be many more.

The concert ended with Howard Goodall's Requiem, *Eternal Light*. Like several of its predecessors – by Brahms, Britten and others – this is not a conventional setting of the Latin Mass for the Dead.

Instead, Goodall juxtaposes certain parts of the Latin Mass with settings of other texts from a wide range of sources: hymns, the Bible, and some familiar poems such as John McCrae's famous *In Flanders Fields*. Goodall was at one time Composer-in-Residence at Classic FM, so it is no surprise that there is a certain easy-listening blandness about this music. But the Choir and the two splendid soloists Léonie Maxwell and Terence Ayebare gave it a truly committed performance. The highlights for this listener were the two movements in which Goodall breaks free from his Classic FM mode. *Factum est silentium* and *Tum angelus tertius claxit* are settings of

texts from the Book of Revelation, dealing with the coming of the Angels of the Apocalypse, and the Choir gave these two movements performances of compelling energy and urgency.

David Hoult
25 November 2018

'The whole concert was a huge triumph ... such sensitive and beautiful playing from Pete Durrant.'

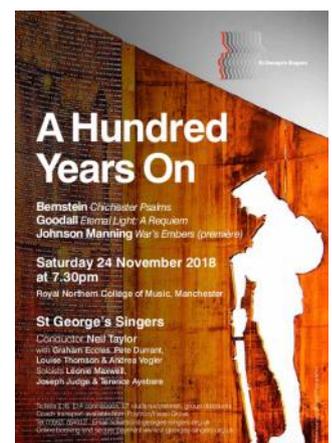
Audience member to a Choir member



Léonie Maxwell delighted us with her singing in both *A Hundred Years On* and our Singing Day.

'The experience of last night is something I shall never forget. St George's Singers is an incredibly good choir which sings with such loving warmth and tenderness. It has a fantastically rich palette of tonal colours which come from a collective musical brain. To me, as a composer of choral works, your sound is the exact sound I have in my head when I write for choirs. So, you can imagine what a treat it was to hear such beautiful sounds breathing my piece to glorious life. I am so very honoured to have been given the chance to create for you.'

Sasha Johnson Manning to
Neil Taylor
Friday 23 November 2019



COME AND SING HAYDN BY DAVE SHIELD



From top: Amanda Roocroft, Joseph Middleton and Ruby Hughes

When I spotted in the Choir announcements the opportunity for a come-and-sing day with Marcus Farnsworth in the Stoller Hall this February, that was one that went straight into the diary. As well as knowing him through the Choir, I had the privilege of singing with him for several years at Manchester University Chorus. I knew we were in for an enjoyable and rewarding experience, and was not disappointed.

Haydn's 'Nelson Mass' is an ideal choice for such a day – sufficiently well known to have a solid core of singers reasonably familiar with it, accessible enough for those that are new to it, while retaining enough difficulty to stretch us all. Marcus approached this with his characteristic vigour and enthusiasm. I'm not convinced the youthful accompanist would have recognised the reference when being called 'Mr Preview', after the basses had been castigated for singing 'all the right notes....'.

There's a limit as to how much can be done in a single three-hour rehearsal, and Marcus was more concerned with encouraging an effective performance, rather than technical precision or note-perfect accuracy. However, he still comes down as hard as ever on an early S, and a misplaced terminal T earned a swift fiery glare at the offending section.

The final performance itself was more than competent in front of a small but appreciative audience, and proved a fitting climax to a well-spent Saturday morning.

But that was only the start of a rich and varied weekend.

The Come and Sing was part of the first Manchester Vocal Weekend, held in association with Chetham's School of Music and the RNCM and was accompanied by a series of masterclasses and recitals.

