

wimbledon choral society winter newsletter 2009

"The Orchestra was magnificent but I wonder if the players' contribution would have been quite as splendid had the choir not matched them at every point."

Season Review 2008-9
Reflections from Michael
Neil's first season with WCS
What's Coming Up

Season Review 2008-9

Sunset and a New Dawn

It's quite difficult to know where to begin to review last season – one point being that we were involved in an event before the new season actually started. That, of course, was participating in the pre-match entertainment for the Rugby League Challenge Cup Final in Wembley Stadium in front of 82,500 in the stadium itself and countless millions watching the television. One hundred of us including some guests from Epworth Choir trooped out on to the hallowed Wembley pitch and, accompanied by the Band of the Blues & Royals, belted out (I think is a fair description) items from *The Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves*, *Carmina Burana* and *Delilah*, as well as leading the singing of *Abide With Me*. It was a surreal experience, especially hearing the roar of the crowd from the centre of the pitch as the two teams came out to warm up around us. For those of us there, we wouldn't have missed it for the world.



Giving it everything at Wembley

That's wasn't all. Before we could get into our first concert of the season we were invited back by BBC TV for another recording of *Songs of Praise*, again recorded in the wonderful LSO St Luke's building.



Songs of Praise



What a way to start the season, one that was always going to be tinged with a little sadness at the thought of it being Michael's last one with us. As noted in his reflections later in this newsletter, he gave us plenty of notice of his intention to stand down and we are very grateful for that. It meant not only were we able to take our time over ensuring we found a highly suitable successor (of more later) but also that we could savour another few years with this outstanding musician.

The season's first main concert was in Southwark Cathedral, a venue we hadn't used for a while. It is not a large space and there are some limitations which means it is not an ideal venue. That said, though, it did make us think about how we could make best use of this wonderful building and the result was a decision to perform Brahms' *A German Requiem* accompanied by two pianos using Brahms' own arrangement for his 'London' version of this work. And they weren't just any old pianos either – two beautiful and matched Steinways were hired for the occasion and what a difference they made, especially with the equally beautiful and matched playing of Norman Harper and Michael Higgins. The other matched pair came in the form of the two excellent soloists, soprano Elizabeth Weisberg (who sang for us in the Schubert concert in the Royal College of Music two years ago) and baritone Jacques Imbrailo, both of whom I hope we can work with again in the future.



Jacques Imbrailo

The evening's performance, to a near-packed cathedral, was a delight as the focus was very much on the choir's sound rather than competing against an orchestra. Michael was clearly enjoying himself as he squeezed every *rubato* and dynamic that he could out of the work. The concert day was a Friday which wasn't ideal but still meant a good sized audience with a fair amount of people buying on the door. We had also taken the decision to perform the whole work without an interval. It seemed appropriate as it was a *Requiem* and close to Remembrance Day.

Following our work with the RPO last year we were invited to join them again for a *Christmas Cracker* concert, this time in the Fairfield Halls, Croydon. Judging from the feedback from audience members they seem to have enjoyed it a lot and the comments from conductor Nick Davies on our performance were very complimentary.

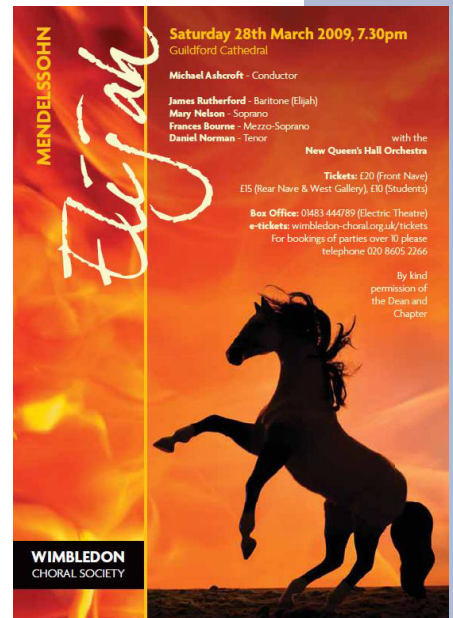


Ian Partridge

Our own Christmas concert was one of those events you wished would just go on for a bit longer. It was not only Michael's last one but also the very last public performance for our President, Ian Partridge. It was a real privilege for our concert to have been selected for this purpose and those last notes of Peter Cornelius' *Three Kings* will linger with us for a long time to come.

