



Hemiola

St George's Singers

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Rachmaninov <i>Vespers</i>	2
Chanting Russia's history	3
Verdi <i>Requiem</i> review	4
Christmas with Rutter	5
Letter from the Editor	5
SGS News	6
Kath Dibbs remembered	6
Robert Brooks: interview	7
Costa Rica: final memories	8
Song for Diana	9
Beethoven's Fantasy	10
Carol concert and <i>Messiah</i>	11

ST GEORGE'S SINGERS

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JOHN RUTTER: CHORAL AMBASSADOR BY NEIL TAYLOR

To my mind, John Rutter is a skilled craftsman, a gifted composer and a classy interpreter.

Let's look: a definitive version of the Fauré *Requiem* in its original scoring; many brilliant recordings with his own group, The

Everybody tells me, who has sung in a choir, that they feel better for doing it. Whatever the cares of the day, if they meet after a long day's school or work, somehow they leave their troubles at the door.

Cambridge Singers over the past 35 years; such an accomplished eye and ear for instrumental and vocal colours; beautifully hand-written music notation; well-crafted melodies; skilled and apt use of texts; a brilliant interpreter of the music of William Byrd.

If you're in any doubt whatsoever about John as a so-called serious composer, listen to *Hymn to the Creator of Light*. It will blow you away.

He is truly an ambassador for the English choral tradition, and his name and influence has brought the choirs, singers and other living composers of this country in the homes of people across the globe.

All of those people are pouring out their hearts and souls in perfect harmony, which is kind of an emblem for what we need in this world, when so much of the world is at odds with itself.

He's also a thoroughly engaging, warm and generous man. I first met him when, as a student, I had a call one Saturday afternoon asking if I could come and make drinks at a Cambridge Singers' recording session in Hampstead, North London.

I hopped on the tube, arrived at University College School, listened to the sessions with that amazing group and the wonderful Jill White as producer, and brewed up.

Since then, I've had the privilege of working with John and whilst he is charming and anecdotal, he does demand much of his fellow musicians and the singers around him, displaying a boundless degree of energy and enthusiasm for the music.

I know the Choir will enjoy working with him for the Christmas concert. There is an almost childlike delight in making music and working with his singers. The concert on 11 December is a marvellous opportunity to work with great musicians in a fabulous venue to a sell-out audience.

Let's make it a good one!



Choral music is not one of life's frills. It's something that goes to the very heart of our humanity, our sense of community, and our souls.

Hear more from an interview with John Rutter talking about The Importance of Choir on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pm-Pm1FYZ-U>

Saturday 21 October 2017
The Stoller Hall, Manchester

Rachmaninov *Vespers*
Górecki *Totus tuus*
Taverner *Song for Athene*
Lukaszewski *Nunc dimittis*

St George's Singers
conductor Neil Taylor

Tenor: Stewart Campbell

Tickets: £15, students £6

Tel : 01663 764012

Email: tickets@st-georges-singers.org.uk

Online: www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

RACHMANINOV *VESPERS*: PREVIEW

By the beginning of the 19th century Russia's church music had become Western in design and form, and had largely forgotten its roots in traditional *znamenny* chant: the singing tradition of the Russian Orthodox church, developed from the Byzantine chant introduced to Russia in the 10th century. But the nationalist revival, centred on the Moscow Synodal School of Church Singing, led dozens of Russian composers, particularly choral specialists such as Kastalsky, Chesnokov and Gretchaninov, to turn their creative energies to composing choral music on texts drawn from the Russian Orthodox liturgy. In doing so, they created the New Russian Choral School which, from the 1880s to 1917, constituted a 'Golden Age' of Russian church music – and of which Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil* is the crowning achievement.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943) was born into a noble family of Tartar descent who had been in the service of the Tsars since the 16th century. His father having squandered his wife's fortune, the family moved to St Petersburg where Sergei studied at the Conservatory before moving to Moscow. Although recognised mainly as a gifted pianist and composer of concertos and symphonies, he also composed a number of choral works, amongst them *The Bells* and *The Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*.

Commonly (but incorrectly) called the *Vespers*, the *All-Night Vigil*

was composed by Rachmaninov in a period of less than two weeks early in 1915, shortly after the outbreak of World War One. It was premiered on 10 March by the Moscow Synodal Choir as a benefit for war relief, receiving such enthusiastic public and critical reaction that it received four more performances that same month. Kastalsky wrote: 'Rachmaninov's new composition is undoubtedly a contribution of great importance to our church's musical literature... of unusual value is the artist's loving and conscientious attitude to our church chants, for in this lies the promise of a splendid future for our liturgical music.'

Sadly this promise never materialised. Two years later, the Russian Revolution banned religion, disbanded the Synodal Choir, and forced Rachmaninov into self-imposed exile in the West, never to compose another sacred work.

Today the *Vespers* is regarded as amongst the most evocative, dramatic and harmonically sumptuous in the Russian Orthodox repertoire, and a major work in the canon of Western choral music.

The work is scored for unaccompanied chorus, and comprises settings of fifteen hymns and psalms from the All-Night Vigil – the evening and night Offices of Vespers (evening prayer at 6pm or when the lights are lit), Matins (midnight), Lauds (dawn prayer, 3am) and Prime (early morning prayer, 6am) – which were held as one long service before major feast days. Some texts are familiar as Anglican canticles or parts of the Catholic Mass, whilst others are specific to Orthodox worship.

Despite the fact that the *Vespers* was intended as a concert work, not a church service, Rachmaninov was still careful to observe Orthodox proprieties. The voices had to be unac-

companied, since instruments were forbidden in the Orthodox church; the text (in Old Church Slavonic) was paramount, never to be obscured by counterpoint; and the hymns had to use the ancient *znamenny* ('notated by means of signs') chants or more recent Greek and Ukrainian chants as basis for the melody. The remaining chants were invented by Rachmaninov himself as 'conscious counterfeits' (and for which he seemed to have a natural stylistic affinity) and this consistent use of chant serves to unify the work. Within all these constraints, however, Rachmaninov created a monumental work that elevates the spirit by its lofty expressiveness, and captivates the ear by its sheer beauty.

