

## EARLY DAYS

In the *Kent and Sussex Courier* for October 7th 1904 it was announced that practices would commence shortly for the rehearsal of Brahms's *Requiem*. Ladies and Gentlemen with good voices were to apply to Mr Francis J Foote at 1 Napier Mansions, Tunbridge Wells.

Rehearsals actually commenced on Thursday November 10th at 8.15. They were held at the old Technical Institute in Calverley Road. A notice in the *Courier* on November 25th reported that there were nearly one hundred voices, but there were still a few vacancies for tenors and basses.

It is interesting to note that the very first announcement on October 7th appeared just above a similar entry for the Tunbridge Wells Vocal Association, who were to begin rehearsals of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. This choir was established in 1870, their first conductor being Mr Elvey Irons. He had been succeeded by Mr W W Starmer FRAM, who was probably connected with Elliott and Starmer's music shop in the town. Their performance of *Elijah* was given on 22nd March 1905 by a band and choir of 150 performers. Thus there was already an established choir in the town giving performances of all the major choral works.

This naturally gave rise to a certain amount of rivalry, and notices and reports of Mr Foote's activities always appear to be rather extravagant.

For instance, on 12th May 1905 the *Courier* reports:

Lovers of music who have been looking forward to the performance of Brahms' *Requiem* were by no means disappointed, judging from the enthusiasm which prevailed at the Great Hall on Wednesday, when his great and difficult work was rendered by a well-selected choir of 90 voices, and an orchestra of 47 members, under the able conductorship of Mr F.J. Foote. Indeed, the performance was regarded as the most magnificent yet given before Tunbridge Wells audiences, the orchestra containing some of the best talent from the Royal Academy, and the choir being unsurpassed.

Mr Foote made the mistake of announcing that he would begin rehearsing Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*. The Vocal Association got in first and performed it on Tuesday March 19th 1907 followed by a performance of *The Kingdom* on Monday 30th March 1908. Each time they received a "Best

wishes" telegram from Elgar as it was the first time these two works had been given in the area. The report on the performance of *The Kingdom* in the *Courier* was very full and enthusiastic. There was a band and chorus of nearly 200. The bass, Mr William Higley, had sung the solos in the very first performance in Birmingham and Elgar had written the part especially for him.

Mr Foote in fact never did succeed in performing Elgar's works in Tunbridge Wells. He had very high standards and he would rather cancel a concert than put on a second-rate performance. Time and again at the beginning of a new season several works would be mentioned for rehearsal but were not actually sung at a concert.

Looking through the weekly issues of the *Courier* for the earlier years of the 20th Century a quite surprising picture emerges of the musical life in the town - choirs and orchestras giving performances of the newest works from Brahms, Elgar and others. Well-known artistes of national and international fame gave concerts at the Opera House, Great Hall or Pump Room. Kreisler gave a recital in 1904 - Dame Clara Butt seemed to be quite a frequent visitor.

The concerts themselves provided plenty of variety too. For instance at the very first concert in May 1905 as well as singing Brahms' *Requiem* the programme included Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* with Herr Hans Wessely (the celebrated Austrian violinist) as soloist, *Les Hirondelles Passagères* sung by Madame Mabel Whitehouse, and a *Concert Overture in E minor* for full orchestra, written by Francis J Foote. The latter work was being performed for the first time in public. Prices were: stalls 5/-; reserved seats 4/-; unreserved 3/-; gallery 2/- (5/- being 25p). The concert started at 7.45pm and the notice stated: "Carriages at 10", so one concludes that the longer works were not "performed in their entirety" unless they were played at breakneck speed!

The programme for the second concert, a year later, consisted of Dvořák's *Stabat Mater*, Brahms' *Song of Destiny*, Max Bruch's *Violin Concerto* and the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* from *Mass in G minor* by Francis J Foote (by special request). I

will give the *Courier* report on this concert in full as it is a very good example of the extensive and effusive press coverage given to the Choir in those days:-

MR. FRANCIS J. FOOTE'S CONCERT.

A crowded and fashionable audience at the Great Hall, Tunbridge Wells, on Wednesday evening, testified to the popularity of that rising and eminent musician, Mr. Francis J. Foote, R.A.M., a local gentleman whom we may feel proud in having in our midst, who although young, is highly cultured and gifted, not only as a conductor, but composer. Ample evidence of both attributes were forthcoming, and those who were fortunate enough to be present must have gone away wonderfully impressed with what they had seen and heard.

Mr. Foote has organised a thoroughly efficient choral class, and it will be remembered that some twelve months ago a remarkable performance of Brahms' *Requiem* under his guidance was given. The general public being aware of this, it was not surprising to see such an excellent attendance on Wednesday, when Mr. Foote's programme comprised Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* ('at the foot of the Cross'); produced locally for the first time; the *Kyrie* and *Gloria* from Mr. F.J. Foote's *Mass in G minor*, and Max Bruch's *Violin Concerto in G minor*, with full orchestral accompaniment. Solo violin, Herr Hans Wessely.