And then came Baal, the fiery chariots, whirlwinds and all manner of things in the form of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Michael's last major fully orchestrated concert with us – and what a concert it was. We were joined by four very fine soloists with the outstanding James Rutherford in the title role. When we put on major concerts like this one in Guildford Cathedral, you certainly rise to the occasion and

it was wonderful to see the nave and West Gallery well filled. *Elijah* is a real stamina-sapper when performed in its full form as we did but you just refused to slow down and get weary. I don't know where you found that extra kick in the final chorus but that last page with the *Amens* was something else! You did, though, set out your intentions from the very start. I'm sure I saw some members of the audience reel back in their seats a little when you hit them with that first "Help, Lord!". Michael said in the 'glow' afterwards that with the choir and NQHO orchestra in such top form this performance it was the "pinnacle of my career". I believe we delivered everything he could have wished for and a whole bunch more.



Nicky's fabulously fiery flyer

Heck – how do you top that to round off the season with a suitable sunset? If you read last year's newsletter you will have seen that we had toyed with a variety of options before coming to a decision. Before that, though, there was the question of maybe participating in a special Evensong service in Southwark Cathedral. Over 40 of you wished to still do this as well as the final concert so we did. Under Norman's expert guidance we put in a highly creditable performance including some of Michael's favourite music from the cathedral repertoire like Stanford's *Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis in A*. Seeing as many of you were unfamiliar with the content of an Anglican Evensong, you coped with the various musical components very well indeed, especially the tricky but equally important psalm and responses. A huge thank you to Norman for having the tenacity to get us prepared in such a short time and to Michael H for his splendid accompanying on the organ.



Photo courtesy of Craig Bishop

When it came to the content of the final concert being Britten's operetta *Paul Bunyan*, I know there were many who thought "Britten? Oh please, no." but how many of you had changed your mind by the closing chord of the work on that Saturday evening in June with the applause ringing in your ears? Quite a number I dare say. Again it was something we'd never done before but it gave Michael the chance to persuade us it was worth doing. Again, he was proved right. What fun it was! Joined by young singers from the Little Opera Company and an assortment of WCS members in various minor roles (including lumberjacks and cronies!) it was exactly the right work to do to conclude Michael's reign at the helm. Then we had a party with great food, good wine and brilliant speeches ... not forgetting the surprise song *Thank For The Music* up until which point Michael had just about held it together! What a way to finish a special season. My sincere thanks to everyone.

Reflections from Michael

A Wonderful Journey

Tracing our journey together over 30 years, it has been wonderful to see the choir develop and grow to the formidable organisation it is today. Back in 1979, the concerts in the Civic Hall were, for some reason, always held on a Monday which meant there was *no* rehearsal with the orchestra and soloists. Nevertheless, the audiences were quite good and, when I introduced Christmas concerts, we often filled the 1000+ seat hall. Not many of you will remember that concert attire for the ladies was long WHITE dresses, and what an assortment we had, ranging from wedding dresses to nighties!



From the beginning I tried to introduce unfamiliar works (anyone remember the Grøndahl *Trombone Concerto*? – no, neither do I!), such as the Bizet and Kodaly *Te Deum*, Le Fleming's *Five Psalms*, Finzi's *Farewell to Arms* and *For St. Cecilia*, Wesley's *Confitebor* and, of course, Pierné's *The Children's Crusade*.

