

Musical Memories ...

In June 2018 I retired from the Salisbury Musical Society after 50 years, and 74 years of choral singing altogether. The SMS has presented almost all of its concerts in Salisbury Cathedral for the last 95 years, and I was in well over half of them. My unbroken association with church music began in 1944 and has not ceased yet; I still play the organ in several south Wiltshire churches. I have been invited to write this article by way of a tribute to the many individuals and institutions, and the whole era, which have nurtured this life in music.

I was lucky to have been born into a musical family; many singers, pianists and organists, amateur composers and conductors; a cellist; and appreciative church and concert goers. None achieved national fame, but many were well known and much respected in their own areas. We had family musical gatherings which, a generation before, might have qualified as musical soirees, and they were so varied. One grandmother loved operetta, music hall and parlour songs. We always sang such gems as *Excelsior* when we went to see her; and she had a gramophone on which we played everything from Chaliapin to The Laughing Postman. There was no volume control on the gramophone but one could open the doors on the front and put a cushion in it to lessen the noise. The other grandmother was into church music; she had a harmonium on which I played hymns from an early age.

My parents were both good singers and pianists and played piano duets. After the war they were members of The Goldsmiths' Choral Union, once conducted by Richard Godfrey's uncle

Freddie Haggis. I went to concerts by myself, from age 12, and soon learnt the difference between a recitative and an aria! My father who once had singing lessons with Dr Malcolm Sargent, was still singing solos, composing and conducting at 88, less than a year before he died in 2000.

My own musical life would probably have got started earlier if it had not been for the war; for 6 years the Sturgesses were rather like one of the lost tribes of Israel, wandering in the wildernesses of Kent, Middlesex, Lancashire, Hampshire and Surrey. Then from 1944 onwards I had a succession of memorable school teachers and choirmasters, and this article is written in profound gratitude to them all.

Many of our teachers during the war were either invalids or very old people brought out of retirement as their contribution to the war effort. I can recall two in particular who must have been born in the 1870s; one of them was Mrs Westcott at Brookwood Primary School, Surrey, whose birthday coincided with mine. Mrs Westcott did country dancing and I spent my 10th birthday taking part in a country dancing display on her lawn. She also did singing. She stood on the stage at school dressed in a long black dress like a Giles cartoon, and did singing. She taught us, 'and to hear the fond tale of the sweet nightingale as it sings in the valley below-ho-ho, low-ho-ho, low-ho-ho' as her vast body swung to and fro in rhythm. Then came Woking Grammar School, and my first Messiah at the age of 10, accompanied by piano duet including the geography teacher Mr Minney on the piano, and conducted by Norman Askew, who was shortly to leave to become County Advisor.

I was at those schools for a total of 3 years. During the third I started piano lessons, and throughout all 3 years I was in the choir at St Saviour's Church, Brookwood, my introduction to 74 years of church and choral music. Our choirmaster was Mr Horswell, a master mason. As a younger man he had worked on Epstein's Christ in Majesty at Llandaff; when I knew him he was Master Mason in the Brookwood Necropolis, that wonderful cemetery the other side of the railway where, one day, my ashes will be spread, because it was at Brookwood that my musical life really got going. One highlight was carol singing round the village, in total blacked-out darkness; we sang all sorts of interesting carols you never hear now.

In 1947 we moved to Beckenham, Kent. I went to St Paul's Church, West Kensington, and joined St Paul's Beckenham church choir (no connection). As at previous schools, I recall virtually nothing of class music lessons, apart from when we were invited to the Director of Music's flat (Ivor Davies) to listen to recordings of Haydn symphonies, while allegedly following miniature scores – except that we were given no instruction how to do that. It was the extra-curricular music that counted.

We did have memorable hymn practices. One speciality was *Ring out, ye crystal spheres*, with words by John Milton. Milton himself, an old boy of the school, was looking down on us as we sang, from the stained glass windows. Again I was in the choir, another Messiah, and also a performance of Constant Lambert's *Rio Grande*, written just 20 years previously. We also had concerts by invited artists; probably the most memorable was RVW's 1938 Serenade to Music, with all the original cast. At school I was also in the Scouts and

experienced my atmospheric camp fires with unaccompanied singing, sometimes in parts, led by one of the original pioneer Scouts, the Revd Chris Heath.

