

Joyce Beaumont looks back

In this important anniversary year I am looking back and remembering the great influence the EDOA has had over my musical career and I hope some readers will also enjoy my memories.

It must have been early in 1967 when I picked up a flyer at my church, then Bowes Park Methodist, advertising the Association. Our daughter was only a few months old, so leaving her in the care of my husband Alan, I attended my first meeting at Joyce and Prue Lambert's home in Gordon Hill. I was given a very warm welcome and David Felstead introduced me to everyone by name. Obviously I could not take in all the names but eventually I got to know them and if memory serves they were Eric Pask, Robin Coxon, Peter Smith, David Holliday, Alwyn Wright, Chris Garratt, Rev. Jack Beeson, Robert Evans, David Felstead, Ken Lea, Prue Lambert, Margaret Williams, Bill Smart and John Cook. It was pretty crowded! Apologies if I have forgotten anyone. The format of these meetings was firstly to deal with any business, planning future events, sharing news and advertising our own events, followed by a talk or discussion led by one of our own members or a visitor, or looking at and choosing music for a forthcoming Choirs' Festival.

These Festivals were the highlight of the year for many. Not every church could boast a full SATB choir but every church could send their singers to take part in music they could not have tackled in their local situation and have the exhilarating experience of being part of a sometimes 200 strong choir. We also included some simpler pieces which were accessible to the smaller groups, thus enriching the music in all our churches. The Festivals were always so impressive with the different coloured gowns, a very well organised procession and fine organ music throughout, with the choirs conducted by one of our own or a visiting conductor. I know my own choir really valued and enjoyed these occasions and we were the only Methodist choir taking part at that time so to experience Choral Evensong was something new for most of them!

The real benefits of my membership were still to come for me personally. So many of my organ students came from that source: Eric Pask invited me to accompany three concerts with his 'St Andrew's Singers', Jack Beeson invited me with Alan and our daughter to do several concerts at his church, Winchmore Hill URC, David Felstead offered me practice facilities at St James, Enfield Highway while my church was being rebuilt and Bridget Marshall gave my name to the Rev. Chad Varah as a lunch-time recitalist at St Stephen Walbrook in London where I gave an annual recital for fourteen years. I was most grateful for all this encouragement and help.

I was very flattered and somewhat disbelieving when, as I was leaving one meeting, Jack Beeson said I should consider conducting the next Choirs' Festival. It could be at my own church, now newly rebuilt and renamed Trinity-at-Bowes Methodist. Jack would write the service suitable for a Free Church. After much thought I said I would only do it if Eric accompanied, but at the afternoon rehearsal I was so paralysed with nerves I made them sing every verse of 'My song is love unknown' before I gathered myself enough to take charge. Then I had the time of my life!

Our regular meetings were led by a Chairman who did a two year stint and after Margaret Williams nominated me, I became the first woman to hold this office. In those days women organists were quite rare and I had previously been turned down after applying for an organist's post simply because I was not a man! They would never get away with it today! My first aim as Chairperson was to make sure that meetings (by then held at Eric's and Pam's

house in The Orchard, Enfield) would finish by 10pm as they had previously gone on until well after 11.00 and I and others felt this was taking unfair advantage of people's hospitality. I was ably supported by Bill Smart as Secretary and at a later date, when I did a second stint as Chair, David Holliday was my right-hand man as Secretary.

I have recently served since its inception on the Teachers' Forum, a small group which is of great value to teachers and students alike, due to the students' concerts and workshops we have arranged.

The friends and contacts I have made during the forty-six years of my membership have been of immense value to me, enriching and enhancing my life as an Organist and Choir Director. I want to pay tribute to the elder statesmen who believed in me and gave me opportunities to develop my abilities and confidence. I hope we are all still doing this for our younger members.

Joyce Beaumont

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My Half-Century's Musical Journey

As EDOA reaches its fiftieth anniversary in the same year as I do, I hope that a fairly recent recruit can be allowed a little reminiscence. I'd like to tell some of the story of my journey through music, and I hope that it might lead others to tell theirs in the pages of the EDOA newsletter.

I think I am fairly unusual among organists and choir directors in *not* having had a musical upbringing. I was never a choirboy or an organ scholar, even though the parish organist lived just across the road. At school I only learnt basic recorder-playing, and that only because there was no choice in the matter. Neither of my parents played, sang in a choir or even went to church. If anything my sister was the musical one, learning the recorder and progressing to flute.