On threat of demolition, the fight to save the Civic Hall was taken to the Council and the local press. Even though the developers had promised a new hall we didn't get anywhere and, of course, the new hall never materialised. How short-sighted of the Council not to realise what an asset they had. Half a million pounds could have refurbished the Hall and the history of the choir would then have taken a different course.



As it was, we had to look for new venues and, because of the large numbers in the choir, that meant looking further afield than Wimbledon. The cathedrals of Southwark and Guildford (left) have been popular venues, as have The Cadogan Hall, St. John's Church, Waterloo and The Royal College of Music. The Fairfield Hall in Croydon was used regularly for many years but became both a bit too large and certainly too expensive for the choir's requirements.

Royal British Legion Festival of Remembrance in the Royal Albert Hall and recordings of BBC TV's *Songs of Praise*. Additionally we moved into the open air for concerts in the Cannizaro and Dulwich Festivals, not to mention the new Wembley stadium for the Rugby League Challenge Cup Final in August 2008.



As to the future, the key to the ongoing success of the choir lies in the selection of music performed, pure and simple. A balance has to be struck between the box office hits and unfamiliar works which help keep the choir fresh and forward looking. There has to be a balance also in the admission procedure and whilst it would be easy to raise the audition bar, and thus perhaps have fewer members and less 'note bashing' at rehearsals, something of what makes WCS what it is would be lost. The choir has always taken a few passengers on board but I like to think of what the choir has done for them, rather than the other way round.

As you all know, I gave the committee 3 years notice of any intention to retire, and this enabled them to plan well ahead for my successor and final season. And what a season it turned out to be!



Cadogan Hall at night

I know the budget was stretched to its limits in order to enable me to mount three unforgettable concerts and I am most grateful for that - two Steinway concert grand pianos for the Brahms *Requiem* in Southwark, professional expenses running to well over £15,000 for *Elijah*, and all manner of unusual things for *Paul Bunyan*. Add to that the wonderful Christmas Concert, also marking Ian Partridge's retirement, the Choral Evensong at Southwark under Norman's direction and my amazing farewell party, and I can truthfully say that I will never forget a single moment.

Just take a look at the special souvenir programme devised by Nicky and Tilly. How thrilling it was to look back at all the music we have performed together over the years, and in that sense it makes a wonderful historical document. Not content with that, the committee commissioned a professional ex-BBC producer to make a film of the final concert (which I hope you will all buy), including interviews with our President and choir members, clips of rehearsals and myself at home and on the river. This will be the only film footage ever taken of the choir during its long history so far and I am proud to be at the centre of it.

I often wondered if I would break down during the final pages of *Bunyan*:

"I needn't say how sad to say we are that he is leaving. Every eye is ready to cry at the thought of bidding adieu, sir. For sad is the heart when friends must part ..."

Of course, the concentration required didn't allow for any of that. But the moment at the reception afterwards when the whole assembled company sang the chorus of *Thank You for the Music* - that is when a fair degree of moisture in the Ashcroft eyes took over and I was simply overwhelmed at this tide of love, warmth and gratitude. Thank you to all those who organised it **and** the food **and** that amazing cake (of me conducting the choir, for those who weren't there) **and** the book of messages, cards and photos **and** the speeches ... As if that wasn't enough, your generosity in being told I could spend £1500 on BOSE audio equipment left me speechless. Every time I listen to a CD or try my new digital radio, I shall remember you all and the wonderful music we have made together over 30 years.

Finally, to all the Executive and the Committee under Neil's dynamic and tireless leadership, I say keep up the good work. Neil Ferris is indeed fortunate to be joining an organisation which is so well run. I wish him well and send my best wishes to you all for a successful first season.

As Paul Bunyan says, when leaving the camp once he feels that what he has worked for and established is secure and ready to face the future,

"Goodbye, dear friends."

Michael

So, who is the new chap? First Thoughts

This season is the first with our new Musical Director, Neil Ferris. Here's a little bit more about the man who will be taking us forward musically in the coming years.



Where were you educated?