As a choral singer, I'm happiest safely hidden away among the massed ranks of the tenors. The prospect of singing solo in front of a crowd of strangers and then having that performance publicly eviscerated holds no appeal. But the students of the Music College are clearly made of sterner stuff. Both Saturday and Sunday saw vocal masterclasses, by Amanda Roocroft and Marcus respectively, where they took a series of songs by the RNCM students (perfectly fine initially to my untrained ear) and stretched them – sometimes literally – to bring out an even more nuanced and effective performance.

Marcus's class was possibly the more technical, while Amanda typically adopted a more cinematic approach. The two sessions complemented each other very well.

A particular highlight was the handling of a Silkie-song via role-play of a mother warning her headstrong teenage daughter of the Dangers of the Wrong Man.

Both days culminated in a recital, showcasing the techniques we'd seen explored in the masterclasses but this time in the hands of an expert.

Saturday was a series of songs by the soprano Ruby Hughes and Sunday saw Marcus highlight



Mr Farnsworth out front and Dave in the front ranks

his solo expertise. In addition, the two performed a number of duets. Possibly the only disappointment of the weekend was that audiences generally felt a little thin

on the ground, particularly for these superb recitals.

It is clear that the intention is to make this Vocal Weekend a regular within Manchester's musical calendar and hopefully attendance should improve as the event becomes more established.

Certainly from my experience of this initial weekend, those that weren't there missed an absolute delight.



The loneliness of the solo singer; on the stage at the Stoller Hall without a safety net in sight

The Choir were delighted to hear the news earlier this year that our President, Marcus Farnsworth, and his wife Alison Rose had become parents. Albert Rose-Farnsworth was born on Wednesday 2 January and is no doubt bringing joy and sleepless nights to Marcus and Alison.

We send them our heartfelt congratulations and very best wishes.

ITV CHRISTMAS CAROLS BY URSULA BIRKETT



St George's Singers can turn our hands to carols in such different circumstances:

- Poynton Christmas Fest, with aromas of gluhwein and sausages, fireworks optional
- 'Accompaniment' to a Christmas lunch in Manchester
- John Rutter's concert at BWH, plus Chetham's, plus King's Singers – very classy.



Alfie Boe compered the ITV Christmas Carols

And now ITV's Christmas Eve service, recorded in St Michael's, Bramhall, with brass fanfares from RNCM, organ by Neil, conducted by Simon Lole (a long-standing friend of Neil's), with large technical support team and huge lorries.

Choir members robed in red were in the choir stalls, other SGS members swelling the congregation in the nave. The view from the front suggested there were a lot of habitual singers, heads up, faces alert and active, just what the conductor ordered. The cameras large and small moved around, and we will see what they caught when the broadcast comes. As I write I have no idea who is featured in open-mouthed close up.

To make sure the robed choir was present in good time, we were called in very early, to get admitted (security checks less fierce than promised) and robed,

and then to chat, eat the biscuits and sweets on offer, and overheat more or less gently until we were needed. Entertainment professionals must get very relaxed about such time-wasting, a necessary learned skill, presumably.



The Choir as choir (robes from *Sister Act!*)



Finally in place, we watched while the setup arrangements were completed. This included candle lighting on and near the choir stalls, prompting visions of emergency illuminations by choristers' hair in flames, none of which happened.

The performance involved a run-through of each carol, recordings, conductor's exhortations and re-recordings until we got it right (enough),



Overheard near the choir stalls, a technician speaking to a member of the clergy:
Technician – Are you a member of the robed choir?
Clergy – No, I'm a member of the robed clergy.

while the cameras prowled.

The various traditional readings got the same treatment, and we can look forward to seeing the end results, with this material



edited into the final version.

The carols in question were all the tried and tested old faithfuls, and thus 'a good sing' rather than much subtlety. But they may turn out to be the bread of a sandwich enlivened with unexpected inserts!

The chiaroscuro effects of lighting and decoration in the church should have given the cameramen-and-woman plenty of material to work with. A screen of poppies at the west end contrasted with ice-white decorations at the altar, whilst drifting clouds of dry ice mist shot through by beams of light. The mist dispersed by degrees, gradually allowing the choir a clearer view of the conductor's back and extended arms.

