

Cambridge Taverner Choir – Reflections on the Twentieth Anniversary

This concert marks the twentieth anniversary of the Cambridge Taverner Choir, which gave its first concert in July 1986. That very first concert – only ever intended to be a ‘one-off’ – was a performance of Taverner’s *Missa Gloria tibi Trinitas* at Tattershall Church, Lincolnshire, as the Mass setting in a reconstruction of Mass for Trinity Sunday, as it might have been sung during Taverner’s incumbency there. The concert was directed by John Butt – performing with us tonight – with Owen Rees at the organ. Four of the current choir members were also singing at that concert (Sally Terris, Rupert Preston Bell, James Durran, Gary Snapper.)

The choir came into being at St Catharine’s College, Cambridge, and even today nine of the choir’s twenty regular members are ex-Catz choristers. Owen Rees was organ scholar at St Catharine’s between 1983 and 1986, working closely with John Butt – previously organ scholar at King’s College, who had stepped in to fill an unexpected organ-scholar vacancy at Catz. Both Owen and John shared a passion for early music (as of course did Peter le Huray, at that time director of music at Catz.) Another enthusiast was Dr Alastair Harper, a Cambridge GP (now in Glasgow) who sang with Catz choir at the time. Alastair – particularly keen on the music of Taverner – suggested putting together a choir of choral scholars from King’s and Catz to perform the Mass in its original location, and organised the concert.

The choir has maintained its commitment to Taverner and to Tudor music, marking its tenth anniversary in 1996 with a performance of the *Missa Gloria tibi Trinitas* in Ely Cathedral, for Cambridge Summer Music, as part of a season devoted to the masses of Taverner. During that season, it also commissioned a piece – *Prayer to the Holy Trinity* – by the modern John Tavener, who wrote it as a tribute to the earlier composer. The choir aims to perform the mass – and Tavener’s piece – again to mark its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2011.

Following the original concert in 1986. Owen Rees and Gary Snapper decided to bring the choir together again in order to allow a group of enthusiasts to continue singing together to explore Renaissance choral music, especially the music of England, Spain and Portugal, particular areas of Owen’s expertise. Although it was not envisaged then that the choir would sing for more than a year or so, it has now been going for twenty years, conducted by Owen and administered by Gary, during which time it has sung a season of concerts in Cambridge every year. The choir is perhaps unique amongst provincial chamber choirs in having presented an extremely wide survey of Renaissance choral music in twenty years’ worth of specialist concerts – often in themed seasons, and always in carefully constructed programmes – at semi-professional level, with no grants or subsidy.

The choir’s formation reflected and formed part of the growing interest in performance of Renaissance sacred repertory by specialist ensembles in this country, particularly in the later 1970s and 1980s. That period witnessed lively debates about interpretation (including, for examples, pitch and vocal scoring in Tudor polyphony) many of which have continued to this day. The Cambridge Taverner Choir’s performances have aimed at a thoughtful engagement with such issues, and have as a high priority the expressive shaping of the music (in part, text-inspired) as a reflection of what the music itself seems to invite by the nature of the writing.

One of the choir's chief principles is that programmes should present music in meaningful contexts, whether liturgical or historical, rather than in arbitrary combinations. Seasons have included 'Europe 1500', 'Europe 1600', 'The Golden Age of Spain and Portugal', 'England 1603' and 'The Music of John Taverner', and individual programmes have explored music from England, Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Mexico by Taverner, Tallis, Sheppard, Mundy, Browne, Cornysh, Byrd, Ramsey, Gibbons, Purcell, Victoria, Guerrero, Morales, Lobo (the Spanish), Lobo (the Portuguese), Cardoso, De Cristo, Fernandez, Magalhães, Monteverdi, Palestrina, Gabrieli, Allegri, Lassus, Josquin, Schutz, Bach, Padilla, and many others. Concert programmes are sometimes organised around specific occasions or masses, or explore the music of a particular place at a particular time (eg Lisbon, London, Seville, Antwerp, Venice), or explore connections with particular people (eg the Catholic monarchs in Spain, Elizabeth I, James I, Prince Henry) or explore particular musical, historical or religious themes.

Until a few years ago, the choir sang its annual season of Cambridge concerts at Jesus College Chapel. In latter years, booking and administering the venue became more difficult and so, regrettably, the choir decamped to Little St Mary's Church, where it has found a welcoming new home, as well as another sympathetic medieval environment. Over the years, the audience has been extremely loyal, though the choir continues to work to bring itself to the notice of new audiences. The choir's four successful recordings – all of which received considerable acclaim in the classical music press – have helped to cement its reputation for high musical standards; the first CD – *Music from Renaissance Portugal* – reached the shortlist of six for the Gramophone Early Music Award – a highlight of the last twenty years.

The music of Portugal has been a recurrent theme, inspired by Owen Rees's main research interest. During the 1990s, the choir performed a range of pieces of extremely high quality – mainly from the Royal Monastery of Santa Cruz in Coimbra – which Owen had recovered and transcribed from rapidly disintegrating manuscripts in the library there, many sung for the first time in four hundred years. Another of the highlights of the choir's twenty years was the tour to Portugal in 1991, during which the choir sang these pieces to a huge and excited local audience at the Monastery of Santa Cruz – the first time they had been heard there for four hundred years. Members of the audience thanked the choir emotionally for 'bringing back our music to us.'