Some movements are short, whilst others are complex structures in which thematic material is continuously reworked. The rhythms are rarely regular, with frequent changes of time signature, and often the elimination of bar lines altogether. The most remarkable feature is its 'choral orchestration'. Rachmaninov created great richness of sound by techniques such as dividing the choir into as many as twelve separate parts, dynamic extremes and contrasts in texture, the onomatopoeic sound of bells, and humming – which probably would have been frowned on by the Orthodox authorities, since removing the text converts the singing voice into an instrument. He also makes full use of the characteristic sonorities of the low Russian bass voice, which descends to the subterranean depths of a low B flat at the end of the *Nunc Dimittis*.

The last time St George's Singers performed the *Vespers* was in 2008 in Gorton Monastery – an amazing space in which to sing one of the greatest of all spiritual works. The forthcoming performance at The Stoller Hall will be no less remarkable.

Rachmaninov: The Last Concert – statue of Sergei Rachmaninov in Knoxville, Tennessee, where the composer gave his final concert in 1943



CHANTING RUSSIA'S HISTORY

The beauty of the sound world created by Rachmaninov's *Vespers* arises largely from his use of traditional Russian chant, the singing tradition used in the Russian Orthodox Church.

The acceptance by Russia of the Orthodox faith from Greek-speaking Byzantium in AD 988 meant that their liturgy was initially heavily influenced by Greek practices but rapidly took on a distinct Russian style, resulting in a peculiarly Russian kind of chant, *znamenny*.

In the 16th century, the Russian liturgical tradition split between the north (Moscow) and the south-west (Kiev). In the north, *znamenny* chant grew more elaborate and the notation system more intricate. Singing schools attached to monasteries sprang up, notably the Novgorod School. Ivan IV (The Terrible) moved the Novgorod school to Moscow to increase the Kremlin's prestige, and was himself a composer of chant, two of which still exist today. Gradually the system became more complicated, so that only trained and educated singers could sing an unknown melody

at sight. Around AD 1600 a simplification to the notation was introduced called 'red marks' – small letters in red placed before each *znamenny* sign, to indicate the highest note of the sign it stands before.

Meanwhile, in the south-west, the Orthodox Church in Kiev faced increasing competition from the Catholic Church. In response, the Russian Church opened schools to teach laymen to sing and read chant, borrowing from other Orthodox chants, forming a distinctive Kievan chant style, and eventually adopting polyphonic styles.

By the middle of the 17th century, Western music started to penetrate Russian culture, and the Orthodox Church introduced polyphony, based on Polish, German and Italian harmonies. *Znamenny* chant has however been preserved in the chanting traditions directly descended from it.

Znamenny chant is unison, melismatic (ie a group of notes sung to one syllable of text) singing, and has its own special notation, called 'stolp'. The symbols used are called *kryuki*

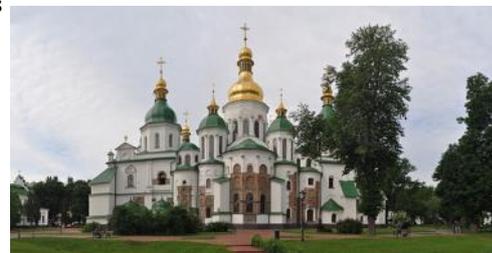
(hooks) or *znamena* (signs or marks). Each sign may include a large black hook or stroke, several smaller black points and lines. Some may mean only one note, some 2-4 notes, and some a whole melody with a complicated rhythmic structure. The most notable feature of this notation is that it records transitions of the melody rather than notes. The signs also represent tempo, loudness, and mood.

Every sign has its own name, and also acts as a spiritual symbol. For instance, the sign called 'little dove' (*golubchik*) represents two rising sounds, but is also a symbol for the Holy Ghost.

Znamenny singers perform with their natural, not classically trained, voices, often in a style reminiscent of folk music. The chant has no pauses or rests, and ideally singers' voices become united in one single voice.



Znamenny notation with 'red marks'



St Sophia Cathedral, Kiev

Photo: Pawel 'pbm' Szubert

THE HANDS OF RACHMANINOV

Part of Sergei Rachmaninov's brilliance as a pianist can be attributed to his unusually large hands, with their very long fingers and thumbs. He could stretch his hands further across the keyboard than any other pianist, and much of his own piano music, with its big chords and rapid, glittering runs up and down the keyboard, was directly influenced by this unique physical ability.

So, how big were his hands, and how did they compare with other famous pianists? Scriabin, a Russian contemporary of Rachmaninov, could stretch an octave. Moving forward in time, Myra Hess could span a

9th, as could Daniel Barenboim, whilst Lang Lang manages a massive 12th. But only Liszt can keep up with Sergei – both could stretch to a 13th – or 12 inches.

It has been suggested by some that Rachmaninov's hands were the result of 'acromegaly' – a disease caused by the overproduction of growth hormone. The composer was admittedly very tall, and had a wide, protruding forehead, both features associated with the condition. However, there is no direct evidence that he suffered from any such disease – he may simply have had big hands!

Other professions of course also demand large hands. The National Basketball Association in the United States for instance has measured the hand-span of professional basketball players for nearly 25 years. In all that time, only one player has recorded a 12-inch span – an indication of how remarkable a human being Rachmaninov was.

Sergei's last words were not documented, but on learning that he had terminal cancer, he said: 'My dear hands. Farewell my poor hands.'

