

# **THREE SPIRES SINGERS**

NEWSLETTER TO SPONSORS, PATRONS, FRIENDS,  
ORCHESTRA MEMBERS AND SINGERS

**April 2007**

## **Musical Director**

As I write, the weather has turned and we have had a run of beautiful sunny days as we approached Easter and now after. Spring is definitely in the air and we are looking forward to immersing ourselves in the rehearsals for our Summer concerts: two concerts of the same work in Penzance and in Bodmin.

Rachmaninov's superb *All-Night Vigil*, often known as his *Vespers* provides two challenges for the choir: first, it is an unaccompanied choral work with no orchestral or instrumental support, and, secondly, it is in Russian. This second feature contributes in a major way to the dark sonorities of the work which is surely one of the most beautiful pieces of its genre. The second basses of the choir have some fun too, including having to descend to a low B flat at the end of the *Nunc dimittis* movement! Each of these two concerts will begin at 8pm and last for an hour, but from 7.15pm, wine will be served so you can come and have a lovely summer's evening of socialising and superb music.

It seems only yesterday that we performed Bach's epic *St Matthew Passion* in the cathedral. What an immensely powerful and moving work this is and an occasion to be remembered. We were fortunate to have the services of a team of excellent soloists as well as our usual orchestral players plus a few more to make the double orchestra which is required in this piece. The Singers were joined by the boys of the cathedral choir for the opening chorus. A highlight for me was the thrilling moment when they entered with the chorale melody against the divided main choir. The boys also joined in with the closing chorale of the first part of the work. Thanks to all of you who supported this wonderful occasion. I hope it won't be long before we can perform this work again.

Looking ahead to the autumn, our main concert will be a mixed programme of Schubert's grand *Mass in E flat*, Purcell's *Come ye sons of art* and Bach's second *Brandenburg* concerto with superb soloists from the orchestra. It promises to be a highlight of the season and I look forward to seeing you at one of the *Vespers* concerts and for the autumn programme in the cathedral.

**Robert Sharpe**

## **Matters Financial**

As it is not long since our performance of *St Matthew Passion*, not all invoices have yet been received for this concert. However, it was well-attended, with an audience of 385 and initial figures suggest that it has performed considerably better than budget as a result. We are grateful for an anonymous donation from a choir member to cover the cost of hiring the orchestral parts, as the hire cost was particularly expensive for this score.

**Sheelagh Jenkins**



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## Patrons and Friends

J S Bach's *St Matthew Passion* on 17 March was attended by a large audience and the performance was a very moving and uplifting preparation for Easter.

As you know, we are now rehearsing for a performance of Rachmaninov's *Vespers* to be sung in Russian at St Mary's Church, Penzance on 16 June and at St Petroc's Church, Bodmin on 23 June. Both performances commence at 8pm. Tickets cost £9, which includes a programme and a glass of wine before the performance from 7.15pm. We do hope you will be able to attend the concert at one of these venues.

Enclosed with this Newsletter is the poster, with my usual plea to place them in strategic places, especially if you live in the Penzance or Bodmin areas.

Thank you for your continued interest and support.

**Anne Drew**

*Great music is that which penetrates the ear with facility and leaves the memory with difficulty. Magical music never leaves the memory.*

**Sir Thomas Beecham**

## Chairman

Halfway through our season and another large cathedral concert under our belt, we are now venturing into somewhat unknown territory in putting on two smaller concerts in Penzance and Bodmin. The Penzance concert is being publicised as part of the Golowan festival which commences on 16 June and the Bodmin concert has already been advertised through posters - on which the Three Spires of Truro Cathedral have been replaced by three onion domes to give the full Russian effect! - at the recent St Endellion Festival.

As further enticement, we are offering a complimentary glass of wine to our audience before each concert commences at 8pm – so please spread the word to all your friends and relations around the county to make them both a success.

The committee has been working hard with Robert to plan the next season well in advance for the publication of the next Three Choirs pamphlet – St Mary's Singers, Truro Choral Society and ourselves. Working together like this is to my mind the best way of producing a wide range of music and styles for our audience and it helps to spread concerts carefully throughout the year. In addition, I have had correspondence with our President Richard Hickox, at present with Australian Opera, who has written to invite Three Spires to join with St Endellion Festival Chorus to perform Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* on 4 August 2008 in Truro Cathedral. We also have a further provisional invitation to join the Philharmonia Orchestra in July to perform Vaughan William's *Sinfonia Antartica* (ladies only!) in Truro and Exeter. As Chairman, I am delighted that the choir will have the opportunity to sing under our new President's and Founder's baton.

