

THE HISTORY OF EXMOUTH CHORAL SOCIETY by Gerald Millington 2001

About the author:

Gerald Millington has sung with the Exmouth Choral Society for the past 23 years. Our late President, Hope Bardrick, persuaded him to join after he moved to Devon. From 1944 he has been the organist for various churches and chapels both in Hertfordshire and Devon.

Over the past 50 years local history research and writing has been his principal hobby. Initially he received tuition from the Workers Educational Association, later conducting courses for them. He has written four books on villages in Hertfordshire and two on Otterton in Devon. In addition he has written numerous articles and given many talks on local history. He is currently Hon. Archivist for the Clinton Devon Estates.

On 8th December 1983 at 7.30 pm. Brian Northcott raised his baton for the first time to conduct the Exmouth Choral & Orchestral Society in concert. This concert was held in Tower Street Methodist Church and was entitled Music for Christmas. Quite appropriately, the first item was the choir and audience singing, "O Come all ye Faithful, Joyful and Triumphant", a fitting statement for Christmas and for Brian's musical leadership for the future.

One hundred and sixteen years before, in 1867, singers living in and around Exmouth formed a choir and gave their first concert under William Vinnicombe. It probably took place in St. John's Church, Withycombe Raleigh. Regretfully, we do not have any details of this performance, but it probably included popular classical songs of the period.

WILLIAM VINNICOMBE AND RAYMOND WILMOT

In 1864 St. John's Church Withycombe Raleigh was consecrated and William Vinnicombe was appointed its first organist. Three years later Vinnicombe and Arthur John Wilmot, a member of St. John's Choir, formed the Exmouth Branch of the West Country Music Association, into which they merged the old Exmouth Harmonic Society. Mr. Vinnicombe was the first conductor. In 1873 the Budleigh and Salterton Branch of the West Country Music Association was formed and they with Exmouth and other branches, performed Handel's *Messiah* in Exeter; the exact venue is not known. It is interesting to note that at that time East Budleigh was still known as Budleigh and Budleigh Salterton as Salterton. According to the Exeter Flying Post, on 14th February 1877, the West Country Music Association was renamed the Western Counties Musical Association; hereafter referred to as the WCMA.

In 1888 William Vinnicombe was appointed organist at Holy Trinity (he died in 1907) and by 1891 Arthur Wilmot's son A. Raymond Wilmot LRAM ARCM was appointed organist at St. John's. At some time in the 1890s Mr. Vinnicombe had conducted the Exmouth choir in a performance of *HMS Pinafore*.

In 1896 the Exmouth Branch of the WCMA was reformed, probably entirely breaking away from the WCMA, and became the Exmouth Choral Society, with Raymond Wilmot as its first conductor. By 1910 the new society had performed thirty-seven different works, including the *Messiah* (4 times), *Elijah* (3 times) and Gounod's *Faust* (3 times). From 1903 Elgar's works became popular and *King Olaf* (performed twice), and *Banner of St. George* (also performed twice) were favourites. Then in 1912 Elgar's *The Music Makers* had its first performance in the West Country, by the Exmouth Choral Society, immediately after its debut at the Birmingham Festival of Music.

It is interesting that during these first years under Mr. Wilmot works no longer heard today by

Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Gounod were performed. In 1911, the year of the Coronation of King George V, Elgar's *Coronation Ode* was performed. Another popular work over these years was *Hiawatha* by Coleridge-Taylor and the whole work was performed in 1912 with *The Music Makers*.

At the beginning of the First World War *Messiah* was performed in 1914 and *Elijah* in 1915, both with patriotic songs in support. In 1915, Kathleen (Kay) Osler joined the choir. She was still singing with the Society in the late 1980s just before her death. In 1916 the concert took the form of songs. Concerts were then abandoned until 1920 as the national war effort led to a severe shortage of choir members.

Between 1920 and 1932 concerts contained a constant repetition of works, with Haydn's *The Seasons* and Bizet's *Carmen* the only new ones. For a long time only one concert was given per year and in 1929 an orchestral symphony concert took the place of a choral concert. There were seven performances of *Messiah* during this time. Repetition was probably due to the fact that members had to buy their own copies and also the difficulty of acquiring scores. However, on 3rd. December 1924 the Society gave a memorable concert in Holy Trinity Church Hall, Exmouth (the usual venue for their concerts) with a thirty-three-piece orchestra including Royal Marine bandmen. Among the first violins was Master Donald White who was later to become conductor. The programme included *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* by Coleridge Taylor and *The Banner of St. George Op. 33* by Elgar. The orchestra played Sibelius' *Finlandia* and Mozart's *Symphony in E flat* (which may have been No. 39). The programme indicated that Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* would be performed in 1925, but this did not materialize.