Watch one musician's attempt to play the Prelude in C sharp minor with slightly smaller hands – and a few aids! Look for 'Rachmaninov had Big Hands' on YouTube, or log onto <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93JiXloIhn4>



Sergei Rachmaninov and his hands

VERDI *REQUIEM* AT GORTON: REVIEW



St George's Singers with The Sheffield Chorale in Verdi's *Requiem*, June 2017

Set within the east Manchester area of Gorton, the Monastery was built by the Franciscan Order between 1863 and 1871. Designed by Edward Pugin, this magnificent building fell into disrepair and was subject to substantial vandalism in the 1970s. It was placed on the World Monuments Fund *Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites* in the world in 1997. Following a 12-year campaign, a total of £6.5m was raised with many of the original artefacts and decorative features being rescued

from auction and by good fortune. The Monastery is Grade II* listed, has a very individual sense of grandeur and makes an ideal venue for musical,

particularly choral, performances, albeit the resonant acoustic is challenging.

Of all choral works in the repertoire Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* might be seen as ideal repertoire for the renewed Monastery building, as representing the agnosticism of the composer and the religious purpose of the music. A complex personality, Verdi could be ... fiercely loyal to those he revered. Along with Rossini, the Italian he most revered and idolized was Alessandro Manzoni, the author of the novel *I Promessi Sposi* that he had read age 16 and to which he attributed the formalisation of the unified Italy's language. At the death of Rossini

in 1868 Verdi had attempted to get the Italian composers of the day to combine in a *Requiem* in his memory; his idea was never fully realised.

When Manzoni died in May 1873 Verdi was devastated. A week after the funeral Verdi went to Milan and visited the grave alone. Then, through his publisher, Ricordi, he proposed to the Mayor of Milan that he should write a *Requiem Mass* to be performed in Milan on the first anniversary of Manzoni's death. ... It was Verdi's eulogy to a great man of Italy and since when the work is often referred to as 'The Manzoni Requiem'. At the time, and to this day, there is debate about the nature of the music Verdi composed to honour his hero. It is very different from the traditional Ecclesiastical Catholic Requiem Mass, being more dramatic, even operatic, albeit set to the traditional sequence of movements and words of the Latin Mass whilst omitting the *Gloria* and *Credo*.

Given the dramatic nature of Verdi's composition and the dynamism of his orchestration it was thought appropriate for St Georges to be joined by around 50 members of the Sheffield Chorale plus 60 orchestral players. The quality of the choral singing was evident throughout this performance, not least in the hushed opening of the *Kyrie* when the articulation was spot on. It was a major drawback of the performance that they were sat on the same level as the orchestra and behind them. Consequently in the highly resonant monastery, with its high vaulted roof and plastered walls, Verdi's dramatic music at times seemed to overwhelm the chorus contribution. This was very evident as we sat on the edges of our chairs for the thundering *Tuba Mirum* and its later reprise. Even that thundering music has its quiet moments as the baritone enters with his intoning *Mors stupebit*. Colin Campbell's vocal steadiness, clear diction and vocal strength compensated

to a degree from his lack of the deep sonority a true bass would have brought to the part, despite that lack he was a tower of strength throughout. Mezzo Joyce Tindsley immediately showed herself to be a class act in the following *Liber scriptus* exhibiting an easy top to match her firm lower tones. Throughout the performance she showed her grasp of the nuances of the words as well as varying her dynamic. Importantly, her vocal clarity and intonation, throughout her range, cut through the sometimes dense textures of Verdi's writing and the resonant acoustic.

The following trio of mezzo, soprano and tenor introduced the other two singers, soprano Rachel Nicholls and tenor Matthew Minter. Her immediate impact matched her mezzo colleague and was reinforced by the following *Recordare*, essentially a duet for the two female voices. With a background of singing the likes of Wagner's demanding *Isolde*, and Beethoven's *Leonore*, her spinto sized voice and clear tone and articulation enabled her voice to cut through the woolly sound of the acoustic, especially when Verdi let the orchestra off its leash, as he often does in the piece. I knew straight away that Rachel Nicholls would make a success of the demanding last movement, the *Libera me*, which she, and the choir carry alone. Matthew Minter, a big man, more like a bass than a tenor, sang with mellifluous heady tone in the *Ingemisco*, but lacked the ideal vocal strength and bite at other times, being too easily overpowered by the orchestra and chorus.

... The 150 choristers showed a capacity to refine their sound or open up to full throated vibrancy as the music required. Regrettably, the volume composer sometimes overwhelmed them in their seated positions and blurred their clarity. I reluctantly decided that this is a piece for the Bridgewater Hall – not Gorton Monastery.

Robert J Farr



Soloists (from left); Colin Campbell, Matthew Minster, Joyce Tindsley and Rachel Nicholls

CHRISTMAS AT THE BRIDGEWATER WITH JOHN RUTTER



What could possibly be more festive than a Christmas concert with some carols by John Rutter? Obviously, a concert with the man himself!

We were all thrilled when Neil informed us a few months that we'd been invited by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra to join them in 'John Rutter's Christmas Festival' concert at the Bridgewater Hall in December. This highly prestigious annual event always draws a packed audience (as at early October tickets were already nearly sold out!) and is a wonderful oppor-

tunity for the Choir to sing in the Bridgewater again alongside other great vocal and instrumental musicians: The King's Singers, Chetham's Chamber Choir, organist Jonathan Scott, and the RPO, all conducted by John Rutter.

The programme will feature a festive mix of carols, including some of Rutter's own works, Chilcott's *Twelve Days of Christmas*, and Christmas music by Bach, Purcell, Smetana and much more.

The King's Singers is one of the UK's longest-established vocal groups. Officially born in 1968 (making the group 12 years younger than St George's Singers) and formed by six then recently-graduated choral scholars from King's College, Cambridge, the

vocal line-up was two counter-tenors, a tenor, two baritones and a bass – a line-up that hasn't changed since, although the individuals of course have! In their fifty-year history, the group has performed on the world's great stages – Royal Albert Hall, Sydney Opera House, Carnegie Hall – have won numerous awards and a place in *Gramophone* magazine's Hall of Fame.

