

When Professional and Amateur Choral Worlds Come Together

Interview with Philip Lawson

By Andrea Angelini, conductor, composer and ICB Managing Editor

AA: Philip, you had a wonderful career in the King's Singers, one of the most acclaimed vocal groups in the world. What is your current approach to the amateur choral world?

PL: *I absolutely love working with amateur choirs (it's one of things I did before I joined The King's Singers, being quite late into the group, aged 36) and fascinated by the levelling effect it has – people from all walks of life working on equal terms to achieve perfection in something other than that which they normally do, and are there because they love being there: the literal meaning of "amateur". I now have my own choir, a good chamber choir based in Romsey near Southampton, and I apply all the choral techniques we used in The King's Singers to my work with them, as I try to do with every choir I work with, either as guest conductor or in a workshop situation. My choir members enjoy trying to attain the precision for which we all strive, and I expect total commitment from them when they're with me: we all owe it to our audiences to prepare well and communicate fully, whether amateur or professional. We have a laugh too: I've amassed quite a collection of funny stories from my life in music so far, though I suspect they may have heard some of them more than once, but are too embarrassed to tell me to stop repeating myself!*

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

PL: *Yes, it was almost by chance: my parents are not at all musical so I did no music to start with. Like many boys of my*

age I was in the Boy Scouts and after one of my friends left to join a local church choir he came to me and told me that the choir was much more fun than Scouts. So I did the same, and it literally changed my life! Though it was only a parish choir we did trips to cathedrals every year, usually Chichester or Guildford, and I loved the way loud final chords echoed through the building, which of course they didn't do in our relatively small church. One of the other choristers lived on our street and his mother turned up at our doorstep one day and told my parents that they really ought to buy me a piano, if only to stop me going round to her house all the time and asking to play theirs! My parents did as they were told and bought me a rather old upright (actually not-so-upright!) piano. It was just what I needed, and I spent hours playing around with chords and melodies and started composing pieces, mostly choral but one or two piano pieces as well. I still have them, and they're all utter rubbish, but you've got to start somewhere!

AA: 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?

PL: I think it's fine to do all those things together, and actually beneficial to experience music from a number of angles. Being active in a variety of disciplines can definitely help each one to develop, and if you were to ask me which of the four I found to be most beneficial in my own experience my answer would be singing. Singing is the about the most directly physical of musical activities, and even if you have not got a particularly good voice, I believe you should try to sing, and through this learn about resonance, harmonics, phrasing, word energy and tone colour, all the things you need to have knowledge and experience of if you want to conduct, or compose/arrange for choirs.

AA: 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?

PL: *My simple answer to this is do what you feel comfortable doing. People often said to us as King's Singers "You do everything". Not quite true – we did a lot of different types of choral music, but never gospel, for instance, or rap! The sound of the group is not set up for those genres, and it would have been foolish to attempt them just for the sake of doing everything, and actually maybe a bit disrespectful to the many experts that work in those fields. That said, it is interesting to put a different slant on some genres, and give audiences a fresh take on familiar styles. An example of this would be The King's Singers doing lower voice German Romantic repertoire by Schubert, Brahms, Mendelssohn etc. These pieces would mostly be performed by fairly large male voice choirs in Germany, but doing them with well-blended solo voices gives them a different and, we thought, attractive colour. It reminds me of when we recorded Tallis's 40-part motet "Spem in alium" multi-tracking in the studio with just 6-voices: it's hardly authentic, but it enabled us to perfectly balance the voices and hear nuances in the harmony which are so difficult to achieve when trying to record 40 different parts in a "live" setting. We needed headphones and playback to record this piece, and it was interesting and slightly weird when occasionally you would sing suspensions and even false relations against another part being sung by yourself!*

AA: Again about the repertoire. There is often a debate about the way to compose choral music today. Sometime 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?

