

Sarisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 27TH AUGUST 2020

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor! I hope this newsletter finds you well. Here is this week's edition... comments, feedback, suggestions welcome!

What's On Listings

Choral conductor Jessica Norton continues her summer singing sessions. This week her session focuses on using your head and chest voices. Next week, the session is focussed on singing fast passages. These are sessions running via Zoom.



<http://jessicanorton.co.uk/>



Eamonn Dougan (Associate Conductor of the Sixteen) focuses on the strongest muscle in your body; the tongue! As he explains, it's important to have your tongue placement correct in order to produce a clear sound:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gxef5M1YIT8>

Ben England appears to be having a well-deserved week off this week, probably in preparation for the "Elijah at Home" project:



<https://www.theseisolationchoir.com/elijah>

There's so much going on over at the Self-Isolation choir website. If I tried to plug it all it would be at least a whole week's newsletter! Well done and thank you to Mark Strachan and his ever expanding team for their excellent work during lockdown, which I know continues to be appreciated by many.

Having said that, I will draw your attention to your (possibly a once in a lifetime) chance to participate in a performance of Mahler's Resurrection Symphony!

<https://www.theseisolationchoir.com/symphony-no-2-mahler>



The "Global Armed Man" project is still up and running, alongside their Caledonia project which is in collaboration with Voces8:

<https://new.stayathomechoir.com/projects>

As I've just mentioned Voces8, here's a reminder of their very exciting online festival titled "Live from London" featuring some of the very best vocal ensembles. This Saturday (29th), is the turn of The Gesualdo Six with an innovative programme titled "Fading":



<https://voces8.foundation/gesualdo-six>



On the subject of online music festivals, St. Martin-in-the-fields in London are also doing the same. The virtual concert on Thursday (27th) is "A celebration of Bach":

<https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org/whatson-event/a-celebration-of-bach/>

If you fancy a challenge, the Vasari Singers are hosting a come and sing online event on Saturday 12th September. The programme is a work in eight parts and one in sixteen parts!



<http://www.vasarisingers.org/event/come-and-singonline/>



The BBC Proms are still going strong; and are continuing their Sunday evenings focusing on past proms concerts that featured choral music. This week is a repeat of a prom from 2017 of the Latvian Radio Choir singing Rachmaninov's Vespers:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000m6xn>

Finally, Richard Cooke (conductor of the Royal Choral Society) has added to his blog by harking back to his childhood with an overview of the symphonic poem Tintagel by Arnold Bax:



<http://richardcooke.org/blog.htm>

Richard introduces the work here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDnxEWMuQso>

The Magnificent Seven

The Austrian composer **Anton Bruckner** (1824 - 1896). Bruckner is best known for composing symphonies (nine in total) and choral works for both large and small forces. For this week, I decided to write about some of the many smaller motets that he composed and I have narrowed it down to seven, hence the title of this section!



In 1851, Bruckner was appointed organist at St. Florian. During his time there, he composed some choral works, including a very effective setting of the Libera me text, dating from 1854. It is scored for five-part choir (SSATB), three trombones, cello, double bass and organ: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKa0Q5AL0tE>

In May 1861, Anton Bruckner made his concert debut as a composer and conductor with his seven-part setting (SAATTBB) of the Ave Maria. Within this, the first bass part divides itself, so there is occasional eight-part writing! Listen out for the vast contrasts of dynamics and vocal ranges: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbHKnUhdv8g>

Locus iste was written in 1869 to celebrate the dedication of the votive chapel of the new Cathedral at Linz in Northern Austria. The text, taken from the book of Genesis, is Jacob reflecting after waking from a dream in which he saw a ladder rising from earth to heaven. Listen out for the bass part in this motet, serving as a sure foundation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUGBoR_nnA



Nine years later, Bruckner composed Tota pulchra es Maria for the 25th anniversary of the Bishop of Linz, who was a friend and supporter of Bruckner. Listen out for the tenor soloist acting as a Cathedral Precentor, the bass part near the end and the occasional contribution of the organ. I think this is my favourite motet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozFaxehi3bk>



In 1879, Bruckner completed Os justi which is a setting of part of psalm 36. He dedicated it to Ignaz Trauhmihler who was music director at St. Florian. Listen out for a nod in the direction of Renaissance choral music in the middle section and the plainsong at the end: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ov-OAmpcRfw>

Bruckner composed three settings of Christus factus est, with words from the letter to the Philippians in the New Testament. The best known setting is the third one, composed in 1884 and dedicated to Father Otto Loidol of Kremsunster Abbey, which is about a two-hour drive west from Vienna. Listen out for the huge dynamic contrasts again!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6fAT3iGRWc>

1885 was the 100th anniversary of the founding of Linz diocese and Bruckner was invited to compose a work for the celebrations. And so, Bruckner composed Ecce sacerdos, which was intended to accompany the Bishop's entrance into the New Cathedral. The motet is for eight-part choir, three trombones and organ. Listen out for the use of plainsong again; and a backward glance to the music from the Renaissance period, in particular the music of Gabrieli:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gzB-np9LJO>

After Bruckner's funeral at the Karlskirche in Vienna, his body was taken back to St. Florian where he was buried under the great organ. Amongst all the great composers he has, perhaps, the perfect burial place.



