

OXFORD HARMONIC CHOIR: 1921-1980

1. BEGINNINGS TO 1945

1921-1924: From Iffley Glee Club to Oxford Harmonic Society

Beginnings

Oxford Harmonic Choir began life as the Iffley Glee Club and dates its foundation to the club's first reviewed concert: a performance of Edward German's light opera *Merrie England* on 28 July 1921.¹ Glee clubs are an interesting part of the social history of music-making in England. 'Glees' were a type of secular part-song, similar to the Elizabethan madrigal, much favoured in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when there were composition prizes for the best glees and composers who specialised in the genre.² Jane Austen in a letter mentions a musical gathering at her brother's house where 'there is to be some very good Music, 5 professionals, 3 of them Glee singers, besides Amateurs', and Dickens mentions 'itinerant glee-singers' in *Nicholas Nickleby* as being part of the musical clientele of Golden Square in London:

It is the region of song and smoke. Street bands are on their mettle in Golden Square; and itinerant glee-singers quaver involuntarily as they raise their voices within its boundaries.³

Glees were a boon for music publishers; a list drawn up in 1885 numbered 23,000 part-songs published in Britain since 1750. Towards the end of the nineteenth-century, part-songs by contemporary composers such as Parry and Elgar were becoming popular and the term 'glee' was falling out of favour. Glee clubs proliferated over the period 1750 to 1914; they started as predominantly upper-class all-male groups but later in the period became more open to women and also spread to lower social classes.

In Victorian and Edwardian Oxford, too, glee clubs were a popular way of making music. There were glee clubs in the colleges: glees were sung in New College hall; there were 'good old English men's voice glees' in Pembroke, and at Magdalen there was a Maltese Glee Club, so called because 'only malt liquor was to be drunk at their meetings'.⁴ There were also civic glee clubs, for example the Oxford Gleemen (founded 1886). These were all-male affairs, but women were a strong part of the Iffley Glee Club, where the small inner group calling themselves the 'Iffley Quartet' consisted of two men and two women: Harry Collier, Harold Cook, Marjorie Adams and Freda Sotham.⁵

Of course, the Iffley Glee Club must have come into existence before its performance of *Merrie England* in July 1921, but we don't know exactly when. Tradition has it that there were seven founding members, among whom was Charles Wale, manager of a Co-op store in the Cowley Road. His daughter, Hilda, sang in the choir from 1924 to 1988, from the age of 15 to the age of 80, and provided some vivid reminiscences from its early days.⁶ The club was certainly giving concerts in the Iffley Memorial Institute in the winter of 1919-20, as we learn from a report given by the Institute's secretary, Sir George Forrest, in the *Oxford Chronicle*:

During the winter some of the most delightful concerts had been given by the Institute Glee Club; it would be difficult to estimate the good work done by the club in developing musical ability in the village. Its success was mainly due to the great tact and energy of Mr. and Mrs. Cook. The concerts had been a source of revenue to the institute.⁷

The Iffley Memorial Institute had been set up in 1917 to remember the war dead and as a tribute to surviving soldiers. Forrest, who lived in the village, was one of its founders. A prolific journalist and historian, he had retired to England in 1900 after a career in India, where he had set up the Imperial Record Office in Kolkata and edited selections from state papers.⁸ He wanted the Institute to be ‘the centre of a new and better social life’, ‘where members of the community could meet on common and equal ground.’⁹

The Glee Club’s performance of *Merrie England* took place in aid of the Memorial Institute in the grounds of Iffley Turn House, the property rented by Forrest and his wife.¹⁰ Glee songs and part-songs were easy to sing and perform by amateur groups without the benefit of an orchestra. *Merrie England* was a more ambitious venture for the club, using soloists from its own members and a small orchestra of 12, and it was favourably reviewed in the *Oxford Chronicle*:

The Iffley Glee Club last night gave an excellent rendering of Edward German’s light opera, ‘Merrie England’, in the grounds of Sir George Forrest, in aid of the Iffley Institute. The Iffley Glee Club always attracts large audiences – Iffley has the rare gift of appreciating a really good performance. There was an excellent orchestra of twelve for the accompaniment, with Mr. Frank Townsend as first violin. Few people realise the charm of outdoor singing until they actually hear it well done. At Iffley last night both the chorus and the solo singers were well above the average. ‘Merrie England’ was a big subject to attempt, but the Party was amply justified – and rewarded.¹¹

Growth

The Iffley Glee Club began to develop rapidly and to move beyond the confines of Iffley Village. At first, its conductors were drawn from within the group, one of them, it is worth noting, a woman, Mrs Cook, who conducted Sir Charles Stanford’s *Battle of the Baltic* in December 1922.¹² In 1923, the club appointed the first conductor from outside its membership: Reginald Jacques of Queen’s College. Jacques had served in France and Belgium in World War I and had been wounded in Péronne in the Somme in March 1918; out of his company of 116 only two others survived. When his hospital ship arrived at Southampton, he was apparently given the choice of two destinations: a hospital at Newcastle or one at Oxford and chose the latter. He spent a year in bed but was then able to matriculate at Queen’s College in 1920 to read for a shortened degree course in English Literature. The notes made on his arrival there state that he was the organist of St Philip and St James Church, was planning to move on to a further degree in Music (you could not do the first degree of BA in Music until 1950) and hoped to make a career as an organist if the wounds to his legs did not prevent it. His interests are described as being Music and Musical History, particularly the church side. In December 1922, he sang several solos in a concert by the Queen’s College’s Eglesfield Musical Society and ‘delighted his audience’ with his ‘powerful, deep bass voice’, and at some point, he started to assist the college organist Maurice Besly in training the choir. In 1926, he was appointed deputy organist at Queen’s while Besly was on leave, and subsequently organist after the latter had resigned, on condition that he submitted the B.Mus. for which he had been studying.¹³ According to *Grove’s Dictionary of Music*, Jacques was encouraged in the study of music by that important figure in Oxford’s musical life Sir Hugh Allen, famous conductor of the Oxford Bach Choir and Heather Professor of Music, of whom more below.¹⁴ Allen was certainly consulted about the Queen’s appointment, and it is quite possible that it was Allen too who had earlier suggested that Jacques take on the Glee Club.

The appointment of the new conductor initiated a closer association of the club with the city. Jacques conducted his first concert with them – a medley of short pieces – in May in central Oxford in the YMCA hall, in George Street.¹⁵ By the end of the year, the Glee Club had rebranded itself the Iffley Choral Society, reflecting a general trend: as early as 1876,

Stainer and Barrett were arguing that small social gatherings for making music were giving way to larger choral societies for the performance of master-works by the great composers, with the result that glee singing was becoming ‘almost a lost art in England’.¹⁶ The society’s first concert in the Town Hall was given on 30 December, a repeat of one held earlier in Iffley. The reviewer in the *Oxford Chronicle* wrote:

The Iffley Choral Society have closed their old year with a red-letter day, marked by their first concert in the Town Hall, which took place on Sunday evening. This small but enthusiastic body of singers have done good work within their own borders hitherto, but the time has come for them to contribute to the musical life of the city, and judging by Sunday’s performance they should have a useful career before them.¹⁷

By June 1924, the choir had been renamed the Oxford Harmonic Society, the name it retained until 2014.¹⁸ In a significant step for its future, it had reinforced itself with other members from the city, as was reported in the *Oxford Chronicle* in a review of the concert given that month:

The Oxford Harmonic Society is an old friend under a new name – the married name, so to speak, of the Iffley Choral Society; for having taken into life partnership a considerable body of singers from the city, and found a local habitation also within the boundaries of Oxford, it was felt that the latter name would be a truer expression of the main geographical source of membership. But it is less the nominal role than the tradition and training of a choir that form its personality, and these have happily remained unchanged; so that we could still enjoy the full rich tone, the steadiness of pitch and the play of light and shade which in its earlier days this choir had taught us to expect of it.¹⁹

With a larger membership and a shift into central Oxford from Iffley, the choir had introduced a new presence into the city’s musical life as a choral society, though it retained some of the traditions of a glee club in its repertoire and programming. Interestingly, the development of the society from glee club to choral society mirrors the recommendations of L.C. Venables in *The Choral Society* (1888), where he says that choral societies ‘like oak trees, should be of slow growth’ and progress from part-songs, glees and madrigals to the simpler kind of cantata and selections from an oratorio to ‘the complete oratorio of the greatest masters’ – the works of Handel, Haydn and Mendelssohn.²⁰

There are no minute books belonging to the choir for this early period, and the story of its development was pieced together by Dr Joe Wilson from the reports in the Oxford newspapers.²¹ Hugh Allen, who devoted considerable efforts to unite city and university in music-making, as we shall see below, was its president at least as early as December 1924, when he is named as such on the concert programme for that month. It is not possible to say much about how the finances operated. The conductor almost certainly gave his services for free.²² We know that many of the concerts were put on in aid of various charities, for example the Iffley Memorial Institute, the YMCA Building Fund and the Headington Orthopaedic Hospital. Entry was free and a collection was taken at the end. The position of Hon. Collector was named in the earliest rules that survive, probably from the 1930s. Some concerts had a small orchestra, presumably amateur; others just a pianist.²³

Considerably more is known about the choir’s repertoire, casting an interesting light on musical taste in the period. Much of this was by contemporary or recent British composers. The first two concerts on record were works by Edward German: *Merrie England* and *Tom Jones*. After Arthur Sullivan’s death in 1901, German had been commissioned to complete his unfinished opera *The Emerald Isle*; following this, he composed a string of light operas of his own in the tradition of Gilbert and Sullivan. The patriotic and humorous *Merrie England* is set in Elizabethan times and offers a slightly tongue-in-cheek evocation of a romanticised past. With its catchy tunes and a strong role for the chorus, the work was extremely popular

with amateur choirs in the early part of the beginning of the twentieth century. The third concert organised by Mr and Mrs Cook before Jacques arrived consisted of two parts. The first half was a performance of Charles Stanford's cantata *The Battle of the Baltic*, a setting of a patriotic poem of 1801 by Thomas Campbell about the naval battle of Copenhagen fought between the British and the Danes. The second half was in the Glee Club tradition, consisting of solos and quartets for mixed voices and male voices, sung by members of the club. The only item we can identify was 'Strange adventure' from *The Yeomen of the Guard*, which was performed as an encore by the 'Iffley Quartet'.

When Reginald Jacques took over, he continued what was probably the pattern of the earlier concerts sung in the Iffley Memorial Institute of putting together mixed programmes made up from short vocal pieces, some for soloists, some for choir, rounded out with some instrumental pieces.²⁴ Of the vocal items some were by earlier composers but more by contemporaries, including Maurice Besly of Queen's College, some of whose compositions were a staple of the early programmes. Parry, Elgar, Holst and Vaughan Williams feature regularly. A slightly longer piece was *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* composed by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor in 1891 to words from Longfellow's well-known poem. This was another popular piece, the first part of Coleridge-Taylor's *Scenes from the Song of Hiawatha*, according to the music publisher August Jaeger 'the biggest success Novello's had since *Elijah*.' After the composer's death in 1912, the work became a regular feature up until World War II for performance in costume in a ballet version at the Royal Albert Hall, often under the baton of Sir Malcolm Sargent.

1925-1945: Consolidation

Over the next twenty years the choir consolidated its position in the Oxford musical scene. The historian of Oxford music, Susan Wollenberg, has written a comprehensive account of the city's music-making in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many features of which continued over into the early twentieth century: for example subscription concerts, bringing external musicians to Oxford; concerts associated with charitable fundraising, and music festivals, all of which figured in the choir's early history, as we shall see.²⁵ A number of musical organisations founded in the late nineteenth century were also still going strong at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Oxford Bach Choir was founded in 1896 and was later amalgamated with the earlier Choral and Philharmonic Society by Hugh Allen. The Oxford Chamber Music Society was founded in 1898 (as the Oxford Ladies' Musical Society) and the City of Oxford Silver Band was founded in 1887 (as the Headington Temperance Band). All this increased concert activity.²⁶ There had always been an overlap between the city and the university in this area, as Susan Wollenberg points out:

It is important to recognize that 'town and gown' combined and overlapped (perhaps in music more easily than in some other areas). Personnel were shared between city and university, and audiences were drawn from both spheres: the advertisements for musical events constantly referred to 'the Ladies and Gentlemen of the University and City, and of its vicinity' ... or some similar formula.²⁷

In the early twentieth century, Hugh Allen was a central figure in Oxford's musical life. He became the organist of New College in 1901 and Heather Professor of Music in 1918. An immensely energetic and dynamic person, he loved conducting amateur choirs and was keen to promote music-making in both town and gown. He became conductor of the Bach Choir in 1901, and in 1902 he founded an amateur orchestra for 'the development of the study and practice of orchestral music among the instrumental players in Oxford, for the performance of orchestral works and for co-operation with the Oxford Bach Choir'.²⁸ Known initially as Dr Allen's Orchestra, it was renamed the Oxford Orchestral Society in 1919 and was able to

support other choirs, including the Oxford Harmonic Society. (It was renamed the Oxford Symphony Orchestra in 1974.) Allen also organised music festivals which aimed to use all the musical forces available in university and city, as well as bringing in musicians from outside Oxford. There was a Bach festival in 1914 and a seven-day festival in 1922 with a wide-ranging programme, including folk-dancing in New College gardens and three historical ballets in the Corn Exchange as well as concerts of classical music.²⁹ Allen also started the tradition of the Mayor's (now Lord Mayor's) Carols in the Town Hall at Christmas, in which the choir was to participate in the eighties and nineties, and communal hymn singing on other occasions.³⁰

Although Allen decreased his performing engagements in Oxford after his appointment as Director of the Royal College in the same year that he became Heather Professor, he retained his rooms at New College and continued to promote music in Oxford. An article in the *Oxford Times* on the Oxford musical scene in 1931 pays tribute to Allen's influence on musical life in Oxford and how he used 'every ounce of his dominant personality to fill Oxonians with a fever for music':

When community hymn singing became the order of the day – and in Oxford it was Sir Hugh who started community singing, which has since become a national pastime – people went because they enjoyed being made to sing.

