

A brief history of Wetherby Choral Society

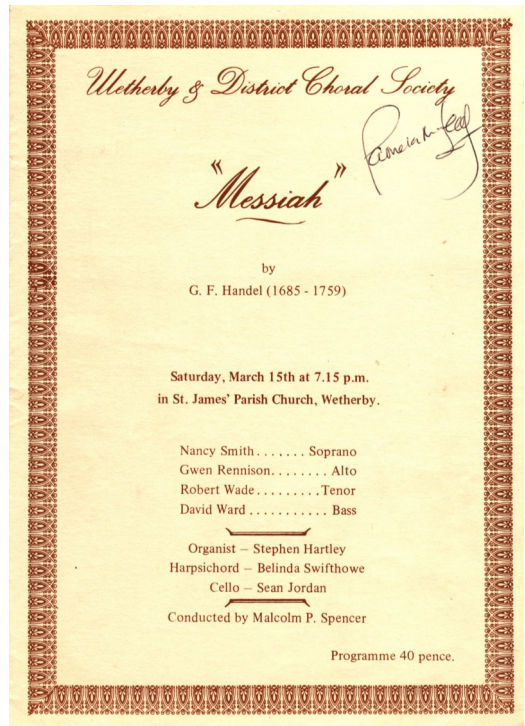
The Senior Choir of Wetherby High School, which comprised senior pupils, members of staff and parents, had gained a reputation for outstanding singing under their new head of music, Malcolm Spencer. It was immediately after a summer concert that Malcolm floated the idea of forming a community choir outside the school, an idea which gained enthusiastic support, and it was from this that the Wetherby and District Choral Society was created, its first rehearsals being held in September 1974.

Messiah is high on the list of music for any choir to tackle. It is popular with audiences and most singers of choral music will have sung it several times, so it was a most suitable piece to begin the story of Wetherby Choral Society, with a performance in March 1975 with organ accompaniment. As a number of singers in the group had a background in lighter music, the autumn concert in the same year was a broad programme of shorter pieces in a concert entitled 'Can't Help Singing'.

Most young musicians take and use influences from their early years. In Malcolm's case, as a pupil at Keighley Boys' Grammar School, he had taken part in a grammar schools festival which featured a performance of Vaughan Williams' *Sea Symphony* and so, inspired by this memory, he took the Choral Society on its first big adventure. This highly acclaimed performance really put the Society and Malcolm on the musical map, and is also remembered for the sauna-like temperature in the school hall at the performance on July 3rd at the height of the record temperatures of the famous heatwave of 1976. It was the choir's first concert with an orchestra, and Yvonne Seymour, who became a frequent performer with the choir in its early years, was the soprano soloist. The special souvenir programme cost £1 and concert tickets were £2.

Malcolm continued to run the choir until 1978, with performances of Fauré *Requiem*, Haydn *The Creation*, seasonal Christmas music and 'A Night at the Opera' among the programmes. One can see the wisdom of the choice of a wide range of music and the practical use of organ and occasional orchestrally accompanied concerts as the choir developed. At this stage Malcolm chose to study for a B.Ed. degree and could not afford the time to both study and continue directing the choir.

The foundations had been laid and the repertoire established. Rehearsals were on Monday evenings from 7.30–9.30pm in the Parish Rooms of St James' Church, and it is only recently that we have had to move from the much-loved rooms into the church for rehearsals.



The programme for the first concert



An early choir rehearsal in St James's Church

Roy Rimmer, a music advisor to Leeds council, took over from Malcolm Spencer, conducting seven concerts between 1978 and 1982. He missed one concert at short notice, when a good friend, Michael Johnson, who also worked for Leeds City Council, stepped in. Michael was to take over from Roy Rimmer as conductor for a series of four concerts in 1982 and 1983.

This period under Roy Rimmer and Michael Johnson, though relatively short, saw the now established choir singing the sort of repertoire that has continued to the present day. It was, more often than not, accompanied by an orchestra – Pro Musica of Leeds, Harrogate Pro Musica and Orchestra d'Amici. The repertoire extended the choir, with Brahms *Requiem*, Mendelssohn *Elijah* and Bernstein *Chichester Psalms* among the ambitious choices undertaken. This was a choir making a considerable mark.

In the 1980s Marjorie Hodlin was appointed as accompanist. This was to prove an inspired move and over the best part of 40 years Marjorie's excellent skills as accompanist gave pleasure to the Society and made the job of learning choral music all the more enjoyable. A good accompanist is the bedrock of support to the choir and its director, and the speed at which music is embedded into the choir is quicker when it is underpinned by an outstanding musician and pianist. Marjorie was simply sensational and a much-loved character within the Society throughout her many years as accompanist. We owe her a huge debt of gratitude for her decades of unstinting service.

In order for the choir to function efficiently during these early years it became clear that it should become a registered charity run by a committee and with its own constitution. Wetherby Choral Society joined the National Federation of Music Societies, which later became Making Music and to which we are still affiliated.

