



Hemiola

St George's Singers

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ST GEORGE'S SINGERS

VICE PRESIDENTS:

Marcus Farnsworth
Sue Roper
Mark Rowlinson
Stephen Threlfall
Stephen Williams

MUSICAL DIRECTOR:

Neil Taylor

ASSISTANT MUSICAL DIRECTOR:

Joseph Judge

ACCOMPANIST:

Peter Durrant

Registered Charity no 508686

Member of Making Music, the National Federation of Music Societies

www.st-georges-singers.org.uk

FOND FAREWELL TO OUR PRESIDENT

Our Christmas carol concert, 'Carols and Brass by Candlelight' at St George's Church in Stockport was as usual a great success, with lots of festive music from St George's Singers, VBS Poynton Band and the children of Bradshaw Hall school.

The concert sadly also saw the final appearance by our President, Brigit Forsyth. Brigit now lives in London, and has recently been extremely busy with stage and television work. As a result, she has found that she is unable to devote as much time as she should like to the Choir and has regrettably had to stand down.

SGS Chair, Andrea Millington, made a presentation to her during the concert, thanking her for her support over the past few years. Brigit has not only come along to a number of concerts, but has also donated her professional acting skills.

St George's Church in its Christmas finery



One of the very first readings she gave some years ago was the *Twelve Days of Christmas: A Correspondence* by John Julius Norwich. By coincidence the same reading was given at this year's concert by soprano Jo Bluck – to much laughter from all, including Brigit.

This year's programme offered something for everyone: highlights from *Messiah*, lots of carols (traditional and new), extracts from Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, and a great fun carol called *Calypso Carol*, in a new arrangement by Darius Battiwalla. By another coincidence, Darius was playing the organ for us at the concert, and we were delighted to have him join us.

The concert ended with quite a lot of complicated stage management, designed to get all 130+ performers together on the stage area to perform a rousing version of the *Twelve Days of Christmas* – with some thrilling falsetto notes from the men!



We hope to make an announcement about our new president shortly. Watch this space!

Lighting some of the hundreds of candles that illuminate the concert



MAGNIFICAT!

**Saturday 7 March 2015,
7.30 pm**

**Bach *Magnificat*
Buxtehude *Membra Jesu
nostri***

RNCM, Manchester

**Tickets: £15, £13 conc,
£5 students**

Tel: 01663 764012

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

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

We know the music at our forthcoming concert will be sublime: Bach's *Magnificat*, and Buxtehude's less well known but no less magnificent, *Membra Jesu nostri*.

But what about the words Bach and Buxtehude chose to set to music? Often we don't pay enough attention to the text, carried away by the glories of the music, but the text was of course all important to both composers.

The Magnificat, also known as the Song or Canticle of Mary, is one of the eight most ancient Christian hymns and perhaps the earliest Marian hymn. Its name comes from the first word of the Latin version of the canticle's text (*Magnificat anima mea*

Dominum – my soul magnifies the Lord).

The words are taken from St Luke's Gospel. After Mary has been told by the angel Gabriel that she will bear a son, Jesus, she visits her cousin Elisabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Elisabeth praises Mary for her faith, and

Mary proclaims the Magnificat in response.

The Magnificat traditionally formed part of the ancient Roman Catholic service of Vespers. After the Reformation it was incorporated into the evening services of the Lutheran church and into Evensong in the Anglican church, usually paired with the Nunc Dimittis.

From the Renaissance onwards, the Magnificat has been set to music more often than any liturgical text other than the mass itself (so it is, perhaps, surprising that Bach composed only one *Magnificat*). The settings vary enormously in style: Palestrina's exquisite four-part unaccompanied compositions;

Monteverdi's grand setting in his *Vespers for the Blessed Virgin*; Mozart's symphonic *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore*. Vivaldi's setting was for soloists, choir and orchestra, Bruckner's for soloists, choir, orchestra and organ, Pärt's for a cappella choir, whilst Rachmaninov inserted additional text – as more recently did John Rutter.

Anglican composers often set the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis together, and the 'Mag and Nunc' has been set by Tallis, Vaughan Williams, Wood and Tavener. Since the canticles are sung every day at some cathedrals, Stanford wrote a *Magnificat* in every major key, and Howells published twenty settings over his career.

Bach's *Magnificat* then is the joyous song of a young mother-to-be, full of eager anticipation, promise for the future, and hope for mankind. In grievous contrast, Buxtehude's *Membra Jesu nostri* winds the years forward to depict the end of Christ's life on the cross, setting to music a meditation on Christ's suffering body.

Whilst there are hundreds of Magnificats, *Membra Jesu nostri* is unique. The words were compiled by Buxtehude himself, drawing on a medieval poem *Salve mundi salutare* (Hail, salvation of the world).