"Sing!" Sir Hugh Allen would shout. "It won't hurt you. Everyone can sing or make a noise." And before long each gallery would be engaged in fierce competition against another, and people would go home humming lovely tunes, or with bars of music recurring in their minds.³¹

As mentioned above, Allen was the Oxford Harmonic Society's president by December 1924 and, during the Second World War at least, chairman as well, with meetings taking place in his rooms in New College. In this later period, now retired from his London position, he took part in its concerts too, playing the continuo in the 1940 performance of the *St John Passion* and the 1941 performance of the *St Matthew Passion*, and he wrote an interesting programme note for the 1943 performance of *Messiah* (see further below). Reginald Jacques was his protégé, as we have seen, and it can be no coincidence that Jacques's successors as conductor of the society were three organists at New College: John Dykes Bower, Sydney Watson and Herbert Kennedy Andrews. Allen may also have been behind the choice of the name Oxford Harmonic Society. Another protégé of his, Harold Spicer, later organist at Manchester College, had co-founded a short-lived choir with this name before World War I but it had foundered after only two concerts when he enlisted in the army.³²

Under Jacques, Oxford Harmonic Society, now regularly performing in the Town Hall, gradually increased in confidence in its programming. In March 1925, Jacques conducted the choir's first performance of an oratorio: parts 1 and 2 of *The Creation*, as was noted in the *Oxford Journal Illustrated*:

Mr Reginald Jacques, as conductor, led the Oxford Harmonic Society to its greatest achievement on Sunday evening, when they gave a performance of Parts I. and II. of "The Creation" in the Town Hall to a crowded audience. The Harmonic Society ... has now grown to a very convenient size, possesses many good voices and shows generally keen musical intelligence. ... More male voices are wanted to balance the choir, which is especially strong on the soprano side, and when that is accomplished the Harmonic Society will be a choir of which Oxford will have reason to be proud.³³

The choir began to take part in the Oxford Subscription Concerts, which had been set up in 1920 by a committee chaired by Hugh Allen 'to promote the performance of good music in Oxford' by bringing professional symphony orchestras and string quartets to the city, as well as using local musicians.³⁴ Jacques planned to include a performance of a new cantata by

Thomas Wood, *Forty Singing Seamen*, for a subscription concert to be given by Sir Henry Wood on 3 June 1926, but the disruption caused by the General Strike in May caused this to be cancelled. The venture eventually came off in February 1927 as a part of what was otherwise an orchestral concert conducted by Wood with his New Queen's Hall Orchestra. Then in March 1928, the choir gave its first performance in the Sheldonian, with a performance of an abbreviated version of Purcell's *King Arthur* and Thomas Wood's *Ballad of Hampstead Heath*. It participated in another subscription concert in March 1929, conducted by Allen with the LSO, performing two of Borodin's Polovtsian dances from *Prince Igor*, and in May 1930 took part in the Oxford Festival of Music, starring in two concerts, the second including a joint performance with the Oxford Bach Choir of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, again conducted by Allen. This festival was 'under the general direction of Sir Hugh Allen' and was 'an attempt to display as fully as possible the musical activity of Oxford in its many and varied forms.'³⁵

The first of these two concerts in the festival, with a programme of music by Bach, was Reginald Jacques's last concert as conductor. His successor, John Dykes Bower, continued the trend of programming at least some more substantial works: his first two concerts included Handel's *Acis and Galatea* and the Mozart *Requiem*. (At the latter, in New College Chapel, Albert Einstein, in Oxford to deliver the Rhodes Memorial Lectures on 'The theory of relativity' and to receive an honorary doctorate, was present in the audience.³⁶) The choir again took part in a festival: the three-day Haydn Festival in May 1932, which was programmed to imitate the series of concerts that took place in Oxford when Haydn received his honorary degree in 1791. The first concert was a performance of *The Creation* in a joint venture with the Oxford Bach Choir and the Oxford Orchestral Society. The soprano soloist was the celebrated Scottish singer Isobel Baillie in her first appearance with the choir.

Under Sydney Watson, the choir took part in yet another Oxford festival in May 1935 celebrating the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Bach and Handel, singing Bach's *Magnificat*. In November, they combined with the West Oxford Choral Society to perform the last movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony in a subscription concert conducted by Malcolm Sargent with the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

In May 1936, the society mounted a major concert on its own, a performance of Verdi's *Requiem* in the Sheldonian, with the Oxford Orchestral Society. It got an enthusiastic reception from the *Oxford Times* reviewer:

The Oxford Harmonic Society gave one of the most important concerts in its history on Sunday afternoon. ...Oxford has possibly more concerts than any other city of its size, but although many of these events are of interest musically, few are characterised by the fire and inspiration of Sunday's performance. Dr. Sydney Watson, the conductor, was out for big effects and sharply-heightened contrasts, which he achieved with an inspiration that did not flag. ... Soloists, conductor, choir and orchestra received a great ovation, and conductor and soloists were called back time after time.³⁷

The society was now an established part of the Oxford music-making and continued in the ensuing years to take part in joint ventures with other choirs and subscription concerts, as well as mounting its own concerts.³⁸

War Years

During the Second World War, there was a considerable effort in Oxford to maintain musical life and other kinds of entertainment, partly as a way of keeping up morale. At first, it seemed that uncertainty, the blackout and the call up of men to fight would make this impossible, but Hugh Allen was keen to carry on. Herma Fiedler of the Oxford Orchestral Society recalled in 1960 'The war brought inevitable difficulties, but after a meeting of all music societies in Allen's room, it was decided to carry on, and carry on we did'.³⁹ The

musicologist Denis Stevens was an undergraduate member of OOS during the war and recalls the respite from worry that music gave:

Rehearsals were held at the Holywell Music Room, reached with some difficulty in the blackout, but once within that harmonious haven we felt the anxious drama of war had receded for a few precious hours. Concerts took place in the Town Hall, and despite the growing shortage of good players, it was sometimes possible to perform seldom-heard works scored with some degree of opulence. We tackled that magnificent “masque for dancing” – *Job*, by Ralph Vaughan Williams, who inspired us all by attending one of the rehearsals. Another concert featured his “*Fantasia on a Theme of Tallis*”, in which members of the Rosé Quartet, refugees from Vienna, played the solo parts.⁴⁰

George Thewlis, who was to become the society’s conductor in 1941, in the extensive notes he made towards a history of Oxford music (now in the Bodleian Library) explains that the arrival of civil servants from London helped to keep up numbers of performers for concerts and gives a vivid description of wartime rehearsals:

The depletion of members was partly compensated by the arrival from London of Government Departments which took over Colleges and other buildings for administrative purposes. The arrival of these brought many Civil servants who were Members of London Choral Societies, who eagerly took the opportunity to join the Oxford singers in making music and thus relieving the tension of anxiety caused by the expected bombing and invasion. Oxford, like other Towns, became a fire-fly city, men and women going about at night with winking torches flashing in the pitch-black night. Rehearsals were often interrupted by the wailing of sirens [sic] and the rush of members from the rehearsals to their fire-fighting duty ... From the upper windows you could see the light in the sky from burning London, and hear the drone of the German bombers passing over on that hellish mission night after night. Truly, music was an antidote to all this horror, and right well did these singers take advantage of the opportunity.⁴¹

Parry’s ‘Blest Pair of Sirens’ apparently became a joke with Oxford musicians, ‘the “Sirens” having wailed their warning many a time during the rehearsals’.⁴² Thewlis’s notes show that in fact there was a very considerable amount of music in Oxford in the war years. As well as choral society concerts and some college concerts, the Subscription Concerts continued, and there were in addition two sets of War Time Concerts, one in the Holywell Music Room and one in the Town Hall. Artists were glad to come to Oxford as a respite from the London bombings and concert goers could hear well-known conductors and orchestras: Henry Wood, Adrian Boult and Constant Lambert with the London Symphony Orchestra, and Malcolm Sargent, Thomas Beecham and Vaughan Williams with the London Philharmonic. Among the soloists who could have been heard were Isobel Baillie, Kathleen Ferrier and Peter Pears; the latter gave a recital with Benjamin Britten, including songs by Handel, Purcell and Schubert, and Britten’s *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*.

Some choral societies did disband during the war, but the Harmonic Society managed to keep going despite the difficulties of maintaining numbers. A vivid description is found in a typescript preserved in the choir archives of life members’ memories:

OHS kept going during the war. Small hall next to Apollo (New Theatre). Rehearsed in that hall on Tuesday nights. One night came out and saw glow in the sky which was Coventry being bombed. Planes going over all night long.⁴³

There was only one OHS concert in 1940 (*St John Passion*), but in succeeding years, after George Thewlis took over as conductor from H.K. Andrews, the choir managed to give two. Some of the concerts raised money for charitable causes: the Soldiers’, Sailors’ and Airmen’s Families Association, the Women’s Land Army Benevolent Fund and the Oxford Eye Hospital Rebuilding Fund. The choir tackled some of the major works of the choral

repertoire for the first time: the *St John Passion* and the *St Matthew Passion* conducted by H.K. Andrews, *Messiah* and *Elijah* conducted by George Thewlis. (It is interesting that the programme note to the latter, written by Thomas Armstrong, at that time organist at Christ Church, states that it was the first performance in Oxford for many years, as the Bach festivals had put the work out of favour and it was due for a reevaluation).

Thewlis also conducted performances of Mozart's *Requiem* and the *St Matthew Passion*, as well as some concerts made up of shorter pieces. He formed a link with Isobel Baillie, who appeared in both the 1942 *Matthew Passion* and the choir's first performance of *Messiah* on 7 March 1943.⁴⁴ The latter was particularly significant for the society. Thewlis gave a more complete performance than was the standard practice at the time, employing the Dublin version of the score, Handel's first version of the work. A programme note by Hugh Allen commended his approach and excoriated the many 'mutilated' and badly edited renderings which the work had received:

No work has ever received so many performances, especially in this country, or received such strange handling by enthusiasts, or been so mutilated with 'cuts', or received the dangerous attentions of so many editors and conductors. But it has stood the test of time and triumphed over the indignities which have been heaped upon it by so many well-intentioned but thoughtless enthusiasts. ... It is strange that a work so beloved should have received such curious treatment as regards its content and performance as is the case with the *Messiah*. It is rarely given as Handel wrote it. Today however the Harmonic Society is giving it as Handel intended and we are told that Handel's own marks as regards dynamic and tempi are being observed and that the scoring is as he made it.

Although there had been earlier attempts to perform *Messiah* in a manner closer to performances in Handel's day, in 1943 this was still unusual and may justly be regarded as pioneering.⁴⁵ In a review in the *Oxford Mail* headed 'Messiah performed at Oxford given as Handel first directed it', Thewlis was praised for presenting the work in its entirety:

It would be interesting to know how many, if any, members of the audience at the Harmonic Society's concert in the Town Hall, Oxford, yesterday afternoon, had ever before heard "The *Messiah*" in its entirety. It was given by Mr. George Thewlis and his choir and the Oxford Chamber Orchestra as it was first performed under Handel's direction in Dublin on 13 April, 1742. Mr Thewlis deserves not only to be congratulated on his enterprise in this respect but on using the composer's markings. The most showy choruses or dearly-loved arias lost nothing by being given their proper place in this grand work. Its power and beauty were renewed by this performance in its completeness.

The concert was a great success. Every ticket was sold and a repeat performance was offered on 14 March, although Isobel Baillie could not appear again. Audrey Bates, who was a member of the society from 1936-88 recalled:

In 1943, during the 2nd World War, we sang *The Messiah* in the Town Hall. The Hall was packed and people, queuing to Carfax, had to be turned away. Because of this, we gave a second performance and filled the hall again the next week! Isobel Baillie sang the Soprano solos, as she did on many occasions. (She had a soft spot for our Society and reduced her fees for us!) Her voice was so beautiful especially so in the Christmas passages that it will never be forgotten, nor surpassed.⁴⁶

Messiah proved to be a money earner like no other, and after the war it was to become an annual event for the society (though at Christmas rather than Easter) helping to keep it afloat financially, as we shall see. Interestingly, it looks as though the society had originally thought of making an annual performance of the *St Matthew Passion*. A note at the end of the 1941 Mozart *Requiem* programme mentions that practices for the society's 'annual performance of Bach, *St Matthew Passion*' will begin 'next Thursday at the Holywell Music

Room' and invites intending members to 'communicate with the Secretary, Kenneth Hutton, New College.' The success of *Messiah* must have put an end to this plan.⁴⁷

Conductors and repertoire

During the period 1925-45, the society had a succession of short-lived conductors but managed nevertheless to maintain and develop its identity. Reginald Jacques resigned in 1930 to take over conducting the Oxford Orchestral Society. His conducting of the choir had been praised in reviews in the local papers and on his retirement, he was complimented on the work he had done with the choir:

Those who remember the inauguration of this particular musical society will be the first to congratulate Mr. Jacques upon what he has made of it. It has grown very considerably from a small beginning, it boasts many good and strong voices and its members are all remarkably keen.

Jacques's concerts tended still to consist of several works rather than one long work, and he continued to include many works by contemporary or recent British composers: Parry, Vaughan Williams, Charles Wood, Percy Buck, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Henry Balfour Gardiner, Rutland Boughton, George Dyson, Maurice Besly, Herbert Howells and Thomas Wood, whose *Forty Singing Seamen*, a setting of a poem by Alfred Noyes, and *Ballad of Hampstead Heath*, with words by James Elroy Flecker, were both given first performances by the choir. Wood was an Oxford composer: from 1924 to 1929 lecturer in music and precentor at Exeter College. The son of a master mariner, he had spent much of his childhood at sea, and the sea was the inspiration behind some of his most popular works. Wood's programme note for the choir's performance of Purcell's *King Arthur* reveals the patriotic sentiment that lay behind the choice of English music in this post First World War period:

Purcell may or may not have known that when he was writing incidental music to a pantomime in 1691 he was making a definite contribution to English music: but he could scarcely have realized that in 'Come if you dare', 'How blest are shepherds' and 'Fairest Isle' (to name three numbers only) he was giving us a national possession.

These years belong to the period named by some at the time, and after, 'The English Musical Renaissance', when there were various movements to promote music in the country, by improving music education, by fostering new composers and by reviving folk songs and the music of earlier periods (the Purcell Society, for example, had been founded in 1876).⁴⁸ The choir's repertoire should be seen in this context: though foreign composers are not excluded, the staple is British music.

Jacques was succeeded by three New College organists. The first was John Dykes Bower, who had become organist at New College in 1929. He had previously been an organ scholar in Cambridge at Corpus Christi College and then organist at Truro Cathedral. Apparently, he had impressed Warden Fisher of New College and Hugh Allen by ejecting from Truro cathedral choir a tone-deaf lay clerk who was also the city's mayor.⁴⁹ Dykes Bower was a perfectionist, who made great demands on his choirs, and he disliked any element of the histrionic in the conductor's role. Reviews in the Oxford papers were largely complimentary: a review of his first concert was headed 'A Dykes Bower Triumph' and his next concert, the Mozart *Requiem*, was also praised as 'a beautiful performance': 'Mr. Dykes Bower knows what effects he wants and gets them.' 'The performance of both choir and orchestra ... suggested that infinite care had been taken at rehearsal.' When he resigned in 1933 to take up the post of organist at Durham Cathedral, the papers regretted his departure:

Sunday evening's concert given by Oxford Harmonic Society in New College Chapel ... served to remind Oxford music-lovers how great will be their loss through Mr. Dykes Bower's departure from Oxford. He is a very distinguished musician.

Trevor Harvey, an organ scholar at Brasenose, who wrote music reviews for the *Oxford Mail*, took over on a temporary basis until a new conductor was found, and only conducted one concert. This got a good reception: 'Mr. Trevor Harvey, the conductor, is to be congratulated on his very responsive choir.'

The next appointment was Dr Sydney Watson, who had succeeded Dykes Bower as organist at New College. He had studied at the Royal College of Music and Keble College, and had worked at Stowe School and Radley College, before coming to New College. Watson stayed until 1938, when he became musical director at Winchester College. He also received praise from the reviewers for his concerts not only for the Verdi *Requiem*, but also for Bach's *Magnificat*:

Sydney Watson conducted a first-rate performance of Bach's splendid *Magnificat*, full of life and colour, and excellently well proportioned. The balance between choir and orchestra was admirable,

and for Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*:

Dr. Sydney Watson has an undoubted capacity for producing the dramatic from both choir and orchestra.