Initially at King Edward VI School in Southampton. I then went to Royal Holloway College, University of London, near Egham in Surrey and followed that with the Royal College of Music.

Did you know from an early age that music was going to be your chosen career?

No, not necessarily. I loved history and politics and considered studying those subjects at university but music won out in the end.

Did you specialise in a particular area in your musical training?

I studied piano (not very successfully) and violin (a bit more seriously) but only specialised in conducting when I studied for a post-graduate degree at the RCM. The choral/singing side was an accident: I had hardly sung since my voice had broken, sorry, changed, until I went to university. I started singing in the beautiful chapel at Royal Holloway College and was hooked. After I graduated they asked me to cover the Director of Music's sabbatical term and it went from there; I decided I wanted to try and find out how to do it properly! Still trying...!



Royal Holloway College

Were you looking for a change or addition to your 'portfolio' when you became aware of the WCS vacancy?

Portfolio ... how terribly grand! Yes, I was looking for a large choir to get through some cracking oratorio repertoire.



What attracted you to WCS?

It ticked all the boxes in terms of size and performing history and tradition, and the repertoire that is possible with WCS is hugely exciting. There was also the professionalism of the application process; the way it was presented showed the choir was determined to get the right appointment (I hope they have!). The rest was confirmed for me when I heard you in action: *The Sea Symphony*, Brahms *Requiem*, Durufle *Requiem* and *Paul Bunyan*. I don't know Michael's exact boot size but they are going to be difficult to fill!

Did you have any links with WCS prior to your appointment?

Rather randomly, Michael Higgins and I have worked together before at the Birmingham Bach Choir where I was covering for Paul Spicer for a term but no links as such other than having met subsequently Neil D and some other WCS members on the *Cranleigh Choral Week* where I was tutoring.

What are your feelings on the response of the WCS Committee to your initial musical proposals?

A wonderfully positive, refreshing and enlightened attitude. For me it is a total breath of fresh air! I know I won't be able to get everything right all of the time (I will be juggling over one hundred opinions) but I have been delighted by the start we have made (even before a note has been sung!). The most important meeting I have attended so far (the Quiz Night!) enabled me to meet a few more of you; thank you for such a warm welcome.



Will you be auditioning the choir?

Yes but not now. I want to take a bit of time to get to know the choir first. The earliest would be during my second season.

Please tell us a little about your family. Is there a strong streak of music in there?

My dad was a chorister at the now sadly defunct Eton Choir School, so I think that was where I got it from, but I must thank my mum for making sure I did my practice every day! My brother Hugh plays the trumpet but now is a sports journalist in Manchester and my wife Sarah plays the violin in a couple of very good amateur orchestras in London (when she can get away from advising the government on the law...). We live in Maida Vale with our eighteen month old son Gabriel. *Hokey Cokey* seems to be the top tune at the moment. Very high brow! Sarah & I were married in Southwark Cathedral and Gabriel was baptized there so I can't think of a better place for my first concert with WCS.

"We very much enjoyed the variety of the programme which must have been quite a challenge for the choir - the quiet passages were very poignant and the 'roof-raising' climaxes most impressive! Congratulations to Neil - he is certainly off to a good start!"

John Willmott, November 2009, "In Excelsis", Southwark Cathedral

First Season and beyond

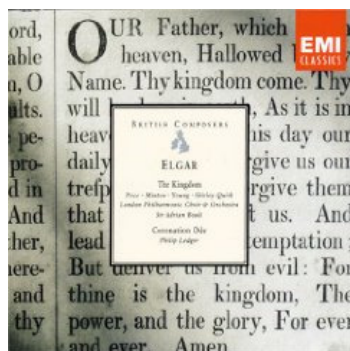
Although it must have felt a lifetime for Neil between his appointment and first rehearsal with the choir, it was planned deliberately so to enable us to achieve two key things - as smooth a transition as possible from one chapter to the next and, secondly, to take our time with Neil on the content of his first season with us. Not surprisingly, the first couple of seasons will be a period for him to get to know us better and to determine where his focus ought to be on improving our performances as we move forward. There are certain areas in which we need to tighten up like, for example, intonation, rhythm & counting (!!!) and smoother singing through words rather than the somewhat chopped approach that we tend to take. None of it is bad but we can be so much better at it.