It is believed that *Salve mundi salutare* was written by St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), whose teachings had a major influence on the development of western Christianity. Bernard had a special devotion to the Virgin Mary, and preached an immediate faith, in which Mary acted as intercessor, as opposed to the rational approach to divine understanding promoted in medieval universities. Bernard was a fierce opponent of Peter Abelard, was one of the instigators of the Knights Templars, preached against the Cathars but in favour of the Second Crusade as a means of attaining grace and absolution for sins.

The poem is divided into seven cantos headed 'to the feet, knees, hands, side, breast,

heart, face', each a meditation on the suffering of that part of Christ's body. Buxtehude used the same structure, creating seven cantatas, each divided into six sections: an instrumental introduction; a concerto for between three and five voices, for which Buxtehude used biblical texts, each with a reference to the appropriate part of Christ's body; three arias for one or three voices; and ending with a reprise of the concerto.

It is not known whether the seven cantatas were performed at a single sitting. Nonetheless, the cycle presents a remarkable sense of unity of style. The seven works describe a tonal circuit from C minor via related keys, returning to the same key for the final cantata. This unity of conception is an admirable antidote to any emotional excess. Buxtehude concentrates the emotional charge in the framing concertos, whilst the arias are cool, gentle and objective creations, fascinating for their varied treatments, in which the mysticism of the poetry is well served. Eschewing flamboyance and all gratuitous indulgence, Buxtehude has created the ultimate in spiritual impact combined with sober grandeur.



Michelangelo's *Pieta* – Mary cradling her son



The Lactation of Saint Bernard – according to a legend dating from 1146 in Speyer Cathedral, the Virgin Mary shot milk from her right breast into the eye of St Bernard of Clairvaux, miraculously curing an eye affliction.

There are dozens of recordings of the *Magnificat*, but the world record for the fastest performance is held by John Eliot Gardiner and the Monteverdi Choir, who perform the opening chorus in 2'49". Not that we want to give Neil a target ...

NEW RNCM CONCERT HALL

On 7 March SGS perform in the RNCM Concert Hall for the first time since its extensive refurbishment. Opened in 1973 as a rehearsal and performance space for students at the College, the concert hall has undergone only minor cosmetic changes over the last 40 years.

This major £7.1m development was completed in November 2014 (on time and to budget), and has turned the hall into the most up-to-date concert hall in Manchester. It is the first venue to be fully lit by LEDs, which have been installed from ceiling to floor. Balconies, including a Royal Oglesby Balcony, have been added, and the hall also features new flooring, seating and heating. New back-of-house facilities include new teaching spaces and practice pods, dressing rooms, laundry and wardrobe rooms.

In a second phase of development, new air-conditioning, floor lighting and a state-of-the-art sound system will be installed later this year.

The hall will now seat up to 730 audience members, increasing the capacity by over 50%.

It took a team of around 70 builders to transform the space during a construction job that saw over 515 tons of waste move out, and 55 tons of steel brought in.

The plan for the space was to allow it to change from being a room for classical music to one for rock, jazz and pop. Much of this is achieved through the lighting effects.

The only remaining feature of the old hall is the distinctive organ, which had a special scaffold built round it to protect it during the works, and an air filtering system installed to

prevent internal damage from dust. The organ can now be dramatically lit by multi-coloured LEDs, when necessary.

The concert hall refurbishment was

particularly challenging as the theatre is entirely enclosed in the building, with walls close to a metre thick.

The RNCM Principal, Professor Linda Merrick, said: 'The RNCM prides itself on offering the best facilities, not only to aspiring young musicians from all over the world, but also to audiences who recognise the significant position the College holds as one of the UK's business and most diverse public performance venues.'

The Choir is really looking forward to performing in the new concert hall, and experiencing the new dressing rooms!



The newly refurbished RNCM concert hall



TEN THINGS WE KNOW ABOUT BUXTEHUDE

1. Of German extraction, Buxtehude was born c1637 either in Holstein or in Sweden – but as both were Danish at the time, he's generally reckoned to be a Dane.
2. He received his early musical training from his father, who was organist at St Olaf's in Helsingør (Elsinore).
3. Originally named Diderich, he changed his name to the German 'Dieterich'.
4. His first appointment was as organist at St Mary's in Helsingør, where the organ he played still survives.
5. On his appointment as organist at St Mary's in Lübeck, he married the daughter of the previous organist – standard practice at the time.
6. Both Handel and Bach visited him in Lübeck, though neither agreed to marry his daughter Anna Margarita.
7. Buxtehude was famous in his lifetime as a virtuoso organist, but also as a 17th-century impresario: he established the *Abendmusiken* (evening musicals) which took place from 4–5 pm and for which he persuaded local businesses to provide funds.
8. Much of his vocal music was only rediscovered in the 20th century, and it is believed a lot of his work has simply been lost.
9. He had five sisters and a brother, who was a barber.
10. He died in 1707, and was succeeded as Lübeck organist by JC Schieferdecker, who happily did agree to marry Anna Margarita.



Buxtehude in a jam session with his viol

IF ORGANISTS WROTE THE WEDDING COLUMN...



