

**Past Events**

**At home with Ted Sharp  
Thursday 18 September 2014**

A small group were warmly welcomed by Ted and his wife Ruth to their substantial home in a quiet part of the peaceful village of Tewin. We started in the organ room where EDOA members were able to enjoy a fine Allen organ, which gave the player a great sense of realism with its massive collection of speakers placed behind the player on the opposite wall. A splendid variety of pieces was played ranging from Bach to some entertaining recent compositions from Robin Coxon's vast repertoire of delightful things. It was lovely to enjoy all of this music with delicate canapés and wine - exactly the sort of pleasure that organists rarely enjoy.



*Peter St John Stokes playing the Allen organ*

We moved on to the drawing room where we sat in unaccustomed comfort to enjoy a fine selection of piano duets from the 19th and 20th century.

The pleasure that we derived from this evening was evident in how quickly time passed and, before we knew it, it was after 11 o'clock and for those of us who live in a rather urban setting it was delightful to say our farewells under a clear and starry sky.

This was a lovely evening, perhaps of a rather old-fashioned kind. There was no recorded music but only that which we could produce ourselves. If we are invited to another similar occasion, please don't miss it!

*Peter St John Stokes*

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Thursday 13 November 2014, 8pm

**Ware Parish Church**

**Talk by Peter Smith: 'The Rise of the English Choral Tradition - Part 2'**

The Government used to sponsor singing classes! That fact, which would probably come as an unwelcome surprise to today's education secretary, Nicky Morgan MP, was one of the surprises revealed by Peter Smith in the second of his talks on the English Choral Tradition, at St Mary the Virgin in Ware on 13 November.

Peter took us on a tour of the highlights of what he considered to be the changes in the performance of music in nineteenth-century England, drawing on his research into the reception of Stanford's music and illustrating his talk with recordings of works by Elgar, Ethel Smyth, Parry, Gounod, Spohr, and of course Stanford himself. A further recording of three anthems performed by the choir of York Minster between 1927 and 2011 gave us some insight into how performance has changed even within living memory.

Whereas universal primary education took until 1870 to achieve, an early Victorian educational reform was to provide for the teaching of singing in schools. Meanwhile men such as John Hullah, Joseph Mainzer and John Curwen (who perfected tonic sol-fa notation) began teaching singing to adults in evening classes across the country, with such success that they apparently had some 50,000 students by 1842. This began a mass singing movement which Peter linked to the development and improvement of singing in churches, the foundation of local choral societies and choral festivals (Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds, Norwich and more), and the exponential growth in the publication of affordable choral music, much of it by the Novello publishing house.

In contrast to the elaborate music performed by professional choirs in cathedral and collegiate establishments, the music in English parish churches was, until well into the nineteenth century, notable mainly for its simplicity. Indeed, it was becoming ever more apparent that the general state of parish church music was pretty parlous. Echoes of S. S. Wesley's criticism of English cathedral music!

Perhaps the most crucial development in the reform of Anglican church music and the wholesale establishment of robed church choirs, was the so-called 'Oxford Movement', which from the 1830s began to urge reform of liturgical practice and a return to the original spirit and letter of the Prayer Book. Clerical zeal plus the effects of the singing-class movement and teacher-training initiatives amongst ordinary people led, Peter suggested, to a desire for church services that combined well-conducted liturgy, ritual and music. Of course the Oxford Movement attracted hostility, but by the 1850s there was a general consensus that music had a place in worship, and robed choirs sitting in chancels became ever more common in Anglican (and indeed Nonconformist) churches. This proliferation of choirs was further encouraged by the Victorian passion for building new churches, particularly in urban areas. I at once thought of Jesus Church, Forty Hill (1835) and St Mary Magdalene, Windmill Hill (1881), and no doubt EDOA members can readily provide further examples.

There was considerable diversity in the nature of parish music. At St Andrew's, Wells Street, London (under Joseph Barnby) and Leeds Parish Church (under S. S. Wesley) the services were very much in the cathedral tradition, with the congregation treated as listeners. By contrast, at London's St Pancras Church (under Henry Smart), there was no choir and the singing was exclusively congregational. The conscious decision not to have a choir there left

Smart free to vary the organ accompaniment to hymns, which he did. The consternation this might cause to a choir even today can be imagined!

By the end of the 1870s almost all churches had a choir of some kind, however, and, Peter suggested, in many places the music was of a professional standard. Evidence of this was provided by the advertisement pages of the *Musical Times*, which carried lists of vacancies for church choristers: boys, men **and women**. The inclusion of women in church choirs is an interesting development of which I for one was unaware, and which I think is worth exploring (note to self: another topic to fill my retirement).

So what sort of music did they sing? Well, hymns, for one thing. The runaway success of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* is a well known fact of the nineteenth century's musical history. Sunday services, however, revolved around Mat(t)ins and Evensong, each with a different set of canticles and each requiring psalm and anthem. You could find out what was being sung in the cathedrals and principal churches by looking at the service lists in *The Musical Standard* or *The Musical News*, both of which appeared on Saturdays.

*The Musical News* published a survey of cathedral music lists for 1906 – 07 at the end of November 1907. In that list, Stanford's Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in B flat was the most performed, receiving 88 performances. Its closest rivals (Tours in F and Walmisley in D minor) received only 69 apiece. Similarly, Stanford's Te Deum in B flat (51 performances) was second only to Henry Smart's in F (69 performances), but still significantly ahead of the next two highest ranking (Dykes in F, 32; and Sullivan in D, 27). The Holy Communion service list was, however, dominated by Merbecke (71 performances). Stanford's service in B flat made it into joint seventh place with Stainer in F (28 performances apiece), outstripped by Eyre in E flat (47 performances), Smart in F (40 performances), Tours in F (39 performances), Dykes in F (33 performances) and Martin in C (29 performances). It struck me how much these music lists were dominated by contemporary composers: only Merbecke, Cooke, Palestrina and Schubert stand out as pre-Victorian names.

The Victorians sang, and listened to, much oratorio as well as well as other forms of music. Ian Bradley discusses oratorio at some length in his book about Sullivan's sacred music, *Lost Chords and Christian Soldiers*. Among Victorian favourites, now rarely performed, were Gounod's *Mors et Vita* (the instrumental piece "Judex" is sometimes played on Classic FM) and Spohr's *Die letzten Dinge* ("The Last Judgement"), excerpts from which were played. We also heard an excerpt from Hubert Parry's *Job*, first performed at the 1892 Three Choirs Festival, and the *Gloria* from Ethel Smyth's Mass in D. I did not know that it had been performed at the Royal Albert Hall, or that Ethel Smyth had performed the Gloria herself – singing all four parts and accompanying herself on the piano – in front of Queen Victoria. Oh, to have been the 'fly on the wall'.

Peter concluded his brief, but fascinating, tour through nineteenth-century musical history by playing us recordings of the choir of York Minster made in 1927, 1951 and 2011. We heard with our own ears how performance practice has changed even within living memory, and concluded how recent is the high standard of performance we are lucky to have in this country.

Warm thanks were expressed to Peter for a most interesting talk, and it was hoped that there might be a sequel at some future date.

*Mark Harris*