In June 1931, Elgar's *King Olaf* was given in the Church Hall at 7.45 pm, with carriages to take people home available at 10 pm. The first movement of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* began the concert. It is interesting that in December 1932, the Budleigh Salterton and Ottery St. Mary Choral Societies performed *King Olaf* when it is described as "a work of exceptional difficulty from the technical view and opportunities of hearing it are few".

A Haydn bi-centenary concert was given on 26th April 1932 with *Spring and Summer* from *The Seasons*. The thirty-piece orchestra played selections from the *Surprise* and *London Symphonies*. The Journal reported that "Exmouth should be proud of its Choral Society and should give it better support both practically and financially". It also reported that the society's founder, Arthur J. Wilmot was 87 in the March and was still singing in the choir as a tenor.

In 1932, three concerts were given in three months. On 12th October a Grand Concert of songs and other popular items was given by Withycombe church choir and on 9th November a Bijou Concert of exactly the same items by the choral & orchestral societies in Glenorchy Hall. The indication being that the church choir and the Choral Society consisted of the same singers. At this time the choral & orchestral societies were separate, both under Mr. Wilmot, who was still organist at Withycombe.

During the 1920s to 1932 seat prices for concerts in the Church Hall were reserved 5/9d, 3/6d, 2/4d; unreserved 1/3d (tax included). Programmes 3d each. Concerts were usually on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Then on Wednesday 14th December, two extra special performances of *Messiah* were given, with some first class soloists, to raise funds for Exmouth Hospital. The response was a disaster. The Journal reported "These are occasions in Exmouth of which one would rather not write, events which bring a blush of regret to the cheek of even a somewhat hardened journalist, and sins of omission which shake a well-founded faith in the excellent taste and abounding generosity of our townsfolk". Fifty people attended the afternoon performance and about one hundred and fifty in the evening. The production was a work of merit but "the result financially was a dead loss". "The performance was

adequate...but there was a sense of restraint...such a vitally human work calls for assistance from the audience and it can scarcely be given to a partially bare hall". Following this debacle, just two concerts were given in December 1933, one a Bijou Concert by the Exmouth Orchestral Society on the 11th and another performance of *Messiah*, accompanied by Harry Gabb, Exeter Cathedral sub-organist, in Withycombe Church. From 1934 to 1938 no Choral Society concerts are advertised or reported in the Journal and it is presumed that as most members were in Withycombe Church choir, Mr. Wilmot concentrated his energies on them. He had already served the Society for over forty years. This period saw King George V's Silver Jubilee and death, Edward VIII's abdication and George VI's coronation, but the Society were not involved in any of these celebrations.

By 1937 Mr. Wilmot had been succeeded as conductor of the Choir and Orchestra, by Archibald Marcom LRAM and the Society was amalgamated with the orchestra in that year, to become the Exmouth Choral and Orchestral Society. Sometime before 1942, the Society was merged into the evening classes run by the Devon County Council and became known as The Exmouth Evening Institution Choral and Orchestral Society. The County Council paid the conductor and pianist. This arrangement lasted to 1967 when the Society became independent again and a new constitution was drawn up.

No records survive for the period up to 1938, but in that year *Hiawatha* was performed. In 1939 the society performed *Elijah*, in 1940 *The Creation* and in 1942 *Messiah*. During the Second World War some concerts had to be cancelled for lack of male voices; understandable under wartime conditions; although some members of the forces billeted in the area occasionally helped out. Some concerts were given for wartime charities. During 1942 a performance of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* and Brahms's *Requiem* was proposed for 13th December in Holy Trinity Church for The Malta Fund. This was cancelled at the last moment.