The church choir was not particularly good but there were many incidental benefits to my membership of it. There were three of us whose voices were changing at the same time; we used to stand together and nudge each other to swap parts, S-A-T-B and back, almost bar by bar, marvellous sight reading practice! I also taught myself a lot of harmony by studying the hymn book during the sermon. We sang in a memorial service to Sir Sydney Nicholson who died in 1947; and the choirmaster Harry Jessop was the first person ever to let me try playing a pipe organ – that is how many organists of my generation began.

In 1952 we moved again and I was able to join the choir at Holy Trinity Church Roehampton, which Douglas Guest in the guise of an RSCM inspector, once called the best parish church choir he had ever heard. It was run for nearly 60 years by Donald Emery (1901-85) who took it on during WW1 at the age of 14. During three well attended services a week we sang hundreds of different hymns, anthems and settings. We sang whole movements of Bach, Mendelssohn and Brahms as anthems during Communion. After choir practice until about half an hour before the pubs closed we explored other oratorios and anthems we had never done before.

In 1961 my musical apprenticeship came to an end as I swapped careers and prepared to be in charge myself.

From 1962-4 as a mature student at Bognor Regis Teachers' Training College I was in the college choir and madrigal group, which were run by two totally





contrasting people, Dr Idris Thomas and Mrs Betty Gordon. I learned the cello (a bit) and took singing lessons using as my audition piece an aria from Mendelssohn's *Elijah* which I had learned at Roehampton. Dr Thomas had an eye for the exotic. Who could forget a pianist called Neil Van Allen rebounding off the piano stool in Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody*, or a Red Indian soloist in the Easter Hymn from *Cavalleriano Rusticana*? A fellow student called Helen Mynett with a voice like Emma Kirkby, without vibrato, sang the solo in Stanford's exquisite *Bluebird*. I was introduced to all sorts of music which even Don Emery could not give us. College certainly opened my eyes and broadened my horizons.

So from 1964 to 1989 I was a teacher and went on learning; you learn by teaching and by doing. I did lots of research and learnt a great deal both about music and about, and from, children. In all three of my schools the pupils achieved standards well beyond anything that might have been expected. Apart from the music, they learned co-operation, responsibility, order and punctuality, and all the other benefits of belonging to choirs and orchestras. I was particularly proud of my success in getting boys to take part on at least an equal basis with the girls. One of them, John Blake, has been playing in the Salisbury Symphony Orchestra for years, while I sang, right up to my last concert.

In April 1981 some of my boys from a council estate in Romsey took part in the SMS performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. That was under Richard Seal who had admitted me to SMS in 1968 – I think I was his first auditionee when he took up the post of SMS Conductor. Highlights of my 50 year membership are too many to mention, though one early one was Sweelinck's *Hodie* at

Midnight Communion before the boys started singing that service. There were my first War Requiem and first Berlioz *Te Deum* (following hearing it at the Proms with Colin Davies and sitting alongside the organ pipes – what a thrilling noise!). I persuaded Richard to let us do Puccini's *Missa di Gloria*, which Dr Thomas had conducted at Bognor in only its 9th ever performance. There were also several chances to sing my favourite work of all, Brahms' *German Requiem* with its emphasis on comfort, alongside two of the most exciting passages in all choral music.

All those were under Richard Seal. Then David Halls took over the SMS and soon afterwards came the Millennium exchange with the Berlin Philharmonie, another highlight. It has been a real pleasure to work with David in so many ways. I am going to presume to use his own expression and call him my colleague and friend. He was so kind when my father died when I was SMS Librarian (as was June Osborne incidentally) and 17 years later when I had heart surgery. One day I hope David will complete his contribution to my life by playing the organ for my funeral! He is 28 years younger than me so that should be alright! What's more it will take us back to 1944 to the very earliest days in Mr Horsewell's Brookwood choir. At the age of 9 I soon realised that *Regent Square* is a good tune to sing – the words might be a bit beyond me but looking at those ageing grandmothers I was intrigued by the idea of bodily renewal in heaven (I really did think like that when I was 9). Anyway, 'religion is something children should grow into, not out of' (Dean John Arnold of Durham) and I suppose I have gradually understood a bit more over the subsequent 74 years. So my last ever hymn will be *Light's Abode, celestial Salem*. Something to look forward to!!

As a relic of all this, including nearly 20 years' membership of The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland, I have a roomful of music, some of it a hundred or more years old, maybe valuable, certainly rare and irreplaceable – I'm

sure it will be skipped when I go, so if anybody has any ideas, do get in touch with me via the Friends' office!

Malcolm Sturgess

