



**THE PHOENIX SINGERS
PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE**

The Phoenix Singers : Past, Present and Future



- 1/ Patrick Anderson : A History of The Phoenix Singers
- 2/ Adrian Hughes : Musical highlights
- 3/ Averil Newell : Phoenix Abroad - Foreign Tours with the Phoenix Singers
- 4/ Richard White : Some Thoughts on More Than 40 years as conductor of Phoenix
- 5/ Connie Drinkwater : Does a Phoenix Tweet?
- 6/ Sarah Lee : What the Phoenix means to a new member
- 7/ Richard Walker : Some thoughts from the Conductor
- 8/ Katie Bedford : Postman Pat and Phoenicks?



The Phoenix Singers rehearsing in St Chad's with Richard Walker in 2015

The Phoenix Singers' first fifty years - by Patrick Anderson

Five original members of this group of amateur singers who still live in or near Shrewsbury met in January 2015 to pool their recollections of how the Phoenix Singers was born. The consensus of the group was that it was in the summer of 1965 that they and their friends who had belonged to another disbanded choir – St Mary's Singers – met for a picnic in a pretty wooded valley by Habberley Brook in what is now called The Earls Hill Nature Reserve just upstream from Pontesbury. It was decided that they should look for a new Conductor with a penchant for singing *a cappella* or with minimal accompaniment. Things must have moved quite fast, because the new choir started work under the leadership of the Reverend Laurence Caller, M.A. B.Mus. in the autumn of 1965, and gave a performance of *The Christmas Story* by Heinrich Schütz in Laurence's own Church of The Holy Spirit in the northern outskirts of Shrewsbury on 12th December.

During the following two years Laurence Caller conducted what was by then named The Phoenix Singers at more than six concerts in local schools or churches, but his tenure as vicar of his Shrewsbury church and parish was drawing to a close. Fortunately he knew the current Music Advisor for Shropshire, John Stephens, quite well: it was John who agreed to play some Bach Preludes on the organ of Laurence's church at quite an ambitious Phoenix concert (Byrd's Four-part Mass, Psalms by Kodaly, some carols and *A Modern Te Deum* by Donald Swann) in December 1966.

It seems very likely that in 1967 Laurence asked John Stephens to succeed him as (honorary) Phoenix Singers' Conductor and Musical Director, and fortunately he accepted. What we members did not know at that time was that his tenure of office at the Shirehall was only going to last another twelve months or so. John was to become an Inspector of Schools based in Hampshire from about December 1968, and later in Inner London. But meanwhile John worked us hard: the Phoenix Singers performed no less than eight times in those twelve months. (John's career in musical education was to be distinguished and pioneering: he would be rewarded not only with an OBE but also with a *Distinguished Musician* award from the Incorporated Society of Musicians – a rare honour.)

John Stephens' successor in 1969 as County Music Advisor was the redoubtable Richard White, and that year Richard agreed (probably with some misgivings) to be the Honorary Phoenix Conductor and Director. He brought with him not only a great deal of experience in both singing and conducting a group of *a cappella* singers when living and working in the London area but also his wife Mary, whose lovely clear soprano voice and very good vocal technique provided us with an excellent in-house soloist when the need arose at our concerts. This proved to be a lasting relationship: Richard – a man of unflagging energy and dedication to musical education - literally gave us in the Phoenix Singers forty years of his time, knowledge, expertise and musical ability. His passion for choral and also instrumental music widened our knowledge of, and honed our ability to perform, a very wide range of both sacred and secular choral works, some of which were his own arrangements or compositions, that has been little short of inspirational. His role as County Music Advisor also meant that he knew all the best local instrumentalists upon whom he could rely for good orchestral accompaniment when the need arose. In addition he would use Phoenix concerts as a means of working with instrumental or dramatic groups, or small ripieno choirs, in a suitable context. Examples included a local Dance and Drama group, a Brass Ensemble, a Recorder group, a Handbell group, the Shropshire Drama Company. We owe him an enormous debt. In 2000 we were delighted when Richard was awarded the Sir Charles Groves Prize at a special concert by Lady Groves herself, on behalf of the National Federation of Music Societies, for his outstanding achievements in Shropshire.

Richard's 'farewell' concert in 2009 in St Chad's Church Shrewsbury was a fitting culmination of his stewardship of the Phoenix Singers during those 40 years, which spanned a vast repertoire (including newly commissioned works) performed in at least 150 concerts in the UK. In addition he was largely responsible for arranging at least ten choral ventures abroad in seven European countries. These are described in more detail elsewhere. However mention must be made of our particular link with an excellent String Ensemble from the historic Saxony town of Celle in Germany with whom the choir has collaborated on some six occasions, either in Celle or Shrewsbury, during the last 18 years. The trips abroad in particular bonded together those who took part in them almost as a family, supporting each other through happy times as well as sad or difficult ones.

Although Richard White had given plenty of notice of his intention to stand down as Conductor and Musical Director, the process of finding a suitable successor proved difficult. It was immediately obvious that the committee had to offer a suitable honorarium in future. Even so, there were few applicants for the role, and often they lived and worked too far from Shrewsbury. However John Naylor from north Shropshire, who already conducted two choirs in that area, proved to be an excellent choice. He had been a choral scholar under Dr George Guest at Cambridge, a tenor chorister at Durham Cathedral and, later, a member of the Chapel Royal Choir at The Tower of London, to mention but a few. In 1980 he founded and directed The Lydian Singers, and in 2005 he also became Musical Director of Nantwich Choral Society. John was appointed our Conductor in September 2009, and lost no time in planning our next concert of Christmas music the following December, combining new pieces with others from our, by then, extensive library. The following year he conducted the St Matthew Passion with Lydian Singers also taking part. Among John's eight concerts with Phoenix was a special concert in April 2011 when we sang (amongst other works) four new compositions that were the winners of an international Choral Competition sponsored by the choir. John's final and very successful concert with Phoenix Singers proved to be the Monteverdi Vespers of 1610, accompanied by professional early instrumentalists.

