



FYC *News*

The occasional newsletter of the Farnham Youth Choirs • Summer 2008

Into the groove

Recording projects bear fruit

After some eighteen months of planning, early April 2008 finally saw Farnham Youth Choir, The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, John Rutter, The Cambridge Singers and soloists Melanie Marshall and Elin Manahan Thomas coming together at the Cadogan Hall in London to record a CD of Christmas music.

For the FYC youngsters, the preparation of Christmas repertoire to recording standard (coming as it did two days before the choir left on this year's European Concert Tour) necessitated the scheduling of four extra rehearsals, two of which were taken by John Rutter himself in Farnham.

In his letter addressed to head teachers, requesting 'Authorised Absence' on behalf of those choir members whose term had not yet finished, David Victor-Smith pointed out the wider educational experience to be gained by participating in a professional recording with professional musicians. Following the day, David received a letter from John Rutter in which he asks that his congratulations and appreciation be passed on to "your wonderful choir. They sang splendidly, and behaved like real pros, too. As you saw, our producer and the orchestra were not disposed to waste time, they get on with the job, and I like that. It was impressive to see how your choir knows how to handle this art form. Thank you so much for all the meticulous preparation which went into it. That's what enables an event like this to go smoothly on the day."

Of the event itself, John Rutter explains: "I'm one of the few musicians who actually enjoys recording sessions – no audience sitting there coughing."

The finished product will, it is hoped, replicate the magic of the John Rutter Christmas Concerts which take place annually in London, often at the Royal Albert Hall (concerts which, of course,



are regularly sold out by summer!) The CD will be released in autumn on the Collegium label.

"They sang splendidly, and behaved like real pros, too... it was impressive"

FYC's recording skills were honed once more during the Bank Holiday weekend in early May when some five sessions were devoted to the completion of the recording started last year of current repertoire highlights. This is also due for release in autumn. Ken Blair, the recording engineer, paid tribute to the choir's ability to focus on the task ahead.

Speaking to the young people at the end of the gruelling weekend he thanked them for all their hard work over the three days and explained that although the reward for so much work was not instant, it would all be well worth it when they heard the results later on in the year.

"Mediocrity is all too common. I have worked with many choirs where this is the norm. You are very lucky today to be led by visionary music teachers and other staff who will encourage you to aspire to the highest standards possible. That is a rare quality in today's climate. It is always a pleasure to work with such a professional choir."

The idea was...



Farnham Youth Choir is preparing to celebrate its Quarter Century with special events spread over a whole season, culminating in a Grand Re-Union Weekend fixed for July 11th and 12th, 2009.

Alumni from 24 'vintages' of Farnham Youth Choir are in the process of being alerted to the date via word of mouth, 'Friends Reunited' and 'Facebook', and already contact has been made with 'old' members from across the globe who are enthusiastically marking it in their 2009 calendars.

The celebratory 25th Anniversary Season will begin this September, and the musical highlight will be the Gala Concert involving all the choirs and many alumni at the Anvil, Basingstoke on Sunday, July 12th, 2009. Other events and celebrations are being planned by a sub-committee, led by ex-FYC parent Graham Noakes. Ideas for consideration by the sub-committee are very welcome and can be sent via David Victor-Smith.

All the latest news and many more pictures can be found on our website:
www.fyc.org.uk

When David and Gillian Victor-Smith founded the choir, their aim was to introduce young people who sing to as broad a range of musical experiences as could be devised without compromising on the standard.

THE REPERTOIRE is wide and inclusive to reflect David's philosophy that young people should be introduced to as wide a range of choral styles as possible so that later in their lives they can specialise. "The criteria for including a new piece of music in the repertoire is always that it should be worthy of the effort that must be put into learning it", he says. "It must also be appropriate for the age and stage of the young people, both in its lyric and in its vocal requirements. Other than that, it must be something that I like! And yes, I have been known to drop songs that just don't seem to be 'taking off', so the choir does have a say in it, too. However, I always keep in mind the fact that our annual 'Song-Vote', whereby the current repertoire is awarded marks out of five by the choir members themselves, proves time and again that a song loathed by one is loved by another!" The choir regularly commissions new compositions which, although often very challenging to master, gives the members the unique thrill of 'bringing the music to life'.