Referring to the libretto of the *Stabat Mater*, the English version by Mr. Fred. J.W. Crowe, organist of Chichester Cathedral, which was used, brings the beauties of the work within the reach of those who, for various reasons, prefer not to use the Latin, the adaptation avoiding the introduction of any passages of a controversial nature, whilst preserving as far as possible the original rhythm. The beauty of the poem, as originally written, has rendered it so great a favourite with composers that the number of fine settings is very great. However, we have now to deal with the musical composition of Dvořák, who we read, was born at Muhlhausen in Bohemia, on September 8th, 1841, and during his very early school days he learnt both to sing and play the violin with so much effect that soon he was able to assist in the Parish Church services. His early life, though, was practically a struggle for existence, but as years went on, with the kind help he received, he was enabled to realise his craving for a musical career, which gradually brought him to the front, and eventually we find him a prolific composer, his industry having been monumental. As it has been truly said, "Dvořák was a past master of the orchestra, and a composer of real individuality; he has earned and deserved his place among the elect, not only by his great gifts, but by his abnormal energy in their development."

In dealing with the work in question, it is safe to assert that the music is very beautiful and original, the orchestration whether in breadth of tone and variety of colouring, being superb; and here we have to heartily congratulate Mr. Foote on the magnificent orchestra (Leader, Mr. Spencer Dyke) which he had around him. Nothing

could have been finer than the interpretation we had the pleasure and privilege of hearing that evening, and when we mention that (in addition to our local amateur talent), the members of this orchestra are connected with the Philharmonic Society, London Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music, it will readily be seen that from an orchestral point of view Dvořák's masterpiece received the treatment it so amply requires and deserves. The choruses were also admirably rendered, the sopranos and contraltos more especially singing with splendid effect. The music throughout bristles with difficulties, which were nevertheless surmounted under the skilful conductorship of Mr. Foote, whose masterly "handling of the reins" in obtaining his requirements, being very interesting to witness. There is plenty of work for the chorus, and every member assisted with a will, with the result that no small gratification must have been experienced by the promoter. Perhaps one of the best numbers was the one in six-eight time, "By Thy glorious death and passion", while some were interspersed with quartets and solos; and that now brings us to the principal vocalists, who were Miss Alice Baxter (soprano), Miss Constance Dugard (contralto), Mr. Hubert Baker (tenor) and Mr. Marcus Thomson (bass), each singing with distinguished success. They may or may not have been students of the Royal Academy of Music, and although neither possessing voices of exceptional power, yet their singing was characterised by sound judgement and highly artistic perception of what was allotted to them, the audience not being slow in recognising their abilities with acclamation. Special mention should be made of the duet for soprano and tenor, and the touching delivery of the contralto solo, 'All my heart inflamed and burning' by Miss Dugard.

Next on the programme came the *Concerto in G minor* by Max Bruch, the celebrated composer; and here again a musical treat was in store. Herr Hans Wessely was the soloist, and his extraordinary skill as a violinist, which is universally known, was a veritable triumph of instrumental art, his wonderful performance creating a perfect storm of applause. As it was necessary that many of the artistes should return to London the same evening, Mr C. Hilbert Strange, the indefatigable and energetic secretary, announced from the platform that time would unfortunately not allow of Brahms' *Song of Destiny* being given, so that Mr. Francis J. Foote's *Kyrie* and *Gloria* from his *Mass in G minor* was at once proceeded with, and we may say that the religious character of the movements is apparent from the first bar, and very ingenious in design, while complete justice was done to this scholarly exposition by the chorus and orchestra, Miss Baxter lending valuable assistance in the soprano solo which is attached.

Taken on the whole, the evening may be said to have been one of a thoroughly enjoyable character (unbounded enthusiasm being manifested), combining with the enjoyment an educational insight into the works of one of our great modern masters, and it is

rumoured that Mr. Foote will present the *Dream of Gerontius* on the next occasion.

As I remarked before, that last comment enabled the rival choir to "get in first", and Francis Foote's next concert, given in the Opera House on Thursday December 13th at 7.45pm, consisted of a number of smaller works:-

*23rd Psalm for men's voices* - Max Bruch;

*149th Psalm* - Antonin Dvořák;

*A Song of Destiny* - Johannes Brahms;

*Symphony in B minor* ('The Unfinished') - Schubert;

*Violin Concerto* - Mendelssohn;

*Tone poem Lancelot and Elaine* - F Foote.

This last received its first performance at this concert, and the psalms by Bruch and Dvořák had never been performed in this country before. Quite an interesting programme!

The first two concerts were given in the Great Hall (opposite Central Station), but for their third concert the Opera House was used. Francis Foote had his music studio in the Opera House buildings, and it was here that the choir met for rehearsals. In the Spring of 1906 the studio had undergone extensive improvements and the choir had had to meet in the old Technical Institute for some weeks. On Thursday April 21st there was a re-opening of the studio and the *Courier* describes it as "a lofty, elegant apartment, prettily decorated, well lighted, and huge enough for choral or instrumental practices. The alterations have been carried out from the designs and under the direction of Mr C H Strange, architect." It appears that two storeys had been thrown into one to obtain this lofty and somewhat luxurious apartment. (Very little is known of Mrs Foote but I have been told that she was rather older than her husband and was fairly well-off, which causes one to surmise that she may have helped to finance these improvements.) Mr Foote was presented with a clock on this occasion as a token of the choir's gratitude and appreciation.