Richard Walker had for twenty years been Head of the Music Department at Harrow School, and on his retirement in 2005 he and his wife moved to Church Stretton. In 2007 Richard became Assistant Director of Music at St Chad's Church in Shrewsbury. He also became Music Director of the annual Church Stretton Arts Festival. In January 2012 Richard agreed to be our next Conductor. He probably knew from the outset that our committee was already in process of organizing a performance of the St John Passion in conjunction with the Celle String Ensemble in March of that year. (Richard is a passionate advocate of the works of J S Bach, notably on the organ.) Since then he has kept the choir fully stretched with at least two demanding but very enjoyable concerts each year. We feel very secure under Richard's exacting leadership, and the choir continues to attract new members.



Some highlights from fifty years of Phoenix concerts

Joining the Phoenix Singers only in 1995, I was immediately struck by the very wide range of repertoire which the choir had already sung in the previous thirty years of its existence - and was to continue to build up over the next twenty. It proved to be excellent timing for, its regular concerts apart, the choir was soon engaged in two memorable projects. The first was a remarkable re-staging of Purcell's semi-opera, *The Fairy Queen*, over three nights in the old Music Hall; this entailed a considerable degree of movement for the choir as well as the singing. The second event in 1996, more far-reaching as it turned out, was the inaugural visit of the choir to Celle in Lower Saxony, Germany. Others will write about overseas links, but as a lifelong exchanger, this tour and those which have followed have been particularly appealing, and the concerts with Dorothee Knauer and the Celler Streicherensemble have provided some memorable moments. To sing, as we have done on each visit, Bach in his own country, to audiences who are invariably enormously attentive, has been very moving; the *Motets*, Bach's very first church cantata, *Christ lag in Todes Banden* and, on return visits by the orchestra here in Shrewsbury, the *St John Passion*...twice. Music and place seem inseparable, so a hot summer's evening in the Haute Savoie in France is immediately recalled by the choral version of Fauré's *Pavane*. Equally, a freezing church in Oświęcim, southern Poland in 2001, where our English Tudor church music was sung to an audience which included devotedly kneeling figures coming and going after work...directly following our visit to that most notorious of all concentration camps, Auschwitz.

English music from Tudor times to the Twentieth Century has long been a mainstay of the choir's repertoire and Tallis, Byrd and other composers from the Elizabethan period have always featured strongly. Perhaps the most striking work from this period is Tallis' *Spem in alium* the 40 part motet, which among several other appearances, was sung in 2000 with singers distributed all round St Chad's gallery. All the major choral works of Britten have been performed, some, such as *St Nicholas*, *Hymn to the Virgin*, *Hymn to St Cecilia* and the *Flower Songs*, several times, while Finzi, Tippett, Parry and Vaughan Williams have all made regular appearances. There have been relative rarities too, such as the Elgar part-songs and - for Richard White's farewell - Constant Lambert's exhilarating *Rio Grande*. Nor has the choir relied on safe standbys or old warhorses, having regularly commissioned music from living composers several times, notably from Robert Sherlaw Johnson, Richard Lloyd and Sally Beamish. 2015 will see the second Phoenix Choral Composition Competition held; the first, in 2011, attracted worldwide interest with the first prize awarded to Owain Park, a young composer who is currently Organ Scholar at Trinity College Cambridge.

Larger-scale works from the Baroque repertoire have provided many highlights in Phoenix history: the two Bach *Passions*, the *Christmas Oratorio* and the *B minor Mass* have been sung several times along with a growing number of the church *Cantatas*. A memorable concert which raised funds in 1997 for the projected Handel House Museum in London, included the composer's thrilling early Italianate *Dixit Dominus*. Only recently, the choir performed all of the *Coronation Anthems* in Shrewsbury and took *Let thy hand be strengthened* to Germany for their concerts in and around Celle, celebrating the tercentenary of the union of British and Hanoverian thrones. From an earlier period of North German choral music, motets by Buxtehude and Schütz have made regular appearances. From England, in addition to the *Fairy Queen*, Purcell has not been overlooked, with many anthems sung along with the remarkable *Funeral Music for Queen Mary*. Early Italian music from Venice has been well-represented with a significant

number of Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli's polychoral works, frequently with accompaniment by Wrekin Brass in the superb acoustic of St Chad's church. More recently, the choir put on a very successful performance of Monteverdi's *1610 Vespers for the Blessed Virgin* accompanied by a period instrument orchestra. French music has played its part in the repertoire, too, from 14th Century Dufay and Janequin chansons from the 16th century, through the Baroque and Marc-Antoine Charpentier to Fauré - the *Requiem*, naturally - Debussy, Poulenc Duruflé and Messiaen.

Phoenix has sung in cooperation with other choirs too, including those from the several European exchange visits which have been made. More locally though, an annual event which usually involved a "Big Work" was the Shropshire Association of Music Societies concert. SAMS performances have included Handel's *Messiah*, Mozart's *Requiem*, Haydn's *Nelson Mass* and the *Creation*, and Carl Orff's challenging *Carmina Burana*.

Often when accompanied music was sung, the choir calls upon its own Phoenix Orchestra. Although the personnel and composition of this band has varied over the years, its core has always been drawn from local professional players, often teachers in the county, sometimes young players from the County School of Music ensembles. Richard White's associations with a number of other groups, too, have led to joint concerts with Shrewsbury Handbells and Consort of Recorders, often at Christmas. In his forty years at the helm of Phoenix, Richard White composed and arranged a large number of pieces for the choir which frequently, but not exclusively, appeared at Christmas or on our tours abroad. It was quite likely that choir members with good sight reading skills would be drafted in to play a range of small percussion in some of these works. This writer also well remembers playing from *inside* a grand piano for part of Paul Patterson's *Kyrie*.

