

Musical Notes

The Vivace Story 1946-2021



Vivace at Guildford Cathedral, 2018. (Ash Mills)

Mary Clayton and Christine Wilks



Jeremy Backhouse at RAH May 2014. (Ash Mills)

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Foreward

Vivace has a proud and substantial 75 year history as both a high quality large chorus and as an enterprising choir that gives its members memorable experiences. 130 voices in full flow with professional orchestras and soloists leads to magic moments.

In this century alone that has encompassed the absolute silence before the thunder of appreciation at the Royal Albert Hall; sharing a stage with star musicians such as Julian Lloyd-Weber and Tasmin Little, or with Tango dancers and Zulu Nation dancers (on different occasions, of course); performing with the RPO or the award-winning Friary Brass Band; commissioning works from Will Todd and Francis Pott. And many, many more memorable experiences – not least being spoilt at our weekly rehearsals with the talent of our music director Jeremy Backhouse and hugely over-qualified rehearsal accompanist, Francis Pott.

We're delighted to continue to play a part in civic life in Guildford – for example we have sung the Mayor of Guildford's Christmas Carol Concert for over 70 years – but have also taken our joie de vivre on international tours that created joyful memories in some stunning cathedrals and churches (and restaurants and bars) throughout Europe. We are definitely a sociable choir.

In this History, Mary Clayton, our archivist, shows that this is nothing new. Throughout our 75+ years the choir has been marked out for its enterprising and eclectic repertoire, it's ambition and quality, and the years have been studded with inspiring music directors and musicians.

Enjoy reading about our roots: I am confident that the same spirit, enterprise and fun will see us through the next 75 years of great Vivace experiences.

Peter Norman

Chairman



CROSSLEY CLITHEROE

[Photograph—GRAYSTONE BIR

DIRECTOR OF MUSIC TO THE GUILDFORD CORPORATION
CONDUCTOR, GUILDFORD MUNICIPAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
CONDUCTOR, GUILDFORD FESTIVAL CHOIR

Jack Crossley Clitheroe, the founder of the Choir (SHC 7708-file 7)

In the Beginning.....

1944. The end of the war was in sight, and an enlightened Guildford Municipal Corporation was thinking how to build a better Peace. During the War 'the English public had awakened to the pleasure' of choral and orchestral music, according to a local reporter. Guildford Symphony Orchestra put on Lunch Hour concerts and Tuesday Evening concerts. There were even symphony concerts of gramophone records attended by up to 170 people. In addition to this, the Municipal Corporation decided it was time to enhance musical education in schools and they employed a Mr Clitheroe to organise it, but he had a bigger plan.

John (Jack) Crossley Clitheroe saw no reason why Guildford should not become one of the most prominent musical centres in the country, a centre of culture. He thought it was ideally situated for holding musical festivals with its many historic attractions and appealing countryside, which would be a source of revenue for the Borough. He suggested the Guildford Symphony Orchestra should become the Corporation's Municipal Orchestra and that a Municipal Choir should be formed. Ideally the choir would be formed immediately so that it could prepare for the peace celebrations. Clitheroe hoped to put on the first music festival in the summer of 1946, but also concerts throughout the year. The plan was adopted, and Jack Clitheroe became Guildford's first Director of Music. Twenty-six concerts were actually put on in the first year – orchestral, chamber and choral. This year would see the beginnings of Guildford's choral heritage from which our present choir would eventually emerge.

So, who was Jack Crossley Clitheroe? He was originally from Preston, Lancashire, and at the tender age of 15 he became organist and choir master of St Stephen's Church in Bury, Lancashire. By 19 he was the organist and conductor at Galway Cathedral Collegiate Church, Ireland, before moving onto a similar post in Omagh. He spent five years in New Zealand, from 1928, employed by the government to organise the development of music there. He was a lecturer in Music at Dunedin, where he conducted the Dunedin New Symphony Orchestra, and he was also a frequent broadcaster. He returned to Northern Ireland in 1933 to become the organist at St Peter's parish church

Belfast. He organised choral and orchestral concerts during the war under the auspices of the Civil Defence Services, and orchestral concerts for school children as well as broadcasting for the BBC. His drive to provide and foster music education for children brought him to Guildford, where he stayed, developing music provision for all ages and tastes. Guildford was lucky to get him.

