

Hitting The High Notes
Market Harborough Choral Society
1967-2007

Choral societies, like back-to-back terraced houses and bicycles, were a nineteenth-century invention. It was the music of Handel and the rediscovery of Bach's Passions by Mendelssohn that inspired the growth of choral singing in Britain independently of the local church. Patronised by Prince Albert and the Victorian court, and made possible by the growth of holidays and leisure activities, choral societies sprang up all over the country.

Yet choral societies came late to Harborough, then still a sleepy market town. Throughout the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, music in the town focused on church and chapel choirs. Indeed under successive choirmasters the choir of St Dionysius church provided musical entertainment for the town ranging from solos and part-songs to the latest cantata, often raising money for charitable causes. There were attempts to found a separate town choral society in the 1890s, during the inter-war years, and in the 1950s, but all foundered after a few years. Yet by this time most of the town's churches had active choirs, and it was under the auspices of the Free Church Council that on 9 December 1967 Paul Wright brought many of them together as the United Choirs of Market Harborough and District to perform Handel's Messiah at Market Harborough Grammar School. Over 100 singers took part and the concert programme contained a welcome from Sidney Brown, the President of the Free Church Council. Such was the audience demand that another performance was given two days later! The driving force behind this event was clearly Paul Wright, then music master at the Grammar School, and whose wife Janet was the piano accompanist for rehearsals. The performances included local soloists and the South Leicester String Orchestra.

This success led in 1968 to the formation of Market Harborough and District United Choir and the presentation of regular concerts. A performance of Haydn's Creation was given in November 1968 and in December the first Christmas concert was held at Welland Park College, which became the society's regular rehearsal and concert venue. The choir was affiliated to the National Federation of Music Societies, and things looked promising when Sir Michael Tippett who had close links with the Leicestershire Schools Symphony Orchestra agreed to become the society's first President. In 1970 it presented Messiah in St Peter's, Church Langton, a venue rich in Handel associations. Haydn's Nelson Mass, Beethoven's Mass in C and Mozart's Requiem were all performed with professional orchestras. With around 80 singers, Harborough's choral music scene seemed well and truly established, and the name was changed to Market Harborough Choral Society in 1972.

Paul Wright left unexpectedly in the summer of 1973, and there then followed an unhappy few months during which local violinist Leslie Howe took the helm as conductor, a role that neither he nor the society much enjoyed. They eventually parted company at the end of 1974. At this time there were close links with Geoffrey Tomlinson from the County Music School and Musical Director of Market Harborough Operatic Society. Several members of this group were also singers with the Choral Society, and through this connection a number of joint events were planned with the Leicestershire Schools Intermediate Orchestra which Tomlinson conducted.

In a surprising turn of events however, society members elected David Johnson as their new Musical Director from February 1975. He was organist and choirmaster at Kibworth Parish Church and had for some years conducted Leicester University Choral Society, but was largely unknown in Harborough. After a difficult six months he won acceptance on all sides. It was a turning-point, and under his guidance there followed nineteen years of consolidation and growth. Within a few years a regular pattern of concerts was established, new initiatives introduced, and the repertoire opened out to include not only

the great classics, such as the Requiems of Mozart, Brahms and Fauré, Bach's St John Passion and the Haydn Masses, but also neglected masterpieces such as Handel's Belshazzar, Haydn's Stabat Mater, and Bruckner's Requiem, alongside 20th-century works such as Vaughan Williams Benedicite, Poulenc's Gloria and Finzi's Et Terra Pax.

There were now four regular concerts in each year - two of them devoted to the classical choral repertoire, a Christmas carol concert, and a summer event lighter in character. The new regime was sanctioned by the appointment of Mrs Marjorie Adcock, MBE, JP and well-respected local councillor, as President in 1975.

It was David's Johnson's policy to perform choral music with the original accompaniments. This usually meant orchestral forces, and one concert each year was given with professional musicians, firstly the Orchestra da Camera and later the East of England Orchestra. But early co-operation with the Leicester Chamber Orchestra (the successor to the Leicester String Orchestra which played for Messiah in 1967) led to an annual joint concert. There were occasions when other forces were required; the Rossini Petite Messe Solennelle was given in its original version for two pianos and harmonium and became a particular favourite, and in 1989 there was a spectacular performance of Carl Orff's Carmina Burana in the version for two pianos and large percussion section. Other guests included the Harborough Band (notably for the Jack Stamp Memorial Concert in 1985), costumed groups like the Halcyon Singers and Bustles and Beaux, and the Omega Brass ensemble. In November 1980 BBC Radio Leicester sponsored and recorded a concert featuring the world-famous Japanese pianist Mitsuko Ushida playing the second concerto of Beethoven, while the society sang his Mass in C and Choral Fantasia.