Piano feature

During August, I thought it might be nice for someone else to write something in the newsletter. So I am delighted that Gilly Slot (accompanist for Winchester City Festival Choir) has put a couple of articles together to share with us. Here is the second one.

What do I look for in a pianist? Lots of pianists can play all the right notes in the right order, but what makes a pianist stand out from the crowd?

For me, the quality of the sound is very important, and a certain sensitivity of touch. Some pianists impress people with their ability to play very fast or very loud. Some music requires a lot of physical strength and power, and these pieces are often popular with audiences. However, I feel that a true test of how musical a pianist is would be to give them some Mozart to play. This type of music is elegant and refined, but a lot of technically competent pianists do not have the necessary control, sensitivity or clarity in their playing in order to perform this music in a convincing way. The texture is so transparent, there is nowhere for the pianist to hide. In many ways, this music is harder to play than big romantic music where a thick texture and generous pedalling hide can hide all sorts of things!

There are many pianists, past and present, who I really enjoy hearing. I will mention just a few here.



The American pianist Murray Perahia (born 1947) tops the list, with his silky sound and sensitive touch. His interpretations of Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven are particularly impressive. The fact that he often looks really bad tempered on stage and rarely smiles is forgiven as soon as he starts to play! Despite suffering some serious hand problems over the years, Perahia is still very active in the concert scene. Here he is playing Bach superbly well.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDFCah-xwYY>

Modern recording techniques enable performances to sound flawless. These are satisfying in one way, but sometimes it's nice to have a few imperfections thrown in! The French pianist Alfred Cortot (1877-1962), ranks right up there with the top pianists. His splashy performances contain a certain number of wrong notes, but his playing is pure magic. Cortot plays in such a beautiful and poetic way, with musicality oozing out from every note – his performances are mesmerising. I would have loved to have heard him play live. Have a listen



to this example of some Chopin. These old crackly recordings have a certain charm! I hope you enjoy the wonderful musicality of this playing, and love the wrong notes as much as I do!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDBDBpQH5Hw>



From the very young generation, I like the British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor (born 1992). I first noticed him when he got to the final of Young Musician of the Year at the age of just 11. Since then he has matured into a wonderfully versatile and sensitive young adult pianist. Not only can he play everything phenomenally well, he can also compose, and improvise on the spot – a young man of many talents. Do try to see him if you can. Here he is playing one of his own compositions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aX1VL1kR2hA>

And here he is at 11 in the final of Young Musician of the Year:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRs_3XKWdDw

There are many other pianists, past and present, well worth a mention, including Alicia de Larrocha (1923 - 2009) for her vibrant and energetic style and wonderfully Spanish interpretations, Andras Schiff (born 1953) for his deeply thoughtful performances, and Paul Lewis (born 1972), a pupil of Alfred Brendel, for his inspiring interpretations of Schubert and Beethoven... so many wonderful pianists to enjoy!



Many thanks to Gilly for her time in researching about a few of her favourite pianists!

In addition to Gilly's recommendations, here are some from me too!



Firstly, the pianist Cordelia Williams who won the piano final of Young Musician of the Year in 2006. *(I think she beat me once in a piano class at Southampton Music festival in 1997, I was just relieved to come 3rd!! Perhaps Gilly could confirm if it was her, there can't be that many excellent pianists called Cordelia Williams can there?)*

Here she is playing some Schubert: <https://youtu.be/WV6Yu0Gdov8>

Since being the piano teacher at Richard Taunton Sixth Form College, it's been a huge privilege and pleasure to work with some wonderful young musicians. In ten years, only one of them has gone on to study piano as their first instrument at music college! So here is Spanish pianist Hanna Orizi, who is currently studying at Trinity LABAN playing some Mozart: <https://youtu.be/Q4IEAlvy7xc> (this video was recorded in 2015, I taught Hanna from 2016 to 2018).



When I used to work at Portsmouth Cathedral, I was often on duty for concerts, including twice yearly appearances from the Solent Symphony Orchestra. While I was tidying up after their concert last October, I was serenaded by a young man on the piano who was to be the soloist in their next concert in March 2020 (he was hanging around with his parents waiting for the next ferry home to the Isle of Wight). However, it transpired that he had to pull out of that concert as he was in the Keyboard Final for Young Musician of the Year 2020, which happened to be the same week. Yes, you guessed it, he won!

Here is the winning performance from 16-year-old Thomas Luke with a programme of Bach, Ravel and Lecuona: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p08byclc>

That's all for this week folks I hope you're still enjoying the newsletters.

Stay safe and keep singing!

Graham