The Municipal choir, known as the Festival Choir, was therefore formed during 1945, gathering singers from church choirs of several denominations, the Teachers' Choir, Dennis Male Voice Choir and senior members of the County School for Girls. Their first performance was on 26 January 1946 where they performed Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise* as part of a victory concert. A Summer Music Festival followed, from 12 to 20 July, and was a great success. The Teachers' Choir performed Bach's *Mass in B Minor* in Holy Trinity Church on the 14th, and on the 20th, following Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique Symphony*, the Festival Choir brought the festival to a close with rousing renditions of Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens* and Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*. A member of the Town Finance Committee who was "doubtful and concerned as to the justification of the proposed expenditure from the public purse" said that time had proved his fears groundless. "The orchestra and choir are already making a name for themselves and I look forward to the time not so far distant when Guildford will rank among the chief centres of music in the south of England."

By December 1946 the Festival Choir had 190 members, and their performance of Handel's *Messiah* was a sell-out. The choir's repertoire expanded with a performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in the Summer Music Festival of 1947 and Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* in 1948. The Music Festival moved to May in 1949, and Crossley Clitheroe, as he was becoming known, formed a second, smaller choir to undertake shorter, often unaccompanied pieces of music. He called this choir the Philharmonic Choir and it probably had some very good singers. The repertoire of both choirs continued to expand over the years to include such works as Bach's *Mass in B minor*, Beethoven's *Choral Symphony*, Brahms' *Requiem*, and Delius' *Sea Drift*, but also pieces by Palestrina and Purcell. In 1959 there was a performance of the Verdi *Requiem* in the 'New Cathedral' in aid of the Mayor's Cathedral Building Fund. Every Christmas the choir would perform *The Messiah* at the Technical College, and lead the singing

of Carols just before Christmas in aid of the Mayor's Christmas Relief Fund. At first they sang on the steps of Holy Trinity Church and then, from 1952, inside the Methodist Church on North Street, with Kenneth Lank at the organ.



Guildford Municipal Orchestra performing at the Technical College
(SHC 7708-file 7)

The late spring music festival continued to be a huge and increasing success. The local paper heaped praise on both the Music Director as conductor and organiser, and the two choirs. 'Crossley Clitheroe was obviously the complete master of the composer's intention', 'a real triumph for the conductor', 'the audience was exhilarated by [the performance's] splendour', 'a major musical and spiritual experience, the choir at their best', 'never was there more exalting and beautiful harmony', are just a few of the comments made.

Famous soloists also came to Guildford. Joan Hammond sang two operatic arias at the 8th music festival in 1953, before the concert was brought to a close by the Philharmonic Choir singing Borodin's Polvtisian Dances. Other

celebrity performers who gave concerts included the internationally renowned pianists Fou Ts'ong, Julius Katchen, and Joseph Cooper of TV's 'Face the Music' fame.

However, there was one increasingly obvious problem for music in Guildford - there was no suitable venue to host large concerts. Orchestral concerts were accommodated in the Odeon cinema, but the only place for choral concerts with a large choir was the Technical College. Crossley Clitheroe pushed the council to look for a suitable site for a concert hall. As early as 1948 it was suggested that 'The Firs', London Road, might be that suitable site. They were still talking about it in 1954. Construction of the building that became known as the Civic Hall was finally underway by 1957 but it had not been fully completed by 7 October 1962 when the opening concert took place. Although the auditorium was finished, the seating had not been fixed, and the restaurant and kitchen still needed to be fitted out. Despite that, the building was described in the press as 'a hall of distinction and simple elegance'.

Unfortunately, the main driving force behind the plan, Crossley Clitheroe, died suddenly in June 1962. At least he would have seen the building nearing completion, although he was denied the pleasure of conducting the first concert in which the Festival Choir performed Vaughan Williams' *Serenade to Music*. Also on the programme was a piece composed by Crossley Clitheroe called *Pastoral*, performed in his memory. He was not a showman, but a kindly man with excellent organising ability and a great gift for friendship. He had said that it was his ambition to leave music in Guildford so secure that his successor would have no difficulty. Vernon Handley was able to build on that firm foundation.