Wrekin Brass, as mentioned above, have had very fruitful links with the choir over many years and, in their own right, have contributed arrangements, often very striking, by their leader Peter Clowes. Perhaps some of the most memorable instrumental collaborations have been with the Latin-American groups *Incantation* and *Caliche*; music performed included the two best-known works by the Argentinean composer Ariel Ramirez: *Navidad Nuestra* and *Missa Criolla*. These concerts, accompanied by traditional instruments left a lasting impression on the singers; the inclusion of several other Latin-American composers' works anticipated their "discovery" by professional singers by some years! When not accompanied by an orchestra or other groups and when not singing unaccompanied, Phoenix have been fortunate to have had many capable piano and organ accompanists including Standish Lester, Alan Vening, David Grundy, Chris Symons, Vivian Redfern and Pam Pickford.

It would be almost impossible to compile a list of *The Best of Phoenix*, but for me, the concerts in Europe would have to be included along with, as mentioned elsewhere, the Renaissance polyphony of Gabrieli with brass, Monteverdi's *Vespers*, the Latin-American concerts, a Christmas compilation of three versions of *O Magnum Mysterium* by Victoria, Poulenc and Morten Lauridsen and - perhaps inevitably - Bach's large-scale works including the remarkable Christmas cantata BWV 63 *Christen ätzet diesen Tag*, with its four trumpets and timpani announcing in no uncertain terms Bach's arrival in Leipzig.

Adrian Lloyd Hughes April 2015

Phoenix Abroad

Every time I drink a cup of coffee from one of the mugs Owen Thorpe made to commemorate special events of the Phoenix Singers of Shrewsbury, I am reminded vividly of the many exchange trips made by the choir. From the answering steeple of St. Alkmund's and the turrets of the town walls of Pskov in Russia to the exuberant dancers on the mug celebrating the 1996 visit to Celle in Germany, to the serried ranks of choral singers in the exchange with Tomasi in Hungary, these mugs speak of the unique opportunities given to the choir and their exchange partners to experience shared music making and hospitable and cultural contacts, often leading to long-lasting friendships; these still reverberate in the memory. I have been fortunate to take part in all the choir's exchanges, beginning with Zutphen in Holland (twice), to Terrasson on the Dordogne in France, to Pskov, to Tomasi, Cagli, in Italy, to Krakow in Poland, Pirmasens in Germany and the well-rooted relationship with the Celler Streicherensemble in Germany. These have given me some of the richest experiences of my life.

It was thanks to the energy and enthusiasm of Richard White, our conductor from 1998 to 2009 that a foreign exchange trip should be part of the pattern of life in the choir. Members of the choir themselves responded to the opportunities with alacrity and showed the characteristic qualities of commitment to musical performance, openness to new experiences and generous hospitality that has made the choir such a strong community over the years and given so many of us vivid memories, deep friendships and support.

Are all musicians such accomplished networkers? It was the contacts made through choir members that enabled us to embark on the many and various projects. Shrewsbury's twinning with Zutphen gave us Sietze; a local business man's contacts with Pskov in Russia; a cousin who had a professional association with a librarian in Krakow; friends with a second home in the Marché in Italy putting us in touch with an Englishman, Richard Dixon, living and singing in a choir there, who was happy to be our link; Simon Cain, a key member of the choir and a music teacher in Telford, who started a new life teaching in an army school in Celle, joined a string orchestra there and was instrumental (pun intended) in encouraging our musical and personal friendships, which still flourish long after he has moved on to pastures new.

These are my memories, partial, fragmented but very vivid. Mostly they will be shared by Tony and shifting groups of choir members and partners during our journeys, receptions, performances and striking incidents. Trips usually ran to Phoenix time, with dawn departures from the Abbey car park, slightly nervous first meetings with our hosts, often in turn to become our guests and sometimes friends, well-selected excursions to local sights, intensive rehearsals and much appreciation from local audiences, shown in the presentation of little bunches of flowers offered by children in Russia to a standing ovation in a packed village church in Ahlden near Celle. I have to admit to a very sparsely filled church in rural France and the spirited rendition of *Katyusha*, a nationalistic Russian song, was less than warmly received when performed in Tartu, Estonia, during a period of tension with its dominant neighbour. Many a heartfelt and tearful farewell marked the end of another successful trip.

Inevitably my memories of earlier trips are much less clear. The people, the food and the happenings have become well-rehearsed anecdotes. I see myself walking in an outdoor art park near Zutphen in a fur coat - unthinkable now! Our hosts were kind and friendly, though their two young sons eyed us warily when the rather Spartan spread of food was put on the table. They were far less inhibited than us in seizing their helpings. A day out in Amsterdam gave us the chance to fill our bellies with chips, only to return to our hosts to be confronted with a yard of bubble and squeak, specially bought from the freezer shop, as they'd noticed that we had "a healthy appetite".

In 1985, after an overnight stay in Reims (and wherever the bus stops, give a concert) the visit to Terrasson is the first exchange that I remember vividly. Our partners, a choir, connected through a visit to Shrewsbury of the town's brass band made excellent arrangements for us to see local beauty spots and fed us with typical Gallic finesse. A bottle of wine was de rigueur in picnic lunches. I remember eating paté and baguettes in the high heathland, where the omission of tin openers was remedied by the boy scout skills with a penknife of Richard White and other choir members. Our enthusiastic but faltering rendition from memory of *La Bataille de Marignan* at the top of the Tour du Merle was less impressive. I remember the squares and cafés of Sarlat peppered with Phoenix clusters and the reverent climbing of the sacred steps of Rocadamour. Our gratitude to our French hosts was shown in many forms, the least appropriate of which was the presentation of bouquets of enormous bronze chrysanthemums, which apparently fortuitously, filled the local florists: Tony, with more local knowledge, was too late to give warnings that these flowers were earmarked for the cemeteries in the October 31st Festival of the Dead.

