FOREWORD

I have long cherished the wish to record Messiah with New College Choir. Encouraged by our success with another classic, Bach’s St John Passion, I thought I should push ahead with the still more demanding project of Handel’s masterpiece. The occasion of my thirty years at New College, coinciding with my sixtieth birthday, provided the impetus to get it done in 2006. The project is also, and very decidedly, a celebration of the Choir’s continued excellent work in the field of performance. It has many enterprising recordings to its name, with an accent on the unusual and rarely recorded music. At the same time it might fairly aspire to record one of the great monuments of the choral repertory. This it has duly done, thanks to the help of many supporters and friends.

Our recording of Messiah is based on performances Handel himself directed in 1751, when he have allocated both the chorus soprano parts and the solo arias to boy trebles. Replicating these conditions is not simply an historical conceit, but the projection of the qualities and character of a collegiate choir into the very heart of Messiah, reinforced by the use of countertenor, tenor and bass soloists all emanating from the same background. The recording is intentionally a manifesto: here is what a collegiate choir with trebles can achieve, admirably supported by one of the UK’s leading early music ensemble, the Academy of Ancient Music. I believe the recording will remind us of the unique musical asset the UK has in its choral foundations, one that really does allow us to sing Hallelujah!

NEW COLLEGE CHOIR THIRTY YEARS ON

The Organist’s View

At one level, my ambition has been and remains very simple: to maintain the traditions of the Choir so ably sustained by my predecessors, and to pass them on in as good shape as I found them. I am very conscious of the thread that joins my work to the past. On the other hand, nobody could do this job without living fully in the present: making music on a daily basis is not an occupation for people who wish to live in the past.

What is the same and what has changed? The seemingly immutable bit of the job is processing into chapel at 6.15pm and singing the evening office in the company of 16 boy trebles and a good crowd of clerks (these days 14, as many as we can accommodate in the stalls). The second immutability, I’m pleased to say, is that the College continues to offer its enthusiastic support to the work of the Choir. After that, all change, though scarcely decay. The boys no longer board. They are more difficult to find (though no less accomplished). Their daily routine is somewhat different. They are quite different in attitude. Chorister parents have become friends rather than names and addresses. Securing excellent clerks is now more demanding as the routes to our doorstep have become more complex. Health and Safety, and Risk Assessment add their irksome and often unnecessary
strictures. Fortunately our repertory is not risk assessed, and this has continued to broaden and challenge us. The educational and cultural value of the work of the Choir is now more easily understood, and remarkable changes of attitude within the University have taken place: notably the Music course now contains options in choral practice; and the Research Assessment Exercise welcomes input from university performers, who may now submit their recordings, and indeed their performances in general. For many years New College has been giving its trebles individual singing lessons, which used not to be thought necessary, or even appropriate. In response to the educational and cultural role of the Choir, the many foreign tours have vastly expanded the Choir’s outreach, and its general impact on the musical world. The regular collaborations with leading ‘early music’ orchestras is a relatively new phenomenon, and it has included significant recording projects with The King’s Consort and The Academy of Ancient Music. The profiling of the Choir as a leading musical ensemble with international reach has become an absolute necessity: there is no possibility within the university sector of defining our work as simply ‘liturgical’; we are now part of an educational endeavour on a world stage.

Not that everything is to be counted in terms of what has changed and what has remained. Purely and simply, during the last thirty years there are achievements aplenty of which the Choir can be justifiably proud. They represent what is possible when trebles and clerks alike strain (in the best sense) to give of their very best. Some of these achievements are locked into a chapel context, a private matter between Choir and congregation, where the singing may have taken off in unexpectedly beautiful and affecting ways. Others belong to the touring circuit, when we have enjoyed the benefit of performing a well-rehearsed programme to large and enthusiastic audiences, as far afield as Brazil, Australia, Japan, the USA and Malta. Others relate to our recordings.

The recordings are clearly all-defining, not least because they travel the globe, and in some numbers. Trying to calculate the sales of CDs featuring the Choir is not straightforward. But with the huge tally accounted for in the Agnus Dei releases, with the very successful run of Handel and Purcell projects on Hyperion, with the steady sales of CRD issues (running from 1979), plus a very successful St John Passion on Naxos, and all the odds and ends of the catalogue, we may be approaching a million. These numbers pale besides the outreach provided by radio stations playing our tracks, particularly Classic FM. The phenomenon of being out there’ is relatively new for the Choir, though it has merited it for many decades.

The content of the recordings is also distinctive. We have made a point of championing neglected repertory. Many releases are first recorded performances, right back to the early 1980s, when hitherto unrecorded motets of Byrd appeared. Many corners of the English choral tradition have been illuminated for the first time on the CRD label (Tye, Tallis, Tomkins, Gibbons, Croft, Greene, Boyce, etc). Other labels have carried first recorded performances of music by Le Jeune, du Caurroy, Desmarest, Lalande, Mondenville, Lassus, Palestrina, de Monte, not to mention Purcell and Handel (with The King’s Consort). Alongside, we have not been afraid to swim in more populated waters, always hoping that our approach would vindicate overlapping repertory. Sometimes this required
determination (for instance, not to heed the advice of a major independent label to drop our St John project, though Naxos has cleared twenty-five thousand copies). And it required more than sang froid to contemplate another version of Messiah . . .