Vernon 'Tod' Handley

In 1969 Vernon Handley commented 'I'm not very well known because I'm a bit mad and it's not a very good idea to put a madman in charge of an orchestra'. However, that was exactly what Guildford Municipal Council had done seven years earlier following the sudden death of Crossley Clitheroe. Tod, as he was known, persuaded the council to let him put on concerts of unfamiliar music, many pieces by English composers, at a time when London venues were only performing what one reviewer called 'bread-and butter-classical favourites'. The Civic Hall was a near sell out for most concerts with concert-goers coming from far afield, including London, to hear works in Tod's 'enterprising concerts' series, as the orchestra became fully professional. Much of the credit went to Tod himself, a charismatic conductor who, according to a local music critic, 'not only brings the highest standard of musicianship and conducting to all that he does, but who also has the knack of giving self-confidence to those who work with him, thus bringing out the best in them'. He was very popular with both orchestra and choir.

Tod's conducting style was modelled on that of Sir Adrian Boult, his mentor, although he also said he learnt a lot from the dance band leader Joe Loss. He had great baton precision and would beat out the more challenging bars in full. There were no wide sweeping gestures. His good humour and self-effacing nature endeared him to his players, and a musician who played a particularly good solo section would get a wink of appreciation from the rostrum. When acknowledging the applause at the end of a concert he would frequently pat the score to indicate that the composer was the one who really deserved the credit.

Soon after Tod became Music Director, the name of the orchestra changed to Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra (GPO), and he formed a youth choir called Proteus, for 15-21 year olds. The idea was that, as the members got older, they would move into the main choir. However they had so much fun no-one wanted to leave, and several members were still there when approaching 30. Some found their life partners at rehearsals. From the beginning of the 1965/66 season, the Festival Choir and the Philharmonic Choir merged to become Guildford Philharmonic Choir (GPC). Both choirs sang together in a

concert on 26 June 1965. The Philharmonic Choir opened the concert with Parry's *Songs of Farewell*, conducted by Kenneth Lank, and the Festival choir sang Haydn's *Nelson Mass*. It was the final concert before the choirs became one.

In 1966 the choir's rehearsal venue moved from the old Methodist Church at the bottom of North Street to the upstairs meeting hall of the new one in Woodbridge Road. The choir members continued to put their weekly subs of 6d into a saucer at the entrance and enter the sum in the registers. After decimalisation in 1971, it became 2½p. In 1975 the subs increased by 100% to 5p a week. The numbers dipped a little but soon the choir was back to its usual complement of about 150 members, and as usual there were fewer tenors than the other voice parts.

Choir rehearsals with Tod were hard work and he could be quite demanding, but they were all laced with humour (unless he was feeling unwell). He had piercing eyes that seemed to penetrate you and kept you on your toes. His exceptionally clear beat was much appreciated, and he loved telling the choir about his experiences with Sir Adrian Boult. One of his favourite phrases was 'It's all in the stick, just watch'. Despite being increasingly in demand as a conductor in London and elsewhere, he took nearly all the choir's rehearsals himself. When starting a new piece, the usual plan was for the tenors and basses to go downstairs into the Methodist Church's auditorium to rehearse, being put through their paces by Kenneth Lank, who was one of the basses. After the mid-session break, the men would re-join the women and go through what had, hopefully, been learnt.

During Tod's time the choir recorded Gerald Finzi's *Intimations of Mortality* in Guildford Cathedral, and Patrick Hadley's *The Trees so High* in Kingsway Central Hall. Both pieces are still available on a highly rated CD on the Lyrita label. Most concerts were performed at the Civic Hall in Guildford, but there was the occasional foray into the wider world. In November 1974 the choir and the GPO ventured as far as Canterbury Cathedral to perform Sir Arthur Bliss' *Meditations on a Theme by John Blow* and Holst's *Ode to Death*, a programme they had performed the week before in Guildford Cathedral. The choir's performance of the Holst was described as joyous which fitted the sentiment of the verses, despite the piece's theme. In June 1977 the Gala Silver Jubilee

Concert performed in the Civic Hall was repeated in Bracknell Sports Centre, not quite as atmospheric a venue as Canterbury, but a good concert nevertheless.