I remember arriving in the town square at the beginning of the exchange with a German choir in Pirmasens just as the bus's video player was finishing the episode of *Faulty Towers* featuring Basil Fawlty's cry, "Don't mention the war!". A local artist had generously made his house available to Phoenixicks – Tony and I, Jill Tear, Molly Fernley and the bus driver. While Tony was a little disappointed not to be billeted with an actual German family, he could take some pleasure from waking up to bedroom walls filled with paintings of florid nudes. Stories of Molly and her badinage with a series of bus drivers have become part of the Phoenix mythology. Pirmasens' shoe industry provided me and others with lasting souvenirs, memories lasting even longer than my bright red shoes.

The exchange trip to Pskov in Russia in 1991 was, for me, our most adventurous project. The opportunity provided by a fortuitous link via Owen and Angela was in doubt because of the unrest in the Baltic States during the period of Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika. When the USSR seemed to be more stable, we seized the chance of an exchange in April, coinciding with the Russian Orthodox Easter. Russian leanings towards the West made us unlikely ambassadors – lyrics of Beatles' songs were an emotive lingua franca between us and younger members of our host families. Gorbachev's fall the following summer was not anticipated by anyone. Given a little confidence by some language coaching by Svetlana in Angela and Owen's sitting room, and having made our wills, we embarked on our adventure.

Landing at the airport in St. Petersburg, armed military guards lining the walkways was a chilly reminder of the Cold War. A representative of the Pskov choir met us and there was a rapid tour of the city with little time to wander in the square in front of the Hermitage but, surprisingly, plenty of time to visit a market selling vastly overpriced matrushka dolls and other tourist tat. Our Russian hosts were later shocked to hear we had paid the equivalent

of a month's wages for our souvenirs. Intrepid Phoenixicks followed ice flows down the river Neva and peered in parks at statues boxed in for the winter.

A warmer welcome awaited us in Pskov - too warm for some of us in the workers' flats where excessive centralised heating tempted Tony to force open the window in our room. The warped frames are probably refusing to close to this day.

The following days were filled with sights imprinted in my mind's eye and ear; fishermen fishing through holes in the ice of the Pskov river flowing under the Muscovite towers of the city walls, almost empty shops and pot-holed roads ("we do not have roads, only directions in Russia"), women sweeping dust from city pavements with brooms of twigs. A towering Easter cake served with pride by our hosts to Tony, Mike, Patsy and me and after a few slices never seen again. Bottles of pickled tomatoes and soft fruits, saved over the winter and brought in from country dachas, rehearsals to perfect our pronunciation of Russian for joint performances of some of the Rachmaninov Vespers with Tony relishing the chance to plumb the depths of a Russian bass, with our partner Russian choir under the mesmerising eye of the Svengali-like Gregor, who set the terms of membership to include middle-aged men but only beautiful young women. Our concerts were in huge Soviet halls with capacity audiences sending down droves of pretty children to salute our singing with flowers. Vodka and Russian champagne flowed in abundance in post-concert receptions, dissolving the polystyrene cups, requiring inverted pyramids of sodden receptacles, while the Natashas and Marias lured us into hypnotic dances.

The pot-holed roads took us through the forests to Novgorod, to be inspired to sing *Dona Nobis Pacem* in the Cathedral and then to wander along the city walls before heading back to Pskov through the endless forest for hours, with comfort stops when necessary, ladies to the left of the coach, gentlemen to the right, keeping the darkness away by singing songs from American musicals, some of the choir being surprised at my word-perfect knowledge of the words – a useful legacy from childhood years of listening to Family Favourites.

Another excursion to Tartu in Estonia introduced us to the gracious Baroque architecture, reminders of the West-leaning ambitions of Peter and Catherine the Great but now showing all-too-evident neglect and impoverishment. I remember the tension in the audience when, in our innocence, we sang the pro-Russian *Katyusha*, associated for them with disenchantment with the USSR. The Beatles, however, still worked their magic.

The paradoxical nature of Russian society of this period was demonstrated by extensive evidence of electronic equipment in the homes of our hosts, mostly musicians eking out a living from odd jobs and private lessons and conducting church choirs, yet still our gifts of soap and basic medical supplies were eagerly accepted. In a teacher training college where Jill, a teaching colleague, and I had given a lecture on 20th century English Literature, we were profoundly shocked to be confronted by a women's toilet with excrement smeared across the walls when just across the corridor there was a lecture hall of young women, beautifully dressed and meticulously made-up and coiffured.

Return visits by exchange partners are naturally less vivid than our own trips abroad but the return visit of the Russian choir continued this sense of a society at odds with itself and the rest of the European world. Our guest sold us a samovar, given as a wedding present, to have enough money to buy the compulsory status symbol of a pair of jeans to take back to her daughter. Other guests, and especially their KGB minder, at supper at our house, were much more eager to taste the fresh oranges than the rest of my carefully prepared meal – again, they deferred to the minder. The sight of that same minder kicking open the

doors of the toilets at Atcham Memorial Hall at the end of the farewell party, to make sure no-one was avoiding the return, made us very aware of the gulf between the two societies, briefly bridged by making music together.

Language was much more of a barrier in our next trip to Tamasi, in Hungary in 1995, with the challenge of Finno-Ugric, one of the most difficult languages in the world, defeating most of us. The most effective means of communication in our host family was for our host to sing the names of Hungarian composers repeatedly, at every meal in his rich, operatic tenor voice.. "Bartok.... Kodaly....", usually after a generous dose of local vodka or a yard of strong home-made wine, he brought from his garden shed and proceeded to pipette into our glasses. The room we slept in was full of electronic hardware – enormous T.V. screens, massive music centres... while the bathroom had an earth floor, with toilet and sink perched precariously on hard earth pedestals. Problems of communication, which frustrated our multi-lingual Tony, were considerably eased by Sylvia, a charming young woman who became our escort on our excursions. Her translations gave us much more insight into the history and culture of Hungary, in Tamasi itself and Pecs, whose citadel seemed perched on the very edge of Europe, as we gazed across a featureless plain towards Asia. Members of the choir kept in touch with Sylvia after the return leg and Colin and Alison Bates generously offered her accommodation when she wanted to stay in England to improve her language. Sadly, after marrying and starting a family, she died very young of breast cancer.