On Saturday 5th August, at well after the stated time of 2pm, Samantha Jones and Philip Smith were married at Our Lady of Sorry Acoustics. The groom wore a black suit and the bride wore a dress. The organist's shoes, in tasteful basic black with lace-ups, were by OrganMaster.

The organ is a rebuild by Harvey Piston Schotz of a 2m Whisk which contains pipework from the original tracker that existed before the tragic fire. The harmonic flute is to die for but the combination action is unreliable.

There were attendants all over the place, but the organist still got only three-quarters of the way through *The Prince of Den-*

mark's march with no repeats, ending in the dominant. That the 8' Tuba was the central feature of the processional was obvious; this could be seen on the smiling faces of everyone in attendance.

After a few minutes speaking by some clergy-type, the organist played the first four phrases of the Schubert *Ave Maria* (in E flat) on the Gemshorn 8' while the couple did something. Later, the bride's sister's best friend's adopted niece breathily sang *The Wedding Song* from the balcony, without interludes. (The organist left them in.) This didn't matter because she used the microphone, obliterating the subtle chiff of the Gedeckt 8'.

The recessional was by Mendelssohn, played on a satisfying plenum. It was played in ABA-BA form to fit the length of the

movement.

The guests talked throughout the postlude, but the organist added stops as the noise level increased, masterfully manoeuvring each drawknob, coupler and reversible, without missing a SINGLE NOTE of the Widor! This noble feat did not go unnoticed by the congregation, as attested to by the audible sighs of relief which were heard as soon as the music stopped.

The bride and groom met at some university or other, where they did not take any music appreciation courses. After their honeymoon somewhere, they plan to live in suburbia, where the highlight of each year will undoubtedly be the replaying of their wedding video and reliving each musical moment.

ARE YOU LOST IN CYBERSPACE?

Not a user of social media? Never been on Facebook? Think Twitter is for the birds? Don't feel bad about it. Lots of people prefer to meet their friends in a pub rather than on a computer. But using social media to keep in touch with friends is also a good way to keep in touch with St George's Singers and promote the choir.

There are now a number of online ways of keeping up to date with SGS activities.

I told you this wasn't the way to the Bridgewater Hall!



- Website. The main SGS website (www.st-georges-singers.org.uk) is our 'public' face, with lots of information about the choir, upcoming concerts, and general information about joining and supporting us.
- Members pages. One part of our website is devoted to SGS members only. Here you can log on to find out all you need to know about being an SGS member, and check recent announcements (without having to trawl through your emails!). You can also link to our charity page from the website, www.easyfundraising.org.uk
- Facebook. SGS has its own Facebook page, which is regularly updated with posts about concerts, events and happenings at SGS. If you're on FB, please search for and 'follow' the SGS page (type 'St Georges Singers') and

share posts with your own friends to spread the word.

- Twitter. The choir also has its own Twitter account (@stgeorgessinger – note the singular name!) which you can follow.
- Cheshire Consort. The Consort has its own website, accessible via the main SGS site, or just by typing in the URL (www.cheshireconsort.org.uk). Even if you don't regularly sing with the Consort, you may find things of interest.
- Cheshire Consort also has its own Facebook page – again, please log on and share posts.

Using social media is a cheap, fast and often very good fun way of publicizing our concerts. Please help!

ST GEORGE'S LADIES: OUT OF THIS WORLD

The ladies of St George's Singers were in mystical mood when we joined Stockport Symphony Orchestra for their performance of Holst's *Planets Suite* in Stockport Town Hall on 31 January. We had been asked by the orchestra to provide a ladies choir to sing the final bars of 'Neptune – The Mystic'.

Things did not start well. The Thursday before the concert, blizzards swept in, and our final rehearsal was cancelled. Then a number of sopranos went down with seasonal bugs. But, we didn't panic. Andrea sent the ladies a link to a YouTube video of a ladies chorus singing the piece, to provide us with the right performance context. We all watched, listened, practised counting to five, and sang along with no problem. We'll be fine on Saturday – and our sops will certainly hit that top G# more accurately than the choir in the video!

Saturday arrived, and we all assembled in Stockport Town Hall in our designated dressing room ready for a 3.30 pm rehearsal. An ornate room, often used for weddings, with one slight hitch – nothing to sit on. The prospect of spending hours on our feet or sprawled on the floor was not appealing, so a raiding party was sent out to find chairs.

Jo Garbutt led us in a warm-up, and everyone sounded in good voice. Then our conductor for the day, Marco Bellasi, arrived and we began at No VI (that's '6' to us). Clearly a perfectionist, Marco took us through all the sectional parts, an hour later declared himself satisfied, and we moved on to stage management.

