



Coventry Philharmonic Society



Making Music For 75 Years

It's my pleasure to introduce this 75th anniversary edition of the Coventry Philharmonic Society Newsletter.

I am, by the standards of the Society, a "recent recruit" to its membership, having only been singing with the Phil for seven years. In contrast, I have in front of me the Choir members' list from our 1993 fiftieth anniversary concert, and thirty of the hundred or so members listed there still sing with us every week twenty-five years later. In a time of increasingly mobile populations, and changing musical tastes, this is a unique achievement and one that demonstrates the ongoing commitment from our members.

This Newsletter is a chance to look back at what the Society has achieved over the last three quarters of a century. The posters and programmes illustrated here will bring back memories for many of us, but may also give us pause for thought – did we really have Joan Sutherland on our stage in 1956? What did Janet Baker sound like in 1958, when she was only 24? And how soon will the outstanding young soloists at our concerts today become equally famous? For in looking back this Newsletter also looks forward. Our Society is as vibrant today, and has as strong a membership, as ever in the past.

Our musical standards are I think as high. And we are still breaking new ground with our repertoire, with new choral groups like the Coventry Singers, and with the soloists and orchestras who join us for our concerts.

As you will see from reading these pages, the Society's founders set high standards for their successors to achieve. I like to think that we have gone some way towards meeting them, and continue to do so - but that is for our successors to judge.

If by any chance you are reading a yellowing copy of this document in 2093, you will know whether our second seventy-five years have been as good as our first. I believe they will be.

John Atkins
Chair

Our 75th Season is packed with well loved choral masterworks including Mendelssohn's Elijah, Handel's Messiah, Mozart Requiem, Haydn Nelson Mass and Orff's Carmina Burana. The Cov Phil Choir gave Carmina's UK's non London Premiere in 1953. This coming Season also includes a performance of Gounod's St Cecilia Mass in aid of Amnesty International in January 2019. This will be conducted by Antoine Mitchell and his Oriflamme Orchestra.

I joined the Society in 2002 and we are currently planning our future performances up to our 80th Season. Highlights include Durufle Requiem, Haydn Creation and Elgar Bavarian Highlands and Sea Pictures with the Warwickshire Symphony Orchestra, conducted by our Patron, Roger Coull.

Steven Russell
Musical Director

In its 70th anniversary year the Coventry Philharmonic Society asked me to become its patron, an honour which I was delighted to accept. To its enormous credit as it approaches its 75th year the Society is stronger than ever, and I have been hugely impressed by the concerts that I have attended - I look forward with excitement to a more active involvement in the future, especially the planned collaboration between the Choir and the Warwickshire Symphony Orchestra.

Roger Coull
Patron

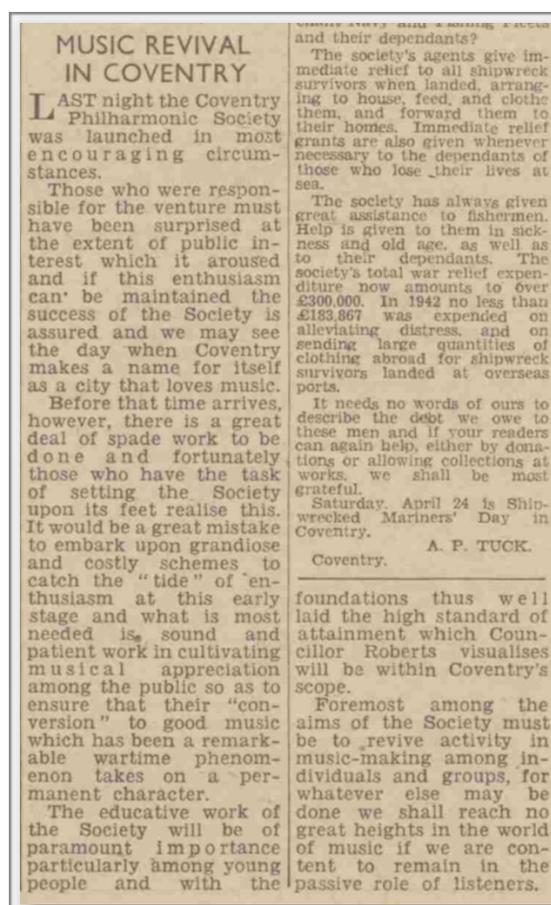
In the beginning

It was in 1942, less than two years after the 14 November Blitz, when the morale of people in Coventry was at a particularly low ebb, that a G.E.C. engineer, Reginald Turner, had the idea of providing good music for the war workers and other people in the city. Mr. Turner and his associates sponsored nine professional concerts over the course of the next few months but organising and financing the events proved to be too burdensome. However, a small flame had been ignited and on **Monday 12 April 1943**, in front of a packed public meeting in St. Mary's Hall, Coventry, Councillor G. E. Roberts announced:

"It has long been felt that there are certain gaps in the cultural amenities of our city. The formation of a Coventry Philharmonic Society is an attempt to fill a need which has been so frequently expressed."

And so the Coventry Philharmonic was launched with high expectations. It would ensure that Coventry "compared favourably with Hereford, Gloucester and Worcester and other cities" for musical provision, and it would foster musical talent among young people.

In something of an understatement, it was acknowledged that *"much preliminary work would have to be done before high standards were reached and the provisional committee had in mind the formation of a choir and an orchestra"*.



By the end of the month, the Bishop of Coventry, Dr. Neville Gordon, had been appointed president of the new Society, and on 11 May an advertisement appeared in the local paper seeking members. A fully functional choir and orchestra cannot be pulled out of a hat and so, initially, the Society focused on promoting high quality concerts, recitals and lectures delivered by well known musicians. These included visits by the Hallé Orchestra and London Symphony Orchestra. Even Sir Adrian Boult took a keen interest in the Society.

On 21 September 1943 it was announced that the Choir, by now some 85 strong, had held their first rehearsal. *“Mr. B. P. Beaumont was conducting the choir and the rehearsal of ‘The Messiah’ was a very satisfying one.”*



It would be another seven months before the Society’s own choir and orchestra, conducted by Dr. W. K. Stanton, performed their inaugural concert of choral and orchestral music, featuring Stanford’s ‘The Revenge’, at the Methodist Central Hall in Coventry on Saturday 29 April 1944. The local paper’s music critic called the concert *“a fine start”* and noted *“there was a large and enthusiastic audience”*.

Membership

From the beginning, attracting members to the choir was a perennial problem. Twice, sometimes three times, a year the Coventry Evening Telegraph ran advertisements inviting vocalists to join. Numbers fluctuated over the 75 years, declining to 50 in 1954 from the original 85, but then increasing slowly over the second half of the 20th Century. Numbers have improved greatly over the past 20 years and the choir is now 140 strong. Hopefully the Choir will never need to repeat this advertisement from 1953.



Concerts, celebrations & celebrities

About three years after its formation, the orchestra was disbanded as it was felt that it would be better for the choir to sing with professional orchestras. Then in 1950 it was decided to stop promoting the regular public concerts to focus on the choral concerts. More than 250 performances of choral and other works have been given by the Choir, including choral “standards” like Handel’s ‘Messiah’ and Bach’s ‘St Matthew Passion’ but also lesser known and more modern works.