

Conductor's Report 2009/10

This season has been another bumper year for the Choir, manifesting once again two particular TCS hallmarks - Variety and Innovation.

Variety speaks for itself – we sang German, French and English music; we sang in English and Latin; we sang 18th, 19th, 20th and 21st Century works; we sang unaccompanied, with just one instrument, with a small orchestra, with a large orchestra and with a very large orchestra plus organ and a Boys' Choir!

The big Innovation this season was using an Enlightenment or Classical orchestra for Beethoven's 'Missa Solemnis', an idea that was suggested by a choir member. Bob Porter, our orchestral fixer ('Mr Brandenburg') was keen to give it a go – a new development for him as well. The advantages included the slightly lower pitch which would give the sopranos and tenors some comfort, the gentler quality of the instruments which would help with the balance between choir and orchestra, and of course the greater authenticity of the sound world.

All through the winter term I was thrilled by the way you tackled the difficulties and stresses of Beethoven's masterpiece. You came up with a performance that was exciting, confident and musical. We were also very well served by the splendid solo quartet. Bob Porter was the first to admit, however, that there were some weak links in the orchestra. What a shame, as most of the players were of the extraordinarily high standard we are accustomed to from the Brandenburg stable. So unfortunately this time Innovation proved slightly less than a blessing.

I would like to take a moment to remind us all of some of the Innovations the Choir has introduced at various periods in my time as Conductor. They have always had the full support of the Choir Committee when introduced and are now accepted as the TCS norm by choir members.

In the CD age, when virtually everything has been recorded and authenticity is pretty well taken for granted in the performance of older music, it is hard to cast one's mind back to a period, not so very long ago, when it seemed somewhat eccentric to perform Bach and Handel with quaint woodwind instruments stripped of the metalwork that usually drapes them like ivy, brass instruments without valves and string instruments with gut strings, flat bridges and curiously shaped bows. TCS were really at the cutting edge when they commissioned the then Assistant Conductor, no less a person than Laurence Cummings, to fix a Baroque orchestra. We never looked back!!

I myself can look back at some pretty extraordinary things – particularly to the time when I was a Chorister in the 50s at St Paul's Cathedral – memories of great annual 'Messiah' and 'St Matthew Passion' performances with huge string forces and a whole phalanx of double basses. The crowning glory was the grand piano continuo!! Another memory from those days is the complete absence of foreign languages, particularly German (don't mention the War!). It is curious indeed to remember Allegri's 'Miserere' in a very dull Stainer edition sung in English, as well as Masses by Byrd and Palestrina also sung in English. Admittedly, we were allowed a few anthems in Latin such as Haydn's 'Insanae et vanae curae' and Byrd's 'Ave verum'.

TCS came up against this dilemma when we wanted to do Bach's 'St John's Passion'. Was it to be in English or German? Most Choral Societies at the time tended towards English, not least the London Bach Choir under David Willcocks. We went for German – TCS once again in the vanguard – and have since taken singing in German, French, Latin or Old Church Slavonic for granted. I remember the first time we sang the Passion in German our President Peter Gellhorn remarked how I had 'got away with it' while he, a German by birth, couldn't persuade his Barnes Choir to shift from English!

So, TCS seems to be fearless or at least brave where Innovation is concerned. Maybe this is partly due to the one great Innovation we managed to engineer early on in my time – the introduction of auditions! No one likes auditions but it is surely understood and accepted that they are a necessary evil for maintaining the high standard TCS expects of itself. The big political/educational debate about selection or non-selection in schools will probably rage till the cows come home, but I trust it is a settled issue as far as this Choir is concerned. When I was appointed Conductor in the mid 70s

Finally, while on the subject of Innovation, there is at least one change I would half like to introduce and was tempted to try it out on the Beethoven – singing Latin in the style suited to the period and country of the music. At the moment we sing some sort of portmanteau Italianate Latin, e.g. ‘pacem’ sounding ‘pachem’, while the Germans would sing ‘passem’. I backed off from the idea thinking we had our work cut out preparing the ‘Missa Solemnis’ without introducing complications.

Was I right? I don’t know.

Many choirs would have been proud to have achieved the Beethoven and would then be looking for a quieter life for the rest of the season. But TCS had three more stunning concerts up its sleeve!

In January you sang a masterly Mozart ‘Requiem’ in St Martin in the Fields along with a repeat performance of Iain Farrington’s deeply moving ‘The Burning Heavens’, this time in a new version with strings in addition to the piano. Iain himself wrote:-

Firstly many thanks for everything as always: for putting on the piece a second time, preparing it so well on all accounts, and for giving it such a brilliant performance. That has to have been one of the most hair-raising and terrifying opening downbeats I've ever seen! It set the piece up so well, and the energy of all involved was superb.

I was delighted with how much the piece seemed to be in the choir's blood. There was very little revision required, which showed how thorough the learning process was. As ever, they excelled in all movements, making light of technical difficulties. Do pass on my very best to the choir, I feel proud to have your names at the top of the score.

The Spring Concert was a big stretch for everyone. English Pastoral Music sounds so innocuous. First of all you needed resilience and energy to sing such a large body of works and then you needed considerable skill to negotiate the rather tricky harmonies in nearly all the pieces. In the event, everything came together, the acoustics in the Landmark Arts Centre gave the choral sound wings and I think you achieved a great success. This splendid concert was enhanced by Chris O’Neal’s delicious oboe playing. He wrote:-

Thank you again for inviting me to play such an engaging programme with your choir last weekend. It was a wonderful, and warming, experience for me, and I very much appreciate the friendly welcome I was given by the choir.

It seemed a timely reminder to me of the reasons I took to music with such enthusiasm as a member of a family of amateur musicians. There is a danger of becoming blasé, and sometimes cynical, which every professional musician must beware of, and we need very much to be part of music-making for its own sake and to take every opportunity to do so.

And now we come to the *pièce de résistance*, a concert imbued with *chic, élan* and *panache*, an all-French over-the-top concert with Berlioz’s unashamedly Romantic ‘Te Deum’ full of power

and delicacy and Poulenc's unabashed Modern 'Stabat Mater' tinged with subtle humour and sentiment. You sang superbly, the orchestra was truly ace (thank you, Bob Porter) and we couldn't have asked for two better soloists. Jonny was masterly at the organ and Simon Toyne's Tiffin Boys' Choir gave the occasion the final stamp of authenticity.

Last year my Conductor's report was brief in an effort to tease out more comment from choir members themselves. Here is a pertinent offering from a very experienced chorister albeit one of our newer members:-

I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed Saturday's concert - and it looked as though you did too! It is such a privilege to sing with the full orchestra in such magical pieces as the Poulenc. From the very opening chord of any of his works Poulenc is so distinctive and I love the way he never repeats any phrase without making a subtle little change to it. He captures the ephemeral nature of life's pleasures whilst delighting in them.

I realize that I am often disappointed by the final performance of some other choirs when the concert is trimmed down to piano or organ accompaniment because of costs. We must not fall into that trap at TCS!!

If there are any traps for TCS to fall into, I feel confident that the dedicated and hard working Choir Officers and Committee (whom I thank most warmly) will see them coming and will head off any disasters. The scene is a good one; we have more and more glorious music ahead of us to get our teeth into. Congratulations to all of you for what you have so far achieved and thank you everyone for your sustained enthusiasm and drive.

Christopher Herrick