Some of the pieces that Tod wanted to perform could be quite challenging, many of them being contemporary music. The first British performance of Boris Blacher's *Requiem* had to be postponed because the choir, despite many, many rehearsals, was not ready. It is an extremely difficult piece to sing – one choir member called it 'impossible'. A wholly orchestral concert was put on instead and the Blacher was finally performed on 9 Dec 1978, but not before the 2nd basses had had a voluntary extra rehearsal. In the end it was an excellent, if exhausting, performance. "To say that [the choir] had mastered all the problems would be an exaggeration" remarked a reviewer in the *Financial Times* (no less!), but he then went on to say, "How many amateur choirs in Germany or Austria, I wonder, would tackle this work and do it as well as this".

A few years later, Tod wanted to perform a piece by Anthony Scott, a local lad who had been a student of Gerald Finzi. After two whole rehearsals on *Mass of the Dawn*, the composer came to a choir rehearsal accompanied by Gerald Finzi's widow Joy. He spent much of the time scribbling at the back of the rehearsal room and then showing several sheets to Tod in the break. A printed manuscript-style score in the Choir's Archive shows a loose additional sheet, no doubt the result of the scribbling in the rehearsal. There were more such sheets after subsequent rehearsals. However, despite having been advertised as a forthcoming concert, the piece was abandoned and may never have been performed.

Most of the repertoire was less experimental, although the emphasis was on British composers. Elgar's *The Kingdom* and *The Apostles*, and Britten's *Cantata Academica* and *War Requiem* were performed, as well as works by Howells, Mathias, Parry, and Vaughan Williams.

After more than two decades as Director of Music for the Council (now Guildford Borough), Tod decided it was time to move onto pastures new, but he continued as the Orchestra's Artistic Adviser, returning occasionally to conduct.



Vernon 'Tod' Handley

The Baton moves on

Following Tod Handley's departure, the Borough brought in a series of guest conductors for both the orchestra and choir. The list is very impressive: Brian Wright, Norman del Mar, Sir David Willcocks, Richard Armstrong, Wilfried Boettcher and En Shao. Occasionally Tod Handley returned to wield his extra-long baton. All this was organised by the efficient and friendly management team led by Kathy Atkins at the Philharmonic Orchestra Office. Kathy had been Tod's personal assistant and then concert manager. When Tod left, she became the music administrator for the Borough of Guildford. With Hugh Bean and John Ludlow, the joint leaders of the orchestra, Kathy would plan the season's programme with the conductors. They would then discuss orchestra personnel, many being regulars, and soloists. According to Hugh and John, Kathy engendered a family atmosphere and players felt a loyalty to Guildford as they knew they were appreciated. Once the choral work had been chosen by the conductor, the Choir's chairman would liaise with Kathy.

GPC's next chorus master after Tod's departure was Kenneth Lank, who had been Tod's assistant for many years, and Crossley Clitheroe's before that. He trained the choir for performances of Bax's *To the Name above Every Name*, Delius' *Sea Drift* and Verdi's *Requiem* which was performed in Guildford Cathedral under the baton of Brian Wright. Kenneth was succeeded in September 1984 by Simon Halsey who was also Director of Music at Warwick University and Chorus Master of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. When Simon was unable to appear due to sickness or another engagement, he would send along another member of his remarkably musical family to take the rehearsal, including his father, the renowned choral director Louis Halsey. Neville Creed also took some rehearsals. It was during Simon's time that auditions and re-auditions were introduced, a no doubt necessary but nerve-racking innovation.

Simon's connection with Warwick University led to two exciting excursions from Guildford, a performance of Rossini's *Petite Messe Solonelle* at Warwick University's Arts Centre in 1985, and a trip to L'Eglise St Roch, Paris to perform Berlioz *Te Deum* in November the following year, with the University's choir and orchestra. Berlioz would have had fond memories of this church as the

première of his first full scale work, the *Messe Solennelle*, was given there in July 1825 when he was just 21. The first performance of his *Te Deum* was in the nearby and larger Saint-Eustache church in 1855. The choir could have done with a larger church on this occasion as the photograph shows. There were 400 performers squashed into modest St Roch.

