



Hemiola

S t G e o r g e ' s S i n g e r s

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ST GEORGE'S SINGERS

PRESIDENT:

Brigit Forsyth

VICE PRESIDENTS:

Sue Roper
Mark Rowlinson
Stephen Threlfall
Stephen Williams

MUSICAL DIRECTOR:

Neil Taylor

ASSISTANT MUSICAL DIRECTOR:

Calum Fraser

ACCOMPANIST:

Jeffrey Makinson

Registered Charity no 508686

Member of Making Music, the National
Federation of Music Societies

www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

WE ALL LOVE PARIS IN THE SPRINGTIME

Excitement is mounting as the Singers get ready for our tour to Paris over May Bank Holiday weekend. We have a fabulous programme of concerts lined up, plus Mass in St Eustache church and a recital in Notre Dame.

The first concert is on Saturday evening at the American Cathedral in Paris, when we'll be giving a full-length concert of works including Faure's *Requiem*, plus a selection of items taken from recent concerts, including Stanford, Britten, and (to show off our French) Debussy and Saint-Saëns. The American Cathedral was built in 1886, and consecrated on Thanksgiving Day (25 November) to coincide with the dedicate of the Statue of Liberty. It serves the American communi-

ty in Paris, so we're hoping for some English as well as French speaking members in the audience.

Sunday brings us a great privilege, when we will be singing Mass in the church of St Eustache. The church has witnessed centuries of historical events: the young Louis XIV's first communion, Mozart's mother's funeral, the baptisms of Richelieu, Madame de Pompadour and Molière (as well as Molière's marriage), all before it was looted during the Revolution. Happily the church was fully restored, and now houses the largest pipe organ in France.



Saint-Saëns and Gabriel Fauré were organists at La Madeleine, so it will be a genuine thrill to sing Fauré's *Requiem* here where it was first performed.

The organ at La Madeleine



On Monday we give a mid-morning recital in Notre Dame, then finish the tour with a concert at the church of La Madeleine—and a chance for Jeff to get his hands on another celebrated pipe organ. Both Camille



GLORIA – CONCERT PREVIEW

Our current season goes out with a bang, as St George's Singers performs not one but two of the most energetic works in the choral repertoire in our final concert of the year: Vivaldi's brilliant *Gloria* and Handel's equally glorious *Dixit Dominus*. Neil Taylor will be giving the Choir's collective vocal chords and diaphragms a real workout as we present works usually found together only on CD sleeves, not in the concert hall.

Given Vivaldi's popularity today, it seems incredible that most of his compositions lay forgotten for almost 200 years, until in the 1920s the music librarian of the City of Turin came across the composer's personal collection of manuscripts, including the *Gloria in D major*. A seriously unauthentic version of the work was performed in September 1939 in Siena, but it was not until 1957 that the original, and now familiar, version was given its first modern-day performance in New York.

Born on 4 March 1678, the eldest of six children of a distinguished violinist in the orchestra of St Mark's Cathedral in Venice, the young Antonio

Lucio Vivaldi is alleged to have played in that august ensemble at the age of ten, and went on to become a renowned virtuoso violinist.

Though ordained a priest in 1703, according to his own account, within a year of being ordained Vivaldi no longer wished to celebrate mass because of physical complaints ('tightness of the chest') which pointed to angina pectoris, asthmatic bronchitis, or a nervous disorder. It is also pos-

sible that Vivaldi was simulating illness – there is a story that he sometimes left the altar in order to quickly jot down a musical idea in the sacristy....

In any event he had become a priest against his own will, perhaps because in his day training for the priesthood was often the only possible way for a poor family to obtain free schooling.

Following his ordination (his red hair earning him the nickname 'Il Prete Rosso', the Red Priest), he was appointed music teacher at the Ospedale della Pietà, a charitable institution for orphaned and abandoned babies. The Ospedale prided itself on the quality of its musical education and the excellence of its choir and orchestra, and Vivaldi composed a great deal of music for performance by his young charges.

In fact, Vivaldi wrote two 'Glorias' in D major, both similar in tonality, scoring and mood. It is thought that RV589 (the version being sung this evening) was the later, perhaps written at the end of 1716 for a mass of thanksgiving for Venetian victories over the Ottomans.

The work sets the 103 words of the traditional 'Gloria' from the Latin Mass, expanded into 11 varied cantata-like sections. Filled with rich contrasts of tonality, tempo and rhythm, and a range of musical expression from lyrical to virtuosic, the music has a theatrical quality and a wonderfully sunny and ebullient nature that gives it an immediate and universal

appeal. It also contains stunning arias for the soprano soloists, which must be an indication of the vocal quality of the young singers at the Ospedale.

We'll be joined at the Monastery by a quintet of fabulous singers. Sopranos Rebecca Lea and Eleanor Gregory, mezzo



Vivaldi's own Google doodle on 4 March to commemorate his birthday

Angharad Lyddon, and tenor Richard Dowling (an old friend!) and we're particularly pleased to welcome one of our Vice-Presidents, Mark Rowlinson, as bass.

Everyone loves the *Gloria*. So if you haven't heard it live for a while, and especially if you haven't heard it before in the splendid Gorton Monastery acoustics, come and join us for a most enjoyable summer evening of music. Even if it's raining outside, there'll be Italian sunshine and warmth inside.

Sunday 23 June, 7.30 pm
Gorton Monastery
GLORIA!

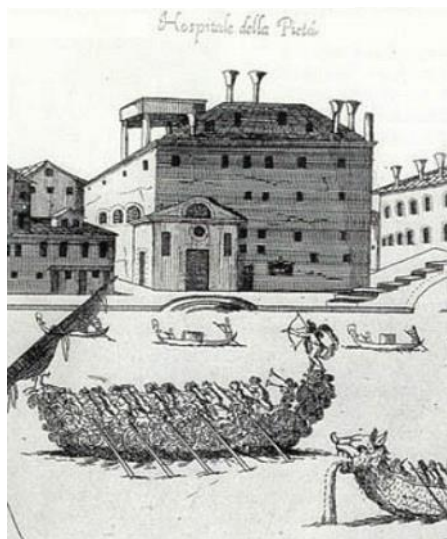
Vivaldi *Gloria, l'estro armonico*
Handel *Dixit Dominus, Nisi Dominus*

Tickets: £16, £14 conc
Tel: 01663 764012

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

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

The Ospedale della Pietà



THE LORD (AND HANDEL) SAID ...