Everyone at St George's Singers is excited about the concert. We'll see you there!



John Rutter responding to our Twitter feed about the concert

**Monday 11 December 2017,
7.30 pm
Bridgewater Hall
John Rutter's Christmas Festival**

Tickets £17-45, concessions available until 11 November, £7 student standby tickets available on the day

**Bridgewater Hall Box Office,
tel 0161 907 9000,
online
<https://tickets.bridgewater-hall.co.uk/>**

The latest incarnation of The King's Singers

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear readers

Whilst Neil insists that he alone dictates the tempo, the universe doesn't always agree, and the years continue to fly past *accelerando*, with little regard for a man waving his baton. Thus it was with some horror that I realised recently that I'd been editing *Hemiola* for nearly eleven years. High time that I handed the job over to someone else – so this will be my last issue as Editor.

Of all the jobs that have to be done for St George's Singers, newsletter editor must be one of the most rewarding: interviewing musicians and singers; researching composers and their works; digging out obscure facts; reviewing books; editing copy; finding appropriate (and sometimes inappropriate!) images and interesting articles about vocal technique;

correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar, and (editorial nerd alert!) eliminating inconsistent use of hyphens and italics; keeping a log of the more printable of Neil's asides – and above all getting to know those of you in the Choir with interesting stories to tell, and persuading (cajoling, blackmailing, threatening) you to write about them.

As I was preparing *Hemiola* for the final time, I had a look back through some old issues, and was astounded at the sheer variety of musical and other activities we get involved in, chorally and individually, often for charity. We are truly a socially caring and musically enterprising bunch of people – the thing that sets St George's Singers apart, and that the newsletter seeks to publicise.

So who's taking over as Editor? I'm delighted to say that soprano Jo Bluck has agreed to take on the

job. (I hear a huge sigh of relief from the second altos – always first in line to be pestered for 300 words by the following Saturday!) Jo will of course bring her signature commitment, off-the-wall creativity and manic organisational skills to the job – but needs you all to provide her with stories and news about your musical (and other) adventures. So please start bombarding her with emails at joannabluck@gmail.com.

Thanks to everyone who has provided me with snippets, jokes, photos, stories, poems and articles over the last eleven years. You have made my job enormously enjoyable. But now I'm putting aside my editor's blue pen so I can spend more time with my pencil. Now, is that a quaver off in bar 73...?

Susan



Editors should be neither seen nor heard – but should always have a book to hand

ST GEORGE'S SINGERS' NEWS



Jacqui walks for charity

Well done to Jacqui Smith who raised £676 for Macmillan Cancer Charity by taking part in the Peak District Mighty Walk. It took Jacqui 10 hours to walk nearly 26 miles from Buxton to Ashbourne. Thanks to all SGS members who supported her by contributing to her fundraising.

Kath Wood

We're sad to report that former SGS member Kath Wood died on 7 July in New Zealand. Many of us will have very fond memories of Kath, who raised money for choir funds year after year with her wonderful marmalade and her photo cards. Kath went to live near her daughter last year when it became apparent that her dementia was going to prevent her returning to the UK. Kath passed away peacefully, and her funeral was held at a beautiful chapel in Karori, just outside Wellington on North Island.

Welcome

We wish our new bass, Andrew Horner, a warm welcome, and hope he enjoys his first – and very busy! – season with SGS. There's nothing like starting off your St George's life with something easy like the Rachmaninov *Vespers*.

Wales – on foot

After 22 days, and a punishing 270.4 miles, Bridget and John Ovey finally completed their walk along the Wales Coast Path when they covered the last section from Freshwater Bay to Chepstow, and taking in South Wales and the Gower Peninsula. John and Bridget would like to thank everyone who has supported and encouraged their amazing achievement and we look forward to hearing more about it in the next issue of *Hemiola*.

Welcome back Chair!

We're delighted to see our Chair John Smith back in

charge on Tuesday evenings. He's been absent for a couple of months for health reasons, but is now raring to go in the back row of the basses as usual. Well, they do need keeping in check John!

Pete's back on track

After a few months out of action because of a broken hand, Pete Durrant was once more pounding the tarmac on Sunday 15 October in the inaugural Birmingham International Marathon. He didn't expect to do a brilliant time, as he hasn't been able to do any training for some months, but he did finish the course in a respectable time. He has also now registered for the Ironman 2018 competition in Bolton, on 15 July next year. More updates from Pete once he resumes serious training!



GOODBYE TO MY CHOIR BUDDY: A PERSONAL VIEW BY BARBARA FORSHAW

I sat beside Kath Dibbs in the second altos from the first day I joined SGS. She had only been a member for a few months, but she knew the ropes and she revelled in inducting me into the unwritten rules of the choir. She was a funny, larger than life character who was great company and called me her 'choir buddy'.

We rarely met outside choir other than going to the odd concert together, but at rehearsals we exchanged snippets of our lives – family, holidays, politics, interests – and this created a degree of intimacy. After her green burial I attended her lovely memorial service at Marple Bridge and it was wonderful to have those snippets amplified into a whole picture. Her close family and friends talked with love and admiration about this highly

intelligent, creative, active and committed woman who had such an impact on their lives and would be so sorely missed.

Kath told me about her illness in June when we were getting close to the Verdi concert at the Monastery. She delivered the information in an almost perfunctory way, as though she accepted the potential seriousness of her situation. She was awaiting a full diagnosis, but said that the concert may be her last. She said that she badly wanted to perform but would need support to get through it. On the day she was quite fragile and was exhausted after rehearsals, but after a sleep in my car, she was ready for the performance and was determined to see it through. Sadly, as it turned out, it was her last concert.

