

# Salisbury Choral Society

## NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 4<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2021

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope the newsletter continues to find you well.

It was good to see some of you on zoom last Wednesday for a whistle stop tour through the choral music of Haydn. I hope that you found it interesting and enjoyable; and I hope you enjoyed the chance to see familiar faces from the choir. From the feedback that I have received so far, it seemed that the warm up video that I used in the session was a particular highlight, so for those who were able to attend last week and for those who weren't, the link to the video is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tqjWIRQ5MI> I found this video by going on to YouTube and searching for "choral warm ups". Why don't you try this too... and let me know if you find a video that should be shared with the rest of the choir.

On to the main part of this week's newsletter. Comments and criticisms welcome!

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### Composer of the week



In the last exciting episode, I mentioned the literary works of Ernest Walker. You might recall me writing that although Ernest Walker was described as a man of unflinching integrity and kindness, he was a man of strong prejudices: he condemned Victorian music; and "named and shamed" John Stainer's "The Crucifixion" as an example... so I thought I should redress the balance and write about the life of **Sir John Stainer (1840 - 1901)** and a bit about "The Crucifixion".

John Stainer was born in Southwark, London. His father was a self-taught musician and played flute, piano and violin; and built a small chamber organ at home on which his son John used to accompany him when he played hymn tunes on the violin.

In 1849, a young John Stainer became a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, travelling each day between his home in Streatham and the cathedral by steamboat! In 1854 he was invited to sing in the first English performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion under William Sterndale Bennett (*pictured right*) at the Hanover Square Rooms.



In 1855, Stainer was offered a six-month contract as organist at St Benet's, Paul's Wharf. During this period, he sometimes deputised for the regular organists at services in St Paul's Cathedral. At the age of sixteen, Stainer was appointed to the post of organist at the newly founded St. Michael's College, Tenbury (*pictured left*).



In 1860 he became organist at Magdalen College, Oxford. He was permitted to study for a degree as long as it did not interfere with his duties. During his time at Magdalen, Stainer introduced new anthems and service music, bringing the choir to a higher standard than previously. In 1861, Stainer was appointed to the prestigious post of University Organist at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin. Here he was expected to play for a service every Sunday (at a later time in the morning than the Magdalen service). Stainer was also conductor of the Magdalen Madrigal Society, which gave concerts in the College Hall, and the Magdalen Vagabonds, which performed during vacations. The latter gave concerts in various towns and cities, raising money for church restoration projects. Stainer had considerable influence on sacred music in Oxford and his reputation spread beyond the confines of the city. He was employed to play solo organ works at weekly concerts at Crystal Palace and took part regularly in the Three Choirs Festival.



In 1872, John Stainer became organist of St. Paul's Cathedral. The Cathedral organ was in the process of being rebuilt by the organ builder Henry Willis to Stainer's design, with portions on either side of the entrance to the choir stalls. At St Paul's, he soon set about reinvigorating the choir. New anthems and liturgies were introduced, a choir school built, and the number of choristers increased from twelve to thirty-five. Stainer became an honorary fellow of the Royal Academy of Music in 1877 and became Musical Director of the Madrigal Society of London.

In 1882, Stainer was offered the post of Inspector of Music in Schools and Colleges, a position which he occupied for six years. In 1883, he completed an oratorio titled "Mary Magdalen". This was followed in 1887 by "The Crucifixion", the work for which he is most remembered. In recognition of his services to British music, he received a knighthood from Queen Victoria in 1888.



Following a childhood accident, Stainer lost the use of one eye. This was a major reason for his decision to take early retirement from St Paul's Cathedral in 1888. In later life, he and his wife took to travelling to the Riviera, Florence or Mentone each year for him to relax and recuperate. It was on such a visit to Verona, Italy, that on Palm Sunday, 31 March 1901 he felt unwell and retired to his room. Later that afternoon he died of a heart attack at the age of sixty. His funeral service was held on 6<sup>th</sup> April at St Cross Church, Oxford with a large number of friends and colleagues present, followed by burial in adjacent Holywell Cemetery.

"**The Crucifixion**" was designed to be a work for Passion Week that was well within the reach of village choirs. The librettist, W.J. Sparrow-Simpson (1859 - 1952; *pictured right*) was the son of one of Stainer's colleagues at St. Paul's. The first performance was at St. Marylebone Parish Church in London. Stainer was writing at a time when Bach's Passions had been only recently introduced to British audiences. "The Crucifixion" follows Bach's example in several respects, notably bringing in the congregation in several hymns, like the chorales in the Lutheran Passions. "The Crucifixion" has had / still has bad press... for me, when the work is performed well, it's incredibly powerful... **and it makes it into my top 5 favourite choral works!** Here is an excellent performance to enjoy: [click here to listen and sing along!](#)



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

Stay safe and keep singing!

*Graham*