In 1707, at the age of 22, Handel left his native Saxony and began a three-year visit to Rome. In spite of his Protestant background, he was soon taken up by the cream of Catholic, Italian society, with no fewer than three Cardinals and a Marquis amongst his patrons.

With opera banned by the papacy, Handel turned to sacred choral music, and in the spring that same year he wrote three psalm settings: *Dixit Dominus*, *Laudati pueri*, and *Nisi Dominus*. *Dixit Dominus* ('The Lord said'),

resplendent with bright colour, vocal virtuosity, expansive structure and driving energy, was clearly designed by Handel to demonstrate his ability to write brilliantly in the exuberant Italian style. Whilst the piece has marked resonances with the choral works of Vivaldi, it is worth remembering that Handel composed *Dixit* ten years before the older Vivaldi wrote his *Gloria*. It is also noteworthy for being the composer's earliest surviving autograph.

The first performance may have been given at Easter 1707 at St John Lateran or in Cardinal Ottoboni's palace; alternatively it may have been commissioned by Cardinal Colonna for Vespers on the feast of the Madonna del Carmine on 16th July.

The work is a setting of Psalm 110, the text of which concerns the power of kings and the supremacy of God, and is filled with blood and thunder imagery that Handel uses to full dramatic effect. Full of drama, technical innovations and virtuosity, clever word painting, sublime moments of peace and tranquillity, contrasted with anguished judgements on the Lord's enemies, Handel's 'word of God' was designed to impress his patrons and his Italian audience – which it most certainly did. Handel became an overnight success.



Cardinal Ottoboni, one of Handel's Italian patrons, who may (or may not) have commissioned *Dixit Dominus*



BALLAD OF HEROES

A reminder that the Britten 100 celebrations are far from over, and that St George's Singers will be performing another of BB's works on Friday 5 July in the Bridgewater Hall with Chetham's Symphony Orchestra and Chorus.

Britten wrote *Ballad of Heroes* at high speed, shortly before he was due to leave for America in 1939. A choral setting of texts by WH Auden and Randall Swingler (editor of the Communist *Daily Worker* newspaper in London) it was composed for a commemorative concert (a Festival of Music for the People) to honour the fallen British members of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, and was first performed

on 5 April 1939 at the Queen's Hall, London, conducted by Constant Lambert.

This highly dramatic work is another of Britten's passionate outbursts against the waste and horror of war which had already engulfed Europe once earlier in the century and was about to do so for the second time, and is one of Britten's most politicized scores.

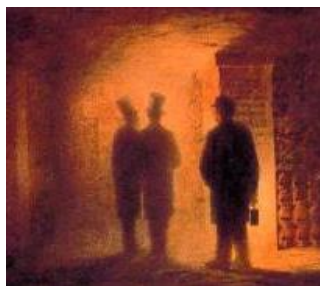
However, as a setting by Britten, a committed pacifist, the work is unique in including an anti-pacifistic sentiment, surely being the only instance in his work that he promoted the idea that there is 'a time for war.'

The concert programme also includes Britten's *Violin Concer-*

to, and Shostakovich's Symphony No 5, and there will be a pre-concert talk by Michael Kennedy at 6.30 pm.

Friday 5 July, 7.30 pm
Bridgewater Hall
Britten *Ballad of Heroes*, Violin
Concerto
Shostakovich *Symphony No 5*
With
Richard Dowling (tenor)
Callum Smart (violin)
Stephen Threlfall (conductor)

Tickets: £10-£20
Tel: 0844 907 9000
www.bridgewater-hall.co.uk



REFLECTIONS ON PARIS—FROM THE DARK SIDE BY ERIC NORTHEY

It is the world's loveliest city and I have wonderful memories of flaneuring round it rather aimlessly, but with a definite spring in my step. Somehow though, I always seemed to end up in one of its many, many beautiful cemeteries. Maybe it was my first visit to the city, in the heady days of August 1968, just after 'les événements', that got me into this rather reflective mood about Paris. By the time I arrived, the revolution had petered out; luckily for me, 'cos I'm a wimp at heart. There were still plenty of the hated CRS on the streets but, if you were a long-haired (those were the days, eh?) student, they usually just checked your British passport and told you, in far from biblical terms, to 'go forth into the world and multiply.'

One afternoon on that first visit,



I took a trip underground to see the Catacombs, the enormous ossuary that Haussmann constructed

after he cleared out all the cemeteries in the poorer districts to make those lovely, broad boulevards. (The cynics would say that made it easier to fire grape shot at the rebelling mobs).

Les *Catacombes de Paris* are about 20 metres below ground and re-use what used to be old limestone quarries. There are over 6 million Parisians down there, from many centuries, all neatly arranged in rather fetching high Romantic sculptural forms. It's eerie of course, and a

certain mood of reflection is instilled into you by the lighting and the exhibits, as well as by the occasional little moral tablets encouraging us to live better lives and remember where

we're all heading. But what I recall most vividly, still after forty years, is coming back to ground level, climbing the 83 steps, up a narrow little chamber and then suddenly breaking out into open daylight. If

you're feeling shy about a visit, then there is a musical justification for going, as one of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is about the Catacombs of Paris. The original picture, (at the top) shows Viktor Hartmann, Mussorgsky's friend, examining the skulls by lantern light. Mussorgsky wrote 'The creative spirit of the dead Hartmann leads me towards the skulls, invokes them; the skulls begin to glow softly from within.' I think Mussorgsky gets the feeling just about right. We're glad to have seen them, but even more glad to be still up-

right and breathing. The tourist information gives the entrance at 1 Ave du Colonel Henri Rol-Tanguy, in the 14th arrondissement. Take the Metro to Denfert Rochereau. Not for the

squeamish, but worth a look.

And when you come out of the catacombs, for the literary minded, Montparnasse cemetery is just a stone's throw away. One can easily walk to it and find Samuel Beckett's grave, plain and simple. I



waited quite a long time there, but no one came.