Kath had visited Costa Rica and had spoken at length to me about the things that I would see on the choir tour. Because of that, and knowing how ill she was, I thought of her many times whilst I was away. Before we left she had texted me with more positive news from her doctors, but on our return we were soon to hear of her untimely death. I am uncomfortably aware of the empty seat beside me at rehearsals. I miss her zest for life and the familiar sound of her powerful voice.

I laughed as Kath and Lorraine entertained me with tales of their exploits in organising the tour to North Wales. It will be particularly poignant that she will not be there to enjoy it with us.

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BROOKS

Do you come from a musical family?

Neither of my parents are musicians, but my grandmother was a fine pianist. I was born in London and lived in the Barbican. I attended Junior Guildhall where I learned guitar, but I was also taught piano and singing at home by musical babysitters. When I was 8 we moved to Oxford and I got a place in New College School, where I had to replace guitar with cello because it was not an orchestral instrument.

When did the voice become your main instrument?

My musicality manifested itself mainly through singing. I would sing back things I heard. My babysitters were music students – my parents found them by putting ads in the Guildhall! – and I sang pop songs in the choir at Prior Weston Primary School. When I moved to Oxford I had an audition for New College Choir with Edward Higginbottom (I sang *Let it be*). He said that I didn't have the type of voice they were looking for, but asked my mum to take me to the choir's singing teacher, who got me to use my head (or treble) register for the first time. Suddenly it was easy to get up to much higher notes – and I got a place.

Why Manchester University?

I had two joint favourites: Manchester and Queens College Oxford. I liked Manchester because it places equal emphasis on performance, musicology and composition. I'm lucky I didn't get a place at Queens because I don't enjoy writing loads of essays, and I think that if I had gone there I might have dropped out. I'd have had to do an essay a week!

Did you get a lot of conducting experience?

Yes! Manchester offers unparalleled opportunities for students to conduct. I also had a stroke of luck. Halfway through our second year the professional choral conductor had to leave suddenly, and it was left in the

hands of three students (including me) to run all the university choirs till the end of term. The many extra hours of taking rehearsal were the best lessons we could have had.

Conducting and singing: how do you balance them?

It's tough! At the moment I'm just about managing to exist through music. Conducting is a much more reliable source of income, whilst singing is more sporadic bonuses. But I do love to perform. I'm inspired by people like Marcus Farnsworth and soprano Barbara Hannigan, who conducts and sings from the podium.

How important is singing for choral conducting?

I think it's hard to be a good choral conductor without having a good idea of vocal technique, because singing is such an internalised experience. You can parrot what other singers and teachers say, but if you haven't felt it yourself, you don't really have an idea of when or why to apply various technical instructions. The choral conductor is often dealing with amateur ensembles and has to be something of a voice coach. Orchestral conductors are dealing with many, many instruments so they can't be technically advanced in all of them, but if you are conducting just one instrument (the voice), it really helps to know a lot about what's going on.

What do you want to do with St Georges?

To take whatever I find and help get it better. There is always an objective standard you aim for, but you also have to work with whatever people give you (which is largely very good in the case of St George's!). Having conducted Cheshire Consort a few times I think I can help people with some technical matters. I'm basically very flexible, and will do whatever Neil wants me to do.

What did you learn from the NYCC Fellowship?

The Fellowship offers very well-rounded tuition, but my eyes

were particularly opened regarding education – leading workshops and working with young people. It taught me to be a much better educator.

What are your immediate plans for the future?

I'll be juggling lots of things for a while yet. I have thought about doing a Masters in Singing, but it gets harder: the more you build up a portfolio, the harder it is to give it up and go back to education.

What is the difference between solo and choral singing?

In an ideal world there would be no difference, but in practice choral singing is more physically and emotionally constrained. Take vibrato for instance – in a freely functioning vocal mechanism there will be a degree of tremor between the cricothyroid and thyroarytenoid muscles. This results in a fluctuation of both amplitude and pitch. However, the wider or slower these oscillations become, the harder it is to tune and resonate with other voices, so conductors often ask for singers to sing without vibrato.

What are your main non-musical pastimes?

I'm not very good at exercise unless it involves mental stimulation as well. Tennis and dancing are two ways to have fun and keep in shape at the same time. With ballroom dancing there's also the element of communicating through music which is what my life is built around! Favourite dance? Hard to beat the slow foxtrot. I love chess too. It's mental torture but the combination of creativity and objectivity is fascinating.

What choral work do you want to conduct above all, and do you prefer large or small choirs?

I would LOVE to conduct *Gerontius*. Large choirs and small chamber groups each have their advantages. Large groups mean you can do things like *Gerontius* (did I mention I like *Gerontius*?) but small groups tend to have better singers and more detailed work is possible.



Our new Assistant Musical Director, Robert Brooks, has already had a lot of conducting experience, winning an award from Manchester University for Services to Choral Conducting. He also has very definite views on the art of conducting, *The Dream of Gerontius* ... and the slow foxtrot.



Despite repeated requests and reminders from the Editor for Costa Rican photos and anecdotes by a certain date, one tourist still managed to miss the deadline. But it's such a good summary of our amazing trip, we're printing it anyway!

COSTA RICA: FINAL MEMORIES BY JO BLUCK

ON MUSIC TOUR

San José – bizarre and surreal rehearsal goes without saying – getting back to the hotel and finding the issues about booking in. Mr Bluck had been there ahead of me so I did not have to go through the arduous and – now we know – long-winded procedure. He'd thought about what I might need when I got in and, having heard about the water being shut off at 10pm, had run a sink full of water so that I could at least strip wash. (And those of you not having been sent to boarding school/guide/scout camp – this is merely washing upright with some clothes on and being able to balance on one foot whilst washing the other.