During the first decade of the Society's first 50 years, 20 concerts were given. Over the second decade the number of concerts nearly doubled, and a further 36 concerts under the baton of Dr Anthony Langford were performed. Anthony was then a lecturer at Leeds College of Music,

an organist and harpsichordist, who served as musical director of Wetherby Choral Society from 1983 to 1993.

A three-concert season became the established pattern, mostly with orchestral accompaniment and some very fine soloists. Looking at the list of works performed, which is available on the Society's website, a wide variety of music from late baroque to modern is revealed. I recall many members of the society talking enthusiastically about the performance of Howells *Hymnus Paradisi*, but there were performances of Bach's immense *Mass in B minor* and *St Matthew Passion*, as well as Elgar's epic *Dream of Gerontius*.

By 1987 Harrogate Philharmonic Orchestra began its long association with Wetherby Choral Society and it was *The Dream of Gerontius* that they accompanied early in this most fruitful of relationships. The soloists were a superb trio, all of whom went on to great things. Catherine Wyn-Rogers, the mezzo-soprano, must have been at the start of her career and is now a superb internationally known singer. Kenneth Bowen, who sang the role of Gerontius, has always been considered one of the great Gerontius performers. Roger Langford (no relation to Anthony) was the bass. In other concerts Helen Leaf (daughter of founder member Pam), who had studied at Trinity College of Music, took the soprano solos on a number of occasions.

I had arrived in Harrogate in 1991, having been appointed director of music at Ashville College there. Always keen to continue with professional music-making and encouraged by the head teacher at Ashville, I became choirmaster at St Wilfrid's Church in Harrogate in 1992 and was appointed musical director of Wetherby Choral Society in 1993.

For most of its life the Society had maintained between 75 and 100 members, and during the past 30 years it has had between 90 and 120 singers. Not bad for a small town! As I settled into the post and learnt my trade as a conductor, the range of music expanded still further, repertoire became more diverse and some ambitious projects were undertaken.



Singers and musicians giving their all in concert

In 1996 we performed *Sinfonia Sacra* by Christopher Steel, a wonderful piece written in Middle English. In 1998 we tackled a setting of Martin Luther King's poem *I have a dream*, written by a composer from Chesterfield, Max Taylor (who happened to be a nephew of one of our basses, Norman Thomas), in only its third performance. In 2002 we presented *Russian Requiem* by Elis Pekhonen – little performed but a fantastic piece – and in 2016 we gave the third performance of *Sacrifices* written by Otley composer Patrick Lee.

Joint activities have included collaborations with Ashville College, with five performances in Leeds Town Hall, often with capacity or near capacity audiences (it holds 1225). These concerts included Orff *Carmina Burana*, Finzi *Intimations of Immortality*, York composer Andrew Carter's *Benedicite*, Verdi *Requiem*, with a combined choir of over 300 singers.

With North Yorkshire Chorus we have given two concerts in Ripon Cathedral, of Elgar *Dream of Gerontius* and Verdi *Requiem*, and we shall be joining with Ripon Choral Society in June 2025 for a performance of Mendelssohn *Elijah*.



*Wetherby Choral Society and Ashville College perform Verdi's Requiem
in Leeds Town Hall in 2012*

Although the Mowbray Orchestra, South Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra d'Amici, and Leeds College of Music Chamber Orchestra have accompanied Wetherby Choral Society on several occasions, there was a strong link with Harrogate Philharmonic Orchestra during the period 1986–2010.

In 2010 I took over responsibility for booking the orchestral players and began by booking members of Harrogate Philharmonic Orchestra as individuals rather than as an ensemble. Of this group there are some who have played for the entire time I have directed the choir and I am grateful to Ian Charters for his help throughout my early years with the choir. Christine Brown and Eric Clark have been superb leaders of the orchestra and our new accompanist,

Christine Alp, has played flute, while Kevin Paynes, Gilly Charters (violas) and Richard Sowden and Rebecca Todd (trumpets) have all played for much of my tenure.

We have tried to encourage young solo singers through running a Solo Singers Platform, inviting postgraduate students to audition before the directors of several other Yorkshire choral societies from Doncaster to Scunthorpe. Many students who took advantage of this opportunity have gone on to great things. Among them is Joshua Ellicott, now one of the country's leading tenors, and our soprano this evening, Samantha Hay, who sings with Welsh National Opera and Opera North, is marking approximately 25 years of singing with the Society.

Having had brush with cancer some 16 years ago, I have put on a number of 'Come and Sing Messiah' fundraisers at which the Society's members have joined forces with other singers, most recently in February. These have raised over £40,000 for a variety of cancer and cancer research charities, as well as being highly enjoyable occasions for all involved.

And so, with my 117th concert with the choir, we celebrate the first 50 years of Wetherby Choral Society in a concert with a nautical theme. We look back to a work dear to the heart of the Society's first conductor, and emulate the second major choral work that Wetherby Choral Society sang under Malcolm Spencer's direction.

Happy 50th anniversary!

John Dunford



The conclusion of another successful concert at St James's Church