As you are singing in Notre Dame, if you get a few free moments, just go behind the cathedral and right at the end of the little island, you'll see an iron gate which leads to the entrance to a small memorial to French Jews, rounded up and deported by the Vichy government. There were over 200,000 of them. The *Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation* was designed by architect George-Henri Pingusson and has a narrow little entrance which

takes you down just below ground. The walls on both sides glitter with many thousands of small crystals, one for each deportee. They illuminate the space and lead you towards an eternal flame. The words 'Forgive, but



never forget' are at the exit. I found it most moving.

Of course, the most famous of all Parisian cemeteries is Père Lachaise. This, for lovers of the arts, is a must. If you take the Metro's line 3, to Gambetta, you'll come out at the entrance nearest to the magnificent catafalque of Oscar Wilde, sculpted by Jacob Epstein in a cream coloured stone. It's of a kind of flying Egyptian angel who used to have genitalia, but some prude hacked them off. The last time I visited Oscar's tomb it was covered in lipstick kisses, which was rather lovely. I'm told they've now banned the practice.

And for those who like a beautiful love story, there's the grave of the 12th century philosopher and composer Peter Abelard and his pupil Héloïse. They fell in love but he was terribly punished for this by the girl's relatives. In his account of their affair, *Historia Calamitatum*, he simply says 'they cut off the parts by which they thought I had offended them'. They wrote the most moving letters to each other after the catastrophe, which Pope turned into a great poem and Helen Waddell into a great novel. There seem to be lessons for our own time there.

And for musicians there are the tombs of scores of composers and singers – Jehan Alain, Auber, Jim Morrison, Bizet, Callas, Charpentier, Cherubini, Chopin, Dukas, Duparc, Enescu, Stephane Grapelli, Lalo, Adelina Patti, Edith Piaf, Pleyel, Poulenc, Rossini and Waldteufel. Innumerable other famous writers, painters, dancers, designers, architects, politicians of right and left, as well as ordinary Parisians who just

happened to die in the city, are buried in this lovely space.

But after I've ambled round the musicians and writers in Père Lachaise, I always drift up to the North East corner to look at the *Mur des Fédérés*, a memorial to the martyrs of the Paris Commune, of whom 147 were rounded up on May 28th 1871, put up against the wall and shot, then thrown into an open grave.

Some years later, a sculptor whose name I have forgotten, gathered the stones together

and around where the bullet holes had ricocheted off the wall, he gently etched little human images on contiguous stones. Some are praying, some defiant, some holding their wounds, and some are just faces or

hands. It's a chastening sight and full of ambiguity. It speaks of people's hopes for justice and a fairer world, but equally of our infinite capacity of for violence and cruelty.

Until I saw the *Mur des Fédérés*, I really didn't understand how cold, inarticulate stone can be just as expressive as a writer's words or and a composer's harmonies. It really is a city for reflection.



ST GEORGE'S SINGERS' NEWS



Farewell to Eileen

A sad farewell to soprano Eileen Halsall, who has retired from the Choir. Eileen joined SGS in 1997 and for the next 15 years regularly sat next to Gwyneth Pailin at the back in the second sopranos. She took part in many concerts and tours, and became an invaluable 'deputy librarian' to Gwyneth particularly when there was a great deal of music to give out and when Gwyneth was away. With some experience of sourcing music for another choir she appreciated the importance of recording names and numbers and Gwyneth could quite hap-

pily go off knowing that when she got back everything would have been meticulously noted. She was a big help on Singing Days and has assisted at front of house when she has not been able to sing at concerts. We shall miss her contribution to the Choir very much. *Memo from Gwyneth—if anyone would like to help out with librarian duties in future, please let Gwyneth know!*

Welcome

Welcome back to Helen Peat who has returned to the sopranos after a break. And a welcome also for two new mem-

bers: tenor Stephen Graham and soprano Hilary Birkett.

Wedding belle

And many congratulations to soprano Debra Sallaway who was married to Andrew Holland on 26 April at Gawsworth Methodist Church. Debra was resplendent in an off-white lace dress and flowers were 'country' style of muted pastels. She had two beautiful bridesmaids in dresses of lilac chiffon. (Ed—wish we had a good photo Debra!) The couple had a fabulous three-week honeymoon in Italy, where Debra brushed up on her Italian accent in preparation for the Vivaldi *Gloria*.

AN AUDITION'S TALE BY URSULA BIRKETT



Not one of the auditionees got the four-note chord right

Audition. Is this the most dreaded word in the amateur choral singer's vocabulary?

It certainly causes a powerful twinge in every singer

I've ever come across, including those of more experience, competence, and known vocal beauty than I shall ever have. It casts its shadow before it for many months, even where snow doesn't disrupt the timetable and postpone the dreaded day, thus lengthening the long shadow.

We acknowledge of course the good sense of it, the need to maintain standards, the im-

portance of the blend, the usefulness of sight-singing skill, and so on and so forth, and the right, indeed the duty, of the MD to adjudicate ... BUT when it comes down to the personal, not to put too fine a point on it, to ME, and the requirement to face that judgement, it is truly unnerving.

Is this why I've been thinking of Finals again, recently? I swore I'd never do another exam, but I did, and this is surely as frightening as any. (We did sudden-death exams back then: could one arrange auditions by modules? But then, think how very drawn out that would be: oh no, sudden death for me.)

Most amateur choirs harbour some excellent singers with beautiful voices, who can step up as soloists, but more, surely, who never aspire to be other than safely in the larger body, and allowed to revel in being in the midst of the music. For them, for me, the solo audition piece is the opposite of what is wonderful about choral singing. Here one's shortcomings are emphasised by nervousness, while there one can be part of

something so much more as part of a body than as an individual, and be allowed to appreciate from the inside the delights of the great works we are privileged to perform, even if the niceties of the musical theory are beyond me.

This time, I'm safely back in, for another three years, and the audition piece is firmly confined to the attic. The possibility of life without St George's exists, presumably, but I'll put the thought from me for at least 18 months.

In the mean time, Neil has about 12 months before he must contemplate doing the next lot, making allowances for all those nerves, even maybe having to eject a member who no longer quite makes the grade. You can see where my thoughts are tending – perhaps I haven't got as much as 18 months in the clear after all?

PS *Audition* is also the title of a Japanese 'psychological horror' film, and is ranked 21st best horror film of all time – enough said!