The Christmas Concert took on its own character when a series of celebrity guests made for special evenings. Marisa Robles played the harp while the ladies of the choir sang Britten's Ceremony of Carols. Ian Wallace sang Mud, Glorious Mud and other Flanders and Swann favourites as well as joining the choir in Vaughan Williams Fantasia on Christmas Carols. James Blades brought along the gong that he hit for J Arthur Rank films, and invited children to play his vast array of percussion instruments. John Amis (of Face the Music fame) entertained the audience with musical anecdotes, Peter Knapp followed the Road to Mandalay with lesser-known Christmas songs, and Young Musician of the Year oboist Nicholas Daniel thrilled the audience with some phenomenal double stopping in the Carnival of Venice.

Most events took place in Welland Park College's octagonal hall, then the best musical venue in the town. But the parish church hosted concerts when an organ was needed, such as for Britten's St Nicolas, Purcell's Funeral Music for Queen Mary, Stainer's Crucifixion and Dvorak's Mass in D. It was once pressed into service by accident, for Messiah in 1979 when there was a caretakers' strike at Welland Park College. On a happier note was the Last Night concert at a packed St Dionysius in June 1991, rounding off the Harborough Festival. In 1990 St Hugh's Church, Northampton Road, the venue for a concert of British music celebrating its 50th anniversary, rang to the sounds of Parry's I was Glad and Elgar's Great is the Lord.

In the summer themed events such as evenings of Victorian, Edwardian and American music were presented; in the 1980s the society ventured outdoors with three concerts of madrigals and part-songs in the stable yard at Lamport Hall. Other away fixtures included a Brahms Requiem in Buckingham Parish Church and Christmas concerts in the churches of Kibworth, Rothwell and Warkton. In 1977 the society celebrated the Queen's Silver Jubilee in a joint concert with the Operatic Society. The programme included selections from German's Merrie England and Britten's Gloriana. In 1987 the society marked its 20th birthday with a special performance of Messiah sponsored by the Midland Bank, and its Silver Jubilee in 1992 with a concert of favourite pieces.

When David Johnson left at Christmas 1993 the society was a well-established part of Harborough's musical scene, with solid foundations, high standards and an extensive repertoire. Peter Marshall's appointment in 1994 marked a return to the old link with the grammar school, now the Robert Smyth School, where he was in charge of music, and concerts now often took place at the school. But the same pattern of concerts was continued as he sought to raise standards with some challenging programming, which included Britten's Rejoice in the Lamb, Johann Hummel's Mass in B flat and Hindemith's In Praise of Music. In March 1996 the society's performance of the Mozart Requiem turned into a poignant memorial to the children killed in the Dunblane massacre a few days earlier. Peter used talented local soloists in his concerts where possible, and entered the choir for the summer Coalville Music Festival as a way of stimulating performances. It was at this time that the society moved to the Methodist Church for its rehearsals.

The appointment of Anselm Kersten as Musical Director in 1998 was more of a turning point. Coming from New Zealand with a Masters degree in Music from Auckland University to settle in England in 1996, he brought a different approach both in rehearsals and on the podium to achieve his musical vision. Some older members found this unattractive and numbers fell, but before long things were turned around and now there is a continuous influx of new members, which bucks the national trend. The choir currently has over 70 singers, many of them younger voices, to draw upon.

Under Anselm the society's programmes have been more eclectic and more populist. There have still been performances of the classics, such as Messiah, Creation, the Requiems and Masses, including some new challenges such as Puccini's Messa di Gloria. But he is not afraid to mix and match old and new, traditional and modern, classical and pop. The Christmas and summer concerts have become showcases for this approach. You can be transported from Purcell through Handel and Elgar to Holst, Vaughan Williams and Britten; and then find yourself listening to Lennon and McCartney, Abba or Andrew Lloyd Webber. The singers clearly enjoy this, and audiences too have responded to it. The 40th anniversary concert in November 2007 is a performance of Karl Jenkins' immensely popular The Armed Man.

There has been greater use of solo voices from within the choir even in the main choral works, and members' other skills have been employed in instrumental performance and readings. A new feature has been the encouragement of young performers in the district by offering them a platform for performance and some sponsorship. Small groups from the society have contributed items in concert programmes, and responded to invitations to sing at weddings and other private functions. In these ways the society has become more integrated within the local community than before. Also after several years' vacancy, the position of President was filled by Phil Gibson.

A choral society like any other organisation relies on many loyal servants who operate often behind the scenes to keep things going. Market Harborough Choral Society has had five musical directors since its inception in 1967. It has also enjoyed the expertise of seven piano accompanists, and many chairpersons, secretaries, treasurers and committee members in that time, as well as those who offer their services backstage and front of house on concert days. Without them such a complex organisation could not continue for long. An exhibition of society memorabilia going back to its beginnings will accompany the celebratory concert in November. Market Harborough Choral Society has undoubtedly reached its fortieth birthday in good shape. May it continue to serve the town and local community successfully for many years to come.

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