In September 1943, Mr. Marcom resigned and Cyril Robinson was appointed as conductor only to leave shortly after to take up a war post elsewhere. Mr. Hyatt followed him but he also had to move on. A concert was eventually given in April 1943 raising £20 for war charities. Sixty singers took part. The programme and venue was probably The Savoy Cinema. Eventually Mr. Marcom agreed to return in late 1943. A carol concert was given in Holy Trinity, followed in March 1944 by a full performance of Handel's *Messiah* to a packed Holy Trinity. Mr. Marcom is already proposing Stanford's *Te Deum* in readiness for an Armistice! This was later performed at a thanksgiving service in the Manor Gardens after the war ended in 1945.

Later in 1944 rehearsals began for the first performance by the Society of *St. Paul* by Mendelssohn. There was much misgiving that the work could not be done owing to a shortage of members, but it was finally performed in May 1945 to great acclaim.

A memorable Victory Concert which "will live in the memories of us all, and in the hearts of the Exmouth Public", as recorded in the secretary's report to the Annual General Meeting of 21st January 1946 celebrated the victory by the allies over Germany and Japan. It was held in the Pavilion on Thursday 29th November 1945. The principal work was the concert version of *Merrie England* by Edward German. In addition the Orchestra played *Pomp and Circumstance number one* by Elgar and *AD1620* by MacDowell. The principal soloists Patricia Davies (soprano) and George Baker (baritone) sung works by Handel, Mozart, Ireland and Quilter. Mr. Marcom conducted and there was a choir of sixty-one with twenty four in the orchestra (eight of whom were Royal Marines). There were two performances on the day, which were well attended.

Social events were started in summer 1946 with an outing to Haldon Hills, Teignmouth and Dawlish. That year was a very busy time for the choir. In March, Stanford's *Revenge* was performed and during October, Exmouth Choral Society put on its first music festival. Held at Exmouth Pavilion, it was originally to be for three days but the third concert was cancelled. Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise* was performed on the 22nd October and *Merrie England* on 23rd. Following the Festival, the Choir gave the *Hymn of Praise* at Topsham to raise funds for its church restorations.

The 1947 Choral Music Festival had *The Golden Legend* by Sullivan and an opera evening consisting of items from *Prince Igor* and *Light as Air*. Early in 1948 Mr. Marcom resigned as conductor and Donald White was appointed, with Mr. Marcom as Guest Conductor.

Archibald Marcom, headmaster of the Beacon School, had seen the society through a very difficult period. He had taken over when, it appears, there had not been any public performances for a number of years. Finances must have been low and interest in choral music at a low ebb. Then came the war with all its difficulties. But by 1944 he was introducing new works and after 1945 he steered the Choir through two ambitious music festivals. As reported "he gave to the Society his all: patience, loyalty and service, and although a tired man, he kept most of Exmouth's musical societies going through to peace days".

DONALD WHITE

Mr. White brought innovation to the Society. The two performances per year were in future to be religious music for Christmas and secular music for the spring. The latter included choral concert versions of *Tom Jones*, *Maritana*, *the Bartered Bride* and *Carmen*; with the choir usually dressed appropriately. Religious works still meant *Messiah*, and *The Creation*, with new works including *Samson* (Handel), *St. Paul* (Mendelssohn), and Brahms's and Mozart's *Requiems*. He also strengthened the orchestra with players from the Western Philharmonic and Torquay Municipal orchestras.

The music festival continued in 1948 with a performance of *Elijah* in Holy Trinity Church in June, followed by *Messiah* in December. Throughout most of the 20th century concerts were held mid-week. It was not until 1991 that Saturday became the regular day. In 1949 two orchestral members were invited to sit on the committee. Two members from the orchestral players continued to be so entitled until 2001, when orchestra was dropped from the society's name. During the 1950s occasional concerts were performed at a loss. In March 1952 the orchestra gave a concert, which incurred "a big loss". Choir rehearsals were moved to the Beacon School in that year.

