



St Neots choral society



The first 25 years

Early in 1971, Longsands School Choir, augmented by staff and conducted by Reginald Searle, performed a concert version of Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas". The small, imported orchestra helped to inspire the singers and the two performances were rapturously received. As a result, Mr. Searle proposed the formation of a choral society, to enable members of the school, staff, parents and friends to perform works beyond the scope of the school choir. September 1971 therefore, witnessed the birth of the Longsands Choral Society and the first work it performed, fittingly enough, was Haydn's "Creation". The venue was St. Mary's Church, St. Neots. In that first year the number of full members, that is adults, was about 40 and the total cost of rehearsals and performances for the year was less than £300. Two concerts were given. "Creation" was accompanied by an orchestra of good local amateurs, strengthened by peripatetic music teachers, and the soloists were professional, one of whom, Bonaventura Bottone, has gone on to an international career. The second concert was a "fund-raiser" using soloists from the Society and only piano accompaniment.

This was the pattern until 1974 when three concerts were given for the first time. This was as a result of an invitation by Gt. Staughton Parish Church to help them celebrate their millenium, a church having been founded there in 974. Three concerts a year, Christmas, Easter, Summer would be customary from henceforth, but only the "big" Christmas concert would benefit from using an orchestra and professional soloists.

Ambition was not dulled however and at Easter 1975 the Society risked the cost of using an orchestra for the second time within a season. It was to prove to be a turning point.

The cost of hiring orchestral players and professional soloists is "THE" major problem for most choral societies. In 1975, Longsands School felt that it could no longer underwrite such losses as the Society incurred on its concerts. The Society, in its turn, could not approach funding bodies for the Arts while it was still a school organisation. The decision was therefore taken to change the Society's name to St. Neots Choral Society and become independent. It did not sever its links with the school because it elected to join the Longsands Association (for affiliated clubs and societies) and hence could still use the school facilities for rehearsal. (It is interesting to note that in today's membership, of the six remaining founder members, three were members of staff in 1971, two were pupils and the last is the father of one of the pupils.)

Affiliation to the National Federation of Music Societies came in 1977. The help, advice and financial guarantees offered by the Federation were crucial to the development of the Society.

Independence brought many benefits and new challenges, as well as the constant worry about money. Bedford, home of the BBC Symphony Orchestra during World War II and now host to the Philharmonia Orchestra, must rank as one of the strongest provincial centres for the performance of live music. The Conductor's links with that musical life enabled him to invite orchestral players from Bedford to accompany concerts in St. Neots. This rise in standard meant that purely orchestral works began to appear in the concerts and this has remained a feature much enjoyed by all concerned. The first work to be performed was for strings only, Mozart's "Eine kleine Nachtmusik". By the time of the Society's 10th anniversary in 1981, confidence was such that a complete symphony was performed, No. 104 by Haydn (the "London").

During these years the number of subscription paying members increased steadily (it was, and still is, free to any student still at school). In 1976 the Society also began its long and very close

relationship with St. Mary's Church, Eaton Socon. April 4th 1981 saw the Society use the newly opened Priory Centre for the first time and this has been a regular venue ever since. It is a much better hall than many locals realise; if only the acoustics could be improved!

Programmes were also acquiring a more professional appearance. Biographies of soloists first appeared at Christmas 1978, and these were joined by photographs the following Christmas. The Christmas of 1979 also saw the first Carol Concert; so that four concerts a year became the norm. This latter was accompanied by organ.

Lastly, during this era, one should mention fund-raising. Jumble sales, cake stalls, raffles, Victorian Evenings and a very hard working Committee kept the Society moving forward. Better players and soloists meant bigger fees, and ticket sales can only do so much, when no venue in the town can seat more than 350 people, once the choir and orchestra are in.

The 10th Anniversary Concert in 1981 was the next major turning point in the Society's history. The large orchestra of more than 50 players, two top class soloists, Jennifer Adams and Jonathan Roberts, a long and difficult choral work (the Brahms' "Requiem") plus the Haydn Symphony No.104, and a packed and highly appreciative Priory Centre, was a magnificent spring-board for the 80's. The 1982/83 season saw two important changes. Although the occasional player had been hired from London in previous years, it was in this season that the orchestra as a whole was brought from London for the first time. A "fixer" was found who would book aspiring young professionals; the Society would provide a coach from a point in Central London, and they would arrive at about 1 pm on concert day. The Society would provide a hot lunch and buffet tea in addition to their fee for the 3-hour rehearsal and performance. This system has worked so well that it remains unchanged today. The second change involved the Society's logo. A music stand had appeared occasionally before 1982 but in this season a new, improved version was adopted and has remained the Society's trademark ever since.