His successor was the new organist at New College, Dr H.K. Andrews. Born in Northern Ireland, before coming to Oxford, he had gained a Mus.Bac. (1934) and a Mus.Doc. (1935) from Trinity College, Dublin, and had then become organist and choirmaster at Beverley Minster. While organist at New College, he read for a BA in Modern History as a mature student and at the same time gained an Oxford D.Mus. He was an expert in Byrd and Palestrina, about whom he was to write several technical studies. (During his tenure at New College, the chapel was known as the Byrd Sanctuary.)⁵⁰ He was also a composer and the choir was later to perform some of his motets. There seems to have been some sort of hiatus from October 1938; although a surviving programme card names Andrews as conductor and lists three works for rehearsal, Fauré *Requiem*, Debussy *Sirènes* and Handel *L'Allegro*, only one of these was performed, the Debussy, in a subscription concert which Watson returned from Winchester to conduct, and it was only the sopranos who were involved. Either Andrews pulled out of his first year or perhaps was reluctant to put on a performance. His first concert with the society, the *St John Passion* in May 1940, made a good impression on the reviewers:

This was Dr. Andrews' first appearance as conductor of the Harmonic Society, and he is to be congratulated on a most successful performance. The chorus was excellent in blend and intonation, and its singing was always alive and enthusiastic.

Despite this, his tenure seems to have been not altogether a happy one. Unlike Hugh Allen, he was perhaps temperamentally unsuited to conducting amateurs; in a brief obituary tribute, George Thewlis wrote that he had an 'abhorrence of less than the best' and 'had no use for slipshod methods or carelessness'. Relations with the choir became strained, numbers started to drop and Allen had to arrange a separation in 1941, after Andrews's second concert, a performance of the *St Matthew Passion*.⁵¹ Andrews doesn't seem to have held this against the society, as he played the organ in its concerts during the war years, and in 1956 provided £100 to help with financial difficulties, as we shall see. Thewlis was to write 'I owe a deep

debt of gratitude to him for his help during the war, and gaining his friendship was to me one of the outstanding experiences of my Oxford career.⁵²

Further light on Andrews's personality is shed in a comment by Frank Howes in his book about the Oxford Subscription Concerts. Andrews became Honorary Treasurer of the Subscription Concerts in 1944, transforming the finances from debit to profit, but after a short period resigned because of disagreements with the committee. Howes writes:

Dr Andrews had certainly worked a miracle but he was an uncompromising sort of person, and he had a way of resigning when things could not be bent to his way of thinking. He did come back on to the committee, contributed to its deliberations and wrote programme notes for it. ... His financial acumen, as revealed in his treasurership of the concerts, was unsuspected by his Oxford colleagues, but it accorded with the penetration of his mind and his realization of the importance of detail in the execution of any plan, whether of practical or academic purpose.⁵³

The three New College conductors were too short-lived to develop a distinctive repertoire. The choir continued to sing works by recent and contemporary English composers: Parry, Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Charles Wood, George Dyson and Thomas Wood, as well as works by Bach, Mozart and Handel. There were more single work concerts: Verdi's *Requiem* and the *St John* and *Matthew Passions*, but the practice of mixed concerts made up of short vocal and instrumental pieces continued.

In 1941, the society chose as its new conductor George Thewlis, who became the choir's second longest-serving conductor, resigning in 1961. He was apparently suggested by Hilda Best, who had sung in his group, the Oxford Madrigal Society.⁵⁴ Thewlis had a rather different background from the choir's other conductors. He was a professional singer, who had come to Oxford from his native Yorkshire in 1918 to be a lay clerk in the cathedral choir, singing bass. He had sung in a couple of concerts for the society, taking the role of Polyphemus in *Acis and Galatea* in 1931, about which the reviewer wrote:

Mr. Thewlis sang "I rage – I melt" with vigour, giving an effectively easy performance of the air, "O ruddier than the cherry."

He was also a tireless researcher into early modern music and, as mentioned above, wrote detailed and most useful unpublished notes towards a history of Oxford music, now in the Bodleian Library. Thewlis was to develop a distinctive repertoire, which will be considered in more detail in the next chapter.

Orchestras and soloists

Orchestras, soloists and concert venues are always concerns for choral societies, and what can be managed depends on the state of finances. In the first part of the period under consideration we have no minute book, and so we have little information about the society's finances. A report of the AGM on 14 October 1931 in the *Oxford Mail* notes that the society was in 'a most satisfactory financial position' with its balance of £9 2s. 8d. 'a larger one than ... for many years'; this suggests that money had often been tight. A concert given in January 1932 with Vaughan Williams's *In Windsor Forest* as its main item realised a collection of £17 1s.6d. and the Town Hall was 'crowded'. The AGM in October 1932 also reported a substantial 'balance in hand':

Although the society had incurred a loss on some of its undertakings, it was reported by the secretary, Mrs. E.M. Birt, that the year had ended up financially well, and had been musically successful.

The first surviving minute book of the society dates from 1943-1946. At the first recorded meeting on 18 July 1943, a balance of £122 at the end of the season was reported. This

happy state of affairs had been brought about by the success of the March performance of *Messiah*. It enabled the society to hire the London Symphony Orchestra for the performance of *Elijah* in the next season – a rare moment of extravagance. Normally, the society had either to dispense with an orchestra and just use piano or organ accompaniment, sometimes with percussion, or to make use of local amateurs – unless they joined in a subscription concert, where professional London orchestras were used, as we have seen. In May 1926, the choir's first performance of Thomas Wood's *Forty Singing Seamen* was given without a full orchestra but with 'pianoforte accompaniments reinforced by a double-bass and a formidable battery of percussion.'⁵⁵ In November 1928, the reviewer commenting on the absence of an orchestra for the performances of Coleridge-Taylor's *The Death of Minnehaha* and Dyson's *In Honour of the City* ended 'Composers will keep on writing for big orchestras that nobody can afford nowadays.'⁵⁶ In the early days of the choir, when an orchestra was employed it was small; the reviews often speak of a band rather than an orchestra and could be critical of their performance, as here about the concert on 7 December 1924:

It is a perennial difficulty with performances of this type that it is practically impossible to secure as much rehearsal for the band as for the choir, and there was occasional evidence that the players were less familiar with the work than were the singers. Nor were they entirely happy with the Schubert Symphony. ... The absence of second horn and bass trombone, though presumably unavoidable, was regrettable; for safely as their parts were put by Miss Tayler [sic] at the pianoforte its tone could not give the true effect. However, these small imperfections are common to the majority of such concerts, except those of the larger and more wealthy societies, and, after all, a gift horse is not supposed to be looked at in the mouth. A committee which depends on a voluntary collection cannot risk much expense on the band, and owes the greater debt of gratitude to the players whose services are so freely given.⁵⁷

One problem, hinted at here, was that there was a shortage among Oxford amateur instrumentalists of wind and brass players. So, again, for the performance of *The Creation* in March 1925, we learn that a small string orchestra was used, and the wind parts were filled in on the organ by Henry Ley, the organist of Christ Church. And for the 1931 performance of the Mozart *Requiem*, a string orchestra was supplemented by William Harris, one of Ley's successors at Christ Church, who filled in the wind parts on the piano, and there was no trombone solo for the '*Tuba mirum*'. It was this situation which Hugh Allen had tried to remedy by founding the Oxford Orchestral Society, persuading a friend to provide wind instruments and people to learn them.⁵⁸ After 1930, OOS was increasingly the orchestra that the society employed. During the war, they also made use of two newly-founded orchestras of young professionals from London. The Jacques String Orchestra had been founded by Reginald Jacques on his move to London in 1936 and was made up of young musicians who he had originally got together to accompany his concerts at Queen's. The Boyd Neel String Orchestra, founded in 1933 by Louis Boyd Neel, was made up of young professionals from the London music colleges.

The society could not always afford top soloists in this early period of its history. It made use of its own members, including the singers who made up 'The Iffley Quartet' and the bass, Oliver West, who was the society's treasurer and a lay clerk at New College, and of local artists, for example, the choir's future conductor George Thewlis. In October 1944, it was noted that 'the engagements of solo artists was discussed and general feeling seemed to be that professional musicians, except for Mr Thewlis, were profiteering on a large scale.' Some notable soloists who sang for the choir in this period, apart from Isobel Baillie, were Elsie Suddaby, Margaret Ritchie, Muriel Brunskill, Eric Greene, Peter Pears (once, for the expensive *Elijah* of 1944), Stuart Robertson and Roy Henderson.

Organisation and membership

The first rules we have for the society, dating to the 1930s, are as follows:

1. The Society shall be called the OXFORD HARMONIC SOCIETY.
2. The affairs of the Society shall be managed by a Committee consisting of a President, Chairman, Conductor, Hon. Treasurer, Hon. Secretary, and not more than 12 other Members. (6 women and 6 men) The above mentioned 12 members shall include an Hon. Collector, Assistant Hon. Secretary, and two University representatives.
3. The Officers and Committee shall be elected annually at a General Meeting to be held in October Term. One week's notice of such meeting must be given to members. Any contested elections must be by ballot.
4. The Committee shall be empowered to elect Vice-Presidents.
5. A statement of Accounts shall be presented by the Treasurer at the Annual General Meeting.
6. The Conductor shall have the power to select the music to be sung by the Society, subject to the approval by the Committee.
7. The Annual Subscription for ordinary members shall be 5/- payable on admission to the Choir, and afterwards during the first fortnight of the October Term.
8. A register of attendance shall be kept and Members must see that their attendance is duly recorded.
9. No rule shall be altered without the sanction of a general meeting of members. Notice of any suggested alteration of rule must reach the Secretary three clear days previous to the General Meeting.

It is interesting that rule number 2 specifies that the twelve ordinary members should consist of up to six women and six men. We have already noted that women were a central part of the choir from the start, with the two female members of the Iffley Quartet and a conductor in Mrs Cook, and this rule is surely a deliberate attempt to reinforce the importance of the role of women in the choir. It represents a change from earlier attitudes; in 1901, we read in the fifth edition of L.C. Venables's handbook on choral societies:

Every one will admit that the success of a society is greatly due to its lady members; and indirectly they largely influence its management. Very rarely have they been invited to sit on committees. The conductor of a society in Scotland writes "we have tried, with success, to have ladies on our committee – the accompanist, one soprano and one contralto – and this has had a good effect on the harmony of the business meetings, keeping talk, strange to say, within bounds."⁵⁹

We don't have continuous records of the society's AGMs until 1947, but a balance in male and female committee members appears to have been kept up from then until 1952 when we find seven men. Treasurers and secretaries were drawn from both genders, but there was no female chair until 1961.⁶⁰

An association with Taphouse's began in 1932. Older Oxford residents will remember fondly Taphouse's music shop in Magdalen Street. The society used its music rooms above the shop, which could be accessed out of hours. Taphouse's were eventually to advise on ticket pricing, organise ticket sales and provide stewards for concerts.⁶¹ There was not yet a regular pattern of three concerts a year at fixed times; there were three in some years, more commonly two and for a period from 1937 only one. Concerts often took place in the afternoon. After the move from Iffley, rehearsals were held in the Cowley Road Methodist Church Hall, on the corner of Jeune Street, and later in the Boys' High School in George Street (now the History Faculty); in the war years, some were held in the Holywell Music Room. Concerts took place either in the Town Hall or the Sheldonian (in the latter generally for subscription concerts) or in cheaper venues: the Arlosh Hall of Manchester College, New College Chapel, the Wesley Memorial Church Hall, St Columba's Hall or Keble College Chapel.

The choir sometimes performed with other choirs, as we have seen, but relations could be strained at times, as we learn from the minutes. In October 1944, 'It was agreed that a letter

should be written to Miss Winslow, the Secretary of the Bach Choir, rebuking her for arranging the Bach Choir concert with complete disregard for the arrangements of other Societies', and at a later meeting in December 'There was some discussion on a matter arising from the minutes, that of relations, or absence of relations, with the Bach Choir. Three members of the Committee were chosen to try to meet a similar number from the Bach Choir who would settle any differences.'

We have no records of choir membership in this period. The newspapers provide some clues. A review of the Verdi *Requiem* in 1936 states 'In a few years the Harmonic Society has grown into a fine choir, with some good strong (and young) voices.' Young voices are mentioned on several occasions: a note in the *Oxford Mail* in December 1941 speaks of 'this Society, which has a number of fresh young voices, a characteristic for many years of this particular choir'. The reviewer of the 1944 *Elijah* notes that the Harmonic Society 'depleted in numbers owing to the war, still has many fresh young voices.' We are told that there were around 100 singers in the choir for the *St Matthew Passion* in 1942. But, as is common with Oxford choirs, men were in short supply, especially in the early years, as was frequently noted in reviews, for example:

The balance is not yet perfect, and its attainment is perhaps a little delayed by a laudable rule against poaching in the preserves of other choral societies; there is a good opening here for singers at present unattached, men, of course, being most needed, and especially some heavy basses.⁶²

In December 1926, there is said to have been an improvement in the balance of voices with 'a number of men recruited', and again in November 1927, 'an influx of male voices' is noted. But in the summer concert of 1933, we read that 'the men, though none too numerous' put up 'a very good show in "The Springtime of the Year."' And the War brought more problems in this area: for the performance of *Messiah* in 1943 'if any be singled out for special praise, it must be the eight stalwarts who sustained the tenor.'

2: POST WAR TO 1980

1945-1961: The Thewlis years

After the War, people in Oxford were keen to resume and enhance musical activity. Undergraduate societies had probably suffered most during the war years and the student magazine *Isis*, back in circulation after a six-year gap, welcomed the birth of 'fresh music clubs arising, phoenix-like, from the ashes of those which perished at the beginning of the war'. The Bach Choir swelled its numbers to 300 by 1946, and many famous musicians came to Oxford to perform.⁶³

The Oxford Harmonic Society's minute book for 17 February 1946 bears witness to another substantial change to Oxford musical life: Hugh Allen was chairing a committee meeting in his rooms at New College at the usual time of 12.15, but later the same day was knocked down by a motorcyclist and died three days later; rather poignantly, those minutes remained unsigned. Denis Stevens was to write: 'We lost a great man and a formidable, unforgettable influence on the English musical scene.'⁶⁴ A paragraph in the concert programme of the choir's performance of the Mozart *Requiem* in May 1946 reads:

The Oxford Harmonic Society would like to take this opportunity of expressing its sorrow at the death of its President, Sir Hugh Allen, and of acknowledging its indebtedness to his never-failing kindness. The Society owes much to his guidance in the choice of its programmes. It is a strange coincidence

that two great Requiems were in preparation before his death; no more fitting tribute could be paid to his memory than the performance of these works.

Allen's successor as Heather Professor, Jack Westrup, agreed to become the new president.

A postwar tradition for the society was initiated in November 1945 when George Thewlis conducted a first peacetime performance of *Messiah*. Thewlis was to write:

This year was inaugurated the annual performance of 'Messiah', chiefly because the public wanted it, but also for financial reasons. The performance of little known works always resulted in a financial loss, but this annual performance relieved us of this worry and enabled us to bring before the public works which would otherwise never be heard.⁶⁵

As for previous generations, Handel's *Messiah* held a special significance for people in the period as a ritual. Allen's note on the back of the programme, re-used from the programme for the 1943 performance, gives the work a particular patriotic status as 'a national possession'. The choir's annual Christmas performances became an Oxford event, which always attracted a large audience, often of around a thousand people. This was good for the society in giving an annual boost to its income, as Thewlis noted, but, as we shall see, the traditionalism of Oxford audiences had a bad effect on attendance at concerts featuring other works which were less well-known.