SGS altos and sopras and congregation



We finished a little late but left with spirits and expectations raised, wondering what televisual gifts Christmas Eve will bring to the ever adaptable St George's Singers.



Actor Antony Cotton, who plays the character Sean Tully in *Coronation Street*, took part in the ITV Christmas Carols. He was friendly and approachable, chatting with congregation in the recording gaps.



He was reading the lesson from Luke's gospel that records the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary in her town of Galilee.

It was strange to see so confident and experienced an actor have some trickiness with his words. He appeared to be having difficulty in the first few sentences and finally confessed after a few takes, 'Galilee, Galilee...I keep wanting to say Galileo.'

The only question to ask is whether he was referencing a physicist and astronomer, or pop legend Freddie Mercury?

Ursula Birkett
 Friday 7 December

SINGING DAY GOUNOD'S *ST CECILIA'S MASS*

Taylor's B minor Tags

Altos, more 'billowing' in the triplets - the Beast from the East! It's like blow football at the moment.

If you've got a change of note here, give it a little 'ping'!

All the pubs are still open; there's really no hurry to get to that bar.

I need this to be confident but don't imagine you're calling from the terraces on a Saturday afternoon.

Brook's B minor Barbs

(After trying out a particular technique)

Oh, alright, do it to 'aw' - how dreadfully unimaginative!

(After rehearsing soprs /altos for 15 minutes)

What, you mean the altos are split? Well, what have you been doing since we started?

At 08.00am on Saturday 14 January, an advance party of the Choir arrived at St George's Church, Poynton to begin preparations for our Singing Day. The day dawned slightly damp and dingy, but there was a warm glow spreading amongst the organisers as we focused on



No, not *Dam Busters*. It's a Taylor warm-up

the job of setting up. Especially when heated by a welcome cup of tea from refreshment guru Peter Farrington. Many hands make lighter work than few and we were soon ready to meet, greet and register our singers, ply them with tea and coffee, give them music and food tokens and then direct them to the church in readiness for the Maestro's warm-up.



Overseer Farrington guides the pouring of tea and coffee

Mr Taylor's warm-ups are reasonably legendary, encompassing a heady mix of loosening up the body with increasing verbal dexterity frequently at the expense of our dignity. But we love it really. Whilst the hard work of learning a piece from scratch took place in the church, so it continued back in the hall. We are always grateful to our own choir members who take precious time before the event to create

culinary gems in the form of soup, sandwiches and cakes.

Lunch is usually a well-organised semi-military affair, seasoned with good humour, quite a bit of arm-waving or pointing and always the fully armed **Lively Ladlers** poised ready to scoop warming soup into large cups. Spicy parsnip

seems to always scoop the most popular award, with two large batches finished very easily!



Once more in church, the afternoon rehearsal for singers continued with further exploration of the work that Camille Saint-Saëns described as a 'serene light which rose before the musical world like a breaking dawn'. On a more prosaic level, back in the hall clearing, washing and setting up took place, for the usually much needed tea break later in the day. Every year our repertoire of cakes

includes some old favourites, but we usually encounter new ones as well.

Soloists Léonie Maxwell, Christopher Littlewood and our own Robert Brooks joined the choir



Where the hard work takes place



'Tea to the right, coffee to the left ...'

as soloists for a quite delightful performance of the work.

Saint-Saëns also said of the piece, 'In the faint distant future when inexorable time has completed its work...the *Messe de Sainte Cécile*...will still retain life.'

Coming fresh to this work and having heard none of the rehearsal, your editor can attest to the accuracy of this prediction. I found the performance by this well-trained scratch choir to be enchanting in so many ways; poignant and possibly sentimental, it was also full of life and optimism.



Tombola, organiser and prizes!