She always get the part



HEEP BIG TROUBLE AT THE COLLEGE

Our concert on 23 February at the RNCM in celebration of Britten's 100th anniversary was a fantastic performance, enjoyed by choir and audience alike. Although the size of the audience was smaller than hoped for (rival Britten concerts in Manchester on the same night!) every one in the concert hall was alternately moved, delighted and elated by the beauty and passion of the music.

In recognition of the fact that this was a special Britten event, SGS Chair Peter Marcus and Joe Keaney gave readings from Britten's letters and from his acceptance speech on being presented with the Aspen Award.

Neil expanded our understanding of Britten and his music by giving passionate and hugely knowledgeable commentary on the music throughout the evening, putting the works in the context of the composer's life, giving us some marvellous insights into Britten's genius, and turning the concert into a genuine event to be remembered. More of that, please Neil!

One slight annoyance marred the evening though, in the form of a complaint from the Uriah Heep Official Fan Club. For some reason unknown to music lovers, the heavy metal band were playing that very same evening just a few yards away from our concert in the RNCM Theatre. The rockers were livid

that our fortissimos during *Rejoice in the Lamb* drowned out at least one of their guitar solos, and our *Hymn to the Virgin* completely ruined their evocative rendition of their classic song *Lady in Black* (the original A minor version as covered subsequently by the German band 'Gregorian'). They also beg us to keep the noise down at our 'Gloria' concert as they're all attending the Who gig at the MEN Arena that same night – and don't want their delicate ballads ruined by our crescendos. Rock on, SGS!



DON'T MESS WITH THE ORGANIST!

The following was spotted in the local paper by one of our sharp-eyed basses:

'The dedication of church organists has kept the country's choral traditions alive for generations. But if new research is to be believed, they are not to be crossed.

'It seems many seize the opportunity to take subtle revenge on clerics who have displeased them or simply play pranks on congregations. A survey of churchgoers found that at least half have noticed their organist slipping snippets of heavy metal classics, advertising jingles and even nursery rhymes in hymns and anthems.

'In some cases it can be a means of waging musical war with clerics while in others it is simply an effort to make the

choir laugh. Among examples cited by Christian Research was that of the organist in Scotland who had fallen out with some of the elders in the Kirk but got his own back by inserting a thinly disguised rendition of *Send in the Clowns* as they processed in for Sunday service.

'Elsewhere a vicar sacked an organist after he played *Roll out the Barrel* at the funeral of a man known to have been fond of a drink. Another congregation found themselves passing around the collection plate to the strains of *Money, Money, Money* by Abba.'

Disgraceful enough, you might think, but then things got a lot closer to home when one Sunday morning, on the Radio 4 *Sunday* programme, presenter Edward Stourton was heard introducing none other than

our very own Jeffrey Makinson from St Ann's in Manchester to talk about this very subject. Had Jeff ever done anything like this himself? 'Absolutely not! I'm very well behaved – but I understand this kind of thing has happened.' (Mm?)

At Ed's insistence, however, Jeff was persuaded to demonstrate how it could be done, and proceeded to render *Happy Birthday* in the minor key ('It's best to clothe the theme in a different harmony or rhythm') followed by a most unliturgical blast of the theme from *Blackadder* masquerading as some Stanford-esque flummery.

We wouldn't for one moment suggest that Jeff gets up to anything like this at the Cathedral, but ...

TAYLOR'S #TAGS

I'm really hoping that the choir will be 'a well-oiled tuning machine'.

The B flat rabbit appears in bar 142.

Handel isn't painting by numbers you know. It's not a case of 'what's left? Oh, the tenors will stick that in'.

Prune, trim, topiarise!

The altos do their own thing here—more than usual that is.

Not every tenor is quite there.

This is where the basses start with their eternal warblings.

There's an 'H' on the words 'here' and 'help'. Even I know that, and English is my second language—Yorkshire being my first.

The 'tu' was splendid. That's a compliment—frame it.

Altos, as ever, you are fine.

This is an astonishingly good triple appoggiatura.

(No, we don't always understand him either)

ST GEORGE'S IN TUNE (LARGELY)

BY LES BERRY



In Tune presenter Sean Rafferty with Jeff and Neil

Radio 3's *In Tune* undertook one of its rare forays oop north on Friday 22nd February. We of St George's have had recent experience of rehearsing at Media City, Salford but what of the prospect of now performing live for hundreds of thousands of people? No pressure there eh? Just think of it as the Daily Service on steroids.

We were required to assemble at the ominously titled Audience Handling Gate with its suggestions of nose rings and cattle prods. But from there we made our way to the relative safety of the Philharmonic Studio and were welcomed by a refreshingly unprecious producer Les (honest!) who assured us

it was nice to get away from 'that big town down south.' I tried hard to believe him. His efforts to put us at ease however, involved a dreadful

gag about Delius' love of cooking being a Delius Myth. You see, that's what passes for humour in the big town down south.

I had always been intrigued and faintly alarmed by Sean Rafferty's deeply plummy tones but the reality presented us with someone more relaxed, more informal and frankly more Irish. However, despite the velvet blarney it was clear that this urbane professional was never likely to break into a chorus of *Paddy McGinty's Goat*. In truth he was utterly charming and welcoming, even apologising for the absence of a cocktail bar. He encouraged us by pointing out that we were to share the programme with, among others, the man once voted the sexiest man alive, (no – not you Dave Francis) Terence Stamp, although it must be recorded, ladies, that our relationship with this celebrity was to remain virtual, the interview having been pre-recorded the previous week. Does he not like Benjamin

Britten? After all he played the part of Billy Budd in an early movie, though it was not of the Britten opera. Comfortingly it turned out Stamp was on a similar mission to us, ie promoting something forthcoming, in his case the film *A Song For Marion*.

We kicked off with the exotic *Caña Dulce* which gave notice, we hope, that we are not a choir with a predictable repertoire. As indeed did our later performances of Finzi's *My Spirit Sang* and Elgar's *As Tor-*

rents In Summer. We sang, I think, without fear and even risked a shy glance at the conductor from time to time. Huge live audience or not, once started you just have to keep going.