We had been told originally that we would be singing behind a screen. (Well, we may not all be in the first flush of youth...but really!) However, as it is

normal practice to have the choir off-stage for this piece, we didn't mind. Now we found that we would be singing in a stairwell at the side of the stage. That meant we had to get round to the other side of the Town Hall, without going through the concert hall, or trekking outside through the snow. Marco told us all to follow him, and off he confidently strode with us following in good choir order. Out of the dressing room, through the double doors, round the main town hall staircase (had picture taken with Ray on those stairs many years ago!), down the corridor, past the Scrutiny Office, round the corner, up the corridor, through the double doors – no hang on, that's not right. Marco retraced his steps: back through the doors, down the corridor – no, that's not right either. Back the way we'd first gone (Do Not Pass Go!), into the orchestral changing room, out the doors, down the stairs – and here's our stairwell.

After a lot of shuffling, we finally agreed on a three-tier formation: 1st choir taller ladies on the lower staircase (looking up at the conductor from below), 2nd choir altos on the upper staircase (hanging over the banisters) and the rest jostling for position on the middle staircase. But we still had problems seeing the conductor's beat. Anne Francis asked if Marco could stand on a box and wave his hands higher in the air? (A bit like Andrew Preview perhaps?) The box didn't materialize, but Marco did try to make sure everyone could see his hands. Eventually everyone was settled, and we pre-

pared to rehearse with the orchestra.

Ah, the orchestra! As we were behind the orchestra, to the side of the stage, and on the wrong side of a door, it was a little difficult to hear the music. Tuning would be something of a problem, and as we couldn't see the orchestral conductor, we would have to rely on Marco peering round the door to see him and then pass on the beat.

Finally, rehearsal was over and we were all told to be back in time for the second half of the concert. Most of the choir decided to come back early however and listen to the first half. We, and the rest of the packed Town Hall, were rewarded with a delightful performance by SSO of Vaughan Williams' *English Folk Song Suite*, conducted by Matthew Wood, followed by Strauss's *Oboe Concerto*, with soloist Simon Beesley.

Then it was the interval and time to congregate in our dressing room, where we would have to wait until the *Planets* had almost finished. As 'Saturn' drew to a close, Marco led us round to the stairwell, and we quietly got into our positions to the strains of 'Uranus'. Then it was our big moment.

Watching Marco's beat and furiously counting to five, we all entered pretty

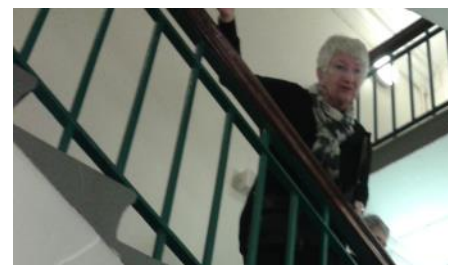
Entry to 'our' much on time, singing more and more softly until we ended our 32 bars by fading away into the heavens.

We hope we sounded mystical, mysterious and ethereal. We were certainly out of this world!



Our chorus master for the day, Marco Bellasi, with some of the SGS ladies

Anyone seen the conductor?



Anne doing some ancillary conducting from the third floor



PASSPORT TO PIMLICO

BY DAVE FRANCIS

These days you don't need to cross a border to get to Pimlico. Stanley Holloway is no longer the Prime Minister and Londoners don't sneak in to avoid post-war rationing. But there are still good reasons for going there, especially if you are interested in school music.



Just before Christmas, we had the pleasure of taking part in a performance of Fauré's *Requiem* at Pimlico Academy and then attending the school's end of term concert. Both were terrific events. We should perhaps admit a degree of bias, since our eldest son, Joe, is a music teacher at the school.

When Joe told us that they were performing the Fauré at St Saviour's Church, next door to the school, we said we would like to come down to hear it. The choir would be made up of students from all years plus some teachers. 'You've sung it lots of times, so why don't you sing with us?' he said. Having been assured that this would be okay, we were delighted to agree.

Never having experienced singing in a high school choir, we were a bit bothered when we arrived at the church hall in time for a pre-concert rehearsal. Dozens of noisy teenagers were milling around, with much adolescent horseplay in evidence. Were these children really going to perform a major work of choral music? As we singers know, the discipline, both musical and behavioural,

involved in giving a choral performance is very demanding. What had we let ourselves in for?

Imagine our surprise and delight when, once in the church and under the quiet but insistent prompting of Annie Palmer, the head of music, this motley crew of teenagers transformed themselves into a highly disciplined choir. The soloists were two sixth-form students. The performance was impressive in many ways, not least because the Junior choir (students from years 7 to 11) sang only in three movements of the piece and in the others stood silent and still. Were these the same children who had been charging about raucously an hour before? Perhaps this transformation explains why we found the performance so moving. Judging by their applause, so did the audience.

To appreciate this achievement you should know that Pimlico Academy has the kind of extremely mixed student intake typical of an inner London school. The fact that it is in the Borough of Westminster and its immediate surroundings consist of streets of lovely Georgian houses should not mislead one into thinking that its students are drawn from upper middle-class backgrounds. Far from it. Most come from large housing estates built after the Second World War.