Rural Hungary gave us some understanding of the isolation from what we think of as the mainstream of European life, the levels of poverty and the resilience and ingenuity of ordinary people. We were much more familiar with cosmopolitan Budapest, with its noble government buildings and parks by the river Danube and the old town of Buda – and the inevitable tourists and the ills associated with them.

In contrast, our stay in Krakow, in Poland, generates many vivid scenes, perhaps because, as chairman of the choir at the time, I had some very specific responsibilities. Though we had been to Italy in 1999 and Celle for a second time in 2000, Phoenixes jumped at the chance to exchange with a church choir in Krakow, a city with its wonderful market square, the Warwel Castle, churches, the Jagiellonian University and so many significant associations. Again, many of the choir experienced at first hand the poverty of their hosts – most meals were communal ones, taken in a student canteen to ease the pressure of hospitality. Tony and I and Pat and Bob Gibson, were privileged to stay in the smart apartment of Marek, president of the choir, ex-Communist apparatchik and Mr. Fixit, who had positioned himself cleverly in time for the dismantling of the USSR. His wife, Christine, was already a successful business-woman, running her own shop selling ski equipment. She was also a fabulous cook, treating us to the delights of traditional Polish cooking – Borscht, bigos – despite detailed recipes, never to be repeated. Both Marek and Christine were kind and helpful, telling us the best shops to buy amber and giving us lengths of curtain material still serving as our Christmas table cloth. Marek was a great help when my purse was stolen, very skilfully, possibly in the market hall - the police station felt less threatening with him as escort.

Krakow has been a significant centre of European learning and culture for centuries, so to see the home and study of Copernicus was fascinating. Marek also thought it important that we saw the nearby concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, though he and other hosts did not accompany us or discuss its history. Though some of us found the visit deeply disturbing, with its mixture of heartrending displays of abandoned belongings and yet the trappings of the tourist circuits, it was an opportunity to accept and bear witness to the darker side of European and human history. I cannot say there was a meeting of

minds as our hosts were very reticent, though very hospitable, but I would like to think that the good feelings generated by our shared music-making developed some mutual understanding. The literally sparkling final banquet in the underground mountain hall of the Wieliczka Salt Mine gave a grandeur to our stay that was truly memorable.

Marek quite rightly negotiated that the Phoenix Singers could and should pay towards the banquet and not put undue financial pressure on the Polish choir. He showed wit and great friendliness in his dealings with his own guests and those of us responsible for organising both legs of the exchange. He was easily able to persuade us to provide extra funds and we were happy to make sure their choir's visit to Shropshire was a great success. But after many gestures of friendship and goodwill, we never heard from him again.

Friendship and good will lay behind our memorable exchange in 1999 with Cagli in the Marche, Italy. John Kingsbury, a longstanding and close friend of Angela and Owen from art college days, now lived in the Marche near Aqualagna and he and his brother and sister-in-law put us in contact with Richard Dixon, an Englishman living in the area and a member of the choir in Cagli, the Coro Polofonico di Cagli (a name I managed to deliver with fitting orotundity when I'd tasted enough local wine). What an opportunity for me, as chairman at the time – to have as liaison a fellow Brit to plan and oversee the trip without any problems from my non-existent Italian language skills. Richard understood perfectly our wish to enjoy all the pleasures of a holiday in Italy as well as satisfy the commitments to rehearsal and performance. It was at his suggestion that we spent a Phoenix-only weekend in Ravenna before joining our partners. Breaking the journey south at St Leo, a gem of an Italian town, occupied since Roman times, set high on the plateau above Rimini, we could wander around the piazza and do what Phoenix does best on exchanges – take over the cafés in the central square and wax expansive. Apparently Dante was impressed by the site and based some of the scenes of the Purgatorio on St. Leo – but not the day we were there.

Richard would have made a brilliant travel agent and tour guide and helped us cherry-pick the best sites of the area – to plod up to the turrets of Perugia, to stroll around Assisi, whose delights were expounded on by a guide whose style was worthy of Liberace, to sample the freshly pressed olive oil of the artisan press in Fossombrone, to visit the monastery where musical notation began. At Urbino, many of us were amazed at those in our party who took their places in the group of over-60s to qualify for concessionary tickets, and perhaps even more startled at those who didn't!

As in other exchanges, our hosts came from many different social and economic backgrounds and Richard was careful not to strain their pockets, energy or vocabularies too far. How he managed to fund the many communal meals in trattorias around the area remained a mystery and he urged my discretion in not enquiring too closely about the source. Perhaps we were a little compromised, but easily able to swallow any doubts in the golden sunlight of that October autumn.

Oddly the exchange trips and partnership that has most structured the ongoing programmes of The Phoenix Singers - the longstanding association with the Streichersensemble of Celle in Germany, is the one where memories are most difficult to pin down - there are just so many of them! As membership and circumstances change, so have our links with Celle adjusted and matured. To develop a relationship with an orchestra has made exchange visits and the performances much more of a partnership, where each concert gave choir and orchestra a complementary role. The dedication to as close to excellence as possible and the meticulous planning is characteristic of both

Dorothee Knauer, leader of the string ensemble, and Richard White. This sense of kindred spirits goes from top to bottom among both groups. We have weathered changes in membership and personal circumstances, illness, even death, among our members but the bonds, both musical and personal, are still strong.

