

The Bach Choir – 140 Years of Music Making

By Nick Cutts

2016 is a very special year for The Bach Choir because it marks 140 years of music-making since the Choir's formation in 1876 by Otto Goldschmidt, who gave the first performance in this country of Bach's Mass in B minor.

The Bach Choir now is very different to the choir of 1876, which comprised the upper echelons of London society, with membership conferred by recommendation rather than open audition. Today at least 30% of the singing members are under 30, entry is by audition alone, and a student bursary programme allows young singers to be part of the Choir. The Choir's pioneering outreach programme, run by volunteer singing members, is now in its fifth year of sharing the joy of singing with children who might not otherwise have the opportunity.

So much has been achieved in 140 years; what remains constant, however, is the Choir's mission to perform choral works of excellence, and arguably the two greatest choral works of Bach – his Mass in B minor and the St Matthew Passion – are at the heart of our programming. Our anniversary celebrations will culminate in a performance of the Mass in Southbank Centre's Royal Festival Hall on Sunday 5 June 2016 at 7.30pm with soloists Susan Gritton, Iestyn Davies, Ed Lyon and Neal Davies, the outstanding period instrument ensemble Florilegium, and conductor David Hill, now in his 18th year as the Choir's Musical Director.

Central to the Choir's success was its Musical Director for 38 years, David Willcocks, who sadly passed away in September

2015 at the age of 95. To him we credit the Choir's transformation; under his leadership the Choir reached new levels of excellence. Soon after his appointment in 1960 he began to point the Choir in new directions by programming Honegger's King David and Howells' Hymnus Paradisi in his first season, and Delius's Sea Drift, Janáček's Glagolitic Mass and Fricker's Vision of Judgement in his second. Because of his connections and friendship with Benjamin Britten, the Bach Choir sang on the first Decca recording of the War Requiem – and this disc is still the seminal recording today. Many more recordings followed, including backing vocals for Marianne Faithful and the Rolling Stones. The Choir became much busier, responding to invitations and taking part in foreign tours, and started to perform outside London.

Sir David Willcocks' musical contribution was immeasurable and, as a special tribute, the Bach Choir is dedicating its performance of the St Matthew Passion on Sunday 20 March 2016 to his memory. The Choir's tradition of performing this work on Passion or Palm Sunday at the Royal Festival Hall dates back to 1930, and is a firm fixture in London's musical calendar. The Evangelist at this performance is Toby Spence, and Christ is sung by Matthew Best. Sophie Bevan, Jennifer Johnston, Nicky Spence and Brindley Sherratt, along with the Florilegium, are conducted by David Hill, with a ripieno choir of girls' voices drawn from schools in and around London.

Edited by Mirella Biagi, Italy/UK