The following evening was the Winter Concert. This began with the Samba band, about 30 children on stage playing an array of percussion instruments in authentic Brazilian style. The programme that followed featured groups and ensembles performing everything from Taverner's *The Lamb*, sung by the Year 12 vocal ensemble, an a capella arrangement



of *Bohemian Rhapsody* by the Year 13 group and Handel's *Sarabande* by the string orchestra, through jazz combos and wind bands to a succession of steel-pan ensembles drawn from each year. The standard of music-making was hugely impressive and the number of students involved even more so.

As everyone knows, for the past twenty years or so schools have been under severe pressure to focus on 'raising standards', with the result that subjects like music frequently have been relegated to lesser status in the curriculum, if not neglected entirely. The shift towards Academies in recent years has been justified by that concern with academic standards. It is gratifying, therefore, to know that in at least one Academy music education and practical music-making are thriving. We hope and believe that this is true of many other schools in the state sector.



'The standard of music-making was hugely impressive and the number of students involved even more so.'

ANOTHER GREAT SINGING DAY

January's Singing Day managed to beat the snow this year, arriving a good week before the blizzards. A packed St George's

Church was the venue for a wonderful day's singing with visitors from near and far joining members of St George's Singers in two works: Mozart's *Coronation Mass*, and Haydn's *Te Deum*.

After a day of hard work, good food and a selection of Neil's jokes (!) a quartet of up-and-coming young singers joined us for the evening's concert: Ella



The Singing Day tenors

Taylor, Cara Cul-len, Timothy Langston and Jonathan Ainscough. We look forward to inviting them back to sing with us again in future concerts.

As ever the members of St George's Singers provided the food, organised for the first time this year by Kate Atherton. Many thanks, Kate and well done to you and your team of servers. Next year something different. We move from classical masses to 19th century oratorio, when our Singing Day will perform extracts from Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. Wonder if Willard is available again ...?



Our quartet of soloists



Some of the tea and coffee servers with tea maestro Peter Farrington, ably assisted in the cake department by George!



ARE THERE BEES ON YOU?

If there are, here are some tips on identifying our most common bumblebees:

Buff-tailed – a dirty/golden yellow collar near the head and one on the abdomen; queen's tail is a buff/orange colour.

White-tailed – bright lemon-yellow band on thorax and abdomen; bright white tail; males have yellow hair on their head, and extra tufts of yellow hair on thorax and abdomen.

Garden – three yellow bands and clean white tail; long face, and long tongues, preferring flowers with deep tubes.

Early – yellow band on thorax and abdomen, the latter less

pronounced or missing in workers; dark orange-red tail. Early bumblebees are small and males have a broad yellow collar that wraps around the thorax, and yellow hair on the face.

Red-tailed – queens and workers have black body with an orange-red tail; males have yellow facial hairs and a yellow band on the thorax with a black abdomen and a bright orange-red tail. The hairs on the pollen baskets (on hind legs) of the female are black, but may be red in males.

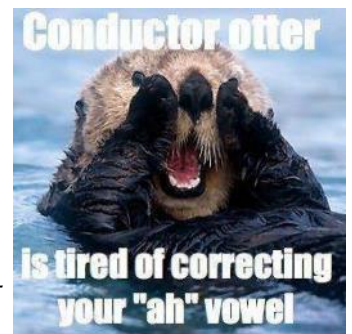
Tree – black head, brown-tinger thorax, black abdomen, white tail. Prefers to nest above

ground, often in bird boxes.

Common carder – completely brown or ginger.

Heath – similar colouring to garden bee but face is rounder.

NOTE: If you come across a bumblebee in February or March crawling on the floor, it's probably a queen exhausted from flying around looking for a new home. Dilute a little honey with some water on a spoon, and let the bee sip from it. (But don't let her walk in it!) The extra energy should revitalise her and allow her to continue her search.



ST GEORGE'S SINGERS' NEWS



Who's who?

St George's Singers reaches another milestone with the publication of the 2015 edition of *Who's Who*. Alto Wendy Flavell – also known as the Professor of Surface Physics at the University of Manchester – is featured in the publication for the first time this year, and amongst her recreational activities lists choral singing and St George's Singers. (We just love high-profile publicity!)

Wedding bells for Jeff

We wish Jeff and Lucy good luck for their wedding day on Friday 27 February at Manchester Cathedral. There'll be no shortage of music at this event! But who'll be conducting the choir and playing the organ ...?

New members

A very warm welcome to Elaine Astley (soprano) and Frank Tucker (bass), husband of SGS alto Felicity. Well done

Felicity! Are there any more men lurking at home who could be persuaded to come for a wild Tuesday night out in Poynton? Where else do you get to spend a whole evening with 60 lovely ladies – and get a cup of tea thrown in? There's even parking space provided!

Cheshire Consort

A number of weddings are in the pipeline for this year, so if you are interested in singing with the Consort, please speak to Alison McLay.

SGS JOIN CHETHAMS FOR MAHLER'S 3RD



Mezzo Sarah Connolly

There was great excitement at rehearsal when it was announced that St George's Singers' ladies had been invited to join Chetham's orchestra and chorus for a performance of Mahler's 3rd Symphony in the Bridgewater Hall in July.