In 1955 the society held a dinner with entertainment. This became an annual event. Social evenings were held throughout the 1950s and 1960s when society concert recordings were played back. Between October 1958 and April 1959, the society was involved in 5 concerts. In 1957 Lionel Dakers became organist and Master of Choristers at Exeter Cathedral. On 9th October 1958 he organised and conducted combined choirs, including Exmouth, in Haydn's *Creation* in the cathedral. He was to repeat the experience with combined choirs in October 1959 with *Messiah*. On 29th October 1958 there was "A Recital of Music - Story of the Bible in Speech and Song" in Holy Trinity Church, with narration by Stuart Hibberd of the B.B.C., who lived in Exmouth. On the 17th December a concert version of *Carmen* (Bizet) was performed in the Church Hall. In March 1959, Exmouth joined with the Sidmouth Choral Society in J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in Sidmouth Parish Church and afterwards at All Saints, Exmouth. It was reported that "the work was rather too quickly prepared"! Finally in April there was an orchestral concert. Another orchestral concert was performed in May 1960, when the society's pianist Ruth Easling, played Grieg's Piano concerto. This concert was in support of muscular dystrophy research.

In May 1961 it was intended to give a performance of Stanford's *Revenge* and the *Choral Dance No.17* of Borodin's *Prince Igor*. By March it was evident that due to falling attendances due mostly to sickness the society would not be able to achieve the high standards necessary in the time available and the project was abandoned.

The 1960s saw a continuing series of semi-stage versions of popular works by Gilbert and Sullivan and others, performed usually in the Pavilion and for two nights each. *The Rebel Maid* was the first in 1960, done with the Exmouth Operatic society. Their pianist Kay Gibbons became the choral society's pianist for these concerts. *Pirates of Penzance*, *Gondoliers*, *Mikado*, Edward German's *Merrie England* and Coleridge Taylor's *Hiawatha* were all given between 1966 and 1971.

On 15th November 1963, the society appeared on a television programme at Westward TV, Plymouth, although it is not known what was performed. During that year the society became a member of the National Federation of Music Societies.

On the 24th and 25th April 1964 the society combined with the Budleigh Salterton Choral society to give *The Emerald Isle* by German and Sullivan. The first night was in the Pavilion Exmouth and the second in Budleigh Salterton Public Hall. This joining of Choirs continued in December with *Elijah* to celebrate Withycombe Church's Centenary.

In the spring of 1965, *The Bartered Bride* by Smetana was performed with the Teign Valley Choir. In June 1966 the *Messiah* was given at Withycombe for two performances. There was apprehension about this before hand and in fact a heavy loss was made.

Ticket prices for concerts make interesting reading. We have seen that in the 1920s, there were three grades of reserved seats from 2/4d to 5/9d and unreserved seats were 1/3d, with programmes extra. In the 1950s entrance was by programme with the price varying according to the venue but usually costing 2/6d. By 1966 the programme/entry had increased to 3/6d. This price was for the 'religious' December concerts, which alternated between Holy Trinity, Withycombe, All Saints, and Tower Street Methodist churches and Holy Trinity Church Hall. The 'secular' concerts in the Pavilion were graded 5/-, 4/-, 2/6d reserved and 1/6d unreserved. Note that these prices are similar to the prices in the 1920s. Then in 1970 church concerts (entrance by programme) increased to 5/- (25p in 1971).

By 1969 auditions for new members were being held, and any member who left for one year was to be re-auditioned. Members fees were raised to £1.10/- for two sessions and £1 for one in 1970. In April of 1969 Brahms' *Requiem* was performed and the orchestra played Beethoven's *Prometheus Overture*.

From 1942 to 1967 the society had been run under the auspices of the Devon County Council as a further education course. In 1967 it became independent and in 1970 it changed to being affiliated to Exmouth Leisure Centre, which provided a free rehearsal room. Donald White was by now also conductor of the Sidmouth Choral Society. Following concerts in Holy Trinity Church members were complaining of having difficulty in seeing the conductor - a familiar cry throughout the 1980s and 90s and still an insurmountable problem today.¹

Organising concerts usually fell on the shoulders of the society secretary, in conjunction with the Conductor. From 1942 the society has been served by very efficient secretaries: Beatrice Lawes,

¹ In 2003 the Society purchased tiered staging and this problem has therefore been resolved.

Marjorie Copp, Ethel Chorley, Stan Symes and Julia Silverwood are gratefully remembered.

On 4th and 5th May 1971, a performance of Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha* in its entirety was given in the Pavilion. Over one hundred and twenty performers took part, including eleven soloists, eight dancers, and a thirty-five piece orchestra. Orchestra apart, everyone was in costume and *The Death of Minnehaha* was performed as a ballet. It is reported in the society minutes that this was believed to be only the third stage production of *Hiawatha* in the U.K. It was met "with great acclaim from the audience and the press", but Donald White states that "the work has been under rehearsed musically. This must NOT happen again". There was a critical shortage of tenors - only two. The financial success or otherwise is not recorded.