The choir, or choral class as it was sometimes called, continued to meet on Thursday evenings until the autumn of 1909 when they changed to Mondays. The works selected for the season were not always performed. It rather looked as if Mr Foote would not perform anything that was not up to a good standard.

Verdi's *Manzoni Requiem* was first rehearsed in the 1908-9 season, but it was not performed until 25th May 1910, when it was given at an "in memoriam" concert for King Edward VII. The concert announcement had a thick black border to it and included the following item:-

The Choir and Orchestra will wear mourning. The platform will be draped. The Orchestral Drums will be muffled.

The audience is respectfully requested to wear mourning and to Abstain from ALL Applause.

Two years later, on 8th May 1912, a performance of Bach's *B minor Mass* was given and, as it coincided with the sinking of the Titanic, it became a memorial concert to those who had lost their lives in that dreadful disaster. At both memorial concerts the orchestra also played the *Dead March* from Handel's *Saul*.

The choir managed to keep going throughout the First World War, a performance of Handel's *Messiah* becoming an annual Christmas event. Mr Foote was also conductor of the Heathfield and the Eastbourne Choral Societies and the three choirs used to help each other.

During the war years concerts were often given to raise funds, mainly for "our blinded heroes". One such concert was held on July 25th 1917. The preliminary notice was as follows:-

#### OPEN-AIR PERFORMANCE OF ELIJAH.

Mr. Francis Foote's Choir and Orchestra, numbering nearly 200, will give an open-air performance of *Elijah* in the grounds of Bredbury, on Wednesday, July 25th, in aid of our blinded heroes. The idea of open-air oratorio in this country is probably unique, and given fine weather the performance will be most interesting.

Bredbury was the home of Mr and Mrs T J G Duncanson on Mount Ephraim. Fortunately the weather was fine and *Elijah* was performed in a beautiful setting. It was decided to repeat the experience in July of the following year with a performance of Brahms' *Requiem*. However the weather was not so kind and so the concert had to be held in the Great Hall, which had been held in reserve - just in case. This meant that a great number of people were disappointed. Mr Foote wrote to the *Courier* (12th July 1918):



The entire seating accommodation of the Great Hall was absorbed within a few minutes of the opening of the doors. It was distressing to me to see the stream of keenly disappointed people turned away and denied the privilege of hearing Brahms' mighty work, although with the support of my choir and orchestra, I did my best to meet the exigencies of the moment by deciding upon a repeat performance within half-an-hour of the first one, of which an overflow audience of about 300 availed themselves.

Mr Foote went on to say that, although the first performance was "splendidly given", the performers "sang and played the second time as if under a great inspiration, and it was memorable."

Although the choir began its 1918-19 season in October, when the works to be studied were *Judas Maccabaeus* (Handel), *Hiawatha* (Coleridge Taylor) and *Messiah*, no concerts were given until April, 1919 when *Messiah* was performed in Holy Trinity Church, followed three weeks later by another performance at St Peter's Church. Oddly enough no reference was made to the Armistice in any of the notices, but *Judas Maccabaeus* was given in Holy Trinity on July 16th 1919. This was to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem. [Although the Armistice was made in November 1918, the Peace was not signed until July 1919; the fall of Jerusalem was part of the last great cavalry campaign, by Allenby against the Turks in 1918.]

On Saturday July 19th there was a huge programme of events as part of the Peace celebrations. This included a Grand Festival of Song in the Calverley Grounds, with 2,000 children and 200 adults taking part under the conductorship of Francis Foote. When the day came - it rained! It was hastily arranged to perform parts of the programme in the Great Hall, and Mr Foote decided to give the complete Festival of Song on Wednesday July 30th. I am glad to say it kept fine for them on that day.

In the *Kent and Sussex Courier* on 26th September 1919 the following notices appeared under the local news:-

SYMPHONY CONCERT. Mr. Francis Foote is arranging (by request) an orchestra of the more advanced local players who desire to study critically and specifically, those larger works in which less experienced musicians find it difficult to take part. When a sufficient number of musicians have given in their names a start

will be made. The orchestra will also have the advantage of joining in the grand choral concerts given by the Francis Foote Choir. Intending members are asked to write to the conductor.

**FRANCIS FOOTE CHOIR.** This highly trained and popular body of vocalists will resume their new season on Monday next. The conductor has compiled a programme of the finest oratorios possible - each one a masterpiece. Delight and instruction must result in the study of such creations under the choir's customary happy conditions. All who are interested in the great oratorios should not fail to avail themselves of this opportunity of knowing them more deeply.

The works chosen were:-

*Hiawatha* - Coleridge Taylor;

*Messiah* - Handel;

*St Matthew Passion* - Bach;

*Elijah* - Mendelssohn.