In December 1983 the Society hired its first "big" name. All its soloists had always been recognised members of the concert or operatic circuits, but Neil Jenkins already had an established international career and had made recordings of considerable renown.

In the Summer of 1984 the Society teamed up with the Huntingdonshire Philharmonic, Oundle and District Choral Society and St. Ives Choral Society to perform Elgar's "Dream of Gerontius" in Ely Cathedral. This venture, very well organised by the Huntingdon organisation, meant that four Societies, none of which was big enough to perform this work on its own, were able to enjoy singing it. The experience was repeated in the Summer of 1987, when the piece concerned was the Berlioz "Requiem".

The Society celebrated the Bach - Handel Tercentenary in 1985 as did almost every other Choral group in the country.

The Summer of 1986 was one of the most adventurous to date. The non-orchestral fund-raiser had been moved to Easter to allow a "big" event in June, and so it was. It was the first, concert performance in Gt. Britain of a Requiem by Suppe (he of "Poet and Peasant" and "Light Cavalry" fame) which had lain forgotten in a library in Vienna since the middle of the 19th century. The BBC had broadcast it in a studio performance and after negotiations with that organisation carried out by one of the Society members, David Cobham, they loaned all the vocal scores and orchestral parts for us to give the first live performance.

The end of the 80's saw the Society invite Brampton Choral Society to join it for a performance of the "Sea Symphony" by Vaughan Williams. The Priory Centre resounded to the sound of 130 singers, nearly 60 players and two famous soloists. The St. Neots Choral Society was ready for the 90's!

The 90's could have hardly begun more auspiciously. At the prompting of his wife Jean, and in co-operation with Carole Lewis (then Head of Music at Ernulf School) and Kathryn Pearcey (Music teacher at Longsands Community College as it now is), Reginald Searle founded the St. Neots Sinfonia. They would perform their own purely orchestral concerts during the year, but in the Summer would join forces with the Choral Society. In this way the Choral Society now found itself with orchestral accompaniment for all three major concerts. June 30th, 1990 saw the first joint venture.

1991 was the Bi-Centenary of Mozart's death. This allowed the Society to devote all of its 20th Anniversary Concert in November to the music of the great man. Who could have forecast in 1971 that the choir of more than 100 members would have an orchestra of London players and international soloists to help it celebrate its birthday. Richard Suart and Margaret Marshall were in demand all over the world, in fact the latter flew in from Vienna the day before the concert and was returning there the following day, while Ann Murray's reputation is of the highest order. A regular at the Salzburg Summer Music Festival, she has also been a memorable soloist on the "Last Night of the Proms" TWICE in the 1990's, with Lesley Garrett in 1990, and most recently with Dame Felicity Lott this year, 1996. This was also the first concert to attract major sponsorship. The Society had been trying for several years to persuade local firms to support it but to no avail. The National Westminster Bank, however, was very generous with this concert and has been again for the Silver Jubilee Concert.

The Society was sponsored again in 1993 by a local supporter, Nigel Smith. This was sponsorship on the most generous scale, and a stunning performance of Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony was the result.

Easter 1994 witnessed all the excitement and revelry of St. Neots' very own "Last Night of the Proms", while in December 1995 the Society was joined by Sawtry Chorale for a performance of one of the most exciting works in the choral repertoire, the Verdi "Requiem". The tenor soloist in this concert was Bonaventura Bottone, now one of the most sought-after tenors on the international operatic scene. He has performed major roles at both London's opera houses, Nanki-Poo in the Jonathan Miller production of "The Mikado" for English National Opera and the Italian Tenor in "Rosenkavalier" at Covent Garden, for example, as well as similar work all over the world. Before the "Requiem" he had been in Chicago for two months at the start of their winter season. As a young man, he had been the tenor soloist in the 1971 "Creation" and has remained a friend of the Conductor ever since, returning to sing with the Choral Society over the years, even as his fame has spread. It is of interest that three of his children have accompanied the choir in Summer concerts as players in the Sinfonia.

From the early 90's, plans were afoot to have a work commissioned for the Society's Silver Jubilee Concert. Negotiations were begun with Andrew Carter and the Choir sang his "Benedicite" in the June concert of 1993. He was so pleased with what he heard that the commission was quickly accepted. The Society has been planning for this ever since. The cost of the composition and publishing of the new work "Horizons" is slightly over £9000. A multitude of activities has been undertaken to raise the money, and it is a tribute to the vitality and enthusiasm of the members that, in conjunction with "reserves" this sum has been raised.

