

A letter from the conductor...

Tony would like to share some of his thinking about future plans with the choir and everyone interested.

Music for next term – from darkness to light, from old to new

Our 2012 Christmas concert is on 15th December, in the heart of the season of Advent. This is a time of reflection about the approaching celebration of the birth of Christ, and second in the Christian yearly cycle only to Lent as a time of penitence and preparation. But whereas Lenten church music includes such pieces as litanies and requiems, Advent music is about anticipating Christ's coming, based on the symbolism of darkness into light, with the lighting of Advent candles in churches, and often using ancient and thrilling words of prophecy. Some Advent music is old and so are the words of the carols we sing. So we will be performing a mix of old music and also modern settings of old words. But just as Advent moves into Christmas, so will our music emerge from the sombre tone of Advent to the joyful brightness of the Christmas season.

The centrepiece of our Advent music will be J.S Bach's cantata 150, *Sleepers Awake! (Wachet auf!)* with each of the three verses of the familiar chorale melody of that name set differently, and separated by recitatives and duets for soprano, tenor and bass. The words of the chorale picture the watchman on the walls of Jerusalem waking the wise virgins who have trimmed their lamps in readiness for the Messiah's coming. The duets are rather startlingly like love duets – though theologically they are duets between Christ and one of the wise virgins who represents Christ's bride, the Church – but none the less affectionate for that!

We shall start the concert with an innovation – the mediaeval 'Responsory', sung under the tower, adapted for the King's College Cambridge Advent Carol Service from Matins for the First Sunday in Advent with music by Palestrina. The choir will then process in, while everyone sings the ancient fourth century hymn by St Ambrose *Come Thou Redeemer of the earth*.

Our Advent carols and hymns are again a mix of old and new. Britten set the 14th *Hymn to the Virgin* in 1930 when he was a 17 year old schoolboy. Herbert Howells *A Spotless Rose is Blowing* is a version of the old German carol *Es ist ein Ros Entsprungen*, evoking the sway of the rose in the wind in the dark of midnight and recalling the prophecy of Isaiah. *Adam lay y-bounden* (set by Boris Ord) and *This is the Truth Sent from Above* (a traditional folk song arranged by Vaughan Williams) both tell the story of the fall of man and the hope of redemption. And I can never resist including David Willcocks' wonderful arrangement of *Of the Father's Heart Begotten*, words by Prudentius written in the 4th century and original music from the 16th century *Piae Cantiones*, with its spectacular descant final verse.

The link between old and new comes from Handel's *Messiah*, with the great prophetic declaration of both spiritual comfort and topsy-turvy revolution from Isaiah – *Comfort ye* and *Every Valley shall be Exalted*, sung by our tenor soloist. Then we will all take the journey from darkness to light in joining in our own (rather good) Sussex Carol – *All out of Darkness we have Light, which made the Angels Sing this Night*.

We tell the Christmas story through a brief extract from Bach's Christmas Oratorio, recounting the angel's appearance to the shepherds. And then we sing a selection of carols by modern composers, many of which will bridge the centuries by setting mediaeval words, interspersed with what have become popular readings. So I do hope that a big choir and audience (with plenty of opportunity to join in the singing!) will be in St Mary's to enjoy this varied programme.

Opportunities for new soloists

I remember very well back in 1980 my pleasure when asked to sing the bass solos in the Mozart *Requiem* by the Shoreham Oratorio Choir. I was in practice as a solicitor in Hove, but had begun after university to study singing with Harold Child, a well-known Brighton teacher who had himself been a good friend of the Sussex composer Roger Quilter. Lessons with him were wonderfully enhanced by his wife Stella squeezing in 30 minutes of accompanying me between her own piano teaching. I went in for classes in the Brighton Competitive Music Festival and occasionally won! This led in due course to being asked to sing solos with a variety of choirs around Sussex for whom (I assume) the ambition for good quality soloists had to be tempered by affordable fees!

I have never forgotten the generosity of such choirs in asking me to sing with them in this way – indeed, if I hadn't started to do so with SOC, I would never have come to take an interesting in choir training and conducting, with twelve years as SOC's conductor under my belt (and braces, of course, for security's sake...)

Hence my enthusiasm for giving young and developing talent the chance to sing solos with us, repaying the gratitude that I feel for those who gave me a chance to sing solos in so many choral masterpieces all those years ago. I have two main sources for these, and have developed a third which we shall be using for our Christmas 2012 concert. The wonderful soloists we sang with at Christmas 2011 and Good Friday 2012 exemplify the other two. First, Lancing College, with which (and particularly with its excellent Music Department) we have developed a very happy link, provided four excellent soloists for our Christmas *Messiah*, with Joe Wicks returning in another guise to play the organ for our Good Friday concert. Their CVs in the programme already sounded like seasoned professionals, with Ella being a BBC ChoirGirl of the Year and Joe due to become Organ Scholar at St John's College Cambridge (as prestigious as King's to many).

For Good Friday 2012 we acquired a quartet of Penny Jenkins' pupils – some like Fiona (soprano) and Hilary (mezzo) quite well-established already, but with both Richard (tenor) and Ed (bass) starting out as solo singers, and all were very good. Neil and Penny Jenkins really help SOC a good deal, with Neil a practical President of the choir able to recommend singers from their excellent AIMS Summer Schools for singers. We remember Frederique Klooster, who emerged from that source at the start of her singing career and performed the Haydn Nelson Mass with us in Shoreham and Elmshorn.

My third source harks back to my early days as a competitor in local music festivals. In a weak but fortunate moment, I offered to sponsor the Recital Class for Springboard, the newly revived Brighton Competitive Music Festival. As an extra inducement (and entirely without the Committee's approval which I forgot to seek, but which I am relieved to say has been given retrospectively) I offered any winner deemed worthy enough the chance of a solo spot at SOC's Christmas concert. I duly attended the class (it's one that long ago I won jointly with a young soprano Tracy Chadwell who tragically died of cancer a good few years ago) and entirely agreed with the adjudicator Gaynor about the first and second singers, who have both agreed to come to sing on 15th December. They are tenor Hiroshi Kanazawa, who studied Russian in Tokyo before coming to London to study music at Trinity and Guildhall Schools of Music, and soprano Rozz Lloyd-Bostock, about to start her music studies in London. I know you will enjoy their singing very much. I will let everyone know who the bass soloist is in due course and their CVs will appear on the website.

It is such a boost to up-and-coming singers to have the chance to sing with choirs and indeed orchestras too and continuing this tradition with SOC gives me enormous personal pleasure, as well as ensuring an excellent supply of soloists.

See you (bringing along lots of friends to join the choir, I hope) in September for some singing, but also a goodly number in our garden on Saturday 16 June from 3 pm onwards.

Tony Allen