Post-war patriotism led to the continuance of the interest in British music that we noted in the earlier period. In 1948, Oxford held a Festival of British Music from 9-16 May, apparently carrying out the wish of Hugh Allen and also celebrating the centenary of Parry's birth; the King and Queen were the patrons; George Thewlis was on the finance committee. The programme was varied; as well as music by Parry, there was much by Stanford, Elgar, Holst and Vaughan Williams, with one work by Britten, his *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*, but there was also a run of Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* by the Oxford University Opera Club, and concerts that included works by Byrd and Purcell and many other less famous composers. The Oxford Harmonic Society's contribution was the opening concert in the Town Hall; Jack Westrup played the continuo. It consisted of an attractive programme of early English music of the kind that George Thewlis loved: John Blow's 'Awake, awake my lyre', Purcell's 'Soul of the world' from his *Ode on St Cecilia's Day*, Handel's coronation anthem 'The King shall rejoice' and his celebration of George II's victory the *Dettingen Te Deum*, and *Solomon: a serenata* by William Boyce, a contemporary of Handel. The programme note (unsigned but surely by Thewlis) gives much information about the performance history and Oxford connections of these items, some of the fruits of Thewlis's investigations into the history of Oxford music. Two days after this concert, Thewlis was awarded an honorary MA by the University for his contribution to Oxford music. The choir purchased an MA hood and gown from Foster's of the High Street at a cost of £18 for him to receive it.

Yet another patriotic event was the Festival of Britain in 1951, put on 'to demonstrate to the world the recovery of the United Kingdom from the effect of war in moral, cultural, spiritual and material fields'.⁶⁶ Oxford was one of the cities chosen to participate and one element of the programme was a University Festival entitled 'The Arts in England in the XVIIth Century'. As part of this, the choir gave a concert of 'Vocal Music of the Seventeenth Century' in July in the Town Hall, performing works by Purcell, Blow, Orlando Gibbons and Oxford's Henry Aldrich, Dean of Christ Church 1689-1710. Aldrich's 'Bonny Christ Church bells' was performed 'at 9.5 when the great Bell "Tom" at Christ Church was striking his 101 chimes, thus acting as a Ground Bass for the singers.'⁶⁷ Isobel Baillie sang *The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation* by Purcell, and she and George Thewlis sang two dialogues by Nicholas Lanier and John Jenkins. Thewlis contributed the programme note, in

which he wrote that Oxford had ‘an unbroken record [of musical tradition] of eight hundred years, unequalled in any other place in the country.’

For the coronation of the Queen in 1953, the choir gave a concert of English coronation music through the centuries. The programme contains an extensive historical disquisition on coronation music by George Thewlis, ending on a patriotic note:

Nothing is more certain than that we are at present living through a period of historical importance unequalled in the annals of our country. Therefore, when we look abroad, we can truly thank God that we are members of the British Commonwealth of Nations, and that we can freely and spontaneously sing ‘God save the Queen’ without that compulsion imposed on a less fortunate people by a dictatorship demanding, as it does, the utter annihilation of that freedom of speech and thought which we so happily enjoy in this ‘fairest isle, all isles excelling’, through the cumulative efforts of those who have fought and suffered in the past.

Conductor and repertoire

George Thewlis was the choir’s second longest-serving conductor. The previous conductors had all been at the start of their careers before moving on to other roles, but Thewlis came in at a later stage in his life, after he had already made his mark on Oxford music. Unlike some of the choir’s conductors, he never had a national reputation – there is no Wikipedia entry for him – but for many years he made a significant contribution to Oxford music. He was born in Idle in Yorkshire on 27 August 1890 and baptised in the Primitive Methodist Chapel there; his father Tedber Thewlis was a bread baker. Later, his parents moved to Wakefield and worshipped at the Eastmoor Methodist Chapel.⁶⁸ George sang in the Wakefield Cathedral Choir and then the choir of Ripon Cathedral; at the same time he began singing solos in local concerts – for example he sang in a performance of Coleridge-Taylor’s ‘The Death of Minnehaha’ for the South Kirkby Choral Society in 1914 – and won a prize for baritone solo at the Pontefract Musical Competitions in the same year. He married his first wife, Lilian Keech, in Wakefield Cathedral in April 1916. During the First World War, he sang in over a hundred fundraising concerts for the benefit of war funds, after 1917 in uniform; in a concert in the United Methodist Church in Goulceby in 1917, he ‘had to sing four times the applause was so great.’ Called up in March 1917, he served as a private in France from May to August 1917, and was then invalided home ‘having suffered impairment’.⁶⁹ He was discharged from the army on 16 December 1918 and, in the same month, he was appointed lay clerk in Christ Church Cathedral. He writes movingly of his first performance in the role at the Parry Memorial Service in Exeter College Chapel on 23 February 1919, in which sections of the Bach, Christ Church and New College choirs took part:

This was my first appearance at a concert in Oxford, having been appointed to Christ Church the previous December. Coming straight from a war hospital where I had been for eighteen months recovering from wounds, the effect of this concert was shattering. The emotional reaction prevented me singing more than half the notes in the ‘Songs of Farewell’, to me the finest things Parry ever wrote. I had been used to the full-blooded Yorkshire Choralism, but here was something different. Here in the Chapel where Parry had spent his youth there was delicacy and refinement such as I had never known. The effect of that Memorial Service is still with me as one of the outstanding things in my musical career.⁷⁰

Thewlis entered enthusiastically into Oxford musical life, supplementing the rather small remuneration received by a lay clerk with other activities. He sang many roles for local choral societies, performing in for example *Elijah*, the Bach passions, Handel’s oratorios, Sterndale Bennett’s *The May Queen* and German’s *Tom Jones*. Two of his most well-received arias were Handel’s ‘O ruddier than the cherry’ and ‘Why do the nations?’. He

taught an evening class in singing and musical appreciation to girls in East Oxford, who performed an annual concert representing English song through the ages; he taught voice production at Cuddesden Theological College; and he took on individual pupils. He became a spokesman for lay clerks and wrote letters to the papers about musical controversies. He was choirmaster of the George Street Congregational Church, and he formed and conducted a group called the Elizabethan Singers, later renamed the Oxford Madrigal Society, which gave many popular concerts.

Thewlis was a great champion of English music and of English song in particular. He agreed with Byrd that ‘There is not any Musicke of Instruments whatsoever, comparable to that which is made of the voices of Men where the Voices are good and the same well sorted and ordered.’⁷¹ He gave talks with illustrations on the growth of English song and wrote an extensive note on the history of the glee – ‘which is peculiarly a product of these islands’ – regretting its demise.⁷² He spent long hours transcribing songs from manuscripts in the Bodleian and Christ Church libraries, which were then performed by his various groups.⁷³ In addition, he made substantial notes towards a history of Oxford music, for example listing all the concerts performed by the various musical societies from the mid eighteenth century on: a most useful source. In his speech on the occasion of Thewlis’s retirement from the Harmonic Society in 1961, Jack Westrup said, ‘Mr Thewlis is one of the most industrious men I have met. He has introduced more unknown music to Oxford than anyone I know’.⁷⁴

Sir Thomas Armstrong, the Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, who, when he was organist of Christ Church, worked with Thewlis, wrote an interesting tribute on his death, pointing out how Thewlis had overcome considerable difficulties in his choice of career and had nevertheless been happy to share his musical discoveries with anyone:

In these days, George Thewlis would have been marked out from boyhood for a university career, perhaps as a musician, perhaps as a historian or classical scholar, and would have been generously assisted. As it was, he had to make his way to the city of Oxford, through his singing ability, by way of the choral foundation at Christ Church, and did not become a member of the University until many years later, when his work was belatedly recognised in the conferment of an honorary degree of M.A. ... George Thewlis was a generous and loyal man, free from the bitterness which might have been created in him by social and professional circumstances which, after the 1914 war, had not yet been humanised in Oxford as they have been to some extent during more recent years. Barriers and prejudices in those days were very real, and could generate unhappiness and resentment.⁷⁵

During George Thewlis’s twenty-year tenure, the choir performed a wide-ranging mix of works. There was the annual performance of *Messiah*. As in the two wartime performances, Thewlis seems to have performed the work in its entirety; in his manuscript list of the choir’s concerts, under the year 1946, he wrote ‘These performances of ‘Messiah’ were complete ones with the original Handel accompaniments’. From 1954, the programme notes state that the performances were based on a manuscript of 1766, which Thewlis believed to have been written by Thomas Harris, a barrister and supporter of Handel, who witnessed some of the codicils to Handel’s will and received a bequest from him:

This ... manuscript came into my possession about 1940, and the performance to-day is edited from it. The date of completion of the MS. is 1766, one year before the first full score was printed. It contains all the alterations and additions made by Handel between his first performance in 1742 and the printing of the full score after his death, and so may be considered the final draft of the work.

Thewlis had misinterpreted the signature towards the end of the manuscript, misreading ‘Tos’ for ‘Jos’. The real writer was Joseph Harris, organist in the parish church in Ludlow, who had had no personal contact with Handel. (A detailed account of Harris’s interesting life and of the manuscript, now in the Lilly Library, Indiana, may be found in an article by Thomas McGeary).⁷⁶ Although Thewlis overestimated his manuscript’s importance due to his

misattribution, it did offer, as one of many early copies of *Messiah*, something much closer to Handel's original conceptions than was provided in most early twentieth-century performances. As advertised in the 1943 programme with Hugh Allen's note, Thewlis was moving away from interpretations of the work, such as Malcolm Sargent's, that employed a large orchestra and modern orchestration towards a more 'authentic' performance.⁷⁷ This did not always meet with the complete approval of reviewers accustomed to a different style of performance. For example, A.D. reviewing the 1956 *Messiah* in the *Oxford Times* expressed regrets for the loss of the Mozart orchestration:

The Oxford Harmonic Society's performance of "The Messiah" in the Town Hall last night did justice to Handel by presenting the complete version; but even more interesting, for the score does contain a few dull patches, is that justice to Handel as the orchestrator was also done. Of course, one is accustomed now to the beautiful scoring of Mozart, particularly his highly individual use of the woodwind. The flute, for instance, usefully supports the voice and tops an instrument line like icing on a choice morsel. The conductor, Mr. George Thewlis, has let us see the original by removing the touching-up processes. The venture was worth while, but Mozart provided a varnish and gloss that now makes the original slightly dull to my ears.⁷⁸

Later, with regard to the 1958 performance, he wrote baldly in the *Oxford Mail* 'Some of the tempi which Mr Thewlis has reverted to certainly prove effective, but I cannot share his enthusiasm for Handel's scoring.' It took time for some to appreciate 'Handel's unsurpassable purity of line ... unencumbered by unnecessary harmonic filling'.⁷⁹ Thewlis maintained one traditional feature of *Messiah* performance: audiences were invited to join in the Hallelujah Chorus.

The choir was often praised for their part in these performances:

The chorus sang excellently, and in perfect harmony throughout the whole performance. (November, 1949)

Rolling in with relays of tidal sound, each more powerful than the one before, outwardly disciplined and yet internally free in repression [?expression], the Great Amen chorus made not only a grand close to Handel's 'Messiah' but a revelation of the resource, power, range and response of the Oxford Harmonic Society. (W.J. 1950)

From the Oxford Harmonic Society under the conductorship of George Thewlis, one always expects good singing and is rarely disappointed. Such singing was forthcoming in generous measure at last Sunday's Town Hall performance. (1952)

For the other two concerts each season, Thewlis was able to make more adventurous programme choices, as was often remarked on by reviewers. Many concert programmes advertised 'first performances' of the works being given. In 1947, a section of the choir gave the 'first performance in England' of the French Baroque composer Michel-Richard de Lalande's 'De profundis' (Psalm 130) and the 'first performance in Oxford' of Victoria's motet and mass 'O quam gloriosum'; this was broadcast by the BBC with an interval talk by Jack Westrup. In 1950, there was a revival of Thomas Arne's oratorio *Judith*, last performed in 1773; Westrup played the harpsichord continuo. The handsome programme was printed at the Oxford University Press with the libretto and a note by Thewlis. There were two excellent reviews:

Oxford is fortunate in numbering among its musicians Mr. George Thewlis, who, combining enterprise with research and untiring labour, gives us unique performances of neglected works.... The chorus sang extremely well, with clear tone, fine attack and good ensemble. (C.T.)

The first presentation since 1773 of Dr. Thomas Arne's sacred drama 'Judith' by the Oxford Harmonic Society ... was a triumph for the society and its conductor, Mr. George Thewlis. ... Mr. Thewlis deserves to be complimented on his conducting and training of the Harmonic Society, whose glorious singing in the choruses proves that no work comes amiss to them.

In June 1952, the programme included the 'first performance in England' of Monteverdi's *Mass for four Voices* and the 'first performance in Oxford' of Buxtehude's 'Jesu meine Freude' ('Jesu, Joy and Treasure'). Eric Blom remarked in the *Observer* that 'The Mass, beautifully sung under ideal acoustic conditions, was deeply impressive.'⁸⁰ From the nineteenth century, there were first performances in Oxford of three Bruckner masses: his *Mass in E minor* in 1951 ('first performance in Oxford'), *Requiem in D minor* in 1954 ('first performance in England') and *Symphonic Mass in F minor* in 1956 ('first performance in England'). Thewlis also continued the tradition of performing works by English composers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Parry, Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Frank Bridge, Herbert Howells, Gerald Finzi and H.K. Andrews. Thewlis was understandably proud of his record, and in the programme for the *Elijah* of February 1960 printed a list of all the works performed in the last twenty years.

Some of Thewlis's concerts continued the choir's earlier tradition of offering a mixture of solo and choral pieces both instrumental and vocal, which gave him an opportunity to include pieces he had discovered in his researches into books and manuscripts in Oxford libraries and to showcase music by his much-loved early modern English composers together with later works. One such concert was that given in the Town Hall on 5 May 1957, intended as a farewell by Isobel Baillie (although she did in fact appear subsequently in Purcell's *Dioclesian* in 1959). The choir sang Handel's coronation anthem 'Let thy hand be strengthened', four motets by H.K. Andrews and an old favourite, Vaughan Williams's *Five English Folk Songs*, items from which had been performed in 1925 and 1933. The pianist Colin Sherratt played three preludes and fugues from by Bach's *The Well-tempered Clavier* and a Beethoven sonata, and Isobel Baillie and George Thewlis performed solos and duets by Purcell, Bach, Haydn, George Hayden, Enrique Granados, Gerald Finzi and George Dyson.⁸¹ A.D. in the *Oxford Mail* praised the formula but remarked that it was going out of fashion:

The miscellaneous concert no longer has the attraction it had for our musical forefathers. Today audiences are drawn to concerts of a limited nature, whether it is all-Beethoven, a recital of Wolf lieder or Bach's harpsichord music. Traditionally, Oxford should try to revive the cause and Oxford Harmonic Society's effort deserved better support than it received yesterday afternoon in the Town Hall, which was only half full, for there is far too much music that would be neglected but for such concerts.

Poor audience attendance is a frequent note in the reviews of many of the concerts, as in this from the *Oxford Times*, reviewing the Bruckner and Elgar concert in May 1956, under the heading 'Thinly-spread Audience':

Fate, or perhaps the same Oxford apathy that is at least partially responsible for the present closed doors of the Playhouse, seems to conspire against George Thewlis's courageous activities in presenting infrequently performed musical works. Whatever factor was at work on Sunday, the Oxford Harmonic Society had a very thinly-spread audience in the Town Hall for the first performance in this country, under Mr. Thewlis's direction, of Bruckner's *Symphonic Mass in F minor*.

Or this from W.A. Chislett in the *Oxford Mail*, reviewing the concert on 23 February 1958, which featured Haydn's *The Passion* and Frank Bridge's *A Prayer*:

That the audience barely outnumbered those on the platform is surely a matter of reproach in a city the size of Oxford.

