

## A Choral Chronicle: The History of Worcester Festival Choral Society 1861-2021

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The Worcester Festival Choral Society began life in the 1860s but failed to outlast the decade; since its reconstitution in the late 1880s on the initiative of Hugh Blair it has survived and thrived, world wars, finances and a pandemic permitting. Its conductorship is an *ex officio* post of the Cathedral organist, as is the artistic directorship of the Worcester Three Choirs Festival. If that Festival has provided one reason for the Society's longevity, Edward Elgar has provided another; not every provincial choral society can boast the presence of a local musical genius. Despite his occasional complaints about the musical atmosphere of his home town, Elgar owed a good deal to the Festival Choral Society. As leader of the orchestral branch, it gave him scope to continue his self-education and exploration of repertoire, and provided him with guaranteed performances and guaranteed audiences - crucial opportunities for a budding composer. Many of the Society's personnel – William Done, Hugh Blair, Hubert Leicester, Ivor Atkins, Canon Cloughton, John Austin, Martina Hyde, Winifred Norbury – were among his earliest encouragers and supporters, and Elgar's music has been a touchstone of the Society's repertoire ever since. The special atmosphere of a performance of one of Elgar's major choral works in Worcester Cathedral remains unique.

Well timed to mark the Society's 160<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and to raise funds at a period of difficulty, this is an account from the inside, as it were, by a chorus member. The Society is well represented as a whole community, and the author has taken care to ensure that many of its members and officers past and present receive honourable mention. But despite the inevitable tendency towards a narrowness of focus inherent in such a history, *A Choral Chronicle* offers more than a list of conductors (eleven) and concerts (358 by my reckoning) fully represented as they are in its pages. Perspectives on social as well as musical history emerge, extending from the days of horse-drawn carriages, no applause and a diet of Handel and the standard classics, to our world of come-and-sing, girl choristers, marketing, websites, a widely varied repertoire, and Covid-cancelled concerts. But old habits can die hard in a world inevitably dominated by its Victorian-Cathedral inheritance. It might be no surprise that it was not until 1954 that Cathedral audiences were seated facing down the nave, not in two rows facing each other across it, and that it was not until 1957 that David Willcocks managed to persuade the Dean and Chapter to permit a performance of *Belshazzar's Feast*. It was a performance of the same work under Christopher Robinson in 1966 that stimulated a first, spontaneous burst of applause from the audience, setting a pattern only grudgingly accepted by the authorities at first. And it was not until 1972 that the Society's concerts were first held on Saturdays, allowing a full choral and orchestral afternoon rehearsal. Previously concerts had usually taken place on Tuesday evenings, possibly an inheritance from Victorian times when chorus members of the leisured classes could be sure of attending a weekday afternoon rehearsal. Possibly, too, Tuesday was early-closing day, convenient for shopkeepers. The social mix of the Society at that period may have been wider than one suspects, even in a class-bound society. Cultural life in Victorian Worcester being largely run through the combined efforts of the aristocracy and gentry, the clergy, the professional and better-educated 'trade' classes, some investigation of the precise socio-economic make-up of the Society would have been of interest. Worcester was something of a stronghold of Freemasonry and it would be interesting too, to have some idea of the part this played in its musical life.

While a certain amount of a perfectly understandable sense of local pride in the Society's longevity and achievements emerges, *A Choral Chronicle* is refreshing in its

acknowledgement of aspects of its internal politics and the human failings of some of its conductors. No doubt some of the best stories remain untold, but nevertheless one of the book's virtues for this reader lies in its avoidance of the kind of solemn tone so often evident in such histories. Instead there is a frank presentation of Hugh Blair's drinking, Ivor Atkins' unbending authoritarianism, Donald Hunt's increasing prickliness and reluctance to retire, and Peter Nardone's evident lack of interest in administration and unhappiness with certain aspects of the Cathedral's musical 'establishment.' Nevertheless, such situations went hand-in-hand with the pursuit of the highest standards, and it is good to see Blair's reputation restored as an ambitious pioneer of broad and varied programming, a policy continued by Atkins, who also made a point of inviting composers to conduct their own works. Donald Hunt famously took the Society's advocacy of Elgar to new heights, while the unassuming and popular Peter Nardone contributed his experience as a professional counter-tenor to the Society's technical armoury.

It is one measure of Worcester's reputation as a musical centre that it has proved a career stepping-stone for so many of its leading figures. Atkins's fifty-three years in post, and Donald Hunt's twenty-two years, now seem out of the question if not inherently inadvisable. David Willcocks left after seven years for Cambridge, the Bach Choir, the Royal College of Music, and a Knighthood; Douglas Guest served a similar period before spending the remainder of his career at Westminster Abbey. Christopher Robinson served for eleven years before leaving for St George's Chapel Windsor, St John's College Cambridge, various conductorships and a CBE. And both Adrian Lucas and Peter Nardone have used their many and varied talents to pursue independent careers.

Conversely, Worcester has been able to attract young newcomers of great talent. Christopher Allsopp, part-time Assistant Organist and subsequently full-time Assistant Director of Music at the Cathedral between 2004 and 2018, had spent a year as Organ Scholar at St Martin-in-the-Fields as a teenager before proceeding to a scholarship at Trinity College, Cambridge, and various subsequent posts, including one at St Philip's Cathedral Birmingham before coming to Worcester. As the Society's rehearsal accompanist, he was well placed to take over rehearsals and concerts when needed, leading to his appointment as Director of Music on a one-year contract on the unexpected departure of Peter Nardone. Allsopp's conducting of a performance of *The Creation* at just one day's notice has become something of a Society legend. His recently-appointed (2019) successor, Samuel Hudson has been both student and Director of Music at Girton College Cambridge, senior Organ Scholar at Wells Cathedral, and was appointed Director of Music at Blackburn Cathedral in his twenties, making him the youngest Cathedral Director of Music at that time. Sadly, and frustratingly for him and all concerned, the three planned Festival Choral Society concerts for 2020, including the *Sea Symphony*, *Gerontius* and *Messiah*, have had to be cancelled, and the Worcester Three Choirs Festival postponed.

At the time of writing in mid-February it does indeed seem that there may be light at the end of that much-vaunted tunnel, that Covid-related restrictions will ease, live music-making return and Worcester Festival Choral Society will be able to stamp its special Elgarian imprimatur on that postponed performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* in the Cathedral. ('The building will do it,' Elgar told Jaeger.) Meanwhile this book offers a reminder of the Society's achievements for performers and audiences alike, and an optimistic focus on the future. *A Choral Chronicle* is a substantial, attractively designed, reader-friendly account with many superb colour photographs, with all profits going to the Society. Warmly recommended.

Kevin Allen

1231 words