It was the ebullient and multi-talented Simon Cain that first forged the link when he joined the Ensemble in Celle, after taking up his post as music teacher in the British Army base stationed there. The choir's loss of him as tenor was more than made up for by his infectious enthusiasm for music making and he nursed any anxieties Dorothee could have had about whether this English choir could match her precious Ensemble for commitment and musicality. She met her match with Richard White!

The four trips to Celle, beginning in 1996, have made so many of us familiar with the elegant baroque town, where groups of Phoenix could often be glimpsed strolling between the timber-framed black and white houses, sitting in the organ loft allegedly used by Bach, cycling on borrowed bikes along the towpaths of the Aller, even sitting under blankets in the town square indulging in coffee and cream cakes. On the first visit, in Simon's attempt to dilute the possibly overpowering impact of so many English visitors, we spent a few days in the Harz Mountains, an area previously in East Germany. The autumn light, the rolling hills and lakes, the almost ageless Saxony architecture of the old towns, the stave churches, and possibly the Glühwein consumed in the Ratskeller of such places as Weinegerode, gave these days such a timeless aura. On other occasions in Celle, in my mind's eye, I see a windmill farm in the sunshine, an exploration of the futuristic Hanover Expo exhibits, a sober walk around the nearby Bergen-Belsen concentration camp as our hosts conscientiously and honestly tried to give us an understanding of the darker past of this peaceful and so apparently civilised area.

Memories of the countless receptions organised by the helpers of the orchestra blur in my mind. I can see an impromptu rendition of one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos by members of the orchestra and Phoenix string players, with instruments hurriedly borrowed and tuned. I still have a photograph of me as Queen to Simon's King in Inge's hilarious dramatisations of a fairy tale - my acting talents received with some surprise.

Despite Simon's leaving Celle, we and the Streichersemble still followed his Pied Piper's lead to Lescheraines in the French Alps in 2008. Wherever he goes, Simon is compelled to set up music-making and owning a holiday home in Lescheraines, the area having a music festival and him retaining very close links with Phoenix and Celle, was an opportunity not to be missed. The lakeside accommodation, the communal meals with orchestra, choir and families, the walks to the waterfall, the boats on the lake, (with an unplanned dip for some!) the warm sunshine and stunning views over the mountains, the charming canals of Annecy. And the music! The sounds of rehearsals floating across the water, the chance to squeeze in a short concert in the quaint church in Annecy before the priest came back and the enthusiastic reception of our performance in the church at Arith, particularly to our performance of Richard's composition of "Là-Haut Sur La Montagne" in a highlight of the Bauges Festival.

Our most recent exchange visit has been to Celle, in 2014, when Dorothee and the orchestra took advantage of the civic celebrations of the Hanoverian dynasty in Lower Saxony to invite us over as representatives of the English subjects of the same dynasty. Many a tortuous argument was used to justify a concert programme of Bach's *Jesu, meine Freude*, Handel's Coronation Hymn *Let Thy Hand Be Strengthened* and John Blow's *God Spake, Sometime in Visions* as clear evidence of a Celle/Hanoverian/English connection. Handel did visit Celle, didn't he, as well as compose Coronation Hymns for George II?

Richard White was eager to be our musical director in Celle and the trip gave a renewed sense of camaraderie to choir members taking part. And Simon contrived to be at the first reception to greet us! That exchange lived up to all expectations – the week organised round rehearsals, the civic reception with town dignitaries honouring our historical links, walks around town and to the art galleries and Castle, excursions to the Hanoverian Gothic folly of Marienburg, with turrets in abundance and a charming guide fresh from a degree in Linguistics from the University of Aberystwyth (small world), the account of Sophia Dorothea, wife of the Elector of Hanover, exiled to the village of Ahlden after a love affair and doomed to never see her children again - the tragic tale delivered by a local farmer's wife in full costume – though “full” included a décolletée which challenged Tony's concentration when asked to translate. I teased him that he had “found his niche”! Capacity audiences in the jewel box church in Ahlden and St. Bonifacius' Church in Celle, with standing ovations on both occasions - what a climax to another successful exchange. When can we return such warm appreciation and hospitality?

And that is the question that challenges us. Can Phoenix continue to renew its membership, its commitment to excellence in performance of a wide range of music and its appetite for taking on new experiences?

Will there be another mug on my mug tree?

Averil Newell



Phoenix Mugs made by Owen Thorpe to mark our trips to Russia, Hungary, Germany, Poland and a mug celebrating Richard White's Award of the Charles Groves Prize for Music in the Community.

From Richard White, Conductor, November 1968 - August 2009

My brief, a daunting but pleasurable task, is to look back on 41 years, minus two months, of life with Phoenix. First I join with the many people who will be congratulating all members, past and present, on their achievements in the choir's first 50 years. I hope that everyone has enjoyed, and surely the present members are still enjoying, both the music and the company. Fine music has been sung in the past, is still being sung, with more awaiting the choir. The standard aimed for has always been high, as I am sure it will remain, and I hope that the choir has come somewhere near the target. As well as the musical satisfaction that Phoenix has brought, its corporate spirit and the sense of purpose that it has always displayed - and judging from its recent past it still does - have been especially rewarding and many friendships have been formed.

Likely to be of much more practical use than anything that I write in this note are the lists produced for this anniversary: a complete, as near as can be, diary of all Phoenix events giving date, place and an outline of the programme; a repertoire list; lists of soloists and of all members. The latter was especially difficult: after my first concert, for four years, members' names were not included in programmes. This archival material will be made available to all and sundry.