Lively Ladlers pre-lunch



Christopher, Léonie and Robert enhancing the final performance.

CHRISTMAS IN ST GEORGE'S STOCKPORT

In amongst the melee of merry Christmas events, the Choir returned to St George's Stockport for our annual Carols and Brass concert. We did have a very busy Christmas and New Year season, but somehow, once we settled into this glorious church, with staging, chairs, urns, tables all in place, we were able to knuckle down to the business of singing. And singing well.

We opened the concert with the slightly challenging but wildly exuberant *Make we Merry* (Andrew Carter), setting a jubilant tone to the proceedings. We were delighted to welcome back Bradshaw Hall Primary School Choir and thoroughly enjoyed singing together *Winter Nights* by the very talented Lin Marsh. The children sang with great tenderness and tunefulness; a credit to Vicki Sunderland's training. A significantly upbeat *I wish it could be Christmas everyday* further galvanised our audience

to sway, clap and embrace the Christmas spirit.

Chetham's Trumpet Quartet, with budding stand-up comedian/comper Dan, entertained audience and choir members with a varied and professional performance, including a spirited version of *Il est Bel et Bon* (Pierre Passeeau) which left many of us open-mouthed in awe at their precocious talent.

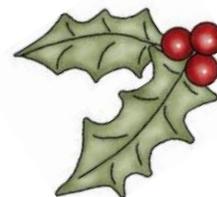
Motto of the choir during Christmas concerts and Singing Days:
See a job, do a job!

Leading into our military style interval refreshments, we joined forces with the Bradshaw choir to sing John Rutter's *Very Best Time of the Year*. And leading out of the interval, a little more light-hearted post wine and mince pie tidying, the Choir sang the appropriate *Whence is that Goodly Fragrance*. This was swiftly followed by William

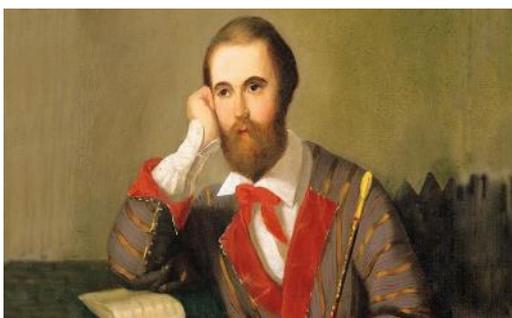
Mathias' syncopated *A Babe is Born*, for which we needed all senses together to deal with some exciting and challenging 'thrown rhythms'.

Our audience was in particularly good form for participation carols (lusty kings and wistful pages) and they were equally appreciative of our final piece, a gathering of the three musical forces with Pete Durrant on the piano for Bob Chilcott's spirited and many-themed arrangement of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*.

This finale included a surprise for the rest of the choir, with soloists having been drawn from within their ranks that day and included Pete Durrant. How did he do this, I hear you ask, both sing a solo and play the piano? Well, in the spirit of a dedicated Ironman, he ran fast.



SINGING DAY (CONT)



Portrait of a Man believed to be Charles Gounod by Louis-Leopold Boilly

although not very recently, but the beautiful music soon came back to me.

'Neil is such a good conductor and communicator that he is able to get the best out of a 'scratch' choir in a short time, seemingly without any fuss or panic! The support given by Peter Durrant at the piano is second to none; it was altogether a very enjoyable and uplifting experience.

'I always look forward to your Singing Days, not only for the singing, but also for the friendliness and the food. This year was no exception. I think the organisation at registration and break times is slick but always friendly. There is a very good choice of soup, sandwiches and cake plus tea and coffee, somewhere to sit and someone to chat to.

'Well done to everybody, and I've already noted the 2020 date in my diary!'

Following our Singing Day we were delighted to hear from Pat Powley, one of the attendees at the Singing Day. Pat attended with friend and SGS member Sylvia Johnson (who can be seen in the team of Live-ly Ladlers of Poynton).