*Hiawatha* (parts 1 and 2) was given in the Pump Room on Wednesday 26th November 1919, the first of many performances over the 90 years that the choir has been in existence. In 1923 it was proposed to do an "al fresco" performance in the grounds of Great Culverden, but this did not materialise. The next date fixed for its performance, 5th December 1923, had to be postponed because of the General Election. It was eventually given on 30th January 1924 with the composer's daughter singing the soprano solos. Mrs Coleridge Taylor, the composer's widow, also attended. Two performances were given, one at 3.00pm and the second at 8.00pm, presumably because the Pump Room could not accommodate a very large audience. It seems that this was a case of "third time lucky".

## THE TWENTIES AND THIRTIES

In 1920, on Wednesday June 30th, a very successful performance of *Elijah* took place in the grounds of Bredbury.

Mr Dan Richards, bass, took the part of Elijah. At this period he often sang with the choir as did the tenor, Mr Cynlais Gibbs.

The following extract appeared in the *Kent and Sussex Courier* on 24th September 1920:-



CHORAL SOCIETY. Under the interesting revival of an old title, The Tunbridge Wells Choral Society (incorporating the Francis Foote Choir) this famous combination has commenced rehearsals for an attractive winter programme.

Soon after this the word 'Royal' was being used in the title, although official permission for this was not given until some years after the Second World War. (Apparently this old title, 'The Tunbridge Wells Choral Society' goes back to 1862.)

During the First War the Vocal Association ceased to meet, but in the autumn of 1922 it was decided to reform this choir. They made quite a good start by giving a concert of madrigals and other short pieces, followed a little later by a performance of Edward German's *Merrie England*, but by 1926 it seems that they ceased to exist. This could have been due to the Depression and General Strike which was affecting the whole country at that time.

Francis Foote was ill for about 6 months in 1926-27 and for at least two seasons the Choral Society's musical activities were severely curtailed. Rehearsals were resumed in the autumn of 1927 and on Monday 10th October members of the Tunbridge Wells Choral Society and pupils of Mr Foote met in the studio at Messrs Barnes, 40 High Street, to present him with a cheque and an illuminated address. Mr Ronald Milsom, a member for many years, made the presentation.

The address was as follows:-

We, members of the Tunbridge Wells Choral Society, and pupils of Francis J. Foote, desire our Conductor and Teacher to accept this message and token of welcome on his return to health and the renewal of his activities in the world of music after his long enforced absence on account of serious illness. We all rejoice in his recovery, and assure him of our loyal support and hearty good wishes for the future. October, 1927.

During that winter the choir rehearsed Verdi's *Requiem* and Edward German's *Merrie England*. The latter was performed in the open air at Dunorlan on 20th June 1928 and was a great success by all accounts. They even made a profit of £20/- which was donated to the Kent and Sussex Hospital Building Fund.

For the next six or seven years Holy Trinity Church was the main venue for concerts, *Messiah* being an annual event with *Elijah* almost as frequent. Bach's *St Matthew Passion* was performed in the Spring of 1932.

To celebrate King George V's Silver Jubilee an open-air performance of *Merrie England* was given at Pembury Place (now St George's School, then the home of Mr and Mrs Owen Parry who were related to the composer Charles Hubert Parry.)

For a good number of years Francis Foote had also conducted choirs at Eastbourne and Seaford, and singers from Tunbridge Wells often took part in concerts in those two towns. One gets the impression that Mr Foote was often frustrated because there was no hall large enough in Tunbridge Wells to accommodate his spectacular performances. Often two concerts were given on the same day in order to satisfy his audiences. Imagine singing the whole of *Hiawatha* twice in one day, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and 8 o'clock in the evening! This was in the Pump Room. There was a lot of talk in the 1930's about building a new concert hall - The Assembly Hall, a project which Mr Foote for one was longing to see come to fruition.

Francis had a son, Guthrie, who was also a musician. In his young days he had worked with his father but, as he grew older, he obviously wanted to develop his own career independently. His main instrument was the violin and he was clearly involved with the local orchestras, but in 1936 he formed a choir known as The Wells Singers. Their main object was to enter competitive festivals, which they did with great success, and so for a time it was Guthrie not Francis who was "hitting the headlines".

The following announcement appeared in the *Kent and Sussex Courier* on September 23rd 1938:-

CHORAL SOCIETY. This long established Society, the oldest for many miles around, begin their winter season next Monday in the Trinity Schools at 8.00pm. The conductor, Mr. Francis Foote, A.R.A.M., has chosen a fine programme of works this Season - Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, Handel's immortal *Messiah*, and Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*. Intending new members should write the conductor, c/o Lindsay Hermitage & Co., High Street, Tunbridge Wells.

One gets the feeling that the opening sentence was directed towards his son and any other "upstarts".

A performance of *Messiah* was given in Christ Church in February 1939 and also at Eastbourne and Seaford. The *St Matthew Passion* was given at a church in Eastbourne in April that year but not in Tunbridge Wells.

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Assembly Hall was opened in 1939, but the Choral Society did not sing there until 26th October 1941. No doubt the onset of the war in 1939 had something to do with this delay. Both men and women had war jobs to do, as those who were not in the Forces were involved in ARP duties, Home Guard, fire watching etc as well as their everyday jobs, and there was also the black-out to contend with. Travel was also difficult as there was no petrol for private cars - no driving for pleasure or leisure - and the last buses left the town before 8.00pm. However, by 1941, people were becoming used to this way of life and Mr Foote obviously decided to try something on a large scale again.