For those familiar with the *In Tune* format, the programme was characteristically eclectic. We were introduced as 'the resident songbirds – a choir of 60 voices' (58 in pedantic fact) and shared the programme not only with the invisible Mr Stamp and the ubiquitous Howard Goodall but also the highly visible and hugely impressive Antonio Forcione Trio (gentle Brazilian guitar rhythms reminiscent of Charlie Byrd at his best) and the remarkable young pianist Viv McLean who, not content with rattling off the pyrotechnic piano parts of Gershwin's *Rhapsody In Blue*,



Neil and Jeff weren't at all impressed by the warm-up man but rightly surmised that Peter Kaye wasn't available

SGS in full voice—and 'in tune'



added in all the orchestral bits himself for good measure. I was reminded of George's father Morris Gershwin's deathless remark when asked about the piece. 'Of course it's important. It lasts twenty minutes don't it?' What a pity McLean's impending performance of this with the Hallé on the following night was heralded by Rafferty as a 'must-hear.' Excuse me. What about SGS at RNCM?

ST GEORGE'S IN TUNE.../cont

Well, happily, we did get in our plug. Did our Musical Director promote us and respond to the affable Mr Rafferty's questions with measured assurance? Absolutely!

Rafferty had done some homework on us but his reference to our annual ceilidh and wine-tasting probably betrayed the perils of reliance on Google.



However, did Neil handle this left field reference with aplomb?

Absolutely! There were also valuable opportunities for him to expand more generally on the choir and its activities and in particular to mention the imminent Britten concert at the RNCM. Asked by Rafferty if our MD ever gives us a tough time we responded with vigorous nodding – not very effective on radio. Absolutely!

All of these verbal exchanges I have to report were probably

correct as far as I could hear. In the cavernous Philharmonic Studio everything sung, played and spoken disappears into ostensibly 'dead' microphones.

If this felt odd, the other aspect of the afternoon that maybe we didn't quite anticipate was the length of 'down time' we had when recorded music, the Stamp and Goodall interviews and the hourly news were going out from the big town down south. In between times we could stroll around, engage the amiable Rafferty in conversation, take photographs like naff tourists and buy undrinkable coffee from the nearby canteen. (Note to the Beeb. Our licence fees must surely provide better sustenance than this.)

Finally we duly sang a couple of our Britten pieces hoping to entice the punters out there into the RNCM on what was to prove a very cold Saturday night. We were profusely thanked on air for all our efforts by our mate Sean (I feel I can now call him that) who so courteously, nay enthusiastically

consented to group photographs before we left.

But can we forgive him for referring to our esteemed accompanist as 'Jeffrey Markinson?' Absolutely not!



Choir mascot George thought it was a splendid event, but couldn't resist a quick nap between live sessions



Our support act

SOPRANOS? DON'T YOU JUST LOVE THEM ...

If you threw a violinist and a soprano off a cliff, which one would hit the ground first? The violinist. The soprano would have to stop halfway down to ask directions.

What's the difference between a soprano and a terrorist? You can negotiate with a terrorist.

What's the difference between a soprano and a pit bull? The jewellery.

What's the difference between a soprano and a piranha? The lipstick.

How many sopranos does it take to change a light bulb? One—she holds the bulb and the world revolves round her. Two—one to hold the diet cola and the other to get her accompanist to do it.

Four—one to change the bulb and the other three to pull the chair out from under her.

What's the difference between a Wagnerian soprano and a Wagnerian tenor?

About 10 pounds.

How do you tell if a Wagnerian soprano is dead?

The horses seem very relieved.

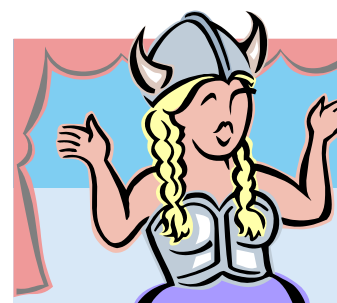
What's the first thing a soprano does in the morning? Puts her clothes on and goes home. (*Oooh! Bitchy!*)

What's the definition of an alto? A soprano who can sight-read.

How do you know when there's a soprano at the front door? She can't find the key and she doesn't know when to come in.

How do you put a sparkle into a soprano's eye? Shine a torch in her ear.

Don't worry sops—it's someone else's turn next term!



YOU WERE WONDERFUL, DARLING

BY RICHARD TAYLOR



Richard doing his evil aristo bit as Sir Percival Glyde (hiss, boo!)

Back in November 2011 I was discussing acting with my friend Hannah, and highlighting the fact that I had never been cast in a play at school. Hannah asked whether I would like to do a short play with her as part of the Halifax Thespians' Showcase event. The Showcase was to take place in March 2012 and was an opportunity for members of Halifax Thespians to present a 5–10 minute play in a genre that they had not attempted before: comedy, tragedy, monologue, Shakespeare, and so on.

I was not a member but readily agreed to be Hannah's acting partner at the event. Having made this decision, the next one to be made was the choice of play. The publican of our local watering hole enthusiastically offered to write a short play just for us and all seemed set.

However, with just a month to go until the showcase, our publican's play had not appeared, so we took the decision to use a scene from the play *Two* by Jim Cartright. This scene features the landlord of a pub and his landlady wife clearing up in their pub after closing time and shows how and why their rela-

tionship has changed after the death of their son.

My first concern was that of learning lines – would I be able to do this? Not just that, would I be able to remember those lines when on stage in front of an audience? I imagine the thought of forgetting lines when under the spotlight can put many people off acting in theatre. At first I found that I had difficulty reliably remembering my first line, let alone the rest of them, but persistence really does pay dividends with line learning. I also found that the learning process was reinforced by acting the play.

My second concern was that of acting – being able to portray my character in a believable natural manner. A friend, an experienced play director, directed us and was a huge help in this regard. I admit I had not appreciated the role of a director until this point! Movement, the use of props, not upstaging, timing and facing the audience all seemed obvious when pointed out.

The first evening of the showcase arrived and I was standing outside the door to the Playhouse bar where the plays were being performed. The bar is a very intimate space into which an audience of some sixty people had crammed. I heard our play being introduced and the moment of truth had arrived – there could be no backing out. We entered the room and started the play, an ironing board topped with plastic beer mugs our set, the audience six feet away. I did not know how I would find the experience and how I would react to an audience but in the event I found that I just became the character for those few minutes and with Hannah's support all went well. As we left the stage and went outside the bar I felt complete exhilaration as we high-fived

and mouthed YES to each other (could not shout this with the next play starting!).