Simon's swan song was a concert of Haydn's *Mass in Bb* and Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* in the Civic Hall in March 1987. The choir's performance was described as highly professional and a fitting tribute to their departing chorus master, who had just founded the City of Birmingham Touring Opera which later became the Birmingham Opera Company. Neville Creed stepped into the breach to train the choir for their next concert just seven weeks later, conducted by Sir David Willcocks. Their performance of Duruflé's *Requiem* and Holst's *Hymn of Jesus* was reported as assured and polished, so it was no surprise that Neville was chosen from among the 50 applicants to be the next chorus master. A short list of applicants had been drawn up who each took a rehearsal, and Neville was the choir's choice. This post was considered a prestigious appointment as the choir sang all its performances with the fully professional Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra, 'the orchestra of the South East', and the chorus master occasionally had the opportunity to conduct the orchestra as well as train the choir.

Neville stayed with GPC for seven years, preparing the choir for several eminent conductors, but also conducting a few concerts himself. In a performance of Mozart's *Requiem*, conducted by Wilfried Boettcher in November 1988, Neville was praised for his thorough training. In the Offertorium, according to a reviewer, 'the sturdy tenors proved they were far from becoming a dying choral race and finished with a fine fugue'. Other highlights from Neville's time include a performance of Handel's *Israel in Egypt* where Neville's conducting was described as dynamic, and an open air 'Opera Spectacular' in the grounds of Petworth House, with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, both in 1991.

In 1986 Guildford was fortunate to find a replacement for Vernon Handley. Sir Charles Groves accepted the position of Principal Conductor of the GPO, and insisted on performing one concert a year with the choir. He frequently took

choir rehearsals, with his wife sitting at the back of the hall. Like Tod, Sir Charles promoted the work of homegrown talent, being described as a benevolent champion of British composers. He was noted for adding adventurous new works to the repertoire of his orchestras and it was said that he gained the respect of the players and the affection of performers. He also fought fiercely for causes he believed in, even selling raffle tickets in the street to help save the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra in 1954.

In 1986 Sir Charles conducted Guildford Philharmonic Choir and Goldsmith's Choral Union in a performance of Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*, firstly in Guildford Cathedral and then in St David's Hall, Cardiff. He was unphased by the rather sparse audience in Cardiff, remarking that he was not upset by the small number of people there; it was a sign of the times. The Hall's publicity describing the work as 'taking the oratorio screaming into the 20th century', might not have helped to boost ticket sales.

Unfortunately, Sir Charles died in June 1992. At his memorial concert in October the choir sang Mozart's *Requiem* to a packed Cathedral, conducted by En Shao. As was noted in the programme, 'everyone who came into contact with him experienced his great musicianship, his warm personality and his many kindnesses'.

One of the most frequent guest conductors was Brian Wright, who conducted the choir in eight performances between 1984 and 1995. Many of these were of monumental and dramatic works, such as the Verdi *Requiem* and *Te Deum*, Berlioz, *Grande Messe des Morts*, and *Te Deum*, and Brahms *Requiem*.

Goldsmith's Choral Union, Brian's principal choir, joined GPC for most of these concerts bringing the combined number of singers to over 200. A review of Berlioz, *Grande Messe des Morts*, performed in Guildford Cathedral on 12 March 1988 called the performance 'awe-inspiring and noble', and the choir as 'outstanding'. The following year GPC joined 33 other choirs from across the UK to sing the *Grande Messe* in the Royal Albert Hall, with Brian Wright conducting. There were 1500 voices, more than double the number Berlioz had initially wanted, but the piece was never performed with that size of choir in his lifetime.

Brian also stepped in, sometimes with very little warning, if Tod Handley was unwell. He conducted Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* in May 1985 at such short

notice that he was not mentioned in the programme. The following February, again stepping in for Handley, he conducted the GPO in a performance of Holst's *Suite 'The Planets'*, with the ladies of the choir singing the wordless, chorus of *Neptune* that fades to nothing. However, a week or so later, with Tod recovered, the ladies had a second opportunity to sing the Neptune chorus, this time in Bexhill-on-Sea. February 1986 was one of the coldest Februaries on record, the day-time temperature never reaching even 1°C. The ladies boarded a coach in Guildford in very wintry conditions. Unfortunately, the heating on the coach had broken down and thick snow fell for most of the journey. They got colder and colder just sitting still, in what became a giant fridge on wheels, despite keeping their coats, scarves and gloves on, and by the time they arrived in snowy Bexhill they were frozen to the marrow. The arctic conditions made the high notes of the sopranos rather thin, reedy, and atmospheric – perfect for the ethereal 'mystic' Neptune, fortunately.