Even more excitement when we heard that Sarah Connolly would be the soloist.

Sarah is one of the UK's foremost mezzo sopranos. Born in

County Durham, she went to school in York, then studied piano and singing at the Royal College of Music. She has won numerous awards, and was made a Commander of the British Empire in 2010.

She got her really big break in 1996, when she got an emergency phone-call to come to a recording studio as a stand-in, to record two Handel arias with Harry Bicket and the Orchestra

of the Age of Enlightenment for a Channel 4 film, *A Night with Handel*. With the red recording light on, she sight-read both arias, discussing ornaments with the harpsichordist between takes. She was introduced to an agent from Askonas Holt, and the rest is history.

If you want to hear Sarah before our own concert, she is in recital at the Bridgewater Hall on 24 March.

BOOK REVIEW: *THE CELLO SUITES*

For those who were members of St George's Singers in 2003, the sound of the wonderful Alice Neary playing extracts from Bach's Cello Suites at our Christmas concert is forever burned in our memories. A recent book by Canadian author Eric Soblin follows the creation, disappearance and rediscovery of these wonderful works.

A pop music critic by profession, Soblin one evening finds himself alone in a strange city. Looking to see what was on at the local concerts, he came across a performance of Bach's Cellos Suites. Ignorant of the work, but not finding anything else of interest, he goes along to

the 'classical' gig – and becomes enraptured and intrigued by this music that, unlike his usual musical fare, he describes as 'music for adults'.

Part biography, part music history, and part literary mystery, *The Cello Suites* weaves together three dramatic narratives. The first features Johann Sebastian Bach and the missing manuscript of his suites from the 18th century, investigating a number of mysteries surrounding the creation of the works; the second strand follows Pablo Casals and his rediscovery of the music in Spain in the late 19th century; and the third is Eric Soblin's own infatuation with the suites in the 21st century.

This love affair with Bach leads Soblin to the back streets of Barcelona and a Belgian mansion; to interviews with famous cellists; to archives, festivals, and conferences; and even to cello lessons – all in pursuit of answers to the mysteries that continue to haunt this music more than 250 years after its composer's death. Why was it written? When? For which instrument? And did Bach himself ever hear it performed?

The Cello Suites is a beautifully written, true-life journey of discovery, fuelled by the transcendent power of a musical masterpiece.

STOP PRESS!

On 25 November 2014, at precisely 8.15 pm, Neil announced that he was 'quite impressed with the basses'.

MEET OUR NEW ACCOMPANIST

We're delighted to welcome our newly appointed Accompanist, Pete Durrant. Here he tells us a bit about himself, his music – and his dog!

Where did you get your early musical training?

I grew up in Wimbledon in London, where my parents still live, and went to Westminster Abbey Choir School. I spent five years there, during which time I sang at Princess Diana's funeral and I was also there when Martin Neary left. I then went to Kingston Grammar School, before coming up to Manchester University to do my degree. I took a gap year to earn some money (including working as a postman!), then went to RNCM to take my Masters degree.

Singing at Westminster Abbey must have been a thrill. What are your favourite memories?

The highlight of my time there was probably going on the USA and Canada tour in 1995 when we toured for three weeks from East coast to West singing about 14 concerts and ending up in Disneyland in Los Angeles. (Well, I was only young at the time!) The main things I remember about Diana's funeral really were watching the hearse procession beginning on the TV and then heading over for the service. I think we probably didn't quite realise how much of a big deal it was until in future years. I remember seeing grown-ups breaking down into tears during the national anthem in the Nave and I remember being a bit star-struck by all the famous faces that were in attendance that day.

Do you play anything beside the piano?

I played violin and viola at

school, and also studied the organ. I got an organ scholarship at St Michael and All Angels church in Croydon in my upper 6th form year, and played most week-ends when I was in London. However, when I started at the University of Manchester I had to choose between piano and organ as my first study instrument and chose piano as I enjoy it more.

What do you do in your spare time?

Sport and music are my two loves. I'm a very keen runner, and I'm now in training for the Manchester Marathon on 19 April. I ran in the London Marathon in 2013, and I'm hoping to do a faster time in Manchester. 3.29.59 is my target time!

Have you settled in Manchester permanently?

I really like living in Manchester. I've even bought a house! It's so much more convenient than London – you can get from one side to the other so quickly and easily. It's also great for music; there's so much going on. And of course my girlfriend Christina, who is a violinist, is here.

Is freelance accompanying your main job?

I also teach piano, and currently have around 20 pupils, aged from 8 to 80, and covering all stages from beginners to degree



level. But accompanying work takes up a lot of my time. I accompany the Keele Bach Choir every Thursday, and have also worked with a number of other choral societies in the area. I play regularly at RNCM for lessons, masterclasses, auditions, recitals and exams, and I also recently played for some of the Hallé choir auditions. I particularly like doing recitals, as it involves a whole wodge of music to learn.

What is it about working with choirs that you like?