Two years later a similar but not so ambitious presentation and for one performance only, was given of Bizet's *Carmen*. This was also in costume with a ballet and a narrator and it produced a profit.

During the 1970s there were a few firsts for the society, notably Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus* in 1978 and the first performance in Devon of Dvorak's *Mass in D* in 1976. This was coupled with Geoffrey Bush's *Christmas Cantata* and a "delightful" *Nunc Dimittis* by Norman Brook, a member of the choir. All three works were new to the society. The Mass is noted as being sung in Latin, which might indicate that this was the first time the original language of a foreign-language work had been used. Mr. White's successor, Brian Northcott has always insisted that choral works will be sung in the original language and not in translation. Other "firsts" were Pergolesi's *Magnificat* and J.S.Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*.

Then in 1977 a Patriotic Concert was given in Exmouth Pavilion to celebrate the Queen's silver jubilee. Although the press review complimented the choral singing it was very scathing about the choice of programme. Listed are a number of works by Edward German, and others by Elgar, Eric Coates and Sterndale Bennett. The review stated that "the music, although totally and appropriately British, tended towards the atmosphere of a previous female reign and left poor Elizabeth without so much as a phrase from the last 25 years, apart from a piece written specially for the concert". This was a song entitled "Elizabeth" written by Pamela Long and Hope Bardrick. The review continued, "most of the works were written by composers who were dead and gone before the Queen's coronation". The following week Letters to the Editor contained some equally scathing comments concerning the reviewer. A loss of £17 was made.

Generally speaking press reports on the society's performances during the 1970s are complimentary. However a report on Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in 1972 brought scorn and derision about the ears of the reporter, Rafael Grant. He comments on the "highly successful failure" of the performance and especially of the poor efforts of George Allen, the bass soloist. Among the Letters to the Editor that followed was one from no less a person than Dr. Arnold Smith, a professor at the Royal College of Music, who "thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated the production of *Elijah*". "I could find nothing in the performance to justify the strictures of the Journal critic. George Allen sang splendidly throughout...with his wide range, brilliant resonance and clear and easy expression". "The chorus and orchestra, considering they were amateurs, acquitted themselves with credit". Mr. Grant does not appear to have reported on concerts after that!

During the 1970s Holy Trinity, All Saints, Tower Street and Withycombe churches were venues for concerts. The Christmas concerts were usually carols and made profits to cover the losses on spring concerts. Entry to concerts was by programme at 50p.

By 1976 the conductor was receiving an honorarium for his work with the orchestra. In 1978 the society withdrew from the East Devon Arts Council. There were complaints that the choir did not rehearse with the orchestra until the day of the performance. In 1979 registering as a charity was discussed but not proceeded with. At that time there were seventy members and a limit to the numbers was proposed, which was found impracticable.

It has been mentioned already that in the 1920s and 1930s members had to buy their music scores and this restricted the number of new works that could be given. It is not known exactly when the library service was first used, but it must have been in the 1970s and certainly by 1979, which would account for new works being introduced. So in the early 1980s Haydn's *Nelson Mass* and Vivaldi's *Gloria* were performed.

On 17th March 1983 Donald White conducted his last concert with the Exmouth Choral and Orchestral Society. It was *Tom Jones* by Edward German in the Church Hall. Two months later Donald was dead.

Donald White was a highly gifted musician, who, unfortunately, owing to the early death of his father, was unable to follow a musical career. He learnt to play the violin from the age of four and was a child soloist at church concerts. The family lived in Kingsbridge, where Donald was born, before moving to Kent. They moved back to Devon in 1924 when he joined the Exmouth Orchestral Society. After World War II he became musical director of Exmouth, Exeter, Tiverton and Teignmouth amateur operatic societies, Exmouth and Whipton choral societies and other chamber music groups; all this in addition to his day-time work in the Educational Department of Devon County Council. With his boundless energy went a clear and precise musical guidance of all performers and orchestral members. "He was a man of considerable charm, both on and off the rostrum".