That's not to say our upbringing in the 60s and 70s was devoid of music. We had radio and records in the house (which I attribute mainly to my mother's fondness for Scottish song), and as schoolchildren we of course sang a hymn each morning at assembly (do they do that now?). As a 10-year-old I was once asked why I *wasn't* singing, though I don't remember what my answer was. Nor do I remember whether it had to do with not getting into the school choir (we were all tried out during the weekly singing period). I don't think I ultimately minded much. A perspicacious teacher, though, 'volunteered' me for my primary school's choral speaking group, which had just been set up so that the school could take part in a local festival.

Perhaps the 'musical gene' (there must be one) skips a generation now and then. My paternal grandfather had been a choirboy in Kent. I still have his copy of Handel's *Messiah* and the festival book for the 1905 Canterbury diocesan choral festival. My grandmother and at least one of her sisters could play the piano. I am told that one of my great-aunts was a cinema pianist in the days of silent films. Gran's piano, however, sat, unused, in the front room of her house. Any attempt to teach my father to play it came to nothing, and she didn't attempt to interest my sister or me in learning to play. I didn't get a chance until 1990 and National Learn the Organ Year.

As a teenager I was more interested in classical music than in pop; but things really changed for me when I went to university. Thirty-odd years on, my big regret is that, probably because of my feelings about religion, I resisted attempts to persuade me to join the chapel choir. Even hearing the choir sing Bruckner's *Locus Iste* (which vies with the *Cantique de Jean Racine* for my vote as the most beautiful piece ever written) didn't tempt me.

What I did do was to join the university's Gilbert and Sullivan Society. We had a couple of G&S LPs at home that I'd quite liked listening to, and I took the notion that it might be fun to try and sing some of this stuff. And if all else failed, there was always the college bar. Singing G&S turned out to be more fun than I'd anticipated, so I stuck with it. And then a girl I met at the G&S Society invited me to a choral concert she was in (it was the Vivaldi *Gloria*). I went along and, maybe not necessarily for the most musical of motives, I ended up joining the choir to sing Verdi's *Requiem*. Somehow I'd been hooked, because I stayed with that choir for *The Messiah*, the *German Requiem*, and Masses by Beethoven and Puccini.

After graduation I got a job in Nottingham, where one evening I went to a local G&S Society concert. The Society needed men for a forthcoming *Pirates of Penzance* at Nottingham Playhouse. How could I pass it up? By coincidence a fellow cast member's husband was the director of a male voice choir and he was seeking new singers. You can guess what happened next, can't you? An invitation to come to the MVC's rehearsal one evening.

Once you're in a choir, it seems, you've got an almost automatic entrée into another one. I didn't take much persuading, then, to join the newly established Nottingham Choral Trust. This was something completely different: two or three sectional rehearsals, followed by an intensive weekend culminating in a performance of a large-scale piece. That's where I first encountered Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* and *The Music Makers*, as well as David Fanshawe's *African Sanctus*.

In 1987 I got a job in London. In the twenty-five years or so since then I have sung in both Lutheran and Anglican church choirs, a large scale choral society (Crouch End Festival Chorus), an opera company (the former Manor House Hospital Operatic Society) and choral societies. One of those was the now defunct Bourne Singers, which used to meet at St John the Evangelist church in Palmers Green. I joined in 1987, when I moved to Palmers Green and, looking for something to do, found that the Singers were rehearsing *Messiah*. I've got to mention the Bourne Singers because that's where I met my wife ...

Male voice choirs are scarce hereabouts, but I did join a workplace choir (this was long before Gareth Malone had come on the scene). At one time I worked for the University of London at Senate House in Bloomsbury (and I secretly think that I got that job because I had declared my interest in choral singing). The University had – and still has – a choir called the Senate House Singers, formed in the 1950s. It rehearses at lunchtime on Mondays and puts on concerts at Christmas and Easter.

I moved to Edmonton in 1990 and, having visited all the local Anglican churches, found one I liked in All Saints. When they found out I was a singer, it didn't take much persuading to get me into the choir, though I little suspected that I'd end up as the choir director twenty-odd years later. It wasn't part of the game plan. I don't know anything about choir directing, bar what I've absorbed by some kind of osmosis during years as some sort of choral singer. My card was marked, I think, from the moment I was persuaded – or did I volunteer? – to

organise a surprise choral evensong at All Saints for the then choir director's 80th birthday. The rest, as they say, is history; but it's been rather fun.

Mark Harris