We repeated the performance for two more evenings, and each time was different. The second evening's performance did not feel as real and I think this was partly due to the bar (AKA ironing board) being placed too close to the audience which disrupted our movements. The last performance was more like the first. I have since realised that every performance of a play will feel different, and that complacency must not be allowed to creep in or the script may come back to bite!

Fired up after the showcase, I joined the Thespians just over a year ago. Now there is much more to being a member of the Thespians than simple acting – in fact, one cannot simply be an actor, darling. There are many tasks to be done and all vital to the running of the Playhouse and the staging of performances: lighting, sound, front of house, props, bar work, coffee provision, maintenance, publicity, programme production, stage management, directing, and so the list goes on. So during the past year, as well as acting, I have designed a couple of sets, helped with set building and served behind the playhouse bar.

My first role in a full play was Lord Matcham in *The Hotel Riposo* in July last year. Billed as a high-class comedy, this play was performed over three nights in the bar room. This had far more lines than my showcase scene and was more demanding in terms of character interaction. It is not enough to learn one's own lines; the cues to these must also be learnt. In the same way that failing to sing at the right time with the right note is bad, saying the correct lines to the

wrong cue is to be avoided, and potentially disastrous. This also means that an actor does rely on the other cast members to give these cues so everyone has to be reliable for a whole play to be performed successfully.

In October last year I played two characters, Igor and Mr Gryle, in Terry Pratchett's *Going Postal*. I had far fewer lines to say than either of the two other plays, but there were two completely different characters to portray and the production was on the Playhouse main stage. Igor is a butler who has been assembled from parts of various other people. This meant an hour of makeup before each performance the result being seen in the photograph! He also has a lisping voice and a stooped, staggering gait. Mr Gryle is a banshee assassin of few words to whom I gave a deep throaty short voice. He also had a costume with wings and a hood that completely covered my face (to hide the Igor makeup). One consequence of wearing this hood was that I could not really see very well which caused me to run into the edge of a flat rather than between the legs on stage during one performance (ouch!).

Ah, but what is a flat and what is meant by legs? A flat is a canvas-covered wood frame, typically nine or thirteen feet high, that is used to form walls on stage. They are put in place and linked together by the set builders, and then painted as required by the set designer. At the Playhouse, the flats are stored upright beneath the stage and hoisted up through a trap when required for a set. Set building normally starts two to three weeks before a production, and a set is struck within a couple of days of the last performance. It typically takes about 90 person-hours to build a set and 20 to strike one. The more a flat is used the heavier it becomes as successive layers of paint build

up on them. Legs are simple narrow curtains hung generally at the sides of the stage.

As Mr Gryle I also had to have a tussle with a postman surrounded by swirls of smoke during which I would be knocked unconscious, landing on a chair. This went well for the first five performances, but on the sixth and final performance we were surrounded by too much smoke and the I missed the chair, bruising my ribs in consequence. The two minutes I had to stay still until the lights were off me seemed an agonising eternity – I then had some inkling of suffering for one's art...

I found acting on the main stage not as intimidating as I expected – in fact it was less so than acting in the bar where the audience are close and visible.



Igor, the butler

It was as a result of the confidence gained in *Going Postal* that I accepted the part of Sir Percival Glyde in *The Woman in White*. This required me to learn far more lines than anything I had done before, and speak in received pronunciation. Rehearsals started in early December which gave a typical six week rehearsal period before production. During this play I had to have a glass of wine

(water!) grabbed from my hand and thrown in my face – Count Fosco, the thrower of said wine, contrived to either miss me completely or hit my shoulder on most occasions. Only once did he get me full on, although I was careful to leave very little wine in the glass. I think in the end I was just thankful that Fosco didn't let go of the glass!

I was also required to put a ring back on the finger of my stage fiancée. Every single night the ring would stop at her second knuckle and refuse to go any further. This didn't matter from an audience perspective, but one of my missions at the start of a performance was to fully seat that ring! I never did achieve that objective.

Although not a comedy, the funniest moment of anything I have seen at the Playhouse was when one of the characters was being energetically wheeled off through a door in his wheelchair: the chair became jammed between the door and frame and all the tugging in an attempt to free it by the pusher only had the effect of swaying the wall of the set – a testament to the set builders that it stayed up and did not collapse onto the cast.

My next acting outing is going to be in *Neville's Island* as one of four men on an island in the middle of Derwentwater. This is a comedy, and this combined with the nature of the large role I will have means that this will be my most demanding play. If anyone wishes to come and watch me in action, *Neville's Island* will run from Tuesday 3rd until Saturday 7th September. You will receive a warm welcome!



Mr Gryle, the winged banshee—probably not quite the right outfit for the tenors and basses at the Bridgewater Hall

For ticket and venue information about *Neville's Island*, visit www.halifaxplayhouse.org.uk.

The blurb describes *Neville's Island* as a 'comedy in thick fog' and the plot of the play as follows: 'Four out-of-condition, middle-aged businessmen are sent off on a team building exercise in the Lake District and succeed in being the first people ever to get shipwrecked on an island on Derwentwater. What should have been a bonding process for Gordon, Angus, Roy and Neville turns into a muddy, bloody fight for survival...'

Just like the choir tours then.

CHORAL NEWS FROM COSTA RICA

BY DAVE FRANCIS



In February Anne and I had a three week holiday in Costa Rica, somewhere we had been planning to visit for several years.

It is a small but beautiful country, whose history is quite inspiring. Following a brief civil war in 1948, the armed forces were abolished and despite the violence that has characterized much of central America in the last fifty years, Costa Rica has been a peaceful and stable democracy ever since. Although it remains relatively poor by Western European standards, the absence of a military budget has enabled Costa Rica to spend money on its infrastructure – it is one of

the only countries in the region with excellent roads, a extensive and reliable power system, drinkable water everywhere, and an education system that enables more than half of 18-year-olds to study at university. We spent two and a half weeks touring around seeing tropical rain forests, high altitude cloud forests and volcanoes (and lots of exciting wildlife), not to mention the Caribbean and Pacific oceans. At the end of the holiday we spent three days in the capital, San Jose, where we met up with our friends from El Café Chorale. Many of you will remember this wonderful Costa Rican choir from their visit to us in 2005. That visit forged a link between ECC and SGS which has continued to this day: David Ramirez, the musical director of ECC, is a Friend of St George's Singers.