I love the music, and being part of something big and organic. It's better if there's a big piano part of course! And I'm really looking forward to working with Neil, Joe and all of you in St George's Singers.

When you're not running or making music, what do you like to do?

Looking after my dog, Toby! He's a golden retriever, and he's 16 months old.

THE CURSE OF THE LIBRARIAN

BY GWYNETH PAILIN

The god Marduk with his pet dragon, on the lookout for recalcitrant book borrowers



During an archaeological tour of Cyprus last year our guide Gillian Hovell, 'The Muddy Archaeologist', made reference at one point to the great library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh in the 7th century BC containing over 30,000 cuneiform tablets on a variety of subjects.

What caught my attention, however, were the accounts of punishments to be meted out by the gods to those who did not respect the contents of the library. Admittedly most referred to theft of or damage to tablets but those who returned things late were also to be punished!

A caution to borrowers states: 'He who fears Anu and Antu will take care of the tablet and respect it.'

Here are a few of the curses to be imposed on defaulters:

For damage:

'He who breaks this tablet or puts it in water or rubs it until you cannot recognise it and cannot make it be understood, may the Gods of heaven and earth and the gods of Assyria [ten are named] curse him with a curse that cannot be relieved, terrible and merciless, as long as he lives, may they let his name, his seed, be carried off from the land, may they put his flesh in a dog's mouth.'

For theft:

'Whoever removes the tablet, writes his name in place of my name, may Shur and Ninlil, angered and grim, cast him

down, erase his name, his seed, in the land.'

For passing it on to others:

'He who fears Marduk and Sarpanitum will not entrust it to others' hands. (He who does)...may all the gods who are found in Babylon curse him.'

And last but not least for late returns (to a private library):

'He who fears Anu, Enil and Ea will return it to the owner's house the same day.'

St George's Singers: you have been warned!

WE ARE NOT AMUSICS

MUSICAL MUSINGS

Music is the silence between the notes.

Claude Debussy

History is littered with figures noted for their hopeless unmusicality. Ulysses S Grant, the 18th president of the United States, had a tin ear and found music profoundly irritating; Che Guevara famously couldn't distinguish one piece of music from another. Once, such people would have been described as 'tone deaf'; today they are seen as much more interesting than that.

In the past few years it has become clear that the inability to hold a tune can sometimes be caused by a neurological condition called 'congenital amusia', which completely robs people of what is normally an instinctive and spontaneous appreciation of music. No wonder the condition has become a major research topic in the bid to understand the mysteries of how the brain handles music.

The first case reported of 'note deafness' appeared in 1878, and

the literature is full of anecdotal accounts of people with a life-long failure of music perception. It wasn't until 2002, however, that the first proper study of congenital amusia was published. A team of researchers at the University of Montreal in Canada reported the case of Monica, a woman in her early 40s who had always lacked even the most basic of musical abilities.

Researchers concluded that Monica's problem was a failure to detect pitch changes in melodies. Played two notes in sequence, she could rarely tell whether the second was higher or lower than the first or had the same pitch. Most people can easily distinguish small differences in pitch – half a semitone, say – but for amusics, even a leap of an octave, equivalent to the first two notes of *Somewhere Over The Rainbow*, can be barely perceptible. Tones and semitones are the building blocks of melody, so no wonder amusics find music monotonous in more than one sense of the word.

Since then the researchers have documented dozens of similar cases. These people all have normal hearing, intelligence and memory, but absolutely no grasp of melody. For them, one tune sounds very much like another, familiar songs are unrecognisable without lyrics, and dissonant chords that cause most of us to wince elicit no response. Amusics cannot sing, though they often don't recognise this. The condition is unusual but not particularly rare – the accepted figure is 4 per cent of the population – and it runs in families.

So what causes congenital amusia? The best explanation is that the human brain is equipped with a specialised 'module' for processing melody, which occasionally fails to develop properly. That would explain why amusia appears to affect musical perception alone. If correct, music, like language, is an innate human adaptation that was hard-wired into our brains by evolution.

Based on an article in *New Scientist*, February 2008



Che was onto the second movement of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* when Mao pointed out that they were supposed to be playing John Lee Hooker's *Boom Boom*

FOR HE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW ...

St George's Singers' Assistant Musical Director, Joe Judge, has been named as one of the eight singers selected for the National Youth Chamber Choir's (NYCC) inaugural Fellowship programme. The Fellowship will run from September 2015 – August 2016 and is a brand new professional development programme which aims to create the most highly-skilled and multi-talented young choral singers in the UK. It is aimed at ambitious and creative people who not only want to become part of the professional choral network, but who want to shape and enhance it.

The year-long Fellowship will provide the eight singers – some of the best young singers in the world – between the ages of 22 and 25 with a unique package of training and benefits including training in performance, ensemble work, musical leadership and teaching to enable the singers to become outstanding performers and educators, equipped for a successful career in choral music.