In a formula $p^1 + p^2 + p^3 = P$, p^1 = people; p^2 = performances; p^3 = places and P is the resulting choir. People are always the most important factor in any organisation and the choir has been fortunate in having great loyalty among its members, not least among a now small group, Patrick Anderson and George and Eileen Pickup, who are still carrying their bats from 1965. Originally membership was restricted to 25 but numbers grew until 40 was reached and many others stayed for a long time. For however long their membership, we are grateful to all for their contributions to the life of the choir. My thanks to the elected officers have been offered frequently over the years and I re-state them here warmly. There were about twelve Chairmen, five women and seven men, some of whom served twice or more and they are named on the membership list. It would be risky to try to name all the others - librarians, stage-managers, fund-raisers/jumble-sale organisers, social organisers, officers for publicity and for tickets; but the Treasurer, being perhaps the most responsible and having the most onerous task, warrants special mention and I thank Keith Woolley, whose predecessor I cannot recall, Richard Moore, Gordon Kirkpatrick, Cynthia Hall and Bill Finlinson for their years of service.

Regarding p^2 , the diary includes the major S.A.M.S. events, in which Phoenix played a major part. The Shropshire Association of Musical Societies, founded in 1926, supported music in the community, especially by bringing together small choirs in order to participate in performances of music that probably would be unattainable by individual choirs. The involvement of Shropshire Schools' Symphony Orchestra brought together youth and maturity and made possible the performance of major works with orchestra. Thirteen events, including Orff's *Carmina Burana* and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, resulted. Sadly, the Association was wound up in about 2001.

Excluding those, there were 169 events. The aim was to offer a wide range of music: indeed the millennium concert brought together music from all ten centuries including Tallis's 40 part motet, Bach's double-choir *Singet dem Herrn*, Purcell's *Funeral Music* and Bruckner motets with brass and crowned by a commission from Robert Sherlaw-Johnson.

Notable also was working with Nicholas Brown within Making Music's Adopt-a-Composer Scheme and his *Two Pieces Concerning Time* were performed several times. We did have resignations from one or two people not wishing to sing in other languages or to sing contemporary music; but by and large I hope that at some stage or other we satisfied most

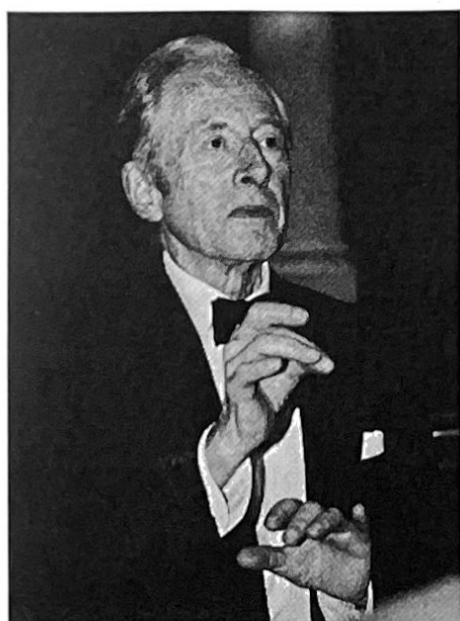
customers in spite of weekly insistence on word and tone, the two most important of the essentials of singing. It was encouraging that during the period of a few years when West Midland Arts made two awards per annum for programme-planning, the choir won one of them in each of two consecutive years.

Excluding music performed exclusively by visiting artists and in-choir soloists, the repertoire list records 569 works ranging from folk-song settings to the St Matthew Passion. We thank all our in-choir soloists and our visiting vocal and instrumental soloists. Ian Yemm, an old boy of the choir, holds the record for visitors' appearances, closely followed by that great Phoenix supporter, Mark Wildman. We thank again all our orchestral players and especially the leaders: Hamish Drummond up to 1997, and thereafter Peter Lewis, joined by Julia Robinson-Dean for one St Matthew Passion performance, while Mary Forrester was spared from singing to lead on another occasion. Thanks also to our in-choir pianists: Sallie Kirkpatrick, Pam Pickford and Mary White.

Places, p³, ranged from small, delightful churches with enthusiastic, wide-eyed and open-eared audiences through the classic but dark London church, recording for BBC 1, to the wonderful Easter-day concert in the St Matthias Cathedral Budapest and to dance-dramas in Hereford Cathedral and Westminster Abbey, while never forgetting beloved St Mary's and St Chad's.

Averil Newell is writing about tours. Why undertake them? They enrich international understanding and friendship, under-pinned by home-stays, increase motivation, contribute to choir-bonding, increase individual responsibility and are fun. They take abroad a taste of England other than the usual political headlines. Between 1969 and 2009 there were twelve Phoenix tours with thirteen return visits. These, plus visits by some other choirs and nineteen tours by young musicians of the County, should have brought Shropshire to the attention of many people to whom otherwise it would be unknown.

Bring on the next 50 years ! All past members surely will join with me in wishing the present conductor, Richard Walker, his successors and all future members good fortune in their journeys through this particular part of the musical world. I hope that their years with the choir will be enjoyed as much as the first Phoenix 50 have been by me.



Richard White in concert (left) and in rehearsal in St Chad's Hall



A New Member's View of Phoenix

I have been a member of Phoenix for a year now, since moving to Shrewsbury from Cardiff.

Singing has been a huge part of my life, having sung with the BBC NCW for 17 years, and so on moving here it was really important to me to find a good choir. This meant not only a good standard of singing but also a choir where the social side and getting to know each other was also important. I have to admit I tried out a couple of other choirs first, mentioning no names, before I was told that Phoenix were really the best choir in the area, so I defected!

From the very first meeting everyone has been extremely welcoming, with a great standard of commitment and musicianship within the choir members. Many not only sing, but play a myriad of instruments too. It's also been great to be involved with other musical events in the county on the back of choir members' other musical interests and to get to know people from other choirs on our workshop days.

The repertoire is different from the big choral pieces that I've done before and it's a great challenge to be in a much smaller ensemble. From a social point of view, I really like the fact that there is always an after-show party where we all bring food and share a few bottles of wine! Moving to an area where I didn't know anyone other than my partner's mum, it was important to me to join a choir where I could make some friends. It's been great for me to meet people from Shrewsbury who do completely different jobs than those in choirs I've sung with in cities. I like hearing about local communities, people keeping sheep, spinning and living out on farms.