San José – the morning after arrival. Jet lag woke me before 6am. I sneaked out the room with swimming costume and basic gym kit to explore for pool and gym. It was open but completely deserted. I spent another surreal (but incredibly peaceful) 45 minutes stretching out airplane-constricted limbs whilst waiting for the official time when the notices advised I was permitted to use the pool. I'd reached moderate serenity and was packing things up when, across the water I saw the Director, clearly about to ignore any notice ruling. So at stupid o'clock, without too much fuss, we swam and pounded out a few lengths before a morning rehearsal. Such is the way of choir tours.

San José – our concert in the cathedral – like most of the choir probably, I was pretty shattered and working out how to keep my energy up for the full performance. I did not want to risk cat-napping in between our sections, whilst Pete performed miracles on the electronic key board – possibility of being left sleeping – so kept my eye on as much of the audience as I could see. And it was thrilling to see their excitement at his performance.

Concerts – performing the *Laudibus* – and trying to keep

our heads right through to the end. Mr Bluck – in the audience on the first night – tells me that my smile was rictus-like. So kind – but probably accurate.

Friendship day – a glorious day, that I had been ever so slightly dreading but don't know why. Memories? Swimming in the rain – but getting out swiftly with the first flash of lightning; Dave Francis unable to speak due to excessive emotion – is that how you spell beer?; the smells – the sun and rain and fruit trees; the band – just fab!; the kindness of strangers – but they weren't, were they?; dancing with Susan Hodgson, who made me fall about laughing when she bopped (or cha cha'd?) over to me smiling, and saying, 'I think I'm going to have a heart attack'; the food – yum.

ON TOURIST TOUR

Walking through the dark rain-forest close to midnight, in relative silence and simple torch-light, listening to the sounds of the forest animals and insects – and Pete Durrant quietly and helpfully pointing out the large spider we were walking into... oh, how we shrieked. But in the silence on the beach, watching a turtle shifting sand, tirelessly protecting her young. And then standing in the murky dark, watching the sea glow as it caught snatches of light.

Seeing the head of a river otter pop up just after its bubbles worked their way across the water – *Ring of Bright Water* memory shot.

A mother monkey with a baby clinging to her back, leaping across the high branches over us on the river – and the spotter, having seen it all before, with the shadow of a smile at our excitement.

The Lodge – sitting on the balcony with Mr Bluck, rocking in the rocking chairs and then watching a hummingbird come to feed at the flowers nearby. Not wishing to undermine the various LBJs (Little Brown Jobs) in our own garden, but it

was extraordinary to watch the delights of hummingbirds.

The swimming pool became the hang-out for cocktails for the back row of the altos and occasionally the MD – an impressive sight and able to withstand any attempt at takeover from other vocal sections. I'm not sure if any water was splashed on aforementioned section's bathing costumes, but Pete was impressively swimming with a plastic bag on his arm.

Cloud forest hotel/Monte-verde – the view from the room waking up on the first morning – an azure blue sky with smatterings of cloud, overlooking the clouds that hid parts of the nature reserve below us.

Cloud forest – following a melt-down on the fourth of the bridges and slow retreat with Steve Allen and Anne Francis, joining Dave Robson for a brief sob then coffee and cake. And then finding the hummingbird centre. The sense of joy after the sense of dismal failure was so extraordinarily restoring to my morale, to have those small flashes of life dust my shoulder with their wings and then rest on my finger whilst they sucked nectar. And then watching more and more members of the choir come into the centre, and seeing their faces light up at the **charm** of hummingbirds – yes, that is the collective noun – isn't that wonderful! And Mr Bluck eschewing his misanthropic tendencies to share the love of that charm.

Hot springs centre – darlings, what a lot of fun! The warmth of the water, the sense of adventure (not knowing if it might be your turn to injure yourself in the limited lighting), the sense of adults just playing like *Blue Remembered Hills* – and the buffet was pretty good too! Mark Warrington sliding down the slide again and again – and emerging from the water with a sloth-like smile on his face each time! Could have been that back row of the altos leading him astray earlier...



Swimming in the rain, just swimming in the rain



Staying awake in Alajuela



Hummingbird with bee escort

SONG FOR DIANA BY PETE DURRANT

I was heading off on holiday on the morning when she died. We were woken up by my aunt ringing to tell us the news but decided to go away to our holiday cottage in the Norfolk Broads anyway, as we didn't know at that point where the funeral was going to be held, or when, or even if it was at Westminster Abbey, whether or not I'd be needed.

Somehow in an age before the internet and mobile phones, Westminster Abbey managed to find our contact details at the cottage, and rang the cottage phone telling us that I was required to return. The furthest away chorister was in Canada; he made it back in time but sadly for him, got a cough the day before and couldn't sing on the day of the funeral itself.

The day was a crazy one, I think we were probably too young to take it all in, but as an 11- nearly 12-year-old, I felt I understood the significance of it. I remember rehearsing first thing on the morning of the

funeral and walking back with armed police and sniffer dogs sweeping the cloisters.

We went back into the school and all sat in front of the television to watch the beginning of the procession of the coffin, with William and Harry, Philip and Charles walking behind it. I think really it was watching

all these familiar famous faces crying in front of me, I'm not sure I'd ever seen an adult cry before that point.

Prince Charles had chosen the music and the strongest memory from the day I have was singing Tavener's *Song for Athene*.



Martin Neary, our conductor, asked the organist, Martin Baker, to play the low F throughout the piece on the pedals as our basses' low F wasn't loud enough for the broadcast, and I remember in the loud bit towards the end, I was one of maybe three or four people holding the top F, giving it all I had!

those pictures that made me realise the scale of it, with the thousands of people lining the streets and throwing flowers.

Then the service itself, I remember singing the national anthem in the nave and seeing

If you ever get a chance to watch any of it again (it's all on YouTube) then I'm the one at the far end on the conductor's side, so furthest away from the conductor! Decani 12!

WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?

Readers not well versed in the ancient terminology of cathedrals may be slightly puzzled by Pete Durrant's final comment in his article above: 'Decani 12'.