BRIAN NORTHCOTT

The shock of Mr. White's death left the society rudderless. But help was at hand. Brian Northcott had recently been appointed as the new director of music at Rolle Teacher Training College and in early July he was approached to take over musical direction of the society, which he accepted.

For the previous ten years Brian Northcott GRSM LRAM had been working in the Isle of Wight, teaching music at schools in Bembridge and Newport and conducting the Ryde Philharmonic Society; the Isle of Wight Choir: the Isle of Wight Symphony Orchestra and Tritone concerts, (both of which he founded). He was also director of music at Ventnor Parish Church.

While living on the Isle of Wight he had conducted a large repertoire of choral works and over the next twenty years he gradually introduced them to the Exmouth Choral Society. In this time he has introduced a number of works which had either not been heard before in the South West, or had been heard many years before and long forgotten. Many of these works have since been taken into their own repertoire by other Devon choral societies,

In December 1983 the *Christmas Cantata* by Geoffrey Bush and in April 1984 Rossini's *Petite Messe Solenne* - a new work for the society were performed. Mr. White had planned both these performances.

In 1985 and 1986 Mr. Brian Northcott (hereafter to be called simply Brian) started introducing his own choices, all new to the society: Fauré's *Requiem*; Mozart's *Davidde Penitente*, Finzi's *In Terra Pax and Dies Natalis*, and Bruckner's *Te Deum* were all performed in this time. As there was a worry that these works might not attract an adequate audience, *Messiah* was performed in two parts; in December and

the following March, realising a small profit.

It should be mentioned that although Brian normally insisted that choral works be sung in the original language, members were very unhappy about singing *Davidde Penitente* in Latin. Brian reluctantly agreed to the singing of it in English on this occasion. It was during this period that a greater need was felt for engaging some professional and semi-professional musicians to strengthen the orchestra. The increase in costs of concerts was partly covered with grants from South West Arts and East Devon Arts. Sponsoring by local companies and banks and fund-raising by members helped to bolster funds.

Concerts in the early 1980s were held in St. Andrew's and Tower Street Methodist Churches, but later Brian negotiated for concerts to be held in the main hall at Rolle College for the next few years. During the next ten to fifteen years the quality of the accompanying orchestra steadily improved. Professional and semi-professional musicians and music students were engaged on a one rehearsal, one concert basis. Although it might be termed a "scratch" grouping, the standard of orchestral playing is very high and no doubt is one reason for the popularity of the society's concerts.

The 1980s saw a drop in the number of choral members. Choir numbers pre 1950 are not known, but during Donald White's era, seventy was the average. After his death the numbers dropped and were as low as forty-five in the late 80s. Gradually numbers have built up and by the late 1990s, seventy has again been reached. The size of the choir has probably worked to advantage in the quality of the music performed. With Brian's intensive training in voice production and diction, the choir has produced some outstanding performances.

The 1980s saw great changes. Between 1980 and 1990 entrance fees for concerts moved from £1 to £2.50, by programme. Rehearsals were held in Exeter Road School, moving to Rolle College in 1987. College students were encouraged to join the choir with no fee. Subscriptions were increased to £6 per session in 1986 and all members were re-auditioned. From that year the grants and sponsorships were introduced. There were also fund-raising socials held. The cost of putting on concerts, quite often for works, which might not attract a large audience, needed considerable subsidies. Members themselves were sometimes not happy with the programmes chosen. Some Christmas concerts included carols, with audience participation, which did attract more people.

Then in December 1988 the most ambitious concert for many years was staged. The Exmouth Journal reporter said it all: "One thing is for certain - never before, in its many years of existence, has the Exmouth Choral and Orchestral Society ever presented a concert like the one at the Pavilion". "It must certainly go down as a milestone in the history of musical entertainment in Exmouth...being a personal triumph for Brian Northcott". This was *African Sanctus* by David Fanshawe. This cleverly written work combined singing and live music, interwoven with tape recordings of African sounds, speech, chanting and music. Despite the large enthusiastic young, and not so young, audience, the event made a loss of £361.

The following Christmas a 'flu epidemic struck Exmouth, which reduced the concert audience to 127. Choir members were also affected, including, Stan. Symes, the secretary, who was to have sung solo in the performance. A loss of about £600 was made even after receiving grants and sponsorships. A satisfactory performance was well received. The beautiful *Suite No.3 in D* by J.S. Bach and his *Magnificat in D*, were augmented by Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* and a *Concertino for Trumpet and Orchestra* by Gordon Langford. Gordon had been elected as our President in 1988 and is a well-known composer, arranger, pianist and broadcaster. His contribution to the world of light music has been recognised internationally and his music for military and brass bands is extensive.