In the *Courier* on Friday 25th April 1941 the following notice was in the Forthcoming Events column:-

Tunbridge Wells Choral Society  
1904-1941  
Rehearsals  
Messiah      Elijah  
Mondays at 8-00pm.      Baptist Hall  
Upper Grosvenor Road  
Conductor Francis J. Foote, A.R.A.M.  
New members can enquire at rehearsals.

A similar notice on the board outside the Baptist Tabernacle attracted the attention of Mr **John H Johnson** who had just been drafted to Tunbridge Wells by the War Ministry. He decided to go along on the following Monday and he soon became involved in helping to build up the numbers of the choir which, on that first evening, consisted of a mere handful. Help was enlisted from the Army camps in the area and then it was not too difficult to find sopranos and altos! By September they were able to give notice that a performance of *Messiah* would be given in the Assembly

Hall on 26th October at 2.30 with a chorus of 100 voices.

The soloists were Florence Astral (soprano), Astra Desmond (alto), Jan van der Gucht (tenor) and Robert Easton (bass), all well known at that time. There was also a fully professional orchestra.

The Assembly Hall was crowded for this performance and Mr Johnson (now in 1995 aged 93) recalls that there was a sudden influx of soldiers, and police had to be summoned to deal with the situation as there was not room for them all.

Sunday really was special in those days! In fact, when announcing their next concert, a performance of *Elijah* on 22nd February 1942 the following paragraph was in the *Courier* for 30th January:-

ELIJAH. Another great treat has been arranged by the Tunbridge Wells Choral Society and early application for tickets is advised. Over 500 persons were turned away at the above Society's recent performance of *Messiah* conducted by Francis J. Foote, A.R.A.M.

History did not repeat itself, but this is what the *Courier* had to say about the concert:

#### CHORAL SOCIETY IN ELIJAH.

To the remarkable record of oratorio performances by the Tunbridge Wells Choral Society which was founded by Mr Francis J. Foote thirty-eight years ago, must be added another fine rendering of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, which was presented at the Assembly Hall on Sunday afternoon. It may be recalled that a memorable rendering of this powerfully dramatic work was given in the open air to members of the Canadian Army who were encamped at Seaford during the last war (1914-18) when Mr Foote transported 200 of his performers to the hills. An amazing effect was produced as the music and words rolled round the countryside.

Sunday's performance was equally impressive and was given with the same intense emotion. Mr Foote, who has done so much to popularise oratorio productions, conducted with his customary skill, and the choir and orchestra of 170 performers afforded immense pleasure to a large audience. A special word of praise must be given to the leader of the musicians, Mr.W.H. Read, while the work of the soloists was beyond praise. Roy Henderson, the well-known baritone, as *Elijah*, showed his intimate knowledge of the work by singing without script of any kind, and Parry Jones (tenor) displayed to the full the rich qualities of his voice. Laelia Finneburg (soprano) and Muriel Brunskill (contralto) also delighted everyone by their skilful renditions. Assisting in double quartets and other numbers were Joan Smith (soprano), Violet Mockett (contralto), John Jarman

(tenor), R.T. Christie (bass), and Marjorie Bowes Smith (soprano) who took the youth's part.

It is Mr. Foote's intention to give a festival performance of Elgar's thrilling masterpiece, *The Dream of Gerontius*, next season. It is nearly 30 years ago when the only performance in this town was given. This event will doubtless prove of great interest. The oratorio is one of unsurpassed loveliness.

I have given the write-up in full because this was the last concert given by the Choral Society under Mr Foote's direction. (Incidentally it was the first choral concert that I experienced.) Both concerts in the 1941-42 season had been given in the new Assembly Hall with first-class soloists, and the committee found themselves in really deep water. The details have long been forgotten but at the time feelings ran very high.

The following appears in the *Courier* of 20th March 1942:

#### MUSICAL SENSATION CHORAL SOCIETY MERGES WITH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

##### Another Choir Being Formed.

Quite a sensation has been caused in musical circles in Tunbridge Wells by the official announcement that the T.W.C.S. is continuing its rehearsals as before, at 7.30 on Monday evenings in the School Hall of the Baptist Tabernacle, Upper Grosvenor Road, and that Mr. George Weldon, conductor of the Tunbridge Wells Symphony Orchestra, is undertaking the direction of the Choral Society. The works to be given next season will be Handel's *Messiah* and Coleridge Taylor's *Hiawatha*.

At the same time comes the announcement from the Tunbridge Wells Symphony Orchestra that they will be giving combined orchestral concerts next season with the Choral Society in addition to six orchestral concerts. All will be conducted by Mr. George Weldon.