The choir has occasionally sung non-Renaissance music, and has a particularly strong affinity with Bach (this is the second time we have sung the complete motets), with Britten, and with the music of Taverner and Part. It has even made one highly uncharacteristic foray into the nineteenth century music – Brahms! A season of twentieth-century British music is planned for sometime in the next few years.

People often ask about how the choir and its members operate. The choir consists of Owen Rees and 20 members – 8 sopranos, 4 altos, 4 tenor and 4 basses – and there is no re-auditioning. For the record, 19 of these were undergraduate or graduate students in Cambridge (nine at Catz and others from Selwyn, Homerton, Caius, Magdalen, Queens', St John's and Downing) and two in Oxford. Six read English, four read music, and others read Geography, Education, Modern Languages, Law, Natural Sciences, and Medicine.

In addition there is an extensive and excellent list of 'deps', some of whom sing on a very regular basis. As members have left over the years, new ones have been invited to take their place, but in fact the membership has been extremely stable, All but two became members between 1986 and 1993; of those, 11 joined before 1990. In the very early years, most members lived in Cambridge, but gradually members have moved away so that now only six live in Cambridge (with four in Oxford, three in London, and others coming from Sheffield, Winchester, Tunbridge Wells, Chester, Devon and Hampshire.)

In order to accommodate this geographically disparate membership, the choir has devised a particular system of rehearsals. With most concerts happening on a Sunday evening in Cambridge, the choir rehearses for five hours on the day before the concert and for a couple of hours on the day of the concert. Additionally, it rehearses for five hours on the Saturday of the previous weekend, meeting in London (until very recently, at Christchurch, Hampstead.) Thus each concert is prepared in concentrated rehearsals in the eight days before the concert.

These concentrated weekends have been a good solution in many ways, and have enabled choir membership to stay stable for many years; most choir members speak of the particular pleasures (social and musical) of singing with such a stable group. However, as choir members have acquired families and demanding jobs, these weekends have at times been a source of stress and logistical difficulty. Choir members have 21 children between them, and the choir contains four married couples, as well as one set of siblings. (At times, the choir has had three other sets of siblings, and three other married couples singing, and members' partners and families often come along to support or child-mind.) The choir includes two barristers, six academics, six teachers, a GP, three business executives, a publisher, a music administrator and two BBC producers. The pressures of two consecutive weekends of rehearsal and performance away from home can be considerable in this context.

Owen Rees's direction has been inspirational over twenty years, and he has often spoken of his particular commitment to an amateur choir aiming for professional standards – in which the singers are doing it purely for love, not money. His rehearsals are characterised by great love for the music, and enormous energy, integrity and good humour: his capacity for outlandish metaphors, Monty Python quotes, Star Trek references, and humorous anecdotes has remained constant throughout.

On the odd occasion when Owen has been unable to conduct, the choir has engaged other directors: Stephen Layton, John Butt, Paul Nicholson, David Allinson, and Rupert Preston Bell – both the latter also singers with the choir.

In addition to its musical aspect, the choir is a charitable association, which is administered by a committee of three (Gary Snapper, Chair; Diana Baumann, Secretary; Rupert Preston Bell, Treasurer); none of the choir's members – nor its musical director – receive any payment, and almost all income from ticket sales goes to paying for publicity, rehearsal and concert venue hire, music, recording costs, and occasional paid administrative help.

Gary Snapper, June 2006

Cambridge Taverner Choir - Members 2006:

Sopranos: Diana Baumann, Josie Dixon, Helen Garrison, Rachel Godsill, Hester Higton, Caroline Preston Bell, Sally Terris, Tanya Wicks,
Altos: Toby Gee, Simon Godsill, Rachel Howells, Rupert Preston Bell
Tenors: Paul Baumann, Tom Salmon, Edwin Simpson, David Thomson
Basses: James Durran, Frank Salmon, Gary Snapper, Paul Watson

Regular deps:

Sopranos: Helen Arnold, Andrea Blakesley, Kathy Medlow, Kate Semmens, Rosemary Tusa
Altos: Suzanne Aspden, Rachael Beale, Bill Budd, Zara Wright, Helen Zimmer
Tenors: David Allinson, Mark Dourish, Nick Marston
Basses: Rupert Beale, Kieran Cooper, Stephen Jones

Previous choir members:

Judith Henderson, Veronica Henderson, Karen Kerlake, Janice Carruthers, Meurig Bowen, Mike Entwistle, Alex Kremer, Alastair Harper, Mel Taylor, Kathy Willis, Emily Hayes, Alison Smart, Julia Hollander, Jan Brown, Mark Le Brocq, Jeremy Hayter, Keith Bryant, James Gilchrist, Philip Mills, Alicia Carroll, Virginia Knight, Aidan Cruttenden, James Black, Tim Dallosso, Margie Simper, Finlay Lockie, Bernadette Nelson, Tim Cronin, Jon Arnold, Peter Smith, David Trendell, Stephen Lawrence, Damian Kerney, Martin Neill, Nick Perkins, Vijay Rangarajan, Bill Byrne