The singers will each receive an award of £4,000 for the 50 days of engagements and training including concerts, recording projects, tours, teaching and workshop engagements, international events and educational projects, both as a part of the 24-strong National Youth Chamber Choir and independently. Individually, they will learn how to be effective choral leaders through sessions from some of the industry's best conductors, teachers and mentors, plus a range of other skills such as improvising, jazz singing and using extended vocal techniques.

Over 50 singers from around the UK applied for the programme. Joe was awarded the Fellowship following a demanding three-round audition process which included solo performance, sight-reading of contemporary vocal scores, on-the-spot improvisation and

ensemble work. NYCC is the 24-voice senior ensemble of the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain, and the mixed-voice octet will form the core of the Choir, performing throughout the UK and abroad. The NYCC performs 5–10 engagements annually, encompassing performance, education and recording projects.

'It's very exciting to have been picked as one of the NYCC's Fellows on the inaugural scheme,' says Joe. 'It will be a mix of performing (both as the Fellowship Octet and as part of the NYCC) and teaching, whilst also receiving guidance of how best to deliver that knowledge to singers as a choral leader. It seems like an excellent opportunity to develop my skills in all these areas, and I'm very much looking forward to the experience!'

Joe standing head and shoulders above his fellow Fellows



Photo © Graeme Robertson

A MESSAGE FROM ALAN

You can't imagine my embarrassment when at the choir's summer social I was presented with an 80th birthday card. Then to find inside it a bundle of vouchers for the Bridgewater Hall, the Royal Exchange and a local eating establishment: this was all too much. I was lost for words, as I often am, for this act of kindness. Together with these was a superb double CD called *Alan's Desert Island Discs* which featured in *Hemiola* several months ago. It is a very professional compilation with a beautiful sleeve; it must have taken hours to make. Thank you Susan; I shall treasure it.

With the Royal Exchange vouchers Grace and I enjoyed Tennessee Williams' *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* then later on *The Little Shop Of Horrors*. Not exactly my choice of musical but it was a brilliant performance and very entertaining.

A concert at the Bridgewater Hall by the BBC Phil featured one of my favourite symphonies, Saint-Saëns' 3rd, the *Organ Symphony*. Together with Beethoven's 8th and Liszt's Piano Concerto the concert was enjoyed by a packed house. In a few days time I will be enjoying a concert by The Sixteen which includes my favourite sing: *Faire is the Heaven*

followed by Britten's *Hymn to St Cecilia*, and much more.

A lunch at Norbury Farm with two of my best friends completed a fabulous birthday present. Thanks to everyone.

Alan Swain

PS A word of thanks to Mo, the widow of our late friend, bass Elfed Hughes. She gave me his collection of CDs and music to sell for choir funds. So far over £100 has been raised. Thank you Mo.



St George's Singers

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To receive a regular copy of *Hemiola*, complete the Mailing List registration on the website, or contact the Publicity Officer.

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

MANCHESTER (AND SHEFFIELD) SING!

ST GEORGE'S CONCERT DIARY 2014/15

7 March 2015, 7.30 pm

Bach *Magnificat*

Buxtehude *Membra Jesu nostri*

21 June 2015, 7.30 pm

Elgar *The Dream of Gerontius*

3 July 2015, 7.30 pm

Mahler *Symphony no 3*

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

A European Lent

Neil Taylor is guest conductor with the Manchester Chamber Choir on 14 March 2015, 7.30 pm at Christ Church, Didsbury in a concert entitled 'A European Lent'. The programme includes Bach's *Jesu, meine Freude, Fürchte dich nicht*; Victoria's *Tenebrae Responsories*; and Poulenc's *Penitential Motets*. Tickets available from www.wegotickets.com/event/280417 or on the door. www.manchesterchamberchoir.org.uk.

Songs for the Spirit

Neil's other choir, The Sheffield Chorale, who will be singing with St Georges in our performance of *Dream of Gerontius* in June, is giving a concert

on 21 March at Holy Trinity Church, Millhouses (in south-west Sheffield). Entitled 'Songs for the Spirit' the programme includes Poulenc's *Mass in G major*, Howell's *Take him, Earth, for cherishing*; works by James Macmillan including *The Gallant Weaver*, Tavener's *Song for Athene*; and songs by Elgar, Finzi and others. Tickets £10, £8 conc, £6 students, under 16s free. www.sheffieldchorale.co.uk.

Maundy Thursday

The Queen will celebrate the Royal Maundy this year in Sheffield Cathedral on 2 April, when she will distribute the specially minted Maundy mon-

ey to 178 recipients aged over 70 – a man and woman for each year of her life. The choirs of Sheffield Cathedral will be joined by the Choir of the Chapel Royal in singing music by Bruckner, Casals, Handel and Wesley.

Beethoven *Missa Solemnis*

The Hallé Orchestra and Chorus are performing Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* in the Bridgewater Hall on Saturday 6 June. A number of SGS choir members are singing as Associate Members of the Hallé, in what should be a memorable event. Sir Mark Elder conducts, with soloists Elisabeth Llewellyn, Susan Bickley and Allan Clayton.