**Caroline Johnson**

## Review of Last Concert

Three Spires dedicated their performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* to the memory of their former Treasurer, the late Ben Cartlidge. Seven years have passed since this great work was last performed in the Cathedral and its complexity of both structure and scope provide a formidable challenge to performers, not least to Robert Sharpe, who was conducting it for the first time. As with his previous Bach performances, he favoured fast tempi without sacrificing dramatic impact – the opening chorus set the scene, deftly interweaving the two-part choir with the Cathedral choristers soaring above.

The contrasting moods were vividly evoked by the chorus, switching effortlessly from vindictive mob – with a splendidly scary shout of 'Barrabas!' – to serene devotion and contemplation – the final chorale, sung unaccompanied, with sublime harmony and phrasing. The various short solo passages, skilfully sung by members of the chorus, were a further indication of its overall strength.

Nicholas Hurndall Smith's Evangelist was agile and expressive, contrasting well with the power and dignity of Stephen Foulkes' Christus. Soprano Natalie Clifton-Griffith's warm, gentle tones gave a special poignancy to her aria with solo flute and oboes and counter-tenor Tim Mead was splendid throughout, his *Have Mercy Lord* simply radiant with Malcolm Latchem's sublime violin obligato. Tenor Nathan Vale's dialogues with the chorus were clear and well-judged and it was a particular pleasure that he and bass Christopher Foster were both accompanied in arias by that rare beast, the viola da gamba, splendidly played by Imogen Seth-Smith. Christopher

also sang a glorious final aria and brought a sense of humanity to his Pilate passages.

As well as the artistic and spiritual challenges of the *St Matthew Passion*, there are the physical demands – Paul Comeau, for instance, on chamber organ, had scarcely a moment's rest but never flagged. The magnificent final chorus, more than three hours after the first, found the choir still full of vigour and commitment, making a glorious sound. Robert Sharpe, whose direction throughout was meticulous but dynamic, could justly be proud of his achievement, as should everybody involved.

**Judith Whitehouse**

## **Ben Cartlidge**



These few lines are gathered together from the thoughts and reminiscences of two or three basses from Three Spires Singers who have known Ben from the early days.

Ben was involved in several choral enterprises, including Helston & Kerrier, Dartington Choral Weekends, St Paul's Church Choir, Truro Choral Society, St Endellion Festival Chorus and of course, Three Spires Singers.

He was a founder member when the Three Spires Festival Chorus was formed for the first Festival in 1981 and took part in all subsequent festivals.

In 1988, when financial constraints put the choir's future with the Festival in doubt, Ben was the principal negotiator who saw the need to establish the choir as a separate and independent entity, with full charitable status, a workable constitution, high standards and carefully applied financial controls. From the ashes of the Festival Chorus, the phoenix of the Three Spires Singers was born. After carrying out the posts of Stage and Publicity Managers he took up the, for him, new challenge of Treasurer, a post which he only relinquished in 2004. He devised and drew up the seating plan for the Cathedral nave and devised the staging plan for the choir. His scheme for the sale of Reserved Seat tickets for Cathedral concerts remains unaltered since its inception, simply because it works so well. He designed the choir logo and, until they were standardised, all of the early concert programme covers.

The after-concert parties at Ben and Christine's home were social events not to be missed.

As a musician, Ben was a gifted singer and accurate sight reader, equally at home with the heaviest of classical works and the lightest of Barber Shop styles. His tastes were eclectic, although one work by Gounod tried his patience sorely, to the extent that practices were punctuated by his muttering of 'bloody Gounod' under his breath. He also discovered, jointly with Steve Clutterbuck, that whenever a particular bass passage was proving more than usually taxing, this frequently occurred on page 88 of whichever work was being undertaken at the time. Problem passages and phrases thereafter became known as 'Page 88ers'.

I first met Ben in 1987 when, as a 'new boy', I joined the ranks of the Three Spires Festival Chorus. He made me welcome, showed me the ropes and was always

helpful and supportive. Looking around today I see many Three Spires members, present and past who, like me have lost a great friend and colleague. Thank you Ben for all that you did for the Three Spires Singers. You were – no ARE a Christian gentleman. Individually and collectively, we miss you more than words can say.