Undeterred by these set backs Brian immediately embarked on another potentially loss-making concert in his quest to introduce new works to Exmouth, and Devon at large. In May 1990, four new works were performed in one concert. After the moving *Beatus Vir* by Monteverdi, works by Stravinsky, Bernstein and Constant Lambert followed. The reviewer stated “Brian's direction is extremely clear and his enthusiasm obvious and infectious”. The Bernstein *Chichester Psalms* included an alto solo, which Brian blithely sang himself. Back in 1985, Brian sang another solo at the Christmas concert. At the following committee meeting it was reported that concertgoers had asked, “whether the society is on its beam-ends financially, because the conductor had sung the alto parts”? This comment has been made on a number of occasions since; maybe there is a little truth in this!

Once again the finances of the society were at full stretch and it was agreed to draw back on the policy of introducing untried works to the area. Fund-raising became a priority. A Carols from Scratch concert was arranged in December 1990, when any singer could join, paying a fee. Raffles were held at all rehearsals. Coffee mornings and cheese-and-wine evenings were organised. The committee worked hard to get members involved in fund-raising but without success. Suggestions such as putting on a light concert among members, setting up a Friends of the Society, and canvassing for patrons and sponsors, were all put to the membership. Members did not seem to appreciate the urgency and there was little response on their part to any of these initiatives. To ‘cap it all’, not many concert tickets were being sold. To ease the situation subscriptions went up to £9 per session in September 1990 and in desperation were increased again to £15 in 1991. In April 1993 an incentive scheme to improve the sale of tickets by members was introduced. £5 was deducted from a member’s subscription if he or she sold six or more tickets for a concert.

Concerts designed to draw a reasonable sized audience included *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, first performed in 1904 and believed to be the 10th performance by the society, Mozart's *Requiem*, Haydn's *Nelson Mass* and *Carmina Burana* - a first for the society and a popular choice. The society had returned to Holy Trinity Church in 1990 on a regular basis for all concerts. In 1993 major alterations were made to the church, with a new entrance and two halls constructed above. During the alterations concerts continued in the church with about 200 seats available. Average attendance during the 1990s was about one hundred and seventy.

Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* in 1993, another “untried” work, did not produce the audience numbers expected. It is of interest that many of the new works introduced to the area by Brian have been taken up by other choral societies, sometimes with greater success than experienced by the Exmouth Choral Society itself. His “trail-blazing” with new works has certainly benefited the South West even if the society has had some financial hiccups.

On the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday 1994, at the request of the Vicar the Reverend Ken Middleton, a very moving performance of J.S. Bach's *St. John's Passion* was given. This was followed by another ambitious first, Janacek's *Glagolitic Mass*. To help raise funds to put on this ambitious work a carol concert was given in December 1984. Owing to the difficulty of the Janacek, rehearsals were run from September 1984 through to the concert on 11th February 1995 but unfortunately only fifty-one members were prepared to take part. To create more problems South West Arts decided to stop supporting amateur choral societies. In the event an audience of two hundred arrived. To help recoup losses, the ever-popular Haydn's *Creation* was performed in May 1995 and the next month the local Stan Hacking Concert Band gave a concert to a packed Holy Trinity Church, raising £376 for our funds. Duruflé’s *Requiem*, another untried work for the South West, was given in December 1995. This has also proved popular among other local choral societies.

The 1990s brought the most ambitious ventures of the society since the series of semi-staged versions of popular operatic works in the Pavilion in the 1960s. These were joint choir performances in Exeter Cathedral. Brian at this time was also conducting the Ottery St. Mary Choral Society and by 1988/9 was planning Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* with both choirs taking part. The concert took place on 20th February 1991 and was a great success. The Express and Echo reported "the work was a thoughtful account, sympathetically paced, serene and sensitive...The listener was aware of the deep spiritual intensity of this work, yet the big choral climaxes had impact". This success prompted another joint concert two years later. Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony* and *Hymn of Jesus* by Gustav Holst being lesser-known works did not attract a large audience and sponsors were difficult to find. The subsequent loss stretched both societies, so it was four years before a further venture was made. This was the ever-popular Verdi *Requiem*. Extensive publicity and greater sponsorship ensured a large audience who enjoyed an excellent performance - and a profit was made.