And on the same concert R. Drummond Hay in *The Oxford Magazine*:

What are critics to do? We blame concert-givers for their eternal performances of *The Messiah*, *Elijah*, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony before packed audiences. And yet if they follow our advice and perform works that are off the beaten track they have only half an audience! Mr. Thewlis and the Harmonic Society are often enterprising in their choice of programme, giving us Bruckner, Palestrina and Handel's other oratorios, but they only can fill the Town Hall with *The Messiah*. Have Messiahites no curiosity about other works, or is it that they are just not musical?

George Thewlis announced his retirement on the programme for a concert featuring Haydn's *St Cecilia Mass* and Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise* in February 1961. It is rather sad that the papers again recorded poor attendance, as they did for his last appearance with the society in the Holywell Music Room in May of that year, where he both conducted and sang 'in a clear fresh baritone, which certainly did not suggest that he has been singing before the public, since his boyhood days, for 62 years.'

Singers

A debate on 27 May 1945 is recorded in the minutes about whether to employ very good soloists or less good but cheaper ones for the next performance of *Messiah*:

The question of soloists was resumed: the two main points of view being a) it was desirable to engage soloists of the highest standing for it was good to hear them sing and because they attracted an audience. On the other hand it was urged that it would be more advantageous for the *Messiah* to engage artists who demand a smaller fee, so long as they give a musicianly performance and exhibit no vibrato, tremolo or wobble, because we would be likely to have a full hall for the *Messiah* even without the attraction of well-known names.

Desmond D'Arcy, a local singer who had been a member of the choir and who was Thewlis's pupil, was chosen for the bass part, presumably as an example of the second option. Isobel Baillie, an example of the first option, had already been approached to sing soprano; although she did not feature in the eventual performance, she was to become a regular performer for the society in *Messiah* until 1955.⁸²

Dame Isobel Baillie (born Isabella Baillie in 1895) came to prominence in the 1920s singing with Herbert Hamilton Harty and Henry Wood and became an internationally famous interpreter of *Messiah*. In her autobiography, Baillie estimates that she sang in over 1,000 performances of the work. She was in her late forties when she sang in the society's 1943 *Messiah*, and by the end of the war she had decided to give up singing *Messiah* with the Hallé orchestra, as she gradually wound down her singing career.⁸³ She was clearly a draw for the audiences and almost always received good reviews:

Mr. Thewlis wisely chose soloists with reputations. How beautiful was Miss Isobel Baillie's singing of the mystery of the Nativity in the aria "There were Shepherds" and the following recitatives! If she emphasised the stillness and mystery of the shepherds scene, she brought pathos to the lovely air of the Divine promise, "He shall feed His flock." [1943]

The solo singing ... was made more memorable by the voice of Isobel Baillie, which caught up the imagination and emotion of the hearers into the music in a manner not often known in Oxford. [November 1950]

Miss Isobel Baillie, however, still steals the thunder. The lovely tone of her voice, and above all, the personality behind her singing, still gives one the thrill of a great interpretative artist. When she sings of peace and beauty she creates them, and when she sings "I know that my Redeemer liveth" we all know it with absolute conviction. Although she sounded tired, this magical power was unimpaired. [1951]

In her autobiography, Baillie says that she managed to keep up performance level in her many renditions of *Messiah* by imagining herself addressing a member of the audience who was hearing the work for the first time. She used to get vocal colour by imagining a scene:

It was ... Sir Hamilton who instilled into me that vocal colour can arise from one's thoughts as one sings. Serious consideration of the text automatically colours the voice, as do mental images, possibly the most common way of creating vocal colour. For example, in the recitative *There were shepherds abiding in the fields* from Part 1 of *Messiah* I would conjure up in my mind a dark blue sky and the feel of that chill night air. Such a mental picture creates a mood which in turn colours the voice.⁸⁴

She had clear views on how to perform the work, disliking, for example, ornamenting the repeats:

Only once, towards the end of my singing career when it became fashionable to add ornamentation to the vocal line, did I sing an 'authentic *Messiah*'. ... I have always regarded *Messiah* not as concert but more as a service and I feel that ornamentation detracts both from the flow of the music and the meaning of the text.⁸⁵

1955 was her last performance in *Messiah* for the society, but she sang in two other concerts, her last appearance for the society being in 1959.

The society was very lucky in that Heather Harper took over the soprano role from Isobel Baillie from 1957 until 1963. She was recommended by Jack Westrup, for whom she had sung the role of Lady Macbeth in a University Opera Club performance of Verdi's *Macbeth*. She also received rave reviews:

Over the past few years Oxford has been lucky enough to hear Miss Heather Harper quite frequently, and every visit has made us more eager for the next. "Promising" was once the word to describe her, but her performance in Handel's *Messiah* in the Town Hall yesterday brought bigger words like "outstanding" and even "great" to mind; they will soon be needed. This was singing of the very highest quality, but it was more: it was a moving experience, and a fresh revelation of music that is always in danger of seeming stale. How is it done? Nature and training have given Miss Harper a complete voice, consistent throughout its range, with enough warmth at the top and clarity at the bottom for a full range of expressiveness. She also has a full operatic training, and this I think is part of her secret. The *Messiah* is often a melodramatic work, but the English oratorio tradition seems to mistrust "an operatic approach." This is sheer nonsense – where the "operatic approach" means true expressiveness controlled by a true musical intelligence. Taste and musicianship inform everything Miss Harper does – even her way of standing. (A.J. Harris, *Oxford Mail* 1957)

There can be little doubt that the most eminent virtue possessed by last Sunday's performance of Handel's "Messiah" in the Town Hall by the Oxford Harmonic Society, conducted by George Thewlis, was the singing of the soprano parts of the work by Heather Harper. Even as one who was raised in what may be termed the Isobel Baillie school of "Messiah" soprano singing, I have not heard a performance of the soprano part in the "Messiah" which was at once so stimulating and satisfying as that of Miss Harper. Miss Harper's singing of "I know that my Redeemer liveth" had all the pellucid clarity we expect from this aria and to it was added a rich tonal warmth, all Miss Harper's own. Her phrasing was superb and her articulation, without being in any way aggressively "elocutory", of exemplary precision. (FWD, *Oxford Times*, 1957)

Other well-known singers employed by Thewlis included: the sopranos Elsie Suddaby, Margaret Ritchie and Iris Kells, the contraltos Muriel Brunskill, Monica Sinclair and Jean Allister, the tenors Eric Greene, Alexander Young, Duncan Robertson and Gerald English and the baritones Thomas Hemsley (in his initial appearances, an undergraduate at Brasenose) and Dennis Noble. An invoice from 1948 shows that the society booked some of its singers through the agency of Ibbs & Tillet of Wigmore Street, London, which managed many famous singers.⁸⁶ Local singers were also employed, for example, the male alto Edwin

Hetterley and the bass Desmond D'Arcy; from time to time, Thewlis himself would participate.

Orchestras

As in the earlier period, the society could not often afford to hire a professional orchestra. A concert of Vaughan Williams, Kodály and Elgar in which the LSO took part sustained a substantial loss, as we shall see. Generally, the orchestra used was the Oxford Orchestral Society, sometimes with the addition of some local professionals or even some London players, but on occasion the society employed the Boyd Neel Orchestra, the Kalmar Orchestra, the Capriol Orchestra, or an orchestra consisting of a mixture of professionals and amateurs got together for the occasion. The Capriol Orchestra was used to play the complex orchestration for the Bruckner, *Symphonic Mass in F minor*, for example. Reviews were sometimes critical of the OOS, for example in November 1953, C.T. wrote:

Mr. Thewlis has brought his choir to a standard far above the level at which it used to sing this work; he should now devote more attention to the orchestra. ... The players need more careful direction, more rehearsal and more consideration.

In February 1954, for the Bruckner and Handel concert, there was praise for a mixed orchestra:

Generally, the orchestra employed – recruited from the best local professionals, professional enthusiasts from farther afield such as Robert Noble, the Berkshire music adviser, and young University musicians who played in the orchestra for the recent University Opera Club production of “Hans Heiling”, was of such an infinitely better standard than that with which the Harmonic Society usually has [sic], that it should effect a much-needed reform in the standards of local orchestral playing. The violins were better than I have ever heard them in a Harmonic Society performance, the woodwind was excellent, and we heard brass playing, notably by the three admirable University trombonists, which was once exciting and satisfying.

Organisation and Finance

For this period of the choir's history, we have more sources: minute books survive for committee meetings and annual general meetings and there are financial records. We have a more complete run of posters and programmes, and the local newspapers continued to give reviews.⁸⁷ Though a useful source, the minute books do not go into much detail and it is not always possible to work out what was going on behind the scenes. There is a run from 1943 to 1946, for most of which period Hugh Allen chaired the meetings, presumably in his role as president (the election of a chairman by the AGM appears to have lapsed at some point, possibly because of disruption caused by the war) and then a new book is started which contains brief accounts of annual general meetings, with only one set of minutes of a committee meeting before 1952. It appears that committee meetings during this period were infrequent (though there may have been un-minuted meetings) and business was probably mostly carried on by conductor, secretary and treasurer. After Allen's death, Professor Clement Francis Rogers chaired several meetings, but thereafter there seems to have been no-one filling this role. A letter from George Thewlis to the treasurer, Aubrey Wale, dated 28 April 1952 survives in the choir archives in which he writes ‘The question has been raised about a lack of Chairman at the Committee meetings, and I feel we ought to meet tomorrow to elect someone to the position.’⁸⁸ An emergency meeting took place on 30 April, at which there was a move to improve the frequency and order of committee meetings. It was agreed:

to elect a permanent chairman and to meet on the first Wednesday of each month, providing there was some business to discuss, and also the Wednesdays immediately before and after a performance, these meetings to take place in the Museum after rehearsal.

W.H. (Bill) Lockett was elected chairman. Afterwards, minutes were recorded still sporadically to 1954 and then more regularly between 1955 and 1961.

Reading through the minute books, one discovers many of the recurring concerns and dilemmas that continue to this day: profits and losses, committee membership and tenure of office, advertising for new members and for concerts, locations for poster display, posterboards, subscription rates, score arrangements, rehearsal times, attendance rules, concert venues, concert arrangements, ticket prices, cost of programmes for choir members, date clashes with concerts by other choirs. A pressing question was whether the choir should perform the popular works that bring in money or be more adventurous,

Finances had always been up and down. There seems to have been a problem just before Thewlis took over in 1941, as a note by 'Diarist' in *The Oxford Times*, October 1941, states that 'as a result of a successful season, the society has recorded a profit of £26, which wipes out its debt and leaves a balance of £10 in hand', and relates that the society was opening 'a guarantee fund to put its financial affairs on a permanently satisfactory basis.' Financial difficulties seem to have become more acute in the post-war period. Profits from the annual performance of *Messiah* and financial support from the Arts Council through the National Federation of Music Societies were not always enough to stave off difficulties caused by losses on the other concerts.⁸⁹ In May 1949, there was a record loss on the concert consisting of works by Vaughan Williams, Kodály and Elgar, which had employed the LSO, and a £100 overdraft from Barclays had to be organised; on this occasion two performances of *Messiah* at the end of the year succeeded in paying this off.⁹⁰ In 1955, financial difficulties led to a clash between the treasurer and conductor. For the next season Thewlis had planned a performance of Bruckner's *Mass in F minor* and Elgar's *Bavarian Highlands* and this had been agreed by the committee in their March meeting. In June, the new treasurer, W.H. Lockett, reported that there had been a large loss of £101.14.2 on the performance of Handel's *Samson* in May. The minutes report that he

said that did not agree with an expensive programme being considered for the spring concert and thought that if a performance were given at all it should be in the nature of a popular concert. The Conductor pointed out that the Bruckner 'Mass' and Elgar's 'Bavarian Highlands' had already been passed by the Committee at a previous meeting and the copies were ordered – some having been purchased by the members – and the programme advertised. The Treasurer expressed concern over the future finances and in view of his disagreement with the Society's policy felt that he would have to consider resigning from the position of Treasurer.

His resignation was reported at the October AGM and a new treasurer, Miss E.D. Bott, was appointed. In 'an open letter to our patrons' printed in the programme for *Messiah* in November, George Thewlis reported the loss on the *Samson* concert, which had been covered by the Arts Council, and made an appeal for audience support for other concerts by the choir:

When I took over the conductorship of the Harmonic Society in 1941, I made a promise to the late Sir Hugh Allen that I would perform a new or unknown work each year. That promise I have faithfully kept. ... Although we have no money in hand, we have faith enough to believe that our patrons would not care to see the end of the Society or the lowering of its standards by always performing popular works, and so, in this faith, we are giving the first performance in England of Bruckner's great Mass in F minor, and the first performance in Oxford of Elgar's 'Bavarian Highlands Suite', in March. The financial success of this concert is vital to the existence of the Society's future, and so we appeal to you all to support us in this crisis by attending the performance and bringing your friends.

And he continues:

Remember that 'Messiah' was a new and unknown work in 1742, and it is only by constant repetition that it has enjoyed the popularity it deserves. It is the responsibility of us all to see that these unknown works are also kept alive for those who come after us to enjoy, and to enable us to keep the faith entrusted to us by our former President, whom we remember with gratitude and affection.

Worries about finance continued. On 7 March 1956, the conductor reported that the City Council had refused to guarantee the next performance but had offered the use of the Town Hall for free. There were attempts to encourage schoolchildren and county choirs to come. In April, the financial state was still said to be demanding 'caution.' In July, the former conductor H.K. Andrews offered to give £100 to bring back stability; this was gratefully accepted by the committee, who voted to treat it as a loan. A Christmas draw and a jumble sale were put on to raise money. By February 1958, affairs had settled down sufficiently to pay back the money to Andrews (though he returned £20), but on the back of the *Messiah* programme for November 1958 there is another appeal to the public:

Owing to the higher costs in printing and artistes' fees, the financial side of running these concerts is becoming an increasing worry. Prices of admission have not increased since before the war. The National Federation makes a grant towards the loss on the concerts, but it does not guarantee the total loss; therefore we are dependent on the good-will of our patrons to support us by their attendance so that we can uphold the standard the Society has always tried to maintain.

Probably as a result of these financial difficulties, there were only two concerts put on for several seasons from November 1954.

Despite these difficulties, the society managed to keep going and to maintain the policy of varied programming. But there appear to have been other problems around this time. In October 1955, we learn from the minutes that choir numbers were down and it was decided to put a large advertisement in the *Oxford Times*; there was also a proposal to print leaflets that described the choir's activities. The question of trying to raise numbers was again discussed at the AGM of 1959, when the membership was down to 82. A suggestion was made to ask the Education Officer to encourage school leavers to come along. The meeting for 2nd November 1955 reports a confrontation with Mr (Stanley) Jones, who had just been voted off as chairman:

Mr. Jones stated that in his opinion the standard of the choir had never been so low and asked the Conductor if he was satisfied, to which Mr. Thewlis replied that he was never satisfied but that he was certainly not unduly worried and reminded Mr. Jones that a large number of the sopranos were new, young and inexperienced. Many of them had not sung "Messiah" before and most of the new ones had never sung with an orchestra. He thought they only needed confidence and this would come when they had rehearsed with the orchestra. Mr. Jones then asked if he proposed to import some sopranos to help but Mr. Thewlis said that he did not think this necessary.