TOURING is high on the list of unique musical experiences that choir members can expect to benefit from. "There is nothing quite like it for encouraging adaptability, flexibility, sociability and a sense of team-spirit", says Gillian. "Youngsters 'grow' in front of your eyes when they are taken on tour. Shrinking violets become self-confident individuals. It can be a test of stamina and of personal organisation, but always undertaken within the safe framework of a supportive team of peers and adults whose motivation is to nurture the growing maturity of each individual. This year's week-long tour to Ghent, Antwerp, Mol and on to Andernach and Mayen (the twin towns of

Farnham and Godalming) was one of the happiest we can remember, and was certainly worthy of the considerable voluntary effort put in by the adult team in the planning stages."

CONCERT-GIVING is a main raison d'être.

From 'cosy' concerts for small audiences in church halls to the high-profile 'status' occasions such as appearing in front of thousands in famous concert halls around the world – the criteria are the same: will the event give the young people an experience of performing that will add to their overall development as rounded musicians, and will the audience enjoy the occasion? "Keeping focused on giving the audience a good time can help the young people forget about themselves for a moment, and this for an otherwise normally self-absorbed adolescent is no bad thing! In reality, some thrive on this kind of self-giving; others need to learn how to, and some find the challenge too much to bear. For those young people, we hope that their time in the choir leaves a lasting impression that they can re-evaluate when the time is right. It is often after someone has left the choir that they realise all that they gained!"

BUSKING is not as easy as it appears. It demands different skills because the audience is so very close to the performers. There is no 'acoustic' to enhance the sound and the repertoire needs to be chosen carefully. "It is no good offering church repertoire to the audience at a Farmers' Market, or some of the difficult contemporary music that we have in our repertoire." The group need to have a corporate self-confidence to withstand the 'slings and arrows' of performing to a public who have not actually invited you to entertain them! Having said that, busking often becomes a highlight of a tour as far as the choir members are concerned, be it in an airport lounge, a restaurant or town square or a Cathedral. Gillian says, "It is wonderful to hear the ease with which the youngsters switch from Pergolesi and Gounod to the Beatles and

Jerome Kern in the coach, but seeing a group of teenagers silence themselves in response to entering a cathedral, then creep to a performing place without fuss, and seemingly without direction fill the space with a heavenly song is nothing short of a miracle. And that is what stays with them."

RECORDING is another skill acquired and honed by members of the Farnham Youth Choir. They have just completed recording an eighth CD of current repertoire but have also undertaken commercial recording jobs where they are treated as professionals and perform with professional musicians. The two experiences are different but both unique in the breadth of musical challenge that the individual young person takes on. Every voice counts, timing must be meticulous, tuning must be perfect, concentration must be maintained. It is hard work – but what better way to learn about deferred gratification!

COMPETITIONS are never the be-all and end-all of what Farnham Youth Choir does. But there is a place in the organisation for some competitive experience. "A competition is another singing experience that we value for what it can give the youngsters. It is akin to taking an exam – an experience with which today's young people are very familiar – and we all like the challenge of taking our performance up another notch in the preparation for a competition", David says.

LEADERSHIP is a quality that one might not automatically identify with singing in a choir. FYC has a system of identifying leaders and nurturing them over their time in the choir. The work undertaken by the leaders in supporting the younger members and setting the standard of behaviour and concentration deserves recognition, says David. "Not every member has a supreme voice – but a choir needs all sorts of individuals to thrive. Because of the fellowship that we hope the choir provides, older members who will undertake to work closely with their peers to support and encourage are invaluable. But they learn how hard it is to lead by example and often need to be reminded that being a leader may bring status, but respect has to be earned! It will look good on a CV, yes, but their peers will not necessarily give them an easy ride! Our adult staff are always looking to support the young people while they gain these leadership skills.