The choir has had some very good accompanists over the years. In the 1960s and 1970s Mary Whittle (née Rivers), Maureen Hall, Prue Smith (née Edden) and Patricia Wood (née Finch) accompanied the Festival Choir and Proteus, and Ethel Crane played for the Philharmonic Choir. From the late 70s Linden Knight and Patricia Wood shared the duties until Christopher Mabley took over in 1982. He now teaches at Trinity Laban's Junior Department. In 1987 Lynette Newman, Neville Creed's sister replaced Christopher Mabley. Towards the end of Neville's tenure Lynette left, and the choir was very fortunate to acquire the services of a fully professional pianist, Jeremy Filsell. He made the choir warm-up sessions much more interesting, embellishing the exercises into mini compositions. As a former organ scholar of Keble College, Oxford, he was more than able to play the organ or piano for the choir's concerts at the Guildford Festival.

In 1994, Neville left to take up the post of Chorus Director of the London Philharmonic Choir, and the choir looked forward to the future with a new face behind the baton.

The Backhouse Years

In contrast to earlier times, the choir were very involved in choosing Neville's successor. The Choir's committee sifted through the many applications and came up with a short list of eight candidates, who each took half of a rehearsal in January 1995. One rather supercilious candidate explained that minims were the 'white notes' in the scores. How had everyone managed before this elucidation! The choir then voted, putting the candidates in order of preference. Peter White, who had been Neville's assistant, came a close second but Jeremy Backhouse was the overall favourite, and was warmly endorsed by the choir's rehearsal pianist, Jeremy Filsell. Over 25 years later Jeremy Backhouse is still the Music Director – the choir definitely made the right choice.

Things looked different from Jeremy's viewpoint. He found it quite daunting to face a choir of over 100 singers, the largest he had stood in front of at that time. Even more daunting was the interview that followed the rehearsal, where one of the interviewers, John Britten, was introduced to him as the nephew of Benjamin Britten.

At this point the Borough still engaged guest conductors, including Edward Warren, Grant Llewellyn, and Jonathan Willcocks who conducted his own composition *Great is the Glory* in November 1995. In March 1997 En Shao, GPO's principal conductor, took the baton for a brilliant and dramatic performance of Rachmaninov's *The Bells*. Then everything changed.

Kathy Atkins retired in 1996 as Orchestra Manager and was replaced by Nicola Gould. Over the next couple of years there was a dramatic shake up of music provision in the Borough which led to a flurry of critical letters in the pages of the *Surrey Advertiser*, particularly in August 1998 when the new season's programme arrived on subscribers' doormats. There were complaints regarding the reduction in the number of major works being performed, as more emphasis was being given to smaller groups of both musicians and singers. The choir had been formed to support the Borough's orchestra so it was clear that as the orchestra's relationship with the Borough was changing, so would that of the choir. Up to this point all choir expenses, including the

chorus master's salary and the costs of putting on concerts, had been covered by the Borough, but this support was removed in 1998. The choir had the choice of giving up or going it alone. Under the leadership of its Chairman John Trigg, the members decided on the latter course. The Borough funded one of GPC's concerts each year until 2002 but then all ties and funding from the Borough ceased. The choir could now choose the content of its concerts, and the orchestra and soloists it wanted to perform with, although the choir was always very happy to perform with the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra.

As the choir was now an entirely free agent, it was thought that the choir's name should reflect that status. A list of suggested names was compiled, and the choir chose from 156 possibles. Luckily some of the more bizarre ones did not make the shortlist, such as Choir 57, Singers R Us, or The Backhouse Babes, which conjured up thoughts of soup, toys or scantily clad young women (not in the Cathedral for a November concert!). Vivace Chorus was finally chosen, and it was hoped it would portray the vitality and enthusiasm the choir members all shared. We have been performing as Vivace Chorus since the start of the 2005-06 season and have not looked back.