Stanley Jones resigned from the committee in February 1956. In view of this exchange, it is particularly interesting to read the reviews of the November 1955's *Messiah*. The choir comes out of it quite well:

The chorus – younger and with less experience than before – sang well. As was only to be expected, they missed some of the finer points, but their approach generally was beautifully fresh and uninhibited. (D.E.H. *Oxford Mail*)

The chorus, on whom rests the main burden in a work of this kind, sang enthusiastically, especially in the final choruses. It was not their fault that "Glory to God" sounded as though the Angels were suffering from severe laryngitis, and in several choruses they sang very well indeed. The sopranos, particularly, had an enlivening vivacity which was very refreshing in the quick fugal movements. (R.J.D. *Oxford Magazine*)

The *Oxford Times* review says that this was in many ways the most impressive *Messiah* in the last seven years and praises the improved standard of orchestral playing, though R.J.D. in the *Oxford Magazine* is much more severe, both on George Thewlis's conducting and on the orchestral playing. In the absence of recordings, it is difficult to know exactly how the choir sounded, but it may be noted that Joe Wilson, who became a committee member in 1957, writes of Thewlis that he was 'perhaps a too genial conductor', and, as we shall see, there was a push to raise standards after he retired.⁹¹ There were good reviews, though, for some of his final concerts, as for the performance of Palestrina's *Missa Brevis* in 1959:

The Oxford Harmonic Society's performance of Palestrina's *Missa Brevis* in Merton College Chapel on Thursday week must surely work out to be something of a landmark in Oxford's concert life for 1959. The opening Kyrie seemed perfect and demonstrated the tremendous hard work which Mr. George Thewlis and his singers put in to their concert. They achieved great clarity of tone throughout. The singing in the Sanctus and Benedictus was a special joy. The opening soft silvery tone of the sopranos was particularly notable. [A.W.]

During most of this period, the choir rehearsed in the Old Lecture Theatre at the University Museum. But in 1959 they had to move to the Boys' High School in George Street and again in 1960 to the Northgate Hall in St Michael's Street.

1961-1980: New Developments

A fresh start 1961

George Thewlis left the choir in May 1961, together with the long-standing secretary, Margaret (Peggy) Herd, who had recently become his second wife. Towards the end of Thewlis's tenure, in February 1961, a new appointment had been made to the chair: Rosalind Noyce (later Rosalind Brain), who was Assistant Registrar in the University, with much experience of committees. At a meeting on 1 March 1961, she proposed that the new conductor should be Dr David Lumsden, the organist at New College, provided that Professor Westrup agreed. Born in Newcastle in 1928, David Lumsden had been organ scholar at Selwyn College Cambridge, where he had studied with Boris Ord and Thurston Dart; in 1956, he gained a PhD on the subject of Elizabethan lute music. He had held various appointments in Nottingham and Keele before coming to New College as organist and University Lecturer in Music in 1959. In Nottingham, he had been the founder and conductor of the Nottingham Bach Society, and he was an extremely accomplished organist and harpsichordist.⁹² At a meeting on 15 March, Rosalind Noyce reported that David Lumsden had accepted the invitation to become conductor, and she then proposed that Frank Garside, who had recently been co-opted to the committee, should be appointed the next secretary. Garside (1915-1988) had read Mathematics at Corpus Christi in Oxford and after serving in the army in World War II, where he rose to the rank of Major, came back to Oxford to teach Mathematics at Magdalen College School. (There he was known by the nickname Fag, from his initials and his 'semipermanent cigarette'.) In 1958, he embarked on an Oxford doctorate on algebra, which he gained in 1965, and he later wrote a seminal article on 'The braid group and other groups'; the term 'Garside element' was coined to mark his work. He was elected as a Conservative to Oxford City Council in 1967 and eventually served as Sheriff of Oxford and Lord Mayor.⁹³ He was to be the society's secretary until 1980.

There is a definite sense of a new beginning to the first minutes on 12 June 1961 with the new conductor, secretary and chair, and the newish treasurer: Joseph (Joe) Wilson (elected 1959), who kept a very keen eye on finance until 1969. The meeting took place in David Lumsden's rooms in New College and there were more committee members present than

previously. Under underlined headings, a number of decisions were recorded on rehearsals, concerts, *Messiah* (the Watkins Shaw version was to be used in future), committee meetings, register, rules, social events and publicity. It was decided, for example, to tighten up on the rules concerning the minimum number of attendances. From this time on, the minutes are much more detailed and informative, and the committee had evidently become more efficient and forceful. At a meeting in December, it is recorded that ‘the main purpose was to take urgent steps to improve the quality of the singing.’ The treasurer was ‘authorised to spend 16 guineas to obtain professional help for the tenors and basses next term.’ It was agreed that the choir should be split up on at least one occasion ‘ladies and gentlemen to rehearse separately.’ David Lumsden also volunteered to rehearse each part separately once a month for half an hour before the main rehearsal. At a meeting in June 1962, it was decided not to have repeat voice tests for existing members, which were reported to have ‘led to a great deal of unpleasantness in other choirs’, but to remind members that the conductor could exclude members from performances if they did not meet the required standard. At the annual general meetings in 1962 and 1963, David Lumsden gave candid assessments of recent performances by the choir:

The Conductor congratulated the Society on its recent performance of St. Nicolas. We were not however quite 100% perfect, and the Committee might perhaps usefully consider ways of improving the quality of singing to a maximum. (AGM May 1962)

Dr Lumsden congratulated the Society on its performance of the Bach B Minor Mass, and gave a detailed criticism mentioning the weak as well as the strong points. (AGM May 1963)

Audrey Bates, who was assistant secretary for 17 years, recalled the performance of the Mass in B minor as ‘outstanding’:

Bach’s B Minor Mass, under Dr David Lumsden was an outstanding Concert. We had worked so hard at rehearsals and we formed small groups for extra rehearsals at each other’s houses – a few from each voice, followed by coffee & eats. Very enjoyable!! All the extra hard work paid off when the concert was given, and we will never forget that concert.⁹⁴

The reviewers concurred that an improvement had been effected. The *Messiah* of 1962 got four good reviews, all commenting on the improvement, including this one from ACB in the *Oxford Times*:

From their performances [*sic*] of Handel’s “Messiah” on Sunday, the Oxford Harmonic Society appear to have taken on a new lease of life. Under the directorship of Dr. Lumsden they gave a full, vital, and accurate account of the work. Their intonation throughout was faultless, and the balance of voices seemed especially happy. This was in part due, I think, to the high quality of the contraltos. They produced a fine, rich tone which blended so well with the tenors and basses that the sopranos stood out against the harmony of these three parts almost as a descant – a light, bright tone, which they maintained to the end with no sign of fatigue.

And there was a similar chorus of praise for the *Mass in B Minor*, even from the often-critical *Oxford Magazine*, where R. Drummond Hay wrote that ‘In the comparatively short time that he has been the Society’s conductor, [David Lumsden] has brought new life to it.’

Starting again 1963

It must have been a disappointment when it was announced in March 1963 that David Lumsden’s doctor had advised him to give up some of his activities and so he had decided reluctantly to resign. The committee cast around for a new conductor and eventually settled on Richard Silk, who had been Head of Music at Magdalen College School since 1959. Silk

was a graduate of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, with a BA and Mus.B in composition and organ performance. His tenure as conductor had a rather tricky start, with mixed reviews and financial losses. In his first season, the choir gave a performance of Handel's *Jephtha* in March which only got a small audience and made a substantial loss, though it earned a very good review from the *Oxford Magazine*:

The Town Hall should have been full for this concert. It was well rehearsed, well sung and was an almost complete performance of one of Handel's finest works - *Jephtha*. One begins to wonder how many people in Oxford have any musical curiosity whatever. Arias such as "Scenes of horror, Scenes of woe", "Tune the soft melodious flute", "Freedom now once more possessing" "Open thy marble jaws" are among the most descriptive and dramatic ones Handel ever wrote, and the choruses are splendid. I very much liked Richard Silk's sincere and simple conception of the work as conductor. The soloists ... were all well chosen and musical. The choir sang well, and as if they liked the music. The Oxford Orchestral Society, led by Shirley Houlton, played extremely well for an amateur orchestra. In fact, it was one of the most interesting and enjoyable choral concerts that I have heard in Oxford. (R. Drummond Hay)⁹⁵

The financial loss caused some perturbation at the committee meeting of 16 March 1964:

The Treasurer pointed out that we had made a large loss on the *Jephtha* concert, and in spite of the good profit made on the *Messiah* we would be very hard put to it to make ends meet for the Mozart Requiem concert. The matter was serious enough to be treated as an emergency. A detailed examination of the likely costs of the Requiem was made, and a rigorous pruning was suggested in all departments. The Secretary suggested that it should be proposed to members that those who wished should underwrite the Requiem concert by guaranteeing to buy one or two tickets. After some discussion this suggestion was adopted.

The final concert of the season, Mozart's *Requiem* received poor reviews in the *Oxford Times* and *Oxford Magazine*; the former accusing the performance of 'shallow and rather vulgar treatment' and the latter of 'insecure and ragged' choral singing.⁹⁶ For the next season, the society made a bold choice of works for its second concert: Arthur Honegger's *King David* and Francis Poulenc's *Gloria*, which had premiered in Boston in 1961. It was noted in the committee meeting of October 1964 that this was a gamble:

A discussion now took place on the advisability of doing the Honegger. This was bound to be expensive. The Treasurer outlined our financial state. It was agreed to carry on with the concert and engage a top artist – we hoped Heather Harper. We would hope for a good audience. A poor audience would strain our resources to the limit. If the audience was poor we would have to be extremely scrupulous in planning our expenditure for future concerts. We would take the gamble this time, and hope it came off. This was a committee decision.

Honegger's *King David* has a major role for the chorus and combines various different styles of music: Gregorian chant, Protestant hymns, polyphony and jazz. It was originally composed in two months in 1921 as incidental music to a theatrical performance by the Swiss playwright and theatre manager René Morax. In 1923, Honegger rescored it for concert performance with a larger orchestra, including various drums, cymbals, tambourine, tam-tam, celesta and harp. There are 27 movements linked by a narrator, with solo parts for soprano, boy soprano, alto and tenor, and a speaking part for the witch of Endor; this was played by Maria Aitken, then an OUDS actress. Despite an article in the local press urging for a full Town Hall, and the presence of Heather Harper, now a celebrated singer, there were only 245 in the audience, a big disappointment, and there was a substantial loss, even though Richard Silk had foregone his honorarium. A subsidy from the City Council gave some additional financial help, and this was renewed for the next seven seasons, which, in conjunction with the Arts Council grants, assisted with continuing losses on some of the following concerts.

Jumble sales were also held to raise funds. From 1969, towards the end of Silk's tenure, until 1971 when he resigned, the number of choir members rose from around 90-100 to around 120, which helped further with finance.⁹⁷

One of Richard Silk's most successful concerts, which attracted an audience of 546, was the choir's second performance of the Verdi *Requiem* in May 1969, for which his conducting received high praise:

There were signs of careful rehearsal, reflecting credit on the two societies and particularly on the conductor who over a period of years has refined his raw material to its present standard of excellence. (S.B.)

The performance was conducted by Richard Silk, whose emotionally unexpurgated, wholehearted Verdi, was a personal triumph. (L.T.)

When Richard Silk left to join the Birmingham Conservatoire, he received a tribute from W.A. Chislett in the *Oxford Times*, rightly pointing to the variety of his concert choices:

The departure of Mr Silk will be a serious loss to Oxford music, not only for Magdalen College School ... but in the city generally, particularly for those who take part in choral music whether as singers or listeners. In his eight years as conductor of the Oxford Harmonic Society he has given some memorable concerts and in them has demonstrated the breadth of his musical knowledge and the catholicity of his taste.

Repertoire, singers and orchestras 1961-71

David Lumsden did not have much time to establish a repertoire, but he seems to have favoured concentrating on one substantial work. The choir performed Bach's *Mass in B minor* for the first time and also their first work by Britten, *St Nicholas*. When Richard Silk took over, he continued to expand the repertoire, and he included some more modern composers. The choir tackled quite a few works for the first time: Heinrich Schütz, *Magnificat*; Handel, *Jephtha*; Berlioz, *The Damnation of Faust*; Vaughan Williams, *A Sea Symphony* and *Five Tudor Portraits*; Orff, *Carmina Burana*; Stravinsky, *A Symphony of Psalms* and Britten. *Festival Te Deum*, in addition to Honegger, *King David* and Poulenc, *Gloria*.

Both conductors kept up the tradition of the annual performance of *Messiah*. David Lumsden introduced the Watkins Shaw version in his first rendition in 1961, highlighted in the programme note:

This performance is in the edition by Watkins Shaw (Novello), which edition comes closer than any other to Handel's intentions. The rhythmic and ornamental conventions of Handel's time are observed as nearly as modern research on these problems permits. The original instrumentation is employed.

Richard Silk continued to use Watkins Shaw and to reprint the same formulation in his programmes. Into his eight renditions, he introduced some of the variants that Handel introduced in successive performances, 'to give variety to a familiar pattern'.⁹⁸ There were mixed reactions from reviewers, some disliking the introduction of ornamentation and the use of a counter tenor, but one, for the 1968 rendition, feeling that the performance was neither one thing nor the other:

Sunday brought us a step nearer Christmas with a typically English performance of Handel's *Messiah*. ... It was 'typically English' in that it aspired to scholarliness but capitulated to tradition. ... This account was neither wholeheartedly brash nor sufficiently scholarly, but it veered in the right direction. (H.L.)⁹⁹

Then, as now, there were differing views about questions of ‘authenticity’ in performance, but modern audiences have become more accustomed to hearing performances closer to those of Handel’s day.¹⁰⁰

Oxford Orchestral Society was the usual choice of orchestra in this period, sometimes with the addition of local professionals. Richard Silk sometimes combined sections of OOS with the Capriol Orchestra for performances of *Messiah*. Some good singers were to be heard in the choir’s concerts. Helen Watts and John Carol Case sang in the *Mass in B minor* in 1963. James Bowman made a first appearance in *Jephtha* in 1964, when he was taking a Diploma in Education at New College and singing in the chapel choir; he was to sing in eight concerts in all, last appearing in *Messiah* in 1984. In an interview he gave to Helen Peacocke in 2002, he said of his student days:

They were some of the happiest days of my life. I have such fond memories of singing with the Oxford Harmonic Society. At that time, I had no idea I would make music my career, I really thought I would go on and teach.¹⁰¹

Ian Partridge sang in *The Creation* in 1966. Philip Langridge sang in *The Damnation of Faust*. Heather Harper sang for the last time in the Honegger and Poulenc concert, as she became too expensive for the society. Other singers included Jean Allister, Gerald English, Kenneth Bowen, Brian Kay, John Noble and Christopher Keyte. The society booked the soloists through the London agency of Nicholas Choveaux, formed in 1948 and continuing until the late 1980s.¹⁰²

New developments 1971-80

Richard Silk left to join the Birmingham Conservatoire in 1971, and was succeeded by Peter Ward Jones, a very accomplished organist and harpsichordist. Ward Jones had been organ scholar at Balliol from 1963-1966 and had joined the Bodleian in 1969 to become Music Librarian. For a time, he was the organist at St Aldate’s Church, and it was through a choir member who also sang in the Oxford Harmonic Society that his name was suggested to the society; shortly afterwards he became organist and choirmaster at St Giles, where he continued until 2000.¹⁰³ He became an authority on Mendelssohn, cataloguing part of the Bodleian’s Mendelssohn collection and editing the diary that the composer and his wife wrote on their honeymoon. He retired from the Bodleian in 2009 but continues to be an active musician and sometimes stands in for our current accompanist, David Langdon.

A copy of Frank Garside’s appointment letter to Peter Ward Jones is preserved in the choir archives. It gives a good picture of the choir in this period, and I quote the beginning of it:

The Harmonic Society is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Its membership is at the moment about 130 (as many as the Town Hall stage will take). Although basically ‘Town’ there has always been a very strong University connection, and many of our members are past or present members of the University. The balance of voices is good. In addition to a very sound basis of members of long standing there is also a healthy turnover of young voices of people who are passing through the University, or whose stay in Oxford is limited for other reasons.