However, El Café Chorale is just part of a bigger project. The

highlight of our stay in San Jose was a visit to the Costa Rica Institute for the Promotion of Choral Music. This Institute was established by David and his wife Darlene (co-founders of El Café Chorale) back in the mid-1990s. Three years ago it was re-launched in new premises, with help from our other old friend, Christian Fröhlich. The story is a fascinating one.

For many years the Institute had managed in very inadequate premises, which severely limited its activities. Then, during one of Christian's frequent visits, he suggested that a company could be set up to purchase a proper home for the Institute. Members of the choir scoured San Jose for a building that was big enough to house the Institute but also within the budget that had been agreed. The choir President, Gilbert Aqino, a successful artist, mentioned the problem to students at the adult classes he runs at his studio. By sheer chance, one of them knew of a large house nearby that had been built a few years before by a wealthy businessman who had now left Costa Rica. This gentleman had made his pile from shipping, so the house (mansion, actually) was designed on the lines of a ship, with a large, open-plan ground floor and open stairways leading to five upstairs rooms. Not surprisingly, it had proved an estate agent's nightmare and had been on the market for several years. It was available at a (for its size) knock-down price.

This building is now the headquarters of the Institute. Each week David and Darlene rehearse three choirs there. David conducts El Café Chorale and also 'Intermezzo', a youth choir for 17–25 year olds. Darlene conducts a children's choir, called Concordia. In addition to the choirs, through other in-





It hardly needs saying that the members of El Café Chorale made us hugely welcome. Our brief three day visit ended with an outing to a trout farm in the mountains near San Jose. It was a choir picnic and more than half the choir came along. We drank local beer and consumed lots of fried trout, caught in the ponds by just about everyone except the visitors from the UK!

We were given firm instructions to convey everyone's best wishes to their friends in St George's Singers.

If you are interested in supporting the work of the Costa Rican Institute for the Promotion of Choral Music, for example by sponsoring for one year a child in the Concordia choir, please contact Dave & Anne Francis for details .

structors the Institute provides individual tuition in singing, guitar and piano. It is a busy place, especially on Saturdays when the children's choir is practising in the downstairs rehearsal space while classes are going on in all the upstairs rooms.

Not content with all this activity, on top of his day job as Professor of Choral Music at The National University in San Jose, David is currently planning a fourth choir, for 12- to 17- year-olds, to bridge the gap between Intermezzo and Concordia. The aim is to provide a continuous experience of choral singing from childhood through to adulthood – a kind of choral equivalent, on a much smaller scale, of the famous Venezuelan 'Sistema'.

The success of this laudable enterprise can be gauged by the many international choral prizes that El Café Chorale have won. This summer they are touring to the USA for the very first time. Next year Intermezzo, the youth choir, will go on its first overseas trip, to take part in an international choral festival in Barcelona.

All of this has been achieved without any public funding from the city or the central government. Costa Rica is not a wealthy country and, though small donations from business-

es have been received, in the main the whole enterprise is possible by the commitment of David and Darlene, the generosity of Christian Fröhlich and the funds the Institute generates



itself through the (small) fees paid by children, young people and adults who make up the Institute's members.

The Institute's children are anything but privileged. Despite the shortage of funds, strenuous efforts are made to encourage and enable children from poor backgrounds to benefit from the Institute's work. The children's choir runs a scholarship scheme to support its poorest members, to cover fees and pay for music and performance dress. To significantly expand its work the Institute needs to find sources of funding beyond its present shoestring budget, as Christian Fröhlich stressed to us while we were there.

You fly all this way for a fish supper, and what do you get?



THE DEVIL IN MUSIC



Here's a devilish question. What do Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze*, Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, the theme tune to *The Simpsons* and Beetho-

ven's *Fidelio* have in common? The answer's the tritone.

The tritone is an interval of three whole tones, eg C-F# (augmented fourth) or C-Gb (diminished fifth). It's one of the most restless and dissonant intervals around, and for centuries it was considered unpleasant and ugly – as well as being awkward to sing. Even worse: it was regarded in medieval times as positively evil, and for centu-

ries was named the 'diabolus in musica', or the devil in music. The first explicit prohibition of the tritone seems to occur around the time that Guido of Arezzo (originator of the do-re-mi) was developing his theories in the 11th century. Suggestions that singers were excommunicated by the Church for singing this interval are probably fanciful, but it is certainly the case that the interval was avoided in medieval church music because of its dissonant quality – music was composed to praise God, so had to be as beautiful as possible. Unless of course you deliberately wanted to evoke the idea of the devil: Luther's hymn *Ein feste Burg* includes a tritone in the melody just at the point in the third line where the 'ancient evil foe' (aka the prince of darkness) gets a credit.

Because of this demonization of the poor old tritone, Western composers have traditionally

avoided using it explicitly in their melody lines, often preferring to use passing notes or skipping to a different note first (eg F-C-B instead of F-B) instead of leaping directly. However, as time went by, composers have gradually used the tritone more and more in their music, disregarding its awkwardness and exploiting its expressiveness to suggest an oppressive, scary, or evil sound. By the time of the classical era it had become acceptable, and composers started to use it freely; and ultimately it became a favourite with jazz musicians.

If you want to know if the devil really has all the best tunes, dig out your old Black Sabbath CDs, sing along with *Tosca's* Scarpia—or listen carefully to 'Qui tollis peccata mundi' from Vivaldi's *Gloria*. Spooky!

I have no pleasure in any man who despises music. It is no invention of ours: it is a gift of God. I place it next to theology. Satan hates music: he knows how it drives the evil spirit out of us.
—Martin Luther

SUPERWOMAN RIDES (AND SWIMS AND RUNS) AGAIN

St George's very own Superwoman, Jo Bluck, is on the warpath again, this time fighting a scourge that kills thousands of people across the world – water deprivation.