Leadership is just one of the many transferable skills from which our singers can benefit. On the musical side, they will develop aural and sight-reading skills that will be of supreme use in music-making on any instrument but, outside the sphere of music, membership of a choir like FYC will help to develop time management, punctuality, commitment, concentration, teamwork, individual responsibility, tidiness, deportment, self-confidence and memory (to name just a few!)

FYC's spring tour to Belgium and Germany proved to be one of the happiest, healthiest and most successful tours to date. Forty girls and one boy plus nine members of staff and a really co-operative coach driver (quickly a fan) made up the team. Three major concerts and many informal 'busking' and 'acoustics testing' opportunities were interspersed with sightseeing and home-grown evening entertainments (to a great deal of laughter), followed by a calming bedtime story!

This year's 'tourists' wrote some helpful hints about how to get the best from an FYC tour:

- Don't pre-empt anything! Take each day as it comes
- Sleep as much as possible
- Look after your voice
- Bring enough socks to wear at night if it's cold
- Keep stress levels down by any means possible
- Try to get everything you need for the following day ready the night before
- Be patient! Your independence cannot be top of the agenda
- Don't be scared about talking to people. Everyone I know in the choir is really nice!
- Don't bring a big suitcase
- Come with snacks
- Take more boys
- Never take more than one boy



FYC regularly hosts choirs from Australia, and this year it was the Young Adelaide Voices who made a return visit to Farnham during their world tour. Some thirty five youngsters (all female, although the choir, like FYC, is actually mixed) undertook the four-week concert tour during term-time with the enthusiastic backing of their school-teachers. They went first to Japan where they were representing Australia in a Concert for Peace with the National Radio Children's Choir of Hiroshima, and from Farnham they headed for the Continent to take part in two international choral events – in Belgium (European Youth Choral Festival) and Germany (International Youth Choral Festival).

The two groups have met before being very similar in age and ethos. Adelaide were guests of Farnham Youth Choir in 2001 and then hosted the Farnham Choir on its Australian tour of 2003. Both are mixed upper voice choirs with a broad repertoire, and both have musical education at the heart of what they do. This time the similarities were more interesting still: both groups found their boys peculiarly reluctant to tour – Farnham had only one lad in its touring group, and Adelaide none at all! And both groups either had been or were just about to tour Belgium and Germany!

The highlight of the visit was a shared tea followed by a joint concert held at St. Thomas-on-the-Bourne. The two choirs not only performed their own repertoire but also shared the Lyn Williams 'Alleluia' and the popular finale 'Goin' Up a-Yonder'. Deb Munroe, director of Young Adelaide Voices, wrote afterwards that they considered Farnham to be the favourite part of the tour: "you folk were so friendly and generous, and of course, your choir was fantastic as always!"

A final word

The third in a popular series of 'Boys Only' singing days took place at the Farnham Maltings on 8th March 2008, when it was Farnham Junior Boys' Choir's turn to play host to some 70 lads with treble voices who came to share singing fun under the leadership of David Victor-Smith, Amy Bebbington (from Berkshire Young Maestros), Brian Cotterill (from Lanesborough) and Linda Sprague (from All Hallows School), all members of the Association of British Choral Directors.

The day was funded by combining it with one organised by Gillian Victor-Smith for 400 adults who came to sing with John Rutter, a co-founder of ABCD. Several members of FYC attended to help with the event, either by supporting the boys or by being on hand to administer music in the Great Hall, with some of their parents amongst the enthusiastic 400!

The highlight of the day was when the 70 lads trouped onto the stage to add their voices to those of the adults in a rendition of movements from Rutter's 'Mass of the Children'.

"The aim of the day", David said, "was to give boys the confidence to sing with freedom and pleasure in a safe 'all males together' environment that positively and without apology excludes the girl soprano. A girl's place in the world of singing is uncontroversial and well-established. It is the boys who need help to discover joy in their unique and temporary voice, and to own it with pride."