'I enjoyed my visit to St George's Singers on 14 January very much indeed. I have sung Gounod's *St Cecilia's Mass* a couple of times before,

FIVE FASCINATING GOUNOD FACTS

He wrote 12 operas, most of which have been forgotten.

After Gounod abandoned his mistress in London, singer Georgina Weldon refused to send on his belongings and took revenge. She wrote her name on every page of the manuscript score for his opera *Polyeucte*.

Camille Saint-Saëns played the organ at his funeral and Gabriel Fauré served as conductor.

Gounod's opera of Molière's play *Le médecin malgré lui* (1858) was a flop but admired by Bizet. 17 years later, Gounod was among several major composers at the premiere of Bizet's *Carmen*.

Alfred Hitchcock Presents, a mystery anthology series 1955–1965, opens with one of the most famous title sequences in television history, scored to Gounod's spookily rhythmic *Funeral March of a Marionette*.

TALES FROM THE CHOIR



Moseley Hall in Cheshire and the mighty troops of the Cheshire Consort

CHESHIRE CONSORT AT CHRISTMAS BY ALI MCLAY

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, 16 singers from the Consort donned tinsel, Santa hats and reindeer antlers and headed into deepest Cheshire, Moseley Hall to be precise.

We had been asked to sing carols at a private Christmas party for about 50 adults and 20 children. And so, with the promise of mulled wine and canapes, we headed out, praying for deep and crisp and even as, for part of the time, we were singing outside.

We stationed ourselves on the spacious circular driveway, expertly conducted by Mary Houtt, and wowed the arriving guests with a selection of carols, from the rousing *Ding Dong Merrily on High* to the quiet and gentle *Oh Little One Sweet*. And, yes, we stayed in tune!

The reactions of the guests were mixed: some stopping in awe and wonder at our dulcet tones and taking photos, others acknowledging the singing with a smile. Personally I think they were smiling at Sylvia Johnson's flashing Santa hat!



'Was it my imagination or did I hear the first carol singers last night?'

And so with numbed fingers and toes, we moved inside to a beautiful drawing room, complete with grand piano to continue our singing, as guests chatted and quaffed champagne.

We had great fun and it was an experience to be in such an amazing old house. Singing in such a small group is always more challenging than in a large choral society, but as always the Consort singers rose to the occasion, and did us proud. And I think the guests liked it as we were praised for 'our lovely singing'.

If you are new to St George's you might like to think about singing with the Consort, especially if you are a tenor or a bass. Have a look on the choir website to find out more about us.

Alternatively contact me on a.mclay77@gmail.com, 07591586447 or speak to me at choir.

Leeds Lieder Festival, June 2019

On Wednesday 19 June, Marcus Farnsworth will be treading the boards in Wigmore Hall as part of the Leeds Lieder Fundraising Gala. The festival has become an event of 'international stature' (*Opera Now*). The festival brochure notes that this performance will see a 'star-studded line up perform a Shakespearian programme to secure the financial stability of the organisation'. Amongst the names of stars listed in the brochure are the following:
...Sir Thomas Allen, Marcus Farnsworth, Roderick Williams baritone ...
It may be democratically alphabetical, but it is impressive.

A MERE WRINKLE IN A SECRETARY'S DAY

A snippet of the varied tasks falling to the role of our Secretary, Jacqui Smith.

She had been liaising with a new prospective bass. He sent in his form with details, contact and street name etc. Jacqui emailed him details of the rehearsal time, where to find us and so on. He agreed that he would be there on the Tuesday in question.

We now skip forward to that Tuesday. It's 19.25. Jacqui is hot-footing it through Macclesfield on the way back from London, to get to choir for 19.30. Then her phone rings – hands-free of course. And the conversation starts.

Philip: Hi, it's Philip, I think I'm in the right place. I'm round the back of the church.

Jacqui: OK, can you see the church hall and car park?