Architecturally, the two sides of the cathedral choir are called 'decani' on the south side and 'cantoris' on the north. The names mean 'dean's (side)' and 'cantor's (side)', and refer to the two highest officials of the chapter of a medieval cathedral. The cantor, or precentor, is ranked immediately after the dean in secular cathedral establishments.

When translated into choral terms, the Decani choristers sing on the dean's side of the choir, whilst Cantoris sing on the cantor's side.

The association of the dean with the south side derives from the Sarum Rite, the liturgical practice used widely throughout pre-Reformation England and Wales. There are some exceptions in monastic cathedrals, however, where the senior cleric

under the bishop was the prior; he often sat on the liturgical north. Hence, in Durham Cathedral, St David's Cathedral, Carlisle Cathedral and Southwell Minster, decani is on the north.



TAYLOR'S #TAGS

'I could do with a few more bottoms here.'

'Sopranos – your Cossacks have arrived.'

'Drones, just crescendo along as you are programmed.'

'Tenors – which arrangement of the *Vespers* do you have? Is it the Swingle Singers' version?'

'Altos – take me to the banks of the Volga!'

'Gentlemen – the work is already finished. You don't have to add more notes.'

I told you I was going to wear the blue and brown stripe today. You're like all basses - you never listen!

BEETHOVEN'S FOUR-MINUTE FANTASY



Some of St George's Singers in the balcony at The Stoller Hall



Our 2017–18 season is even busier than usual, with no fewer than four invitations to sing with orchestras and choirs. The first of these was on Sunday 20 August, when St George's Singers joined Stockport Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Stephen Threlfall, in the new Stoller Hall in a performance of Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy*.

The invitation had come from our vice-president to take part in Chetham's annual International Summer School and Festival for Pianists. The programme for the concert was Beethoven's Piano Concerto no 3, plus his *Choral Fantasy*, written for the unusual combination of piano solo, chorus and orchestra.

With Chetham's School students all away from Manchester for the vacation, Stephen asked St George's if we would like to take part.

The *Fantasy* is not a long work – after waiting 23 minutes for the orchestra and pianist to do their thing, the choir sings for the final 4 minutes! – so an

hour's rehearsal one Tuesday evening with Neil during the summer was thought sufficient.

The main rehearsal came the evening before the concert, when we were conducted by Alun Jones, Chetham's relatively new Head (he joined the School in 2016). And as a (very) last-minute replacement, our own Liz Jameson was accompanying us on the piano. Brilliant job, Liz! Alun took us through the work in great detail, but with enormous good humour and seemed to enjoy the rehearsal almost as much as we did!

The concert itself was a great success and for the choir immensely rewarding. The new Stoller Hall is a lovely space in which to sing, both visually and acoustically. The Choir was in the balcony which surrounds the stage: a good position from which to see the audience, though there was a slight sight-line problem for the people in the second row – choir folders in the front row tended to be exactly in line with the conductor, necessitating some last-minute shuffling and folder bobbing. The soloists for the

concert, all drawn from the choir, were particularly outstanding, and produced some beautifully blended and expressive singing. Many congratulations to all of them: Gillian Banks, Jo Bluck, Wendy Flavell, Andrew Charlton, Jonathan Wright and Dave Morris.

Both Alun and Stephen were delighted with our performance. Alun made a point of saying afterwards that the choir was fantastic, and Stephen wrote to Anne Francis:

'I just felt compelled to drop a line to say thank you so much to you and everyone in the choir for taking part yesterday – and being so brilliant too! Please pass on my thanks to the choir members when you all next meet and in particular to the soloists. I hope everyone enjoyed the experience and was pleased to be part of the Beethoven expedition!

'I trust you also enjoyed spending the evening with Alun on Friday who I know loved being back in front of a choir and making friends with you.

'Warmest thanks once more and Bravo St Georges !!'

Overheard by a choir member on a recent cruise along the Danube: 'We have a couple of more mature altos who've recently moved down a part. We call them our "Tena" ladies.'



A SINGER'S GLOSSARY (PART TWO)

Chest voice: Also known as 'chest register'. The lower notes of a singer's range; in the same general range as the speaking voice. When singing in the chest voice, the vocal cords become naturally thick, and the resulting sound is generally associated with deep, warm tones. Achieved by using resonance and voice placement.

Consonant: A speech sound produced as the result of a temporary partial or complete constriction of airflow (eg b,d,f,g,l).

Diaphragm: The dome-shaped muscle attached to the bottom of the lungs that separates the chest and stomach cavities. Its main function is to initiate inhalation.

Diction: The clear pronunciation of words. This requires attention to both consonants and vowels. Different types of music may require more or less diction; for example, in musical theatre, it's essential that the audience understand the lyrics, but in jazz or blues, the singer may occasionally slur words on purpose in order to achieve a desired sound. Good diction helps produce good sound, however, so all singers should pay attention to it.

Dynamics: The variations of soft and loud singing in a given song.

Epiglottis: The leaf-like cartilage that separates the functioning of your oesophagus

(channel to stomach) from the functioning of your trachea (channel to the lungs).

Exercise: In singing, a device (a note or sequence of notes sung in a certain manner) used to condition and/or strengthen your vocal muscles to work with the proper airflow.

Falsetto: (false singing) In male singers, a high register (actually, sung in the female range) similar to the head voice. However, unlike the head voice, falsetto cannot blend with the chest voice. Females can also sing in a falsetto range: it has a 'Minnie Mouse' sound about it.

ST GEORGE'S BY CANDLELIGHT

 Our traditional carol concert this year returns to St George's Church in Stockport, where we will once more be joined by the children of Bradshaw Hall Primary School, who never fail to bring alive the spirit of Christmas for young and old.