The boys could not have had a more enthusiastic audience than the adults attending the Rutter Singing Day. "I could see them grow in confidence during the day, and they left at the end ready to 'take on the world' and proclaim some Vocal Boy Power!!"

The Institute for Public Policy Research reports that although more British teenagers than ever before leave school with good qualifications and go to university, the mental well-being of our adolescents is among the worst in Europe. Is this why the Government has introduced its 'Sing-Up' campaign in primary schools, I wonder? Matthew Freeman, national development manager for 'Sing Up', is quoted as saying "Singing 'ticks all the right boxes' ... and meets the requirements of the government's Every Child Matters framework, which aims to improve young people's life chances. Singing helps children feel more confident and positive. It's also a great cardiovascular workout, releasing endorphins and Immunoglobulin A, which prevent you from getting ill. And because singing naturally brings people together, it helps to create community cohesion ... all of which is important for creating healthy, happy children and young adults."

Yes, we who have been working with young singers in the barren waste-land that is our exam-ridden education system have been proclaiming that fact for decades! But the job is not getting any easier, despite the Sing-Up campaign.

The pressures on schools to satisfy league tables intensifies, and the children are forced to jump through higher and higher hoops to prove their teachers' worth. Our young people have become the most examined in the world, it seems.

Nowadays FYC includes sixth-formers, so in any one year we will have members facing SATS (at 14 years), GCSEs (at 16), AS levels (at 17) and A levels (at 18). Add to that the fact that more and more subjects have become modular, thus extending the exam period back to January (or even to the previous year for GCSEs). Add to that the fact that many schools have increased the number of GCSEs from 9 to 11 or more (to look better in the league tables). Bear in mind also the

often excessive course work required and add the necessary mock exams and practice tests and it's easy to see that there isn't much time left for what I would term 'real education'.

How does this impact on the week-to-week running of a busy choir like FYC? Where possible we avoid summer events to ease the pressure because we have learnt to expect many absences from rehearsals. On our recent tour we had to provide blocks of revision time for some of our older members. They felt unable to give themselves permission to have a week away from their studies during their spring vacation – having just finished a long, arduous term.

But there is another way to run an education system. Our recent hosting of the Young Adelaide Voices (a choir remarkably similar in age and ethos to FYC, both having members who come from many different schools) high-lighted this difference. Young Adelaide Voices were travelling for four weeks during term-time – with the blessing of the various feeder schools who viewed their tour to Japan, England, Belgium and Germany as education of the highest calibre!

There seems to be a complete chasm between the aims of the government and the reality on the ground for the young people in our schools. A colleague of mine, also a member of the Association of British Choral Directors, regularly works in Surrey primary schools. He has been dismayed to see the drop-off in singing in year 6 at many schools and attributes this mainly to the fact that music is being sidelined in that year to make way for practising skills for the forthcoming SATS.

Since singing helps children feel more confident and positive, wouldn't it be a better idea to increase the singing opportunities for youngsters during 'testing times'? DVS

How to make friends...

Friends of Farnham Youth Choir, a registered charity, provides advance notice of concerts with the opportunity, where feasible, to reserve seats, attend special events and purchase FYC merchandise, as well as the chance of contributing financially or through fund-raising to the musical development of current and future choir members.

For more information contact Jeremy or Sian Smith on 01252 326465

...and contact people

On any matter directly affecting the choirs or their members, the main contacts are:

Farnham Youth Choirs' Administrator – Jan Dunford (01252 716387)

Farnham Youth Choir – Ros Piddington (01252 625252)

Junior Girls Choir – Jan Dunford (01252 716387)

Junior Boys Choir – Jan Dunford (01252 716387)

Training Choir – Jan Dunford (01252 716387)

On general contact, information, concerts, recordings, or whatever you need, try:

E-mail: youthchoirf@btconnect.com (Chris Mansell, Chairman) – Website: www.fyc.org.uk

Telephone: 01252 717173 (David Victor-Smith, Musical Director)

Fax: 01252 713903 or 01252 717173

© Farnham Youth Choir 2008. Photos: Jeremy Smith, Jan Dunford