This encouragement produced another cathedral concert in February 1999. The main work chosen, Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, was expected to draw a large audience, but this was not to be. The supporting work *Sancta Civitas* by Vaughan Williams had never been given in the South West before, which may have affected audience numbers. Counterpoint and the Exeter Cathedral girls' choir both took part in a "dazzling" performance. "The musical effect in the vast expanse of the cathedral was staggering". In the *Sancta Civitas* "a rather long and complex work, the beautiful angelic voices of the girl choristers came from a side aisle, creating a truly ethereal quality". The subsequent financial loss, sadly, saw the end of joint concerts with the Ottery St. Mary Choral Society.

Brian left Rolle College in 1996 and about the same time the college, now part of Plymouth University, increased their fees to the choral society. In September 1997 rehearsals were moved to Glenorchy Church and Hall. This arrangement did not work out satisfactorily and another move was made, to Exmouth Community College in the Green Close complex in September 1998. This venue was also unsatisfactory owing to parking difficulties (two fixed penalty notices were received). Finally a move of rehearsals to Salterton Road United Reformed Church in September 1999 has proved highly successful.

During the late 1990s other changes were made, this time to the content and the timing of concerts. However changes were gradual. In May 1997 a concert was given in Tower Street Methodist Church to celebrate their centenary year. Six short works included a J.S. Bach *Cantata* and Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum*. In December the Christmas concert, held in All Saints Church, included Benjamin Britten's *St. Nicholas*, with the Exeter Cathedral girl choristers. The audience numbers were poor due to Exmouth Community College having a choral concert on the same night. Previously efforts had been made to avoid clashing concert dates, which usually result in low audiences all round. For Christmas 1998, to avoid this happening again, the three choral societies then in Exmouth, decided to perform on consecutive Saturdays in December. This proved very unsatisfactory as the audiences at each concert were of around one hundred people and substantial losses were made. It was realised that possibly the numbers attracted to classical choral concerts in Exmouth is limited to around three hundred and it is logical that they would not want to attend three concerts in close proximity to one another.

The Exmouth Choral Society had found that holding its joint winter concerts in Exeter Cathedral in January or early February worked well. Longer time could be spent on rehearsals; there was no clashing of dates with other concerts; it was much easier to engage professional and semi-professional musicians, and bigger audiences could be attracted, weather permitting, as very few events are on at this time. It was therefore decided to hold major works early in the year, followed by a May concert to

include popular works and often a Haydn Mass. This arrangement began after the *Belshazzar's Feast* concert in Exeter Cathedral in February 1999. Haydn wrote fourteen Masses and the May 1999 concert started the series with *Missa in Tempore Belli* (in time of war). Together with works by Vivaldi and Charpentier the well-known *Nelson Mass* had been performed in 1991.

For the beginning of the new millenium, three *Glorias* - by Vivaldi, Poulenc (another first for the South West) and Rutter were performed. In May the new director of music at Exeter Cathedral - Andrew Millington - was invited to accompany Haydn's *Little Organ Mass* and perform organ works by J.S.Bach and Vierne. Other choral works were by Fauré and the African *Missa Luba*.

From 1998 a National Federation of Music Society's representative had attended most concerts and was giving very favourable reports. The society began to get a good reputation with "concerts of a high quality". Audience numbers increased. In January 2001 a stirring performance of J.S. Bach's B Minor Mass was given to a packed Holy Trinity. People were turned away at the door; something unheard of for very many years.

By January 2001, Brian Northcott, with the choral society, had performed sixty-four separate works in thirty-four concerts, plus a number of Christmas carol concerts. It will be evident that during the 20th century an orchestra has usually accompanied the choir and conductors have made full use of it. In the last 20 years orchestral works by J.S. Bach, Boyce, Copland, Corelli, Handel, Ives, Janacek, Langford, Mozart, Nielsen, Purcell and Vaughan Williams have been performed.

By Gerald Millington 2001

Sources:

Minute books of meetings and a collection of programmes in the society's archive.

Newspapers:

Exeter Flying Post (West Country Studies Library).

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