PL: *As long as there are groups around like The King's Singers, The BBC Singers etc. who can perform these difficult contemporary choral pieces we haven't lost them, and also not every composer is capable of writing really challenging music that is worthy of performance: I know I can't! The King's Singers commissioned many wonderful pieces that are beyond the capabilities all but the finest amateur choirs: Ligeti "Nonsense Madrigals", Berio "The Cries of London", Maxwell Davies "The House of Winter" to name but a few, but that doesn't mean great composers should not be attempting music like this, and the repertoire is enriched by such wonderful pieces as these. History as usual will judge the merits of music from the contemporary scene, and for this reason I feel it is better for lesser composers (such as myself!) to stick to what we can do, i.e. write more accessible music as best as we can rather than attempting "challenging" music just for the sake of so-called progress.*

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AA: In your opinion, is there a right place for each kind of repertoire? My friend Peter Phillips (the conductor of the Tallis Scholars) once told me 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?

PL: *I agree with Peter – a concert hall with excellent acoustics is a great place to hear sacred music, especially polyphonic pieces whose nuances are otherwise lost in the wash of reverberation of a vast cathedral. Similarly churches can be good places to hear arrangements of folk songs and spirituals. We can't always choose our acoustics of course, and if you find yourself in a very dry, very large space the most important thing is to get a homogeneous, well balanced and well tuned texture from the choir, with everyone matching vowel sounds and dynamics, and then the enhanced harmonics will do the work of projecting the block of sound into the space.*

AA: 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?

PL: *I am sad and disappointed about the result of our 2016 referendum, especially as there was such a large number of liberal-minded people (alas not quite large enough) who wanted to remain in the EU. However, it is a political not an artistic union, and art and politics are two very different things – what we need is for governments to stop cutting subsidies to the arts: that is potentially more damaging than the question of whether UK artists need visas to work in the EU, and vice versa. Music knows no boundaries, and we need to continue to use choral music and art in general to find the common ground which binds us all together as individuals. I am determined from my own point of view that the UK leaving the EU should have little or no effect on my work, and I can continue my relationship with the many European countries that I have loved visiting and working in over the years. Vive L'Europe!!*

AA: The last question, the most complicated probably. What is

choral music?

PL: Choral music is a tool by which people come together to exercise both body and mind, share a common goal, and put aside, if only temporarily, any differences they may have. In *The King's Singers* we often disagreed about many things, not just musical but also to do with the running of the group. However, I always remember and cherish the fact that whenever we walked out on stage all of that was temporarily forgotten, in the interests of making music to the highest possible standard and communicating to our audiences all the different emotions that music can summon up. Choral music may be just lines and dots on a piece of paper, but the fact that it has the power to enhance, even change the lives of both performer and listener, that's pretty cool isn't it?!

AA: Thank you Philip, this has been one of the most inspiring interviews I have ever done!



For 18 years **Philip Lawson** was a baritone with *The King's Singers*, and was for most of that time also their principal arranger. Having replaced founder-member Simon Carrington in 1993, he performed more than 2,000 concerts with the group and appeared on many CDs, DVDs, radio and TV programmes worldwide. Philip contributed more than 50 arrangements to the repertoire of *The King's Singers*, including 10 for the 2008 CD "*Simple Gifts*" which went on to win the GRAMMY for Best Classical Crossover Album in 2009. Before joining the group, Philip was Director of Music at a school in Salisbury, England, and a Lay Clerk in the cathedral choir there, and had previously worked in London as a freelance baritone, performing regularly with *The BBC Singers*, *The*

Taverner Choir, The Sixteen and the choirs of St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. He now has a writing and consultancy contract with the American publisher Hal Leonard Corporation, for whom he holds the title of European Choral Ambassador. Philip has over 200 published arrangements and compositions, and leads regular choral workshops in Europe and the USA. He has also twice been Professor of Choral Arranging at the European Seminar for Young Composers in Aosta, Italy, sponsored by Europa Cantat, and Professor of Choral Conducting at the Curso Canto Choral in Segovia, Spain. He is on the staff of Wells Cathedral Specialist Music School, Salisbury Cathedral School and the University of Bristol as a vocal performance teacher and since 2016 has been Musical Director of The Romsey Singers. Email: lawson.philip@gmail.com

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