The rehearsal evening is Wednesday, the present times being 7.30-9.30 pm, in the Northgate Hall, St. Michael’s St. The first rehearsal is normally about the 8th or 9th of September, and after breaks of about three weeks at Christmas and Easter the season closes about the 20th May. It has been the custom for many years for the Society to give a performance of the ‘Messiah’ at the end of November in the Town Hall. There is usually a capacity audience, and not only has this concert in its way become an Oxford ‘occasion’, but it has added greatly to the stability of the Society’s financial situation. We usually get an N.F.M.S. guarantee, and for the past few years the City has each year voted a sum towards our expenses so that at the moment we are on a sound financial basis.

The normal concert year has consisted of this performance of the 'Messiah', followed by a second major concert with full orchestra in the Town Hall, and a lighter Summer Concert in the City Church or a college chapel, with instrumental music between the choral items. The Oxford Orchestral Society normally accompanies us except that in the past few years we have engaged the Capriol Orchestra of London with a section of the Oxford Orchestral Society for the 'Messiah'. Apart from the 'Messiah' the choice of other works lies with the Conductor, subject to the Committee's approval.

One immediate change was instituted. Although Garside in the continuation of this letter had suggested using the OOS for the annual performance of *Messiah*, Ward Jones decided to employ the Oxford Pro Musica, a professional orchestra founded in 1965 and managed by the Oxford trumpeter John King. (It is now named the City of Oxford Orchestra.) Ward Jones had played harpsicord continuo for them since the sixties. He felt that for Baroque works crisper orchestral playing was needed than could be provided by amateurs, though he was happy to use OOS for Romantic music. Roger Payne replaced Bernard Brown for the trumpet solo in 'The trumpet shall sound'.

Although he had been instructed by Garside that the choir performed an annual performance of *Messiah*, Peter Ward Jones also had it in mind that this might become less frequent. He was not the first person to have raised this possibility. The treasurer (Joe Wilson) had 'ventilated the possibility of us not doing the Messiah' at a meeting on 22 February 1967, because the profits on the last *Messiah* had been small and it was difficult to afford good soloists, but had been voted down 10-2. At the AGM of 1970, the question had come up again:

The question of perhaps dropping the Christmas performance of the Messiah was also raised, but it was generally agreed that it would not be in the Society's interest to drop this annual event, which was indeed the Oxford 'occasion' for which the Society was best known.

Nevertheless, there was clearly a bit of a frisson when Peter Ward Jones brought the matter up at the committee meeting of 8 February 1973:

Christmas Oratorio The Secretary mentioned that in his formal letter to Mr Ward Jones when he became our Conductor, that [*sic*] he had made it clear that it was the custom for the choir to perform the Messiah annually. The Conductor said that several numbers of the choir had approached him about a possible change this year, and he felt this might well be good for the choir. The Committee agreed that we should this year perform part of the Christmas Oratorio ... instead of the Messiah, but that we would revert to the annual performance of the Messiah in 1974.

Disagreement on this issue evidently continued. At the AGM of 1977, the treasurer stated that 'the two years when we had made the greatest loss had been those when we had not done the Messiah.' But K.R. (Ken) Gadd countered that 'our financial viability was geared primarily to the loss we made on the second concert, and was not necessarily connected with performing or not performing the Messiah.' The compromise of doing something different every third year continued until Ward Jones's retirement, so that there were two performances of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and a concert consisting of Britten, *A Ceremony of Carols*; Vaughan Williams, *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*; William Mathias, *Ave rex*, and other carols. In his farewell speech at the AGM of 1980, Ward Jones remarked that breaking the annual tradition of *Messiah* performance 'had not bankrupted the Society'.

Like Richard Silk, Ward Jones included in his performances of *Messiah* some variations from the most frequently played versions, for example the original version of the Pastoral Symphony, which was only eleven bars long, and the bass version of 'Thou art gone up on high', which was the first to be composed.¹⁰⁴ In his first performance of the work in 1971, he chose a counter tenor, James Bowman, instead of a contralto, as Silk had done in 1965. The programme note explained

The use of the male alto, as in today's performance, has the composer's sanction, for in 1750 and subsequent years Handel engaged the Italian Gaetano Guadagni to sing the alto part in *Messiah* and composed for him new versions of the arias 'But who may abide' and 'Thou art gone up on high', both of which had originally been written for a bass.'

It is interesting that as late as the 1970s this choice was still felt to need explanation, and indeed it did not meet the approval of one reviewer:

Handel's preference for the flamboyant alto-castrato Guadagni, who displaced female soloists for some three or four seasons, did not lead him to choose other castrati for "Messiah". Still, there was a precedent of a sort for Mr Bowman. I prefer his magnificent counter-tenor in other music. In "Messiah", the comparatively impersonal falsetto is not really warm enough for the tenderness of most of the contralto part.

The choir's performances of the work continued to receive some good reviews. In 1974, 'the truly alert choir managed detail and tempi beyond previous form, and the result was clarity, urgency and fine emotional representation of the favourite masterpiece.' The 1977 performance was praised in the *Oxford Mail* under the heading 'A faultless Messiah':

Oxford Harmonic Choir gave its annual performance of "Messiah" in the Town Hall yesterday afternoon, and drew a capacity audience. Under the spirited and stylish direction of Peter Ward-Jones, the work sounded fresh and untarnished, and the choir gave an enthusiastic and well projected display of singing. ... Oxford Pro Musica were on very good form indeed, and they enhanced the performance considerably: the "Pastoral Symphony" was played with shimmering tone and real poise.

Repertoire and singers

Peter Ward Jones continued to expand the choir's repertoire. There were first performances by the choir of the following works: Handel, *Saul* and *Solomon*; Rossini, *Petite Messe Solennelle*; Puccini, *Messa di Gloria*; Dvořák, *Mass in D major*; Vaughan Williams, *Mass in G minor*; Walton, *Belshazzar's Feast*; Duruflé, *Requiem*; Britten, *Rejoice in the Lamb* and *A Ceremony of Carols*. In his leaving speech at the AGM of 1980, Peter Ward Jones said that his favourite concerts had been *Saul*, *The Dream of Gerontius*, *Belshazzar's Feast* and the Verdi *Requiem*. He told me that *Saul* was his favourite Handel oratorio, with the most interesting orchestration (trombones, carillon and obligato organ), and that he felt that *Gerontius* was a piece where, because of the many changes of tempo, the conductor comes into his own and the choir have to watch his beat! *Belshazzar's Feast* was a challenging work and he was pleased when a saxophonist who came from London complimented him on his conducting.

The NMFS grant was partly intended to help societies employ good artists. The society continued to use Nicholas Choveaux's agency and employed some excellent singers. Following on from Isobel Baillie and Heather Harper, the beautiful soprano Patrizia Kwella sang in a *Messiah* of 1977 and received an excellent review:

Of the soloists, the soprano Patrizia Kwella, who made a successful debut in Oxford last year with the University Opera Club, gave a really remarkable performance, with a lovely seamless legato in the slow arias, and glittering divisions in the coloratura of "Rejoice greatly". (J.G. *Oxford Mail*)

She also sang in the second *Christmas Oratorio*. Paul Esswood sang the role of David in *Saul*. Other new singers were Emma Kirkby, Pamela Bowden, John Elwes, Richard Morton, Brian Rayner Cook, Michael George, Michael Rippon and Stephen Varcoe. The society also made use of some local semi-professional singers, for example Peter Reynolds.

Finance and organisation

The pattern of audience attendance going up and down for popular and less popular works continued, with resultant fluctuations in profits and losses. *Saul* and *Belshazzar's Feast* made substantial losses; Verdi's *Requiem* and *The Dream of Gerontius* did well. At the AGM in June 1975, after the latter was performed, it was announced that there had been 'a hitherto unprecedented achievement of a profit on the second concert'. At the AGM of 1979, Ward Jones congratulated the choir on its performance of *Belshazzar's Feast* and Puccini's *Messa di Gloria* and regretted the small audience, speculating that this might be due to 'the escalation of college concerts large and small.' It is surely to the society's credit that, throughout this period, despite some concerns being voiced at committee meetings, it continued to back the conductors' choices of some more unusual works and maintained its tradition of varied concert programming.

The 1970s were the period of high inflation, with resulting rises in professional fees. It was reported at the meeting of 10 February 1977 that the cost of the Pro Musica had more than doubled 'making [the] cost of concerts very high.' Taphouse's stewarding costs were also a problem, and towards the end of the decade volunteers from the choir began to take over stewarding and box office on the concert day. There was still the NFMS guarantee to help with losses, and grants from the City Council and Southern Arts together with jumble sales continued to bring in some extra revenue. Subscriptions were put up throughout the decade to meet rising prices; membership figures were generally high, which helped with finance. In 1975, it was reported that 'the membership remained high at about 140', and in 1980 when Peter Ward Jones left, it stood at 146. In June 1973, the committee noted that some 'solid basses' were particularly wanted and there was 'also room for some young sopranos.' At the AGM in 1977, the conductor said that the choir was 'remarkably well balanced in the four voices.'

From 1941 onwards, the two main concerts were held in the Town Hall. The Sheldonian only had a license for a few concerts and was not generally available; it was not until later that it adopted a more liberal policy. (An exception had been the performance of *Jephtha* in 1970 put on for the Radcliffe Infirmary Bicentenary Celebrations.) The third concert, for which sometimes only an organ was needed, was held in one of the college chapels, the City Church (All Saints Church in the High, now Lincoln College Library) or the University Church. Performances of *Messiah* took place in the afternoon, and lunch for the soloists was provided in the Town Hall. (The question of evening versus afternoon performance comes up from time to time in the minutes; the arguments against have rather a period flavour: 'It somehow made a very long day for the housewife.'¹⁰⁵ In 1979, the choir came round in favour of evening performances except for *Messiah*.) In the early days of the choir, there had apparently been no rules about concert dress:

In early days there was no uniform and much discussion in committee. Then audience complained about different colours being worn, long black dresses chosen, some time after 1957.¹⁰⁶

In 1975, long black skirts and long-sleeved black blouses for women were prescribed, while bow ties for men went in and out of favour.

The Miners' Strikes of the early 1970s caused some disruption to rehearsals. At the meeting of 16 March 1972, 'the Committee passed a vote of thanks to the Secretary for his efforts at the time of the coal strike to ensure that a suitable rehearsal room was found and the concert successfully put on.' It seems that worries about heating caused the choir to move out of the Northgate Hall back to the University Museum. (Northgate Hall was heated by overhead electric heaters, but the Museum had oil-fired central heating.)¹⁰⁷ The custom of making announcements in the mid-rehearsal break was established in 1980.

Social activities were a part of the choir from its early days when there were apparently Christmas parties.¹⁰⁸ These were also a regular fixture in the sixties and seventies: at the committee meeting of June 1961, it was agreed that there should be two major parties, one at Christmas and the other immediately after the AGM, which at that time took place in the summer. Some handwritten programmes for the Christmas parties survive in the choir archives, listing games, competitions and carols to be sung. Summer outings and other get togethers organised by a social sub-committee are also mentioned in the minutes. Two longstanding members of the choir, Hilda Best and Audrey Bates, were active members of this sub-committee. The latter later recalled one of the outings as especially memorable:

The visit to Coventry by coach was a great occasion as we attended the first performance of Benjamin's Britten's War Requiem, the composer conducting & Peter Pears singing the tenor solos.¹⁰⁹

Committee meetings often took place in Rosalind Brain's house at 15 Rawlinson Road. David Lumsden was president from 1972, and Denis Arnold, the Heather Professor of Music, from 1978. Frank Garside resigned as secretary in 1980 because of his duties as Sheriff. The choir's accompanist from 1967 was Eleanor Mathews, who also acted as harpsichord continuo player in the concerts. Eleanor Mathews was a cello and piano teacher; she was a member of the Lorna Windass Quartet, and she and her sister, a viola player, played in the Oxford Orchestral Society. 'They were almost always to be seen in the audience at all sorts of Oxford concerts' writes Peter Ward Jones 'as well as regularly attending Magdalen College Chapel – a very familiar sight on the Oxford music scene.'¹¹⁰ Eleanor Matthews was to be our longest-serving accompanist to date, retiring in 1989. She died in 2013 at the age of 96.

Peter Ward Jones left the choir in 1980. His conducting had been consistently praised in the concert reviews. A list of suggested names for his successor was drawn up, and Philip Cave, who was about to become Director of Music at St Edward's School, was chosen.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement should be made first to the contributions of many former and current choir members in assembling information on the choir's history, which eventually resulted in the two editions of the *Blue Book* (first published 1998, revised 2011), a compendium of facts, notes, documents, anecdotes and a brief history of the choir. Particular mention must be made of its editor, Dr Trevor Hyman, and of Dr Joe Wilson, whose unpublished study 'Oxford Harmonic Society, 1921-71: the first fifty years' is a key source for the early history of the choir. Mention must also be made of the choir's past and present archivists, Sasha Wernberg-Möller and Don Marshall, and their work in preserving and organising much important material on the choir's early history.

I should also like to thank the following for their help: Peter Ward Jones, Professor Donald Burrows, the archivists of All Souls, Brasenose, Christ Church, New College, Queens and Worcester Colleges, Simon Bailey of the University Archives, Martin Holmes and the Special Collections Department of the Bodleian Library, and the Manuscripts and Archives Research Library, Trinity College Dublin. Joe Wilson (sadly deceased in 2023) loaned his invaluable notebooks and answered many detailed questions. Special thanks are due to Lindsey Charles for her helpful suggestions for improving and correcting my earlier drafts.

¹ Acknowledgements will be found on p.33.

² See further David Johnson, 'Glee' and Judith Blezzard, 'Partsong', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2nd ed., 2001); Michael Hurd, 'Glees, madrigals and partsongs', in *The Romantic Age 1800-1914* (Blackwell History of Music in Britain, vol. 5) ed. Nicholas Temperley (Blackwell, 1988) pp.242-265; John Caldwell, *The Oxford History of English Music*, vol. 2: *From c. 1715 to the present day* (OUP, 1999) pp.150-5, 235, 236, 270-1; J. Stainer and W.A. Barrett, *A Dictionary of Musical Terms* (Novello, 1876).

³ *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd ed. (OUP, 1995) p.180; Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (New Oxford Illustrated Dickens, OUP, 1950) p.7.

⁴ See Susan Wollenberg, *Music at Oxford in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (OUP, 2001) pp.183-5; *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 7: *Nineteenth-century Oxford*, pt. 2, edd. Michael G. Brock and Mark C. Curthoys (OUP, 2000) p.438.

⁵ They are named in e.g. the review from the *Oxford Chronicle*, 21 December 1923, which speaks of 'the well-known Iffley Quartet'. (Please note that I am only giving references for newspaper reviews that we do not hold in the Choir Archives.)

⁶ See the pamphlet entitled 'The Oxford Harmonic Society Sixtieth Anniversary 1981' by Glenys Davies, reproduced in the *Blue Book* 2nd ed., p.9, and '64 Years a-singing' [an article by Ian Smith on Hilda Best] *Oxford Times*, Friday, 6 January, 1989.

⁷ *Oxford Chronicle*, 9 July 1920.

⁸ See further *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online version (henceforth *ODNB*).

⁹ *Oxford Chronicle*, 9 July 1920.

¹⁰ Now known as Grove House, 44 Iffley Turn.