What inevitably strikes me about all this is that it has been achieved not by a group of fully-trained and widely experienced singers, but by a cohort of boys and students who are undergoing training, and gaining experience, with the help of some part-time professional singers (our layclerks). Nothing could speak more eloquently of the value of training people ‘on the job’, of challenging them to meet goals that look unattainable (ask a probationer what he thinks about the work of a senior chorister), and in believing in the product before proof of its quality is available. Compared with directing a fully-trained professional group, large quantities of energy and application are required just to build the instrument. The rewards however are clear: no tired professionalism on the block, choristers whose rate of development puts a Porsche to shame, commitment and enthusiasm re-energising the whole (including the director), and flexibility.

And buried at the very heart of the Choir, the daily office. What does this contribute? Its effects can be divided between the spiritual and the educative. On the first, singing an office is not singing a concert: the two sides of the choir face each other (not the congregation), and sing to fulfil the requirements of the liturgy. The value of what we do is not measured by anybody’s reaction save our own. The music becomes a gift we share, and we articulate our dependence on a higher, all-powerful presence, encouraging at least a degree of humility. Educationally, this environment provides an ideal place for the growth and development of the Choir: promoting a critical self-awareness, providing daily challenges but not a daily Everest, offering an appropriate place for emerging talents to flourish, creating a disciplined structure for choral experience. Had William of Wykeham got beyond thinking about the repose of his soul, he might have had a glimmering of these advantages. In a manner which is both surprising and obvious, the Anglican routine provides the non plus ultra of a modern pedagogical environment. Today’s specialists would be incapable of discovering, or at least of putting it into place. Thank God for those who did have the vision to set it all going, and thank God for the innumerable generations who have kept it going.

And the future? I remain convinced of the widespread support for the Choir, support which reasonably enough is conditional on our maintaining high standards. Financial pressures are not bearing down on us in Oxford (at the moment), though other pressures are: maintaining healthy levels of recruitment in a world neglectful of our choral tradition; a descending age of puberty in boys; future prospects for combining my Organist’s post with an academic position; the place of the Church of England in public life; downturns in artistic funding not only in this country but abroad (limiting our touring); further downturns in the world of commercial recording. There will be ways of weathering all these but the falling age of puberty. Nevertheless, compared with how things were two generations ago, we are much more challenged. Nothing can be taken for granted. The paradox is that what looks to the outside world as one of the unchanging faces of our national life is now
maintained in a delicate ecosystem. The Organist’s job has never been dull, and it clearly won’t be in the future. Floreat Collegium Novum!

Edward Higginbottom, July 2006

SPONSORS OF MESSIAH

Bringing this project to fruition has required a very special effort and significant levels of generosity from many people. At the outset we were greatly encouraged by a contribution from New College and its Development Fund, between them meeting well over a quarter of the costs. Our chorister parents were extremely active, setting in train an auction of Messiah movements. The auction raised over half the total amount we needed. Other contributions have come through a general appeal to members of the College, many of them former members of the Choir. The Choir Association of the College was especially pro-active in approaching former choristers and clerks. It is a great pleasure to be able to list the names of donors, and to repeat our heartfelt thanks to each one of them. The names fall into two categories, sponsors of individual movements, and those making general contributions.

Sponsors of individual movements of Messiah

Part 1

1  Sinfony  Tom Edwards
2  Comfort ye, my people  Nigel Denton
3  Ev’ry valley shall be exalted  Bob Lowrie
4  And the glory of the Lord  Dr Stephen Page and Anthea Morland
5  Thus saith the Lord of Hosts Greg Yates, in loving memory of Susan Langtree
6  But who may abide the day of His coming?  Nadine Majaro and Roger Pilgrim
7  And He shall purify the sons of Levi Teresa, Jeremy, Hugh and Aidan Irwin-Singer
8  Behold, a virgin shall conceive  Andrew Boggis
9  O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion  Stuart Millman
10  For behold, darkness shall cover the earth  John and Valerie Hess
The people that walked in darkness

For unto us a Child is born Mr & Mrs Mitson and Mr & Mrs Hobday

Pifa

There were shepherds abiding in the field James, Edward, Tristan and Caspian

in loving memory of Helen Mitchard

And lo, the Angel of the Lord

And the angel said unto them

And suddenly, there was with the angel

Glory to God in the highest

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion

Then shall the eyes of the blind be open'd

He shall feed His flock like a shepherd

His yoke is easy, His burthen is light

in memory of Mary Schroeder

Part 2

Behold the Lamb of God

He was despised and rejected

Surely, He hath borne our griefs

And with His stripes we are healed

All we like sheep have gone stray

All they that see Him, laugh Him to scorn

He trusted in God that He would deliver him

Thy rebuke hath broken His heart

Behold, and see if there be any sorrow

He was cut off out of the land of the living

and family, in memory of John Rucker
Part 3

43 I know that my Redeemer liveth In memory of John Harper and Eva Harvey
44 Since by man came death In memory of Marjorie M. Crook, from her family
45 Behold, I tell you a mystery Malcolm Carlisle
46 The trumpet shall sound In memory of Simon Hobart
47 Then shall be brought to pass .. Peter, Tessa, Matthew, Stephen-Peter Kirk

in memory of Leonard and Betty Kirk

48 O death, where is thy sting Lance Pierson
49 But thanks be to God In honour of Colin Gordon
50 If God is for us Julian and Philippa Walker
51 Worthy is the Lamb that was slain The Revd Canon Dr Jane Shaw
52 Amen In honour of William of Wykeham

General contributions