

Whitehall Choir nears 60 – a brief history

In 1941 a small group of Board of Trade civil servants started meeting at lunchtimes to sing madrigals. It helped to take their minds off the Blitz, and at first I dare say that was the summit of their ambitions. But by 1943 the group had grown large, and permanent, enough for its founder, Vivienne Constantinides, to decide to form it into a regular Choir – the Board of Trade Choir. Over the subsequent fifty years that choir - since renamed Whitehall Choir – has gone from strength to strength, and what started as a lunchtime diversion has turned into a regular participant in the London musical scene.

The Choir's archives do not, unfortunately, reveal where and when the first public performance took place. The first records (but without programme details) we have are for a carol recital on Wednesday 20 December 1944 in St Margaret's Church, Westminster. (We do, however, know that there had been some earlier performances. A church magazine dating from 1968 tells us that a group called the Board of Trade Singers had given a lunchtime recital of carols in St Stephen's Church, Westminster in December 1942.) Then, on Saturday 12 May 1945, in St Margaret's (which was to prove a favourite for many years), the Choir gave a performance of Handel's *Messiah*. Sadly, in those days the finances did not stretch to an orchestra, although we did manage a solo trumpet, played by Frank Buck. The organ was played by G T Pattman and Albert Whitnall conducted - as he was to do for the next five years.

In 1946 the Choir achieved a double first: its first premiere of a new work - an oratorio called *Sanctuary* by Albert Whitnall – and its first newspaper review. Unfortunately, the critic (F.B., writing for - to judge from the typeface - *The Daily Telegraph*) was not particularly impressed by the work, although he complimented the 'good will and accuracy' with which the Choir sang. Around this time the Choir established its near-perennial custom of singing carols. In 1945 it was the first choir to sing carols in Trafalgar Square; and in December 1948 when the first Christmas tree donated by the Norwegians was erected there, the Choir was invited to give a recital as part of Whitehall's expression of thanks.

The Choir's breadth of musical vision was evident from early days. In its first half-dozen years (during which Robert Noble took up the conductor's baton) the works performed ranged from *Merrie England* and *Tom Jones* through *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* to the differing solemnities of Fauré's *Requiem* and Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. Primarily for financial reasons, the Choir's early performances were all either of unaccompanied works or performed with organ or piano accompaniment. However, in 1952 the Choir gave its first public performance with orchestra in Handel's *Acis and Galatea* at Caxton

Hall. The orchestration used was the original chamber version - indeed, in many of its performances around this period the Choir made a point of performing original versions in the place of better-known later editions. Perhaps we can claim to have been at the forefront of the authentic performance movement!

THE BOARD SING THANKS

Eighty members of the Board of Trade choir will sing their thanks to Norway in Trafalgar Square this evening for the Christmas tree which has stood there over the holiday.

Over 50 members of the choir are women and girls who, during the day, are typists, secretaries, telephone operators.

After tonight, the Christmas tree goes to Hyde Park.

The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 was a significant event for the Choir (under its new conductor Charles Farncombe). Probably every other amateur choir in the country staged some sort of special concert to mark the occasion. Few, though - in fact only two (the other one was a combined choir formed by the Treasury Singers and the Colonial Singers) - were permitted to do so in the splendid surroundings of Westminster Hall in the Palace of Westminster. According to contemporary newspapers, this was the first time the House authorities had permitted such an event since the Hall had been restored by Richard II in 1394, and it created quite a stir. Questions were asked in the House of Commons, and a debate was held on 3 November in which a number of backbenchers pleaded with Sir David Eccles, then Minister of Works, to allow more such concerts. History does not tell whether their success was influenced by the fact that the Speaker's son was at the time a member of the Choir, but successful they were, and at Christmas 1953 the Choir gave a choral recital in the Hall, a tradition that was to continue, with two interruptions, until 1978. Sadly, such an event is no longer possible, largely because of the increased need for security at sensitive locations of this kind.

CAROLS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

RECITAL BY BOARD OF TRADE CHOIR

Westminster Hall has been used for many legal and state purposes during its long history, but never so far as anyone knows, for carol singing. Never, that is, until yesterday, when the Board of Trade Choir gave a concert of "Music for Christmas" which set the great hammer-beam roof ringing and drew an appreciative luncheon-time audience of about seven or eight hundred.

Most of them had to stand, but they were compensated with three-quarters of an hour of varied and well modulated singing in one of the most beautiful settings which London can offer. The choir stood half-way down the steps against the back ground of the west window, which was lit by the wintry sun. The programme was drawn from carols of many centuries, from the Sans Day Carol named after the Breton St. Day, to "Torches" with music by Mr. John Joubert. Gustav Holst and Mr. Healey Willan were among other modern composers represented.



Carols in Westminster Hall, 17th December 1953.

From its earliest days the Choir had been a social as well as a musical organisation. In the early 1950s this led to a number of Choir outings. They seem to have been lot of fun: a contemporary record of one boat-trip, for example, records that: 'several of us could undress quite comfortably...the bar was very popular...the dancing was abandoned...the

younger people all seemed to enjoy themselves.' In the interests of historical accuracy I should perhaps admit that the full record has a slightly less racy flavour!

The Choir has always set its sights high - sometimes higher than resources permitted. Perhaps the clearest example of this came in 1958, when we tried to book Joan Sutherland - already by then well established at Covent Garden - for a performance of *Solomon* at St James's Piccadilly. Sadly, the Choir could not afford her fee of 35 guineas.