On 12 May, she took part in the Alnwick sprint triathlon, completing the course in 1:49.54 hrs and raising money for Water Aid, the charity that seeks to provide clean water for people across the world. This was a family outing, as Jo was joined by her brother- and sister-in-law and her godson.



Then on 2 June Jo enters the Cheshire Super Sprint Triathlon in Nantwich. (Apparently, it's a shorter distance, but everyone has to run/cycle/swim more quickly!) She's running this with her friend Bev in a team called Bookworms, and you can follow progress on the website, www.cheshiretriathlon.co.uk.

The final event of the season is a mountain climb – this time organised by Water Aid itself, who are asking volunteers to climb a handy mountain to raise money. Jo is climbing

Margery Hill, the highest point in South Yorkshire, as part of Water Aid's campaign to get 2,000 people on top of 200 peaks on one day.

If you'd like to make a donation, contact Jo for sponsorship forms or go to the charity website at www.wateraid.co.uk.

SINGING IN CHOIRS—THE HEALTHY OPTION

A study by Professor Robert Beck at the University of California confirmed scientifically that singing in a choir makes you healthier.

Researchers found increased levels of disease-fighting proteins in the mouths of choir members after they sang Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. According to the study, a protein used by the immune system to fight disease called Immunoglobulin A increased 150% during rehearsals and 240% during performance.

The boost seemed directly related to the singers' states of mind, which many participants described as happy or euphoric. The more passionate they felt while singing, the greater the effect. The difference in the increased levels between a performance and rehearsal might be because the singers had

achieved mastery of the piece, after often-stressed rehearsal and also were enjoying the thrill of the performance.

Researchers attended rehearsals over an 8-week period of rehearsals, using cotton swabs to collect saliva, which contains the immune protein, from 32 volunteer choir members, before and after singing, and analysed the results. They also surveyed the singers' feelings and emotions to see if their immune response was linked to how performing changed their moods.

Rehearsing and performing in public are both stressful activities, and previous studies have shown that stress is linked with lowered immune response. Studies conducted over the past 20 years have found that stress causes decreased immune lev-

els. Whilst other studies have found that music increased it. Robert Beck was surprised by the intensity of the increase in immune response.

'Basically we made three findings. One is that the immune system rises after extended amounts of singing. The second is that this is heightened during a performance. And the third is that the more passionate you feel, the more this effect is heightened.'

Because virtually all the singers tested have been lifelong choir members he now wants to extend this study to see if the same effect exists among new singers. He was however unwilling to predict the outcome for people who sing in the shower.

MARCUS REVIEWS

Our old friend Marcus Farnsworth is making quite a stir in the opera and concert world, as these recent reviews show.

Britten's *Journey of the Magi*

'The dynamic range of all three of tonight's singers was impressive, and the addition of Marcus Farnsworth to our previous duo [Mark Padmore and Iestyn Davies] was well balanced.' – *Bachtrack*

'(Padmore and Davies) combined in luxury casting with baritone Marcus Farnsworth for a suitably restrained treatment of the enigmatic *Journey of the Magi*.' – *Guardian*

'The ensemble was terrific, and the separation into character

equally effective, with Farnsworth's agile and attractive voice agreeably relating to the dark area of Padmore's tenor. The atmosphere they created was impressively leaden and mysterious.' – *Classical Source*

'Praise is also due to Ann Murray and Marcus Farnsworth for sterling work in lesser pieces. What riches!' – *Daily Telegraph*

Maxwell Davis' *Eight Songs for a Mad King*

'Young baritone Marcus Farnsworth has to be congratulated on so thoroughly embracing the role and making its demanding score appear such light work. In a military top coat over somewhat soiled institutional bedware, he

brought the character alive.' – *Herald Scotland*

'Theatricality aside, it is also a piece that makes big demands on its musicians and singer — in this performance fast rising star of opera, the award-winning young baritone Marcus Farnsworth.' – *Forres Gazette*

'Marcus Farnsworth found humour as well as pathos in the part, pitching the song-speech as naturally as any of the role's most distinguished interpreters.' – *Financial Times*



For those new members of SGS who don't know him, Marcus was our Assistant Conductor for a number of years whilst studying at Manchester University, before he joined the Royal Academy of Music in London. You can find out more about his career on his website: www.marcusfarnsworth.com

St George's Singers

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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 now 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, 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 2013-2014 SEASON

7 December 2013

Carols and Brass by Candlelight
St George's Church, Stockport

15 December 2013

Bach Christmas Oratorio,
Todd Footprints
Royal Northern College of Music

18 January 2014

Singing Day—Beethoven *Mass in C*
St George's Church, Poynton

22 March 2014

'Visions of Heaven' - a celebration of
English church music
St George's Church, Stockport

22 June 2014

Zimbe!
Gorton Monastery

Ticket Hotline: 01663 764012
tickets@st-georges-singers.org.uk

NEXT SEASON

Plans for next season are almost finalized (just a few minor details to sort out), but we can reveal the really important headlines for the 2013-14 season, when we run the gamut of music from B to Z.

The first concert of the season is (unusually) our traditional carol concert, featuring VBS Poynton Band, and the pupils of Bradshaw Hall Primary School. That's followed a week later by the first 'big' event – Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, combined with the brand new work commissioned by St George's Singers from Will Todd, and entitled *Footprints*.

The Singing Day features another B – Beethoven this time,

and his *Mass in C*. It's many years since St George's has sung this work, so this should re-introduce us to a work that quite unjustifiably suffers in comparison with the *Missa Solennis*, but which is full of beautiful and exciting Ludwig van touches.

March 2014 sees us move onto the Ts (along with half an alphabet of other English composers) when Tallis's sublime *Spem in Alium* forms the centrepiece in a lovely concert of music drawn from English churches and cathedrals through the ages, and entitled 'Visions of Heaven'.

We finally reach the Z with *Zimbe!* – the choral work by

Alexander L'Estrange for choir, children and jazz quintet. Charting the day in the life of an African village, *Zimbe* fuses song, jazz, lullabies, drinking songs and music for religious occasions into a work that will have the Monastery rocking. Also included will be Tippett's *Five Negro Spirituals* and other works.

The new Season Brochure will be available in time for our 'Gloria' concert, giving details of ticket prices, and information on discounted season tickets.

Keep up to date with all the details of next season on the Choir's website: www.st-georges-singers.org.uk.