This is not the only new work in the 90's. Reginald Searle took early retirement from Longsands in the summer of 1994 and has since been writing music in a determined fashion. He has provided original carols, or arrangements, for the Carol Concerts since the early 80's. A "Folk Song Confection" for the Sinfonia was followed by a setting of the "Magnificat" which was performed in June 1996. Thirty-five minutes long, for choir, orchestra, two soloists and a speaker, this must rank as a major piece. It was very well received by performers and audience alike. Is there more to come? Lastly, one would mention that his "retirement" also gave him the time to orchestrate many

of the carols used in the Carol Concerts. Sinfonia therefore provided the accompaniment to the 1995 concert and thus for the first time, all four concerts in the season employed an orchestra. Plans are that this should continue.

The Choral Society prides itself on being able to bring singers and players of the very highest quality to St Neots. Many of the orchestral members, who come as young professionals, go on very soon to permanent places in the London, or major provincial orchestras. Others are busy, freelance players, who return time after time, because it is one of their most enjoyable engagements. They enjoy the fuss that is made of them. One, Bedford-based Michael Hext, was famous at a young age because he was the first winner of the BBC Young Musician competition. International harpist, Sioned Williams, played in St Neots a matter of days before going to New York for, her Carnegie Hall debut!

The list of singers who have sung with the Society is even more impressive. St Neots audiences can hear, at very low prices, soloists who would normally command astronomical seat prices in the opera houses and concert halls of the world: Ann Murray in Salzburg, Margaret Marshall in Vienna, Peter Coleman-Wright taking the title role in "Don Giovanni" at English National Opera, his wife Cheryl Barker singing Mimi in the Sydney Opera production of "La Boheme", broadcast on BBC Television last Christmas, Bonaventura Bottone, the Duke in "Rigoletto" all over the world, Helen Walker, Peter Rose, Peter Bronder, Jeremy White, Christopher Keyte, Andrew King and so on. The Society is also extremely fortunate in having such talented members that soloists for the summer concerts can be found from within its ranks. It also does its best to promote local talent, so that ex-Longsands pupil, Rosamund Barker, who is beginning to make her way on the professional singing circuit, has been booked to sing on several occasions in the last few years.

Over and above all these stands a very special favourite of Choral Society followers: its President, Linda Hibberd. As a very young mezzo-soprano in 1973, she came to sing in "Elijah". The conductor, whose boyhood had been dominated by Kathleen Ferrier's glowing recording of "O rest in the Lord" from that work, changed his allegiance immediately when he heard Linda's performance. The richness of the voice and the unfailing musicality have enchanted St Neots audiences ever since. Her connection with the Society became so close that, after the retirement of Peter Grahame-Dunn as President, she was invited to take over the post, which she accepted gladly, beginning her new role in 1988. Linda is as busy as ever. In Italy during the summer of 1996 and in the Far East after that, she is now preparing the solo part in the Society's commission, "Horizons", which Andrew Carter has written especially for her.

Fund-raising must be a vital part of any amateur music-making society. Subscriptions are the front line, allied to ticket sales, but these can never be sufficient in the expensive world of concert promotion. Extra work must be undertaken. Jumble sales, raffles and cake stalls are common to most organisations and these have all been used, together with other successful ventures. Victorian evenings, plant sales, craft evenings, crossword competitions, musical quizzes and a stall at the May Day Fayre on Eaton Socon Green have all been interesting variations on a theme and raised much needed money.

For the commission, some special events were needed. A "Bridge Day" was organised; Linda Hibberd, the President, gave a recital; her husband, Tom Winthorpe, a trombonist in the Covent Garden orchestra, gave a fascinating lecture/recital about a long lost, musical instrument, the ophicleide; a strawberry tea was enjoyed; a Fireworks Party on November 5th went off with a bang! Christine Anderson and her brother, Graham Bunting, entertained us with an evening of Piano Duets. A Barn Dance exhausted its participants and, finally, a "Buy a Note" scheme was adopted. Happily, all were successful and the commission is secure.

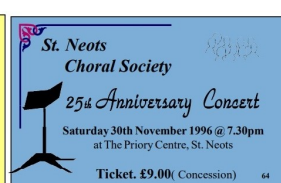
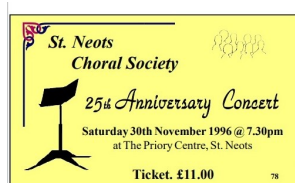
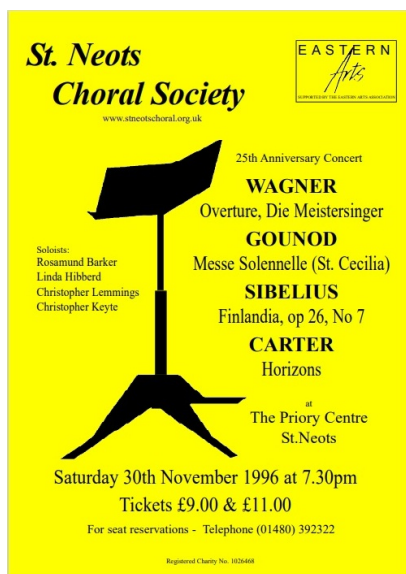
Since becoming a registered charity, the taxman has helped us in no small measure and sponsorship has been an important part of our funding in the nineties, although, like Oliver, we would always like "some more". A thoroughly professional application to the National Lottery resulted in £10,000 for the special purchase of proper staging for concerts. Lastly, we rely on proceeds from our summer concerts. There are few professional expenses associated with them and some monies can go into the coffers.