**Stuart Skeplorn**

## **TSS Website**

Coming soon, to a computer near you, the Three Spires website is at last nearing its launch date. Since the idea was first mooted about four years ago, the choir has reserved the address for its site but no-one quite had the courage to find out how to actually construct it. A fortuitous meeting with an enterprising student from Newquay led to an offer of help and Josh Bonfield has now been engaged to turn the dream into reality. Camilla Comeau's design skills have already created the basic look of the site and the content is now taking shape.

The main purpose will of course be to inform the visitor about the choir, forthcoming concerts, how to become a Sponsor and how to join us as either a singer, a Friend or Patron. This material will be covered in just five pages to begin with but more information could be added later when Josh has taught us the necessary skills. Most important, of course, will be the need to keep the site up to date.

An additional incentive to get the website working now is the imminent launch of a new booking system by the Hall for Cornwall. The HfC, of course, handles most of our ticket sales and their new system will allow online booking for the first time. For concerts in either the Hall or the Cathedral, the user will be able to see a seating plan, showing which seats are still available. You can then choose the seats you want, and pay for them online. A link to the HfC's site from the Forthcoming Concerts page on the Three Spires website will, we hope, be very attractive to the many people who are now used to being able to shop online and – who knows – maybe this could even increase our ticket sales.

So, give us a few weeks but well before the next Newsletter appears, we hope to be live at:

**[www.threespires.org.uk](http://www.threespires.org.uk)**

**David Smith**

## **Rachmaninov's Vespers**

This June we are departing from our usual Truro Cathedral concert, instead singing in St Mary's Church, Penzance and St Petroc's Church, Bodmin. The reasons for this have to do with hire charges but the novelty goes beyond the change of venue: we are also singing in a completely unfamiliar language.

I have a personal affection for the Rachmaninov *Vespers* (or *All Night Vigil*) beyond almost anything I've ever heard. About 25 years ago, I came across what was then an old record, made in the Soviet Union, of this most haunting and beautiful music. The Russian choir on that recording is, in the cold English daylight, out-of-tune - but what a ravishing way to be out of tune . . . you feel that if they had all drunk a bottle of vodka they would still sound enchanting. Why is it, I wondered, that Russian choirs sound so utterly different from English choirs? It is as if they are in a parallel musical world. Part of the answer lies in the writing: the chords are much more widely spaced, so the sopranos are asked to sing consistently higher (which is

demanding) while the basses shovel away underground, descending slowly down the scale to a bottom B flat in one movement.

Then there's the language. Господи Боже мой, возвеличился зело or in transliterated Russian: *Ghospodi Bózhe moy, vozvelíchilsia yesí zeló* simply wouldn't touch the right spot if we sang 'O Lord my God, thou art very great'. A choir member who is half Russian has been helping the choir with pronunciation. Even the spoken language sounds fascinatingly unattainable – but the second week was easier than the first and we will do it.

Anyone familiar with Rachmaninov's piano music may expect something very different from this. On first hearing, the meditative stillness of the Vespers has little to do with the complex, swirling textures of his virtuoso piano writing but there is a simple, undulating melody at the beginning of the Third Piano Concerto that is quite similar to the opening of the *Vespers*.

Kings College has made a recording of this (in Russian) under Stephen Cleobury. They make a very creditable attempt at sounding like a Russian choir - it is a beautiful disc and their tuning is immaculate, of course. While we shall strive for the same degree of professionalism, I cherish the hope that if our tuning is anything short of perfect (the whole work is unaccompanied) we shall sound more Russian than they do.

To our loyal Truro audience, please do try to make the journey to Penzance or over the Urals (Goss Moor) to Bodmin to hear this rarely heard and exquisite music. With the pre-concert glass of wine, it should be a lovely way to spend a summer evening.

**Camilla Comeau**

### Future concerts and events

<b>16 June 2007</b>	<b>Rachmaninov</b>	Vespers	St Mary's Church, Penzance
<b>23 June 2007</b>			St Petroc's Church, Bodmin
<b>20 October 07</b>	<b>Schubert</b>	Mass in E Flat	Truro Cathedral
	<b>J S Bach</b>	Brandenburg Concerto No 2	
	<b>Purcell</b>	Oh Come Ye Sons of Art	
<b>15 December 07</b>	Christmas Concert with the Cathedral Choristers		Truro Cathedral
<b>1 March 08</b>	<b>Beethoven</b>	Missa Solemnis	Truro Cathedral
<b>28 June 08</b>	<b>Mozart</b>	Mass in C Piano Concerto Soloist: Paul Comeau	Truro Cathedral

*Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything.*  
**Plato**