There have been so many stand-out performances and experiences during Jeremy's tenure as Music Director, the first being only a few months after his appointment. On Sunday 7 May 1995 a group from the choir joined Guildford Choral Society and ten other choirs in Hyde Park as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of VE Day. It was an incredibly hot day for so early in May, about 25°C. The morning was spent in rehearsals with the European Union Youth Orchestra, and then all singers were in place on the stage for the arrival of 50 Heads of State and the Queen. The Orchestra did very well, especially as the conductor Lt Col Ross stated that he could not possibly conduct with his back to the Queen, so didn't actually face the orchestra at all. It was even more tricky in the piece with the bagpipes, as bagpipes start in their own time. Everyone had to follow them.

The first concert given by the choir without financial support from the Borough was Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* in March 1998. The night before the concert the solo tenor phoned Jeremy to say he could not sing the following day. The ailing tenor left a message on tenor Eugene Ginty's answerphone on that Friday night asking him to step into the breach, but Eugene had thought it was

a friend playing a joke. Luckily he checked the following morning, only to find it was a real, urgent request. He leapt out of bed and drove as quickly as he could from Colchester, Essex, singing along to a tape of Gerontius while he drove, to remind himself of the piece. He just made it on stage at 1.45 for the afternoon rehearsal. At the end of the rehearsal, the choir's chairman and his wife, John and Hilary Trigg, gathered Eugene up and took him back to their home where he consumed a massive full English breakfast – he had not eaten all day! He was a real star in the evening, singing gloriously and movingly, and saved the choir from a deep embarrassment on its maiden concert since becoming independent.

One of the choir's more bizarre experiences was singing Beethoven's Symphony No 9 'The Choral' at the Barbican in May 1998. A wealthy music lover had paid a small fortune to be allowed to conduct the work himself. Unfortunately, he needed to focus on the score, so his eyes were downcast for 90% of the time and he gave no obvious direction to the orchestra or singers. However, the word got round the choir – watch the lead violinist. He conducted the whole piece with firm nods of his head and interpretive flicks of his bow. And he got the biggest applause of the night since he had single-handedly saved the performance.

The choir has sung three times at the Royal Albert Hall since the Millennium. In October 2001 it was the backing choir for Russell Watson 'The Voice'. Although audiences are usually very appreciative, the choir had never encountered the cheers, whistles and whoops they, or rather Russell Watson, received after the high notes at the end of *Nessum Dorma*. The experience was repeated in April the following year at the Brighton Centre.

Vivace Chorus's next RAH appearance, in 2011, was very different. The choir took the great risk of hiring the Hall for a performance of Mahler's *Symphony No 8, 'Symphony of a Thousand'*, with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. They had sung this monumental work in Guildford Cathedral in 2003, a great triumph for both Jeremy and the choir. On this second occasion, the choir was joined by London Symphony Chorus, The London Chorus, Romsey Choral Society, and Tiffin Boys' Choir. Altogether there were in excess of 500 performers. It was the first time Jeremy had conducted in the auditorium. As he stood on the podium, he thought of all the international maestros who had

stood there before him, including Sir Thomas Beecham who had founded the very orchestra he was facing. Reviewers praised his masterly and calm control of so many musicians and singers. It was a truly magical performance to a packed house and a real triumph for all involved.

Vivace's latest appearance at the Royal Albert Hall was for a magnificent performance of Verdi's *Requiem* in May 2014, with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra again, London Philharmonic Choir, Twickenham Choral Society and Wimbledon Choral Society. To publicise the concert a group of 11, known as the 'Singing Cyclists', cycled from the hotel where Verdi began composing the Requiem to the RAH, where Verdi conducted the first British performance. In the process they got very wet but raised nearly £9000 for a local charity, the Rainbow Trust, who support families of very ill children. The concert was spellbinding and one which no-one in the choirs or the audience are likely to forget. It was described as 'mesmerising', 'thrilling', 'an emotional experience of sound', and 'when the final chord died away no-one wanted to break the magic of that atmosphere, and silence hung in the air for some while'. Eventually, after what seemed like several minutes of emotional silence, the audience broke into thunderous applause. Unforgettable!