Some of the music in this first season will highlight (and has in part) these areas. This article was written after our opening concert in Southwark Cathedral, a highly successful event consisting of choral works written entirely by British composers - namely CHH Parry, John Rutter and Paul Patterson (right). The review of the concert will be in next year's newsletter but it is worth noting the challenging rhythms encountered in the Rutter *Gloria* and, in particular, in the splendid Patterson *Magnificat*. With very able support from Michael H on the organ and ear-bashing support from Brass Adastra, this was a cracking start to the season.



By contrast, the March concert will be an opportunity to show just how good we are at putting on large scale performances of some of the greatest choral music written. We have a particular affinity with Elgar and it was a toss up between doing *The Dream of Gerontius* again (last performed in 1999) or something different. The committee decided in the end that it would be worth doing *The Kingdom* instead - the third of the 'trilogy' of great oratorios by Elgar, the other being *The Apostles*. Whereas *The Kingdom* does not get performed anywhere near as much as *The Dream of Gerontius*, it is considered by many (including the eminent conductor Sir Adrian Boult) as being superior. The internet encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* states "**the work continues to be sung by talented choral societies**" I believe we qualify. This is a very large work indeed for both the choir to master and for Neil to manage, and will be a real collaborative effort to make it work. If you are looking for a good recording of this then the recommendation is to go for the double CD with the London Philharmonic Choir & Orchestra (Boult conducting) on the EMI label. You can find it for under £10 and the front cover looks like the image on the left.



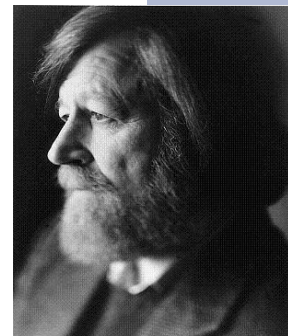
And then onto the summer where we will stretch across the Atlantic and mix in some music either influenced by America (Tippett's *Five Spirituals*) or written by American composers, some contemporary, some not so contemporary. Eric Whitacre and Morten Lauridsen are high of the list of composers whose works are performed regularly by choirs across the UK. Lauridsen's short work *Sure On This Shining Night* is an example of his smooth, flowing melodies and harmonies. Whitacre's *Sleep* is the piece that is being sung at the moment and you'll see why when you see and hear it. There's a very good CD by the choir Polyphony called *Cloudburst* containing Whitacre's music including *Sleep* if you'd like to listen to more of his work.