It's a completely different world for me and fascinating!

I see the effort that members go to to keep the choir going, which shows how important it is to everybody. Many members spend significant amounts of their time doing extra jobs to keep the choir running.

Our conductor Richard has a dry sense of humour which always gives me a smile! He is an excellent musician and is very supportive to the choir. It's also been great to be able to do some solos with the choir, which is another benefit of being in a smaller choir.

I'm looking forward to singing Bach's Christmas Oratorio next term and to getting to know members of the choir even better in our new term.

Sarah Lee



The Music of the Americas
Programme design by Angela
Thorpe. 5th April 2003

A Message from our Conductor, Richard Walker

Shropshire's premier choir has had a splendid first 50 years, and looks forward to maintaining and further raising its game in the coming decades. Local choirs often have a static membership – but The Phoenix Singers has bucked this trend: more than a third of the choir has joined during the last four years, and (without wishing to appear ageist) the new members have significantly reduced the average age of the membership!

As a medium-sized choir, it is never going to be a contender for performance of the largest-scale works, such as *The Dream of Gerontius*, *The Choral Symphony* or Verdi's *Requiem*, but there is a huge amount of music appropriate for a choir of around 40 members. Add to this the fact that all members have passed an audition, and you begin to see why the Phoenix Singers excel at their 'core' repertoire – baroque, classical and early romantic. Sight-reading of repertoire is routine, and rehearsals are usually spent polishing the performances and giving them a sense of direction – with the results that you can hear tonight.

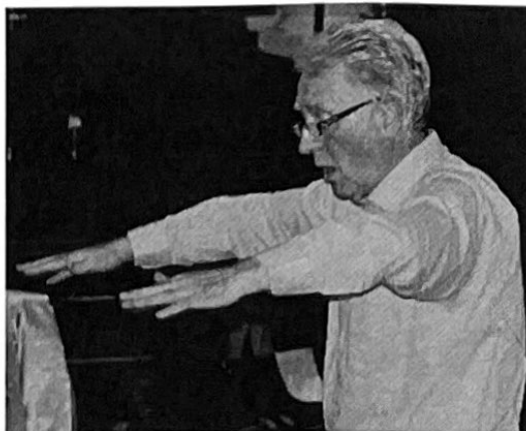
We do additionally regularly tackle some of the more demanding modern repertoire – including a fine James MacMillan work last year. And we encourage young composers with our composition competitions, of which the 2nd has just closed; the two winning works will be performed in our concert on March 19th at St Chad's – together with a performance of Dvorak's Mass in D. We will also perform again on that occasion our Sally Beamish commission of Bird Year in 2007.

The future is looking bright, with membership numbers buoyant and an increasingly good reputation in the area for producing concerts of high quality. Because of this we can rely on the services of first-class soloists time after time, and local musicians almost invariably enthusiastically accept our invitations to play for us. For the future, we are opening the 50th Church Stretton Festival with a performance of Handel's *Messiah* in Concord College on July 30th, a concert in November with orchestra, to include Haydn's *Maria Theresa Mass*, Purcell's *My Heart is Inditing* and Britten's *Hymn to St Cecilia*, and there will be a return visit by our friends in Celle, probably in 2017, culminating in a performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion.

So – spread the word! We have a really good choir here in Shrewsbury, and it's in everyone's interests to make sure that the whole town, and indeed the county, knows it. We deserve sell-out audiences and everyone who reads this can help us achieve that. In turn, that would allow us to programme more ambitiously and perhaps even lower the ticket prices! 300 people at £6 brings in the same income as 150 people at £12.

Meanwhile we are always keen to recruit new singers of appropriate standard, and those who would like to be part of this flagship choir should see any member of the choir or look at the website for details of how they might be able to join. We can find a space for really good singers in any part, but we are actively looking for more tenors and basses at present.

Richard in rehearsal
at St Chad's Church



Postman Pat and Phoenixicks?

In the original series of Postman Pat, there is a character called Miss Rebecca Hubbard. She is often seen around the village, usually on her bicycle, and cuts a doughty figure. Her minor role in Pat's adventures leaves us in no doubt as to her determination, her practicality, and her community spirit.

A song from the series describes her as follows: 'Miss Rebecca Hubbard is a strong-willed lady, never thinks of using any words like 'maybe'. When she starts a job, she likes to see it through, and always likes to feel that she has lots to do. With church choirs, flower shows, fetes and dramas, Cubs and Brownies, guilds for farmers, collections for church charities, at garden parties with high teas. And in between these fine activities, keeps horses, hens and honey bees.'

Since I moved to Shropshire last year, I feel lucky to have met several Miss Rebecca Hubbards - both male and female - and the Phoenix Choir seems to me their natural home. The more I get to know the choir, the more I see the hard work that goes on behind the scenes to facilitate the enjoyment we all derive from each rehearsal, each concert, each party. No one is 'simply' a first bass or a second alto, they also perform another role as ticket printer, chair putter-outer, website designer, tea maker etc etc etc. Jobs undertaken so capably that they become invisible. And it is this spirit which particularly endears the choir to me. The singing is great, the repertoire exciting, the standards high. But what has kept the choir going for 50 years, and will hopefully pass down through us newer recruits for the next 50 years and beyond, is a willingness to work to keep those standards, those opportunities, and that fun.

Postman Pat struggles a lot with the weather on his rounds. On one day, the fog is so bad they are doubtful whether the village choir practice can go ahead. 'Aha,' says the Reverend, 'Miss Rebecca Hubbard will come. Nothing stops her'. And so it is with the Phoenix.

Katie Bedford



Jauchzet, frohlokket
auf, preiset die Tage!!