The Singing Cyclists

Vivace have sung in several other venues in London. Between 2005 and 2010 the choir took part in five 'Last Night of the Proms' concerts in Fairfield Halls, Croydon, conducted by Darrell Davison, with all the traditional hats, flag waving, whistles etc, which were great fun. Vivace Chorus takes part in the Music Festivals put on in St Martin in the Fields by the Brandenburg Sinfonia, usually in January or February, singing Vivaldi's *Gloria*, Mozart's *Requiem*, or Fauré's *Requiem*, by candlelight. The space for the singers is quite small so only about 50 members can take part, but these change each time. The choir first sang with the Brandenburg Sinfonia in a performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, in conjunction with the Freiburg Bachchor, in Guildford Cathedral in March 2000. Later that year, in August, the choir was invited to join the Brandenburg in an open-air concert of Baroque favourites at Crystal Palace Bowl, and have been the choir's orchestra of choice ever since.

Another memorable excursion was to the Royal Festival Hall in May 2017, where Vivace performed Brahms' *Requiem*, and also a new composition by Francis Pott, called *Cantus Maris*, an atmospheric piece that really portrays a sense of the sea. Francis took over from Jeremy Filsell as the choir's rehearsal pianist in 2008 when Jeremy accepted the post of Principal Organist of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. He is now Director of Music at Saint Thomas' Church, Manhattan, New York City. The choir swapped one exceptional accompanist for another. Francis was Head of the London College of Music and had just been appointed their first Professor of Composition when he started spending his Monday evenings in Guildford at choir rehearsals. Well over a decade later he is still brightening up rehearsals with his playing and erudition. He is such an asset, being able to play any combination of parts he is asked to, and also play in the choir's concerts, either solo or as part of an ensemble.

It hasn't been all gallivanting about. The choir have put on some memorable and exciting concerts in Guildford: Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*, Britten's *War Requiem*, the *Concert for Rowan* where all three of Jeremy's choirs joined together, the *Concert for Peace* to commemorate the centenary of the end of the Great War, two *Nights at the Opera*, Will Todd's *Mass in Blue* with Palmeri's *Misatango* brought to life by professional Tango

dancers, and a joint concert with the Guildford Shakespeare Company. In March 2020, just as the Covid pandemic was taking hold, Vivace performed David Fanshawe's incredible *African Sanctus*, complete with the dancers of the Mighty Zulu Nation Theatre Company, wielding their assegais. In addition, of course, the choir have enjoyed singing works by Handel, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and other more traditional pieces. It has enjoyed working with amazing vocal soloists, both student and professional, and has been able to engage top-class soloists such as Julian Lloyd Webber, Tamsin Little, Chloë Hanslip and Michael Collins.

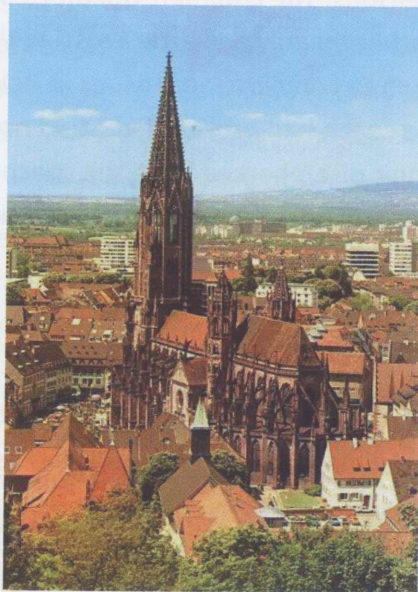
Apart from concerts, the choir has undertaken other events. It's Come & Sing days have become a permanent fixture in the calendar for the end of January (apart from 2021). There are usually about 180 singers who enjoy a morning of singing, followed by lunch of homemade soup, bread and cheese, then a bit more rehearsal, ending with a mini performance. It has been described as an excellent lunch with a bit of singing thrown in, but everyone works very hard.

The choir has made two recordings with Jeremy. In 2010 it recorded Will Todd's *Te Deum* at