From enquiries made by a *Courier* reporter it would appear that certain repercussions followed the Choral Society's recent performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* conducted by Mr. Francis Foote. It is stated that at a meeting of the Committee that body was asked to resign, but the Committee refused to do so, whereupon the question arose as to whether the Choral Society should fade out for another to be substituted under the old conductorship or whether the Choral Society should merge with the Symphony Orchestra. The Choral Society have decided to throw in their lot with the Symphony Orchestra and thus give practical support to the proposal which had been made by the Symphony Orchestra some

time ago to form a choir. The Symphony Orchestra had hoped to form a choir to perform a choral work next winter.

"All we wanted was law and order," said a member of the Choral Society to a 'Courier' reporter on Wednesday night. "We were told to clear out, but as a Committee we declined, and now it would appear that Mr. Foote has walked out. There may be further details for the press next week, but nothing more can be added at the moment. We shall welcome new members at our rehearsals, but if there are those who would like to make enquiries I am sure Mr. Albert H. Trott of 41, Mereworth Road will be pleased to give details."

Rumours current on the town on Wednesday night were to the effect that Mr. Foote is engaged in forming another choir with a view to performing Edward German's *Merrie England*. In our last issue a notice appeared stating that Mr Foote is arranging this performance to be given in the open air, and that all profits will go to Mrs. Churchill's *Aid to Russia Fund*. The paragraph asked that all desirous of taking part should write the conductor at High-street, Tunbridge Wells.

In the weeks following this announcement Mr Foote was very active in forming a new choir and during August he gave two or three performances locally of *Merrie England*. For a short time he continued to use the title 'Tunbridge Wells Choral Society', which gave rise to the following notice in the *Courier* on 17th July 1942:

CHORAL SOCIETY.- because some misapprehension may arise, the *Courier* has been asked by Mr R.T. Christie, Hon. secretary of the Tunbridge Wells Choral Society, to state that recently a paragraph appeared in these columns in which it was stated that Mr. Francis Foote was to conduct a performance of *Merrie England* to be given by his Choral Society. Mr. Christie says:-

"May I point out that Mr. Foote has now no connection with the Tunbridge Wells Choral Society and that this Society is not taking part in any performance of *Merrie England*. The only conductor of the Tunbridge Wells Choral Society is Mr. George Weldon, and its chorus master is Mr. Sidney Ansell. The Society has arranged to give three concerts during the coming season, on Sundays, September 13, December 13 and April 11. The performances will be *The Music Makers*, *King Olaf* (Elgar), *Elijah* (Mendelssohn) and Handel's *Messiah*. The Tunbridge Wells Symphony Orchestra is under the leadership of Esther Burdett-Coutts."

According to the *Courier's* reports of these three concerts the combination of the Choral Society and the Symphony Orchestra was proving to be a success and the *Messiah*, given in April 1943, drew a large crowd. Some of the



credit for this success must be due to the fact that the soloists were Isobel Baillie, Nancy Evans, Heddle Nash and Henry Cummings.

In spite of its being wartime the Choral Society was very active in 1943 and *Hiawatha* in September attracted almost a full house at the Assembly Hall, the conductor being **George Weldon**. It was at this time that Mr Weldon was appointed conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and so the Choral Society's December concert was conducted by Sir George Dyson. Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise* and Bach's *Sleepers Wake* were the works performed.

In the following spring Sir George also conducted the *Messiah*. The performance was enjoyed by an enthusiastic audience in spite of the fact that Francis Foote and his Tunbridge Wells Choral Union had also given a large scale performance only two months earlier. The bass soloist in the Choral Society's performance was Owen Brannigan, "a welcome newcomer to Tunbridge Wells with his rich and compelling bass voice." He is just one of a number of distinguished singers to perform with the Society in the early stages of their careers.

**Sir George Dyson** became the Society's President but did not conduct any more of their concerts. For the next two years concerts were given on a less grand scale, probably because finances were at a very low ebb, although the proceeds from the performance of *Judas Maccabaeus* at St Andrew's Church were donated to local hospitals. Various churches in the town were used as venues and Mr **Sidney Ansell** was the conductor. Local singers took the solos and these included Amy Roberts (contralto), the wife of Mr J H Johnson (Chairman and later President of the Society). The organ was used for the accompaniment, played by Mr E R Barnard and later by Mr Leslie Stephens.

## THE POST-WAR PERIOD

The choir went out of town on 30th September 1945 to perform Handel's oratorio *Samson* in Cranbrook Parish Church under the direction of Mr **A D Croucher**, and early in 1946 he was appointed as the new chorus master. This

was to be on a temporary basis as Mr Croucher was already very involved with the Maidstone Choral Union.

The first work to be given under the new régime was Brahms' *Requiem* which was performed at Mayfield Church, the Baptist Tabernacle and Cranbrook Church on three consecutive Sundays in the spring. Then in November 1946 the Society performed *Elijah* in the Assembly Hall with the Tunbridge Wells Symphony Orchestra and their conductor, **John Hollingsworth**. In order to boost the number of singers for this performance, choral societies from Crowborough, Heathfield, Mayfield and Rotherfield were invited to join with The Tunbridge Wells Choral Society.

The same forces were used for the performance of *Hiawatha* in April 1947, Mr Croucher preparing the choirs but the concert being conducted by John Hollingsworth. This was not an altogether happy arrangement. For one thing the singers lacked the confidence needed to respond well to a conductor who was not familiar to them. The Autumn concert, *Messiah*, was conducted by Albert Croucher and the orchestra was a group of amateur and professional musicians individually engaged by the Society.