In 1960 Charles Farncombe retired as conductor and his place was taken by Alan G Melville. Alan was to stay with us for eighteen years. It was during Alan's time with us that we first met Christopher Herrick, who was to succeed him: in 1970 Christopher was the organist for a performance of Haydn's *Harmoniemesse* at St Margaret's Westminster. And Alan was to help us establish another musical relationship that continued for many years. In 1975 the Choir again performed Handel's *Solomon* at St James's Piccadilly. (This time we did not even try to book Joan Sutherland!) Twenty years ago orchestral concerts were still the exception rather than the rule but we were fortunate that Alan's daughter, Clarissa, herself a professional flautist, was able to assemble the Rosebery Orchestra for its first performance. The partnership was to continue, the Rosebery Orchestra playing for several seasons. In 1978 Alan retired and was succeeded as conductor by Christopher Herrick who was (and is) also conductor of Twickenham Choral Society and who was at the time sub-organist at Westminster Abbey.

In its first thirty-five years the Choir had, bearing in mind its size and resources, pursued an ambitious programme. We had, for example, put on Purcell's *King Arthur* in St John's Smith Square as part of the Westminster Festival of Music. Under Christopher's guidance, the Choir raised its sights and expanded its horizons still further, performing under its new name in the largest concert venues in London. The link with Twickenham proved invaluable. One of our first joint ventures was a performance, under Christopher, of a programme of music for two choirs. Whitehall Choir arranged the central London performance which was repeated, a couple of days later, on Twickenham's home patch. There have been a number of joint concerts since, including Verdi's *Requiem* in 1985 and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* in 1986, both at the Royal Albert Hall. We have also twice visited Dieppe as a joint choir - dubbing ourselves "Choeur de Londres" - to give concerts at the magnificent old church of St Remy.



On the eve of our Diamond Jubilee season, Whitehall Choir under Paul Spicer in St Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey.

In 1983, to mark its fortieth anniversary, the Choir for the first time staged a concert on its own account on the South Bank, *Israel in Egypt* by Handel. Since then the Choir has performed regularly on the South Bank and at other major London venues: among its other successes have been a performance of Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony* in 1989 which was very favourably reviewed in *The Independent*. For the same concert the Choir had commissioned an orchestration of Finzi's *God is Gone Up* from the composer William Godfree. At its 1990 candle-lit performance of Monteverdi's *Vespers* in Westminster Cathedral, the Choir began its association with London Baroque Orchestra, an original instruments orchestra founded by the Choir's then assistant conductor Laurence Cummings.



Bach B Minor Mass, St George's Hanover Square, 1983.

In 1991, Whitehall Choir and Twickenham Choral Society staged their most ambitious joint venture to date, when they promoted a performance of Verdi's *Requiem* and Bruckner's *Te Deum* in the Royal Albert Hall. This performance involved 500 singers from six different choirs, and the logistical problems were formidable. Nevertheless, the concert was a remarkable success: over 2800 seats were sold.

For its Golden Jubilee season in 1992/3 the Choir celebrated 500 years of British music. The first programme included the season's oldest and newest works, the oldest being Tallis's challenging 40-part motet *Spem in alium* and the newest the premiere of *An Augustan Triptych* by the young composer Robert Keeley. Britten's *St Nicolas* and Parry's *I was glad* completed the concert. The season continued with performances of Handel's *Messiah* and Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*. At our Jubilee Gala concert that summer we persuaded Sir Edward Heath to conduct us in a performance of Vaughan Williams's *Serenade to Music*. The jubilee season was a celebration of all that the Choir has achieved in its first fifty years, and a springboard for the next fifty. In that season the

Choir also launched its Jubilee Appeal, which was successful in raising a substantial fund to underpin our future, and to give us the scope - from time to time - to undertake more ambitious projects than we could otherwise afford. We are grateful to all those who helped by donating or by arranging fund-raising events: their generosity continues to benefit the Choir many years later.

During the 1990s we have continued to stage concerts at major London venues. We have also branched out once more into carol singing – only this time in the Palm Court at the Ritz Hotel instead of the rather more draughty surrounds of Trafalgar Square. We are fortunate enough to be invited to perform there for several nights in the run-up to Christmas, which not only gives us all a most enjoyable night out but also makes a very welcome contribution to Choir funds.

After serving the Choir faithfully for 21 years, Christopher Herrick finally decided to bow out as our conductor at the beginning of the year 2000, in order to devote more time to his international career as an organist. (His recordings for Hyperion of the complete organ works of Bach have received widespread critical acclaim.) We marked the occasion with a performance of the Verdi Requiem in the QEH - the first South Bank concert in the year, and a thorough-going success as well as a most moving occasion. We are fortunate indeed to have secured as his successor Paul Spicer and we look forward to further challenges and successes with him.

Above all, Whitehall Choir is and always has been both proud of its standards and extremely friendly. (Indeed, it has sometimes been accused of acting as a marriage bureau!) We owe much both to those who founded it and to its conductors down the years. Until this year, I had only had the good fortune to work with one conductor, but other members of longer standing speak with great affection of the contribution which his predecessors also made. We all stand very much in the debt of Vivienne Constantinides, Albert Whitnall, Robert Noble, Charles Farncombe, Alan Melville and Christopher Herrick. The future, under Paul Spicer, is onward and upward. Join us. You will not regret it.