This year we are particularly delighted to welcome some new young musicians to the event, when two enormously talented brass ensembles



from Chetham's School of Music provide the entertainment: the Jack Bradley-Buxton Quintet and the Nuta Quartet. They'll be playing a selection of Christmas music, as well as accompanying the choir and audience.

As usual mince pies and mulled wine will be served at the interval, along with specially baked biscuits for the children.

Musical Director Neil Taylor hasn't



yet finalised the programme for the concert, but you can be certain it will include some (if not all) of your favourite carols.

The lighting of the candles and the dimming of the lights at the start of the concert always bring a special atmosphere to the evening. Please come and join us.



Saturday 9 December 2017
St George's Church, Stockport
'Carols and Brass by Candlelight'

St George's Singers
Conductor Neil Taylor
Organ Pete Durrant

Bradshaw Hall Primary School Choir
Chetham's Middle School Brass Ensembles

Tickets: £12, conc £10, students/children £3

Tel : 01663 764012

Email: tickets@st-georges-singers.org.uk

Online: www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

MESSIAH AT NORBURY

St George's Singers will be putting on an extra concert this year: Handel's *Messiah* on Saturday 13 January 2018.

Most performances of Handel's great oratorio are given either just before Christmas or at Easter. But the weeks following Christmas are usually so gloomy (meteorologically and temperamentally!) we decided that hearing glorious and uplifting music is just what is needed to revive the spirits.

The performance will as usual be conducted by Neil Taylor, with Graham Eccles on the organ, and soloists are all members of The Turton Consort, a professional vocal ensemble founded by Joe Judge, formerly St George's Singers' assistant musical director.



The Turton Consort was formed of singers who studied in Manchester. Since

2013, members of the Consort have performed a variety of solo and ensemble recitals at Turton Tower, a Grade I-listed Tudor manor house in Lancashire, from which the Consort takes its name, and other locations around the North West. The Consort is used to performing to the highest calibre, equally accomplished in repertoire from the medieval and renaissance periods right through to modern and contemporary works.

Recent engagements have included performing at the launch of the Whittingham Lives project at UCLan, Preston and opening the Raimondi exhibition at the Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. The Consort regularly sing live on Radio 4 for the BBC Daily Service, and future plans include a collaboration with The Vine Quartet, featuring Tavener's *The Bridegroom* and music by Bach.

Four members of the Consort will be taking part in *Messiah*: soprano Leonie Maxwell, countertenor Joseph Judge, tenor Ranald McCusker and baritone Robert Brooks – who is of



Members of The Turton Consort

course our current assistant MD.

Handel's *Messiah* is a work written on broad canvass, as befits the narrative that describes the birth, life and death of Christ. The Choir last performed it in the vastness of Gorton Monastery. We think the smaller and more intimate space of Norbury Church will bring a different but no less enthralling dimension to the occasion.

Saturday 13 January 2018
Norbury Church, Hazel Grove
Handel *Messiah*

St George's Singers
Conductor Neil Taylor
Organ Graham Eccles
The Turton Consort

Tickets: £12, conc £10, students/children £3

Tel : 01663 764012

Email: tickets@st-georges-singers.org.uk

Online: www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

St George's Singers

For more information, please contact:

John Smith (Chair), 01422 359073
stgeorgessingers.johnsmith@gmail.com

Jacqui Smith (Secretary), 01625 875437
enquiries@st-georges-singers.org.uk

Susan Hodgson (Hemiola Editor)
susan.hodgson28@btinternet.com

Jean Egerton (Publicity), 01625 871371
publicity@st-georges-singers.org.uk



Find us on the web at:
www.st-georges-singers.org.uk.



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ST GEORGE'S SINGERS CONCERT DIARY 2017-18

20 August 2017

Beethoven *Choral Fantasy*

21 October 2017

Rachmaninov *Vespers*

9 December 2017

Carols & Brass by Candlelight

11 December 2017

John Rutter's Christmas
Festival

13 January 2018

Handel *Messiah*

20 January 2018

Singing Day - Haydn *Creation*

17 March 2018

Music for Passiontide

23 June 2018

Duruflé *Requiem*

5 July 2018

Elgar *The Music Makers*

Ticket Hotline: 01663 764012

tickets@st-georges-singers.org.uk

www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

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.

MANCHESTER SINGS!

Thursday 19 October 2017

1.10-2pm
Martin Harris Centre, Oxford
Road, Manchester

The Turton Consort sings
Monteverdi's Madrigals Book
IV (1603)
Entry free

Saturday 11 November 2017

10am-4.30 pm
Hallé St Peter's, Ancoats,
Manchester

Hallé Choir Workshop
Bach *B minor Mass*
Conductor Matthew Hamilton

£32, including music hire
Apply by 31 October online at
<http://www.halle.co.uk/the-halle-family/halle-choir/>

Saturday 18 November 2018

St Edward's Church, Leek

Come and Sing
Handel's *Messiah*
Conductor Pete Durrant
Organ Ian Riddle
£10 to sing
Rehearsal in morning and evening, with concert early evening.

Saturday 20 January 2018 St George's Singers' Singing Day: Haydn *Creation, Parts 1 and 2*

St George's Church, Poynton
9.30am register, concert 6pm.

£22 to sing, including music (£5 students), £5 audience.
The day will be conducted by
SGS Musical Director, Neil
Taylor, with Pete Durrant accompanying. Soloists are members of The Turton Consort.

To book a place:

- fill out the application form on St George's Singers website (www.st-georges-singers.org.uk), or
 - email stgeorgessinging-day@gmail.com, or
 - tel 01925 213949.
- Homemade soup and rolls (lunch) and cake (tea) will be available on the day.
Our Singing Days always sell out – so book early!

Sunday 28 January 2018

Manchester Grammar School

Brahms' *German Requiem* in aid of CLIC Sargent, conducted by Rob Carey. £30.

Rehearsals from 10 January.
To book a place, email penny.cssingers@gmail.com.