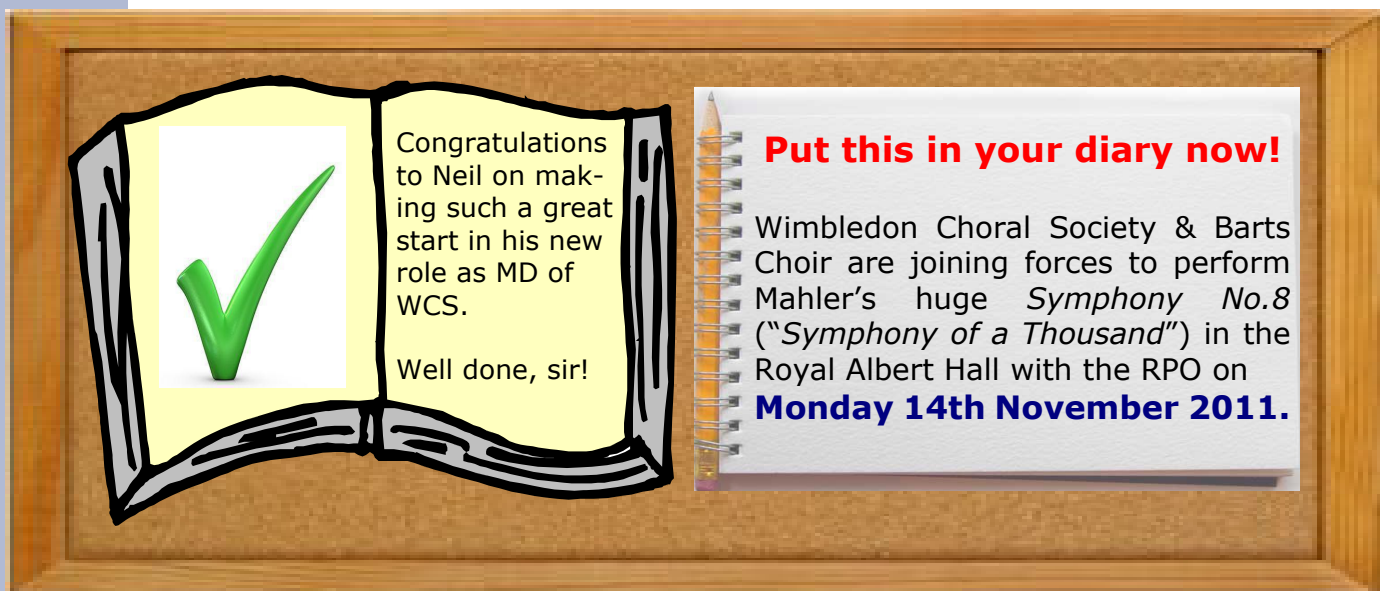
Eric Whitacre

With additional music by Shearing and Gershwin this will complete the summer concert and round off a splendid first season under Neil's baton.

We're looking ahead to devising the seasons that follow and do hope you stay with us on this great journey.



Morten Lauridsen



Gift Aid Helps the choir and costs you nothing

Last season, the Taxman contributed just over £5,000 to the choir's budget. This is because many members and Friends who are taxpayers have signed a Gift Aid declaration, enabling us to reclaim tax from HM Revenue and Customs on your subscription or donation. The declaration is a very simple form. It doesn't cost you a penny and you are not bound by any time commitment. The key requirement is that you must pay an amount of Income Tax &/or Capital Gains Tax in the relevant tax year at least equal to the tax that WCS reclaims on your donations (eg £27 on the 2008/09 subscription of £108). Even if you are not paying income tax on a salary or pension, but receive interest on a bank or building society account net of tax, or pay tax on income from investments, then you can make a declaration under the Gift Aid scheme.

If you have already signed a Gift Aid declaration, then:

- THANK YOU for the help this is giving to WCS finances.
- PLEASE let Richard Allan know if your name or address details change, or if you no longer pay an amount of Income Tax &/or Capital Gains Tax equal to the tax we reclaim on your subscriptions or donations.
- Note that, for Gift Aid to work, the membership subscription needs to be paid by the taxpayer themselves. We can no longer reclaim tax where a tax-paying partner pays the subscription for a non- taxpaying member.

If you have not yet signed a Gift Aid declaration then please consider whether you could help the choir in this way. It costs you nothing but the choir gains considerably!

For Gift Aid declaration forms, and any queries on the scheme, please find Richard (Bass 2) on a rehearsal night and he'll happily supply you with the details. Thank you!

And Finally ...



Please make sure we have your up to date contact details - in particular your home address, your telephone number (home and mobile) and your accurate email address if you have one. Please keep Laura informed of any changes. We are in the process of reviewing the way we handled communications with you the members and to the wider public, making use of newer technologies and options where appropriate.

None of the posts on the exec team or committee is fixed. As a member of this Society you are entitled to put yourself forward if you would like to be considered for any of the roles and you don't have to be a member of the committee to be nominated. If you are interested in doing this then please let Deborah know as soon as you can before the AGM so that the necessary voting procedure can be included in the agenda.