Choral Music is an Expression of our Souls and our Social Togetherness

Interview with John Rutter

By Andrea Angelini, Choral Conductor, Composer, ICB Managing Editor

AA: John, you have a wonderful career as professional composer. What is your current approach to the amateur choral world?

JR: I love to write for amateur choirs, and to work with them. I also think it's important to draw new people into the world of choral singing, and for many years I have been leading 'Come and Sing' days for anyone who wants to just enjoy a day's singing, explore choral repertoire, and experience the wonderful pleasure of being in a choir. It is good that we now have a number of fine professional choirs and vocal ensembles around the world, but let's remember that the huge majority of choirs are made up of children, students, or amateurs. Let us not cut ourselves off from them or look down on them.

Let's start from the beginning of the adventure… Do you remember how you first came into contact with choral music?

I was four years old! At my nursery school, each day began with singing – all of us together. My mother kept my first school report, and the report on music said 'John sings well if he sings softly'. I must have been over-enthusiastic. I soon discovered I was no good at sports like football, but I got the same satisfaction from being in my school choir: I was part of a team, and could contribute usefully to a team effort. And you don't get cold, wet and muddy singing in a choir! I was told I had a good singing voice as a treble, and

I might have auditioned to be a cathedral chorister, but at the age of eight I was not sure I wanted to be at a boarding school (in England most cathedral choir schools are boarding schools) and instead I joined my school chapel choir. It was a very good choir, and I sang the same sort of repertoire – Palestrina, Byrd, Monteverdi, Bach, Brahms and so on – as I would have experienced in a cathedral choir. As I grew older, I worked my way down the four voice parts, and there are some pieces of church music (like the Palestrina *Sicut Cervus*) where I believe that, at one time or another, I have sung every part.

Conducting, singing, composing, arranging… four different aspects of a musician who wants to devote his/her life to choral music. Is it possible to become a true expert in everything or is it maybe better to pursue only one thing?

I have always believed that if you want to be rich and famous, concentrate on one thing and pursue it obsessively. If you want to have an interesting and fulfilling life, do lots of different things, whatever interests you. I'm not much interested in money or fame, but I *am* interested in many aspects of music: composing, arranging, orchestrating, conducting, talking about music, making and producing recordings . . . the brain is a very big storeroom, and there is space in it for many ideas and skills. And I do believe that one branch of music nourishes another: I think I probably compose better because I have long experience of conducting, I write better for voices because I also write for orchestras and solo instruments, I am a better recording producer because I understand what it feels like to be a performer. There's nothing wrong with specializing, but for me I don't think it's necessary to specialize. Was it Leonardo da Vinci who said, 'Nihil humanum a me alienum puto' – I don't consider anything human is alien to me. He was saying that everything was interesting to him. A good maxim.

The choral repertoire is huge: from polyphony to contemporary

music through baroque, romantic, lyric, gospel, serial music. Should choirs attempt to do everything or, if they specialise, what should be the criteria for choosing the styles they perform?

That depends on the personality and expertise of the conductor. Under the right leadership, a choir can master music of almost any style, but if the conductor has a special affinity for one particular type of music, maybe better to focus on it rather than spend time with music that conductor really doesn't connect with or like – the lack of connection will transmit itself to the singers. Of course, sometimes both choir and conductor can go on a voyage of discovery together. I remember the first time, many years ago, that I conducted the Brahms Requiem. At the time, I wasn't sure that I quite 'got it'. As rehearsals progressed, it was exciting for both the choir and for me to realize what a fabulous work it is. Sometimes you have to unwrap the package before you find the treasure inside.

Again, about the repertoire. There is often a debate about the

way to compose choral music today. Sometimes it looks like composers do not have the possibility to affirm their style but mostly they need to follow what the music market is asking for. To elaborate on this: 90% of the choirs are amateur; this affects the possibility to perform very complicated music. Are we losing the music of our time?

It is true that writing choral music presents a special challenge. Most orchestras around the world are expert professionals, and you can write anything, no matter how complicated and difficult, and they will play it. Most choirs, as I said in my first answer, are not professionals, and their level of musical and technical skill varies. It is important for composers of choral music to know the choir, or type of choir, they are writing for, and how much rehearsal they will be able to have. It is good to stretch your performers – if all the music they sing is in their comfort zone, without much technical challenge, they will get bored. If it is far beyond their technical ability (and the ability of the conductor), they will get discouraged and the music will not be well served. It's a balancing act. In general, I find in writing choral music that I need to present my ideas in the simplest possible form, stripping away all unnecessary complexity. It's actually harder to write a simple piece than a complex one, because the simpler the music, the more it stands naked before the listener and the greater the risk it will just be banal or derivative. We don't have the space here to discuss in depth the divide that opened up (sometime in the nineteenth century) between 'high art' music and popular forms of music. At the start of the nineteenth century, Schubert could write both serious symphonies and light dance music, using the same musical language. By the end of the century, you can safely say that Johann Strauss couldn't have written *Tristan and Isolde* and Wagner couldn't have written *The Blue Danube*. Up to about the time of Mahler, no composer could have survived without a strong gift for melody; in the twentieth century, Stravinsky confessed 'I lack the gift of melody', but in his