The organist at St James' Church on 10th March 1948 was **Robin Miller**. He was playing for a performance of Haydn's *Creation* and he was appointed as the Society's new conductor for the 1948-49 season. Mr Miller was the Music Director at Ardingly College.

For the main concerts held in the Assembly Hall the Society was still being assisted by smaller choirs from Crowborough, Mayfield, Rotherfield and occasionally Lamberhurst and Tenterden. It was through this liaison that Tunbridge Wells was invited to take part in Bach's *St Matthew Passion* at Glyndebourne under the auspices of the Lewes Music Festival. The first visit to this well-known Opera House took place on Good Friday 1949 and was repeated on that very special day in 1950 and 1951.

Celia Saunders, née Halton, a member of the Choir from 1944, and whose daughter Diana sings with us at the present time, remembers one of those visits very vividly - it was

probably her first as it was mine, and this is how she describes it for me:

Good Friday, 7th April 1950, was a very special day in the memory of an impressionable 23-year-old member of the Choral Society. The choir set off by coach to the Glyndebourne Opera House where we were met at the front door by Mr Christie. This was not an outing to an operatic performance - oh no! - but to sing ourselves! We were to take part in a Festival Performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, arranged by the Lewes Music Festival. The soloists and instrumentalists were quite outstanding - such a thrill to be taking part in a performance with them. The soloists were Margaret Ritchie, Kathleen Ferrier, Eric Greene, Richard Standen and Ian Wallace. The Jacques Orchestra was conducted by Dr Reginald Jacques and the principal players in the first orchestra were: Violin; Irene Richards; Flutes, Gareth Morris and Gilbert Barton; Oboes; Leon Goossens and Joy Boughton. Harvey Phillips played the 'cello continuo and Dr Thornton Lofthouse the Harpsichord. The rehearsal went well. At one point the choir missed their entry, being so absorbed by the sound of Kathleen Ferrier's voice. Reginald Jacques acknowledged how beautiful it was and Kathleen Ferrier turned round and sang to us and with us, which inspired us all. Between the rehearsal and the performance we wandered about in the gardens, enjoying the special atmosphere and breathtaking views of the South Downs and the surrounding countryside. Primroses, violets and other spring flowers were blooming on the banks of the stream. Masses of daffodils surrounded the lake. It was such a clear day with sunshine and a gentle breeze. The performance was a thrill indeed and our journey back to Tunbridge Wells was a quiet one - people were so affected by the day and the beautiful music we had heard and taken part in. I have sung in *St Matthew Passion* several times since then and listened to it performed and I have always thought of that very special day at Glyndebourne.

It was Robin Miller who started the annual Carol Concert, the first one being given on December 10th 1950. He also introduced auditions for membership, and the standard of performance began to improve after that difficult period of the Second World War and the post-war years. In fact, when King George VI died in February 1952, the Society gave a very creditable performance of Brahms' *Requiem* as a memorial to the King. This after a couple of rehearsals. It had previously been given in November 1950 and so was reasonably fresh in people's minds.

During this post-war period the brother and sister team, **Marjorie and Robin Vinall**, were taking a very active part in the Society, Robin being the Concert Secretary and Marjorie the accompanist - she always seemed to know exactly what

the conductor wanted and where he was going to "pick it up". Sadly, Robin died in the early 1950's, but it is good to see Marjorie still playing an active part in the Royal Tunbridge Wells Symphony Orchestra.

The Society has been fortunate with regard to accompanists during the past fifty years. **Walter Neal**, organist of St Luke's Church, followed Marjorie Vinall. **Derek Watmough's** first contact with the Choir was as accompanist for a short while and then **A B Smith-Masters**, a former Music master from Marlborough, held the position until he left the area. For a number of years now **Wilmarc Ellman** has proved to be a very versatile musician, accompanying on organ and harpsichord as well as piano, besides conducting the occasional rehearsal. These wonderful people, though mainly remaining unobtrusive, are always there when needed and have contributed much to the Society.

## RECENT TIMES

When Robin Miller left in 1953 to become Director of Music at Oundle School, his place was taken by **Dr Harold May**, who had recently come to live in the area. He was working at the Municipal College at Southend as a singing teacher and conductor of a large choir, and so, during the ten years that he was with the Society, singers from Essex would come to help swell the ranks in Tunbridge Wells and vice versa.

It was under Dr May that the choir gave its first concert performance of Verdi's *Aida* and the *Requiem* was re-introduced. The latter had not been performed since the memorial concert for King Edward VII in 1910. Francis Foote had often rehearsed it with his choir, but it did not reach the performance stage until nearly fifty years later. The choir certainly found it a very exhilarating experience when they sang it on March 15th 1959.

Another important "first" with Dr May was R Vaughan Williams' *Sea Symphony* on November 20th 1960. The composer's widow was present at the concert, which also included Brahms' *Requiem*. What a strenuous programme! In fact one of the front row sopranos collapsed at the end of it.