None of this would have been possible without determined and far sighted committees during the life of the Society, and to mention their Chairmen during those years is to honour all who worked with them. Jill Handley, Eric Quin, Norman Cave, John Creber, Francis Burnley and the present incumbent, Roger Pitt, have led the teams which have helped the choir to grow to a membership of 122 in the 1995/6 season, with a turnover of nearly £28,000.

Finally, no history of the Society would be complete without recognition of the enthusiasm and dedication of its Members who have given generously of their time and money throughout these first 25 years.



The choir ready for the 25th Anniversary concert which included the first performance of the commissioned work 'Horizons' by Andrew Carter and held at the Priory Centre, St. Neots on 30th November 1996.



The major works the choir has performed over the first 25 years (1971-1996)

Bach	Christmas Oratorio (1975, 1985) Magnificat in D (1976, 1991, 1995) St. John Passion (1979, 1990) St. Matthew Passion (1979) Sleepers Wake (1973, 1978)	Mendelssohn	Come Let us Sing (1990) Elijah (1973, 1983, 1988) Lauda Sion (1992) St. Paul (1979, 1992) Symphony No. 2, Hymn of Praise (1984, 1997)
Beethoven	Christ on the Mount of Olives (1991) Mass in C (1976, 1986) Symphony No. 9, "Choral" (1993))	Mozart	Exsultate, Jubilate (1986) Mass in C (1987) Missa Brevis in D Major (1978) Requiem (1977, 1991)
Berlioz	Requiem (1987)		
Brahms	A German Requiem (1981, 1990) How Lovely are Thy Dwellings (1974) Song of Destiny (1981)	Palestrina	Missa "Aeterna Christi Munera" (1976) Missa Brevis (1977)
Britten	Hymn to St. Cecilia (1976, 1991) Missa Brevis Opus 63 (1982) St. Nicolas (1983)	Parry	Blest Pair of Sirens (1974, 1994) I was Glad (1984)
Bruckner	Mass No. 3 in F Minor (1985)	Puccini	Messa di Gloria (1987) Come Ye Sons of Art (1996) Dido and Aeneas (1989)
Bush	A Christmas Cantata (1983)	Rossini	Petite Messe Solennelle (1988)
Carter	Benedicite (1993) Horizons (1996)	Rutter	Requiem (1994)
Dvorák	Mass in D Major (1995) Stabat Mater (1984) Summer Song (1986)	Schubert	Mass in Eb (1992) Mass in G (1974, 1982) Song of Miriam (1995)
Elgar	Sea Pictures (1994) The Banner of St. George (1996) The Dream of Gerontius (1984)	Searle	Magnificat (1996)
Fauré	Requiem (1980, 1993)	Stainer	The Crucifixion (1973)
Gabrieli	In Ecclesiis (1993)	Stravinsky	Mass (1985)
Gounod	Messe Solennelle (St. Cecilia) (1996)	Suppé	Requiem (1986)
Handel	Judas Maccabaeus (1980) Messiah (1972, 1985, 1993) Dettingen "Te Deum" (1996) Let God Arise (1991) Zadok The Priest (1976, 1984) The King Shall Rejoice (1976) Samson (1988) Let Thy Hand be Strengthened (1978)	Vaughan Williams	A Sea Symphony (1989) Benedicite (1992) Pilgrim's Journey (1991) The First Nowell (1986) Requiem (1995)
Haydn	"Maria Theresa" Mass (1974) Harmoniemesse (1981, 1993) Mass in D Minor, "Nelson Mass" (1976) Paukenmesse - Mass in time of war (1984) Te Deum (1976) The Creation (1971, 1977, 1994) The Heavens are Telling (1974) The Seasons (1982)	Verdi	Jesu! The Very Thought is Sweet (1974)
Kodaly	Missa Brevis (1981)	Vivaldi	Gloria in D (1989) Magnificat (1980)
And perhaps on a lighter note:			
	German	Merrie England	(1988)
	Gilbert & Sullivan	HMS Pinafore	(1985)
		Patience	(1989)
	Horovitz	Horrtorio	(1983, 1990)
	Purcell	King Arthur	(1975)
	Strauss	The Gypsy Baron	(1982)