world of composition, it didn't matter because concert music and opera had taken a different direction, while melodic music found a home in the worlds of operetta and popular song.

Melody is important to me – I think music should be rooted in the two fundamental human activities of song and dance – and so I would describe myself as half composer, half songwriter. The more a composer inclines towards songwriting, the more distant that composer's work is from the concert-and-opera world of today, but who is to say that the language of those forms is truly 'the music of our time'? At a conference I attended in Rome, I posed the question 'when the history of Italian twentieth-century music is written, will the important composers be seen as the two Luigis, Nono and Dallapiccola – or Ennio Morricone and Nino Rota?' I don't believe there is one musical mainstream any more, just many streams that occasionally flow together but are most often separate. We live in a diverse society, and so long as we respect and learn from each other, that's fine.

In your opinion, is there a right venue for each kind of repertoire? My friend Peter Phillips (the conductor of the Tallis Scholars) once told me that there is no specific connection between the text and the venue at which a choir is singing. Is it possible for you to make singing a sacred motet in a concert hall attractive?

It is paradoxical that the biggest audience for sacred music is nowadays in the concert hall and on record. Palestrina or Victoria would never have expected their Mass settings to be heard in concert halls, with all the movements following directly on from each other, but the world has changed since their time. It is always best if music is heard in the same sort of acoustic setting it was written for, I certainly always prefer to perform Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony in reverberant churches – and not all reverberation is the same. The marble churches Palestrina wrote for give you a bright, ringing reverberation which suits the high tenor

parts in, say, the *Missa Papae Marcelli* – whereas the stone churches William Byrd worked in have a darker reverberation which ideally suits his choral music.

We cannot always recreate the liturgical context of sacred music, but sometimes that's a good thing. I imagine the chatter of the congregations and the clanking of the censers in the Lateran Church, or the interminable sermons in Bach's churches. Maybe it's preferable to sit quietly and enjoy the beauty of sacred music performed in a Tallis Scholars concert.

Choral music is a big net. There are a lot of organizations that are building bridges between countries to make the world a better place through choral music. You know, there have been examples of singing revolutions even up to thirty years ago. Recently, England has decided to exit from the EU. Two different attitudes? What is your perception?

Groan! If only the world was run by musicians rather than politicians. We would have more harmony, for a start. Musicians know that we live in one world and we are all linked by bonds of humanity that go beyond politics and national boundaries. We must all be *communitaire*.

The last question, the most complicated probably. What is choral music?

The direct answer is that it is music written for many voices to sing together. The deeper question is what it means in our society, and I see it as an expression of our souls and our social togetherness. I have said this many times, but choral music brings people together, and it brings peoples together. It can draw on an amazing repertoire of music, stretching back over a thousand years and many countries, and it can be anything from a little madrigal or barbershop group to a mighty massed choir singing Beethoven 9. It brings an extraordinary physical, emotional and spiritual satisfaction to those who take part in it. And, as the English author

Kingsley Amis once said, it’s the most fun you can have with your clothes on.

John Rutter *was born in London and studied music at Clare College, Cambridge. He first came to notice as a composer during his student years; much of his early work consisted of church music and other choral pieces including Christmas carols. From 1975–79 he was Director of Music at his alma mater, Clare College, and directed the college chapel choir in various recordings and broadcasts. Since 1979 he has divided his time between composition and conducting. Today his compositions, including such concert-length works as Requiem, Magnificat, Mass of the Children, The Gift of Life, and Visions are performed around the world. His music has featured in a number of British royal occasions, including the two most recent royal weddings. He edits the Oxford Choral Classics series, and, with Sir David Willcocks, co-edited four volumes of Carols for Choirs. In 1983 he formed his own choir the Cambridge Singers, with whom he has made numerous recordings, and he appears regularly in several countries as guest conductor and choral ambassador. He holds a Lambeth Doctorate in Music, and in 2007 was awarded a CBE for services to music. Email: info@johnrutter.com*

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