It was also Dr May who helped the choir to tackle Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* which was given in 1963. His ability as a singing teacher was a great help to the choir but conducting an orchestra was another matter and so his appointment was not renewed for the 1964-65 season. Dr May was given notice of this early in 1964 when he was preparing the choir for a performance of the *St Matthew Passion* to be conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. The news so upset Dr May that he refused to have anything further to do with the society. Fortunately Sir Adrian was able to take some of the rehearsals and so it was business as usual. He had already conducted us in the *Dream of Gerontius* in 1962 and so we were not complete strangers.

As it was the choir's 60th season plans had been made to celebrate the anniversary with a special concert on May 10th 1964, and Albert Croucher and Robin Miller had been invited to take part with Dr May. The latter's sudden departure meant that someone else had to be found to take his place and this is when **Trevor Harvey** began his association with the Society.

Mr Harvey was quite a well-known broadcaster and conductor and presented the Robert Mayer Children's Concerts for a number of years. In fact the Choral Society took part in one of these concerts in April 1971, the orchestra being the Royal Philharmonic. Vaughan Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem* and *How Lovely are Thy Dwellings Fair* from Brahms' *Requiem* were the two choral works in the concert. This was a day when choir members reached "star status" as they were approached by young autograph hunters!

It was Trevor Harvey who introduced the choir to Bruckner with his *Mass No 3 in F minor* in March 1966; he also introduced us to Kodály's *Missa Brevis* and one performance of this was given as an integral part of Mayor Woodland's inaugural service at the convent in Pembury Road in 1970.

At a special concert with the Royal Tunbridge Wells Symphony Orchestra in June 1969 the choir performed Beethoven's *9th Symphony* for the first time.

By 1972 it was becoming obvious that Trevor Harvey was feeling the strain of a busy conductor's life and he conducted

his last concert with the Society, Bach's *St Matthew Passion* on 26th March.

It so happened that **Myer Fredman** was living in Tunbridge Wells at this time and was working as Head of Music Staff at Glyndebourne. He undertook the November concerts for the next three years with the help of Derek Watmough who conducted for the Christmas and Spring Concerts.

Under Myer's lively direction Verdi's *Requiem* was given in 1972, Vaughan Williams' *Sea Symphony*, Elgar's *The Spirit of England*, and Arthur Duckworth's *Man of Kent* (specially dedicated to our then Secretary Cyril Wood and the Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society) made up the programme for November 1973, and *Messiah* in 1974. Myer was then appointed to a conductorship in Adelaide and so left the town for Australia.

**Derek Watmough** then became the choir's director. He had already undertaken a very enterprising programme in the Spring of 1973. It consisted of Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, Handel's *Zadok the Priest*, Vaughan Williams' *Serenade to Music* and Stanford's *Songs of the Sea*. The Bedfordshire Symphony Orchestra played for this concert as they had recently added the Walton music to their repertoire and were looking for another opportunity to perform it. This orchestra came to Tunbridge Wells again in April 1975 for another programme which certainly broke new ground. Walton's *Coronation Te Deum*, Holst's *Hymn of Jesus* and Verdi's *Four Sacred Pieces* were quite a challenge and a refreshing change. This was followed in the Autumn by two more 20th century works, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* and Vaughan Williams' *In Windsor Forest* - hard work for everyone, including Derek who had a sabbatical year in 1976.

The Spring concert of that year, a performance of Bach's *Mass in B minor*, was conducted by Richard Hickox, and the November concert was under the direction of Alan Wicks, then organist at Canterbury Cathedral. Richard Hickox had been a pupil of Derek's when at school in High Wycombe.

In 1980 another guest conductor was Brian Wright, a former



choir member and ex-Skinners' School pupil. This was for a performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*.

In March 1987 the choir sang *The Kingdom* (Elgar) for the first time. It had not been performed in the town since the Vocal Association sang it in 1908. Another "first" was *Chichester Psalms* (Leonard Bernstein) given in March 1990.

For some years the idea of a link with a choir from our twin town of **Wiesbaden** had been talked about and this was eventually achieved in 1985. Members of the Choral Society travelled to Germany on the weekend of 24 - 27 May to take part in a Concert of works by Bach and Handel with the Wiesbaden Bach Choir given in the Lutherkirche.

In 1987 the **Lutherkirche Choir** visited Tunbridge Wells on the first week-end in June for a combined performance of Mozart's *Coronation Mass* conducted by **Klaus Uwe Ludwig**. Each choir also performed a shorter work, Derek conducting The Tunbridge Wells Choral Society in a performance of Pergolesi's *Magnificat*.

Singers from the Tunbridge Wells choir paid a return visit to Wiesbaden that same year, thus setting the seal on a very happy friendship. Three exchanges have now taken place, the last one being in 1994 when our German friends joined us for a performance of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*, a work just as unfamiliar to the German visitors as was Reger's *Psalm 150* to us when they had introduced it to us in 1991. A real cultural exchange!

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And so the Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society goes on towards its centenary, sometimes breaking new ground, sometimes enjoying the well-established choral classics, under the admirable directorship of Derek Watmough MBE.