¹¹ *Oxford Chronicle*, 29 July 1921. 'Party' here, I think, means 'Glee party', a common expression at the time. For more details about this concert, see the blog on the choir website entitled 'Beginnings in Iffley: Merrie England 28 July 1921'.

¹² It used to be thought that Harold Cook was one of the Glee Club's first two named conductors, from a mistaken note by George Thewlis in his list of the choir's concerts in Bodleian Thewlis MSS, Box 6, p.489. The review in the *Oxford Chronicle*, 15 December 1922, discovered by Dr Joe Wilson, clearly states that Mrs Harold Cook, not her husband, conducted the third reviewed concert on 14 December 1922: 'Mrs H. Cook conducted carefully and with confidence.' Since Harold Cook sang in *Merrie England*, he could not have conducted the first concert (the review does not name the conductor) and we know that Oliver West conducted the second concert, *Tom Jones*. Sadly, I have not been able to discover Mrs Cook's first name.

¹³ I am indebted to the Archivist of Queen's College for this information. I should add a caveat that the reading about the number of casualties is rather hard to decipher. For the detail about the choice of the Oxford Hospital, See Donald Brook, *Conductors' Gallery*, 2nd ed. (Rockliff, 1946). For the account of the Queen's concert in 1922, see *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 13 December 1922. For Jacques assisting Besly in training the choir, see *Oxford Times*, 6 November 1931.

¹⁴ Article on Jacques by Arthur Jacobs in *Grove's Dictionary of Music*.

¹⁵ For details of all the concerts, see the concert listing in Appendix 3 in the Choir Archives.

¹⁶ *op.cit.*, p.198. Though the term 'glee club' is still used in America, glees in the original sense are not usually performed in them.

¹⁷ 4 January 1924.

¹⁸ On the choice of name, see further below.

¹⁹ 27 June 1924.

²⁰ See further Laura J. Wiebe, "*Peopled with invisible presences*": *Oxford and the Tudor revival, ca. 1890-1939* (Doctor of Musical Arts thesis, University of Iowa, 2011, available on Iowa Research Online) pp.87-8.

²¹ See *Blue Book* and his unpublished 'Oxford Harmonic Society, 1921-71: the first fifty years'. Dr Wilson substantially expanded the notes made by George Thewlis in Thewlis MSS, Box 6, in the Bodleian Library, a transcript of which is in the Choir Archives.

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- ²² George Thewlis seems to have been the first conductor to receive an honorarium. At a committee meeting in December 1946, it was decided to give the conductor a minimum of £25 at the end of each Autumn term.
- ²³ For the full concert history, see Appendix 3 in the Choir Archives.
- ²⁴ And also from the kind of programmes put on by the Eglesfield Society, see *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 13 December 1922.
- ²⁵ Music festivals go back to Handel's visit to Oxford in 1733 to receive a degree, when there had been three days of concerts. Later it became common for there to be a series of concerts associated with the University's Encaenia ceremony. In 1791, there were three grand concerts in the Sheldonian to mark Haydn's visit to Oxford.
- ²⁶ See further Susan Wollenberg 'Oxford' in *New Grove Dictionary; The Encyclopaedia of Oxford*, ed. Christopher Hibbert (Macmillan, pbk ed., 1992) pp.265-8.
- ²⁷ *Music at Oxford in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, p.viii.
- ²⁸ Herma E. Fiedler, 'The Oxford Orchestral Society', *The Strad* (April 1960).
- ²⁹ Cyril Bailey, *Hugh Percy Allen* (OUP, 1948) pp.46-7. A full programme for this festival is held in the Bodleian, shelfmark G.A. Oxon 4^o 432.
- ³⁰ Cyril Bailey, op.cit., pp.58-9.
- ³¹ *Oxford Times*, 6 November 1931, p.17.
- ³² See further Joe Wilson, 'Oxford Harmonic Society 1921-71'.
- ³³ *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, 18 March 1925. There was a less favourable review in the *Oxford Chronicle* (20 March).
- ³⁴ See further Frank Howes, *Oxford Concerts: a Jubilee Record* (Blackwell, 1969). This includes a fascinating account of the fluctuating finances of the scheme.
- ³⁵ *Oxford Times*, 9 May 1930, Thewlis MSS, Box 3.
- ³⁶ 'To see the celebrated man many discovered on this occasion that they had no need to sit through an hour's lecture in German, which they could only dimly understand.' (*Oxford Mail*, 18 May 1931). On Einstein's visit to Oxford, see Robert Fox, 'Einstein in Oxford', published:09 May 2018 <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsnr.2018.0002>.
He apparently appreciated 'the university's rich musical offerings.'
- ³⁷ *Oxford Times*, 29 May 1936.
- ³⁸ See further the concert listing in Appendix 3 in the Choir Archives.
- ³⁹ Herma E. Fiedler, op. cit. See also Thewlis MSS, Box 6, p.445.
- ⁴⁰ Denis Stevens, 'Music at Oxford During and after the War', *Oxford: the Journal of the Oxford Society*, 40 (2) (December 1988) p.57.
- ⁴¹ Thewlis MSS, Box 6 (no page number).
- ⁴² Thewlis MSS, Box 6 (no page number).
- ⁴³ Choir Archives, Box 3.
- ⁴⁴ See further the blog on the choir website entitled 'Isobel Baillie and Oxford Harmonic Society 1932-1942'.
- ⁴⁵ See further Donald Burrows, *Handel, Messiah* (Cambridge Music Handbooks, CUP, 1991) pp.47-54; Jonathan Keates, *Messiah: the composition and afterlife of Handel's masterpiece* (The Landmark Library, Head of Zeus, 2017) pp.117-129; Richard Lockett, *Handel's Messiah: a celebration* (Gollancz, 1992) chapters 9 & 10. See further the blog on the choir website 'A new approach to Messiah 1943'.
- ⁴⁶ Typescript in Choir Archives, Box 3.
- ⁴⁷ The idea was taken over by Thomas Armstrong, who formed the Bach Passion Choir in 1946 in order to give an annual performance of the *St Matthew Passion*. The Bach Passion Choir was disbanded in 1973.
- ⁴⁸ See the provocative but informative book *The English Musical Renaissance 1840-1940: constructing a national music*, by Meirion Hughes and Robert Stradling, 2nd ed. (Manchester University Press, 2001) and the detailed critique of its arguments by Alain Frogley 'Rewriting the Renaissance', *Music & Letters*, 84(2) (May 2003) 241-252; and John Caldwell, op. cit, pp. 317-322.
- ⁴⁹ See *ODNB*, article on John Dykes Bower by Henry Chadwick.
- ⁵⁰ *New College*, ed. Christopher Tyerman (Third Millennium, 2010) p.78.
- ⁵¹ Joe Wilson, 'Oxford Harmonic Society 1921-71'. And see the typescript of life members' reminiscences in Choir Archives, Box 3.
- ⁵² Newspaper cutting in Choir Archives, Box 3.
- ⁵³ See further Frank Howes, *Oxford Concerts: a Jubilee Record* (1969) pp.51-4.

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- ⁵⁴ ‘64 Years a-singing’, article cit.
- ⁵⁵ *Oxford Chronicle*, 14 May 1926.
- ⁵⁶ *Oxford Chronicle*, 23 November 1928.
- ⁵⁷ *Oxford Chronicle*, 12 December 1924.
- ⁵⁸ Fiedler, op. cit.
- ⁵⁹ L.C. Venables, *Choral and Orchestral Societies*, 5th ed. (Curwen, 1901) p.12.
- ⁶⁰ If the notes of life members’ memories in Box 3 can be relied on, the choice of a woman to be chair was unpopular with at least one male choir member.
- ⁶¹ We don’t know exactly when the society started charging for concerts; ticket prices are given on a surviving flier for the 1940 *St John Passion*, which states that tickets are on sale from Taphouse’s.
- ⁶² *Oxford Chronicle*, 27 June 1924. See also *Oxford Times*, 20 March and 4 December 1925.
- ⁶³ See Susan Wollenberg, ‘Music in Oxford, 1945-60: the years of change’, in *Essays on the History of English Music in Honour of John Caldwell*, edd. Emma Hornby and David Maw (Boydell Press, 2010).
- ⁶⁴ Arnold, article cit., p.61.
- ⁶⁵ Thewlis MSS, Box 6, p.499.
- ⁶⁶ Ramsden Committee report 1945, quoted in Heather Wiebe, *Britten’s Unquiet Past: sound and memory in postwar reconstruction* (CUP, 2012) p.4.
- ⁶⁷ Thewlis MSS, Box 6, p.504.
- ⁶⁸ Biographical details gleaned from the Thewlis MSS, Box 3, and from *Ancestry*.
- ⁶⁹ Thewlis’s army records can be found on *Ancestry*. He served first with the Leicestershire Regiment and was transferred to the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire 17th Battalion from June 1917. He was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, and his character was said to be ‘very good’. It is not clear exactly what ‘the impairment’ was: the army records speak of ‘rheumatism’ but an article in the *Oxford Times*, 30 November 1951, says that his lungs were badly affected by a gas shell.
- ⁷⁰ Thewlis MSS, Box 6, p.359.
- ⁷¹ Quoted in the programme of the concert of glee songs by the Elizabethan Male Voice Octette, given at a garden party at Headington Hill Hall in August 1935, preserved in Thewlis MSS, Box 3.
- ⁷² Thewlis MSS, Box 3. He used it as a programme note for a concert of glee songs by the Elizabethan Male Voice Octette, details above.
- ⁷³ See further Laura J. Wiebe, “*Peopled with invisible presences*”: *Oxford and the Tudor revival, ca. 1890-1939* (Doctor of Musical Arts thesis, University of Iowa, 2011, available at Iowa Research Online), pp.90-6 and *passim*. This thesis highlights Thewlis’s role in the Tudor revival in Oxford.
- ⁷⁴ From newspaper cutting in Choir Archives, Box 3
- ⁷⁵ See newspaper cutting in Choir Archives, Box 3.
- ⁷⁶ Thewlis sold this ms. to A. Rosenthal of Turl Street in 1950 and for a long time its whereabouts were unknown. It was originally copied by Joseph Harris for his private use and records many of the early variants, see further Thomas McGeary, ‘Joseph Harris, Birmingham organist (1744-1814) and his *Messiah* manuscript’, *Early Music* 39/2 (2011) pp. 165-84. I am indebted to Professor Donald Burrows for the information about the manuscript’s location in the Lilly Library and for the reference to McGeary’s article. On Thomas Harris, see Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, *Music and Theatre in Handel’s World: the family papers of James Harris 1732-1780* (OUP 2002), which gives a wonderful insight into eighteenth-century responses to Handel’s music. See further the blog on the choir website ‘George Thewlis’s *Messiah* manuscript’.
- ⁷⁷ On the performance history of *Messiah*, see Donald Burrows, *Handel, Messiah* (Cambridge Music Handbooks, CUP, 1991) pp.47-54; Jonathan Keates, *Messiah: the composition and afterlife of Handel’s masterpiece* (The Landmark Library, Head of Zeus, 2017) pp.117-129; Richard Lockett, *Handel’s Messiah: a celebration* (Gollancz, 1992) chapters 8-10. On the gradually changing notions of performance in the twentieth century and discussions of the validity of ‘authentic’ performance, see Harry Haskell ‘Early Music’, *Grove’s Dictionary of Music*, and Nicholas Kenyon, *Authenticity and Early Music: a Symposium* (OUP, 1988).
- ⁷⁸ The standard performing score (1902) by Ebenezer Prout used at the time retained the flutes, clarinets and trombones that Mozart had added to the original. See Rosemary Williams, ‘Ebenezer Prout’, in *Grove’s Dictionary*. On Handel’s orchestration, see Keates, op.cit., pp.90-2, 111.
- ⁷⁹ Andrew Gant, *The Making of Handel’s Messiah* (Bodleian Library, 2020), p.63.
- ⁸⁰ Thewlis MSS, Box 6, p.504.

⁸¹ Colin Sherratt (1936-2004) had acquired fame as a boy, at the age of nine, playing in a concert at the Wigmore Hall in the same programme as Yehudi Menuhin. He was a music scholar at Christ Church and later became Head of Keyboard Studies at Dean Close School. Isobel Baillie can be heard on YouTube singing some of the same pieces: Bach 'My heart ever faithful' (Cantata 68) and 'Flocks in pastures green abiding' (Cantata 208).

⁸² For further information on Isobel Baillie's association with the society in this period, see the blog on the choir website 'Isobel Baillie and Oxford Harmonic Society 1945-1959'.

⁸³ Isobel Baillie, *Never Sing Louder than Lovely* (Hutchinson, 1982) p.140. In 1955, she was asked to give way to others in *Messiah* performances for the Three Choirs Festival.

⁸⁴ Isobel Baillie, *ibid*, p.29.

⁸⁵ *ibid*, p.100

⁸⁶ Christopher Fifield, *Ibbs and Tillet: the Rise and Fall of a Musical Empire* (Ashgate, 2005).

⁸⁷ The Bodleian Library contains a bound volume of almost all the Thewlis programmes.

⁸⁸ Choir Archives, Box 2.

⁸⁹ Arts Council support is first mentioned on the programme for *Judith* in 1950. The Arts Council had been set up as part of the postwar reconstruction for the arts. The grant, administered through the NMFS, aimed to allow amateur societies to employ professional soloists.

⁹⁰ The problem was partly caused by the timing of the arrival of the NMFS guarantee, which was dependent on the production of audited accounts; this was eased by changing the end date of the financial year from 30 September to 30 June.

⁹¹ For the quotation about Thewlis, see Joe Wilson, 'A Short History of Oxford Harmonic Society', *Blue Book* 2nd ed., p.16.

⁹² See further *Grove's Dictionary*.

⁹³ See further Peter Neumann, 'Inspiring Teachers', *Mathematical Gazette; a Journal of the Mathematical Association* 100 (549) (Nov. 2016) and information gleaned from the internet.

⁹⁴ Choir Archives, Box 3.

⁹⁵ There was a less enthusiastic review in the *Oxford Times*, which talked about 'a general air of unpreparedness'.

⁹⁶ In the reminiscences of life members in Choir Archives, Box 3, Rosalind Brain recalled that 'the choir got lost' in this performance. Joe Wilson writes that 'some in the choir felt that there had not been enough rehearsals.'

⁹⁷ On membership numbers see further *Blue Book* 2nd ed., pp.24-6.

⁹⁸ *Messiah* programme for 1 December 1968.

⁹⁹ For criticisms, of 'authentic' features, see the reviews for the 1964, 1965 and 1967 performances.

¹⁰⁰ See note 14 above.

¹⁰¹ Article entitled 'Master of the countertenor returns', dated Friday August 23, 2002, in a folder lent me by Dr Joe Wilson.

¹⁰² Choveaux was also an organist and composed several organ pieces.

¹⁰³ This section contains information kindly supplied by Peter Ward Jones in an interview with the writer.

¹⁰⁴ See the programme note for the *Messiah* of 1972 and for further variations the programme note of 1978.

¹⁰⁵ *Minute Book*, 5 April 1973.

¹⁰⁶ Typescript of choir memories in Choir Archives, Box 3. See the AGM for June 1966 for the new rule making black compulsory for 'ladies'.

¹⁰⁷ Joe Wilson, 'Oxford Harmonic Society 1921-71'.

¹⁰⁸ A Christmas party in 1925 at which Reginald Jacques was present is mentioned in the typescript of choir memories in Choir Archives, Box 3.

¹⁰⁹ Choir Archives, Box 3

¹¹⁰ Information supplied by Peter Ward Jones.