Philip: Yes, I can see the church hall, but all the lights are off.

Jacqui: Hmm. That seems strange. People would usually be there for this time. Are you by the centre of town, by the roundabout?

Philip: Yes, that's right, opposite Arnold Clark.



Jacqui Smith, SGS Secretary

Jacqui: (Thinking) Arnold Clark? What's he on about?

Jacqui: Sorry, Arnold Clark? In Poynton?

Philip: Poynton? I don't know Poynton.

Jacqui: Well, where are you then?

Philip: I'm in Belfast.

Yes, there is a St George's

Singers in Belfast – there are many St George's Singers – and in Belfast they wear black with a red rose too.

So he's forgiven, but we will be asking more direct questions in the future, such as, 'Have you got the correct choir?'

TALES FROM THE CHOIR

TOUR TO BRUGES

For those not familiar with our tours, the Choir venture to parts of the UK and Europe on alternating years, to sing in varied venues to a range of audiences.

On Friday 24 May a group of 72 Choir members and affiliated partners, spouses and friends will be heading to Brussels then Bruges at the start of our European tour.

This year we have taken the decision to start the tour at London St Pancras, giving travellers the opportunity to make their own way there using railcards and other options to keep costs low in the journey south. In addition, a number of people have elected to fly to Brussels or to fit the business of singing into a longer holiday in Europe. But, all being well, we will eventually all meet in Bruges at our hotel, nestled in the cobbled streets of this medieval town and a short walking distance from the main market square.

The history of Bruges is one of rise, fall and rise again. In the 12th century, Bruges gained city status, but soon after the River Zwin started to silt up,



The wide open space of the Markt in central Bruges. We hope for similar weather in May.

dividing the settlement from the North Sea. Bruges adapted by creating outposts in Damme and Sluis and land transport became more prevalent. Traders across the world continued to flock to the city to sell their wares and buy internationally-acclaimed Flemish cloth. This was produced by various cities including Ghent,

where we travel on our first day, to sing in Sint-Michielskerk as well as explore this beautiful, sedate city.

In Bruges we will be taking part in a Mass at the city's Basilica of the Holy Blood which houses a venerated relic of the Holy Blood allegedly collected by Joseph of Arimathea.

On our final day, we travel to Brussels, host to the official seats of the European Commission. No further comment there, but we are delighted to be singing our final concert at Brussels Cathedral before heading to the Eurostar and back home to Blighty.



Sint-Michielskerk, Ghent, will be one of our concert venues during the Choir Tour to Bruges, 24-27 May 2019

ROB O'CONNELL (1979–2018)

St George's Singers were deeply saddened to learn of the death in July last year of Rob O'Connell following a short but courageous battle with cancer.

Those of you who looked closely at this year's Season Brochure will have seen that Rob was due to be singing the bass role in our performance of the B minor Mass.

From an early age Rob loved music, especially singing, first becoming a member of the Surrey Youth Choir and then the National Youth Choir (NYC) from where he established long and close friendships with many other singers.

In a tribute to his friend, a NYC contemporary, George Poppe, remembered travelling 'throughout the Southern Hemisphere on the 1999 World Tour, when we were often paired for

home-stays; the memories from these will always stay with me.'

After completing his music degree at the University of Huddersfield he set out into the world of a professional singer with formative years spent as a lay clerk at Manchester Cathedral. His solo work included operas, oratorios and even a tour with the band *James*.

Rob was a regular fixture with ensembles in the North (William Byrd Singers, Canzonetta, Manchester Chamber Choir amongst others) as well as a long-standing member of the Endellion Summer Festival, first attending in 2004 and once again forming long standing and firm friendships.

It was at the festival that he met his partner Debbi. At the

2018 festival the performance of Elgar's *The Music Makers* was dedicated to his memory, just one week after his death.

In the words of his National Youth Orchestra friend, 'Rob was truly a gentleman, a warm and witty friend and so modest about his talents...he is fondly remembered and dearly missed.'

*We are the music makers
and we are the dreamers
of dreams.*

It is with bitter sweet emotion that the Choir welcome Marcus to sing the bass role in our performance of the Mass in B minor at the end of March, taking over from Rob O'Connell.

Marcus and all the soloists in this performance knew Rob from the 'Manchester singing circuit' as well as other events such as the St Endellion Festivals.

St George's Singers

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www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

Hemiola is sent to all Friends of St George's Singers, and a digital version goes to those on our Mailing List. To receive a regular copy, complete the Mailing List registration on the website, or contact the Publicity Officer.



St George's Singers was formed in 1956 by Rev Eric Chapman and Geoffrey Verney, organist and choirmaster of St George's Church, Poynton in Cheshire, where the Choir still rehearses every Tuesday night. Geoffrey's dream was to build a community choir, capable of performing major choral works to a high standard and which would attract singers and audiences from neighbouring towns. Geoffrey died in 1964, but his legacy was nurtured by his successors Duncan Eyre, Ray Lomax and Stephen Williams, and is continued by our present Musical Director, Neil Taylor.

St George's Singers is recognised as one of the leading and most innovative choirs in the North West of England, performing an astonishingly varied repertoire, and with around 100 members drawn from an area far beyond the community of Poynton. We present at least four major concerts a year, in venues including The Bridgewater Hall, Gorton Monastery, The Stoller Hall, Manchester Cathedral and Royal Northern College of Music, hold annual Singing Days, and tour regularly in the UK and abroad.

St George's Singers continues to explore and expand the boundaries of choral music, and communicating the sheer enjoyment of singing together. Entry to the Choir is via audition, and new members are welcome to come along to rehearsals at any time.

ST GEORGE'S SINGERS CONCERT DIARY 2018-19

Sunday 31 March 2019

Bach B minor Mass
with Northern Baroque
Gorton Monastery

Saturday 8 June 2019

The Well Conducted Tour
St George's Church, Poynton

Friday 5 July 2019

Mahler Symphony No 8
Chetham's Chorus and Symphony
Orchestra and others
Bridgewater Hall

Ticket Hotline: 01663 764012

tickets@st-georges-singers.org.uk

www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

MANCHESTER SINGS!

The Pilgrim's Progress by
Ralph Vaughan Williams

Sunday 31 March, 3.00pm–
Saturday 6 April, 3.00pm
(Various dates)

Tickets from £21.00

The Pilgrim's Progress tells the story of an Everyman figure who journeys through a series of challenges to salvation. This new RNCM Opera production is set during the First World War, with the Pilgrim as a deserter leaving his fellow soldiers behind to embark on a quest for something better.

When Ravel met Gershwin,
Clonter Opera Theatre,
Congleton

Sunday 7 April 2019, 3.00-
5.00pm

Tickets from £18.50

In 1928, at a party given for Ravel to celebrate his 53rd birthday, Gershwin was one of the guests. This was the start of a lifelong mutual admiration. This event unites two great loves of Clonter's founder Jeffery Lockett to mark his 80th birthday: French song and Jazz. James Pearson performs the *Rhapsody in Blue*. Soprano Sophie Angebault performs Ravel's *Scheherazade*. Dani Sicari also performs with her band, the *Easy Rollers*.

Manchester Jazz Festival

Thursday 23–Monday 27
May 2019

Moving to the last weekend in May (clashing with our choir tour!) MJF returns to the city with exciting changes. Unable to use Albert Square due to the town hall renovations, this year the event will cover the length of St Ann's Square and Exchange Street with a host of free stages, food stalls and festival bars.

With gigs at a number of tried and tested venues across the city (and a few new ones) the programme includes a number of free events, kicking off with *Andy Scott: Mancunity* at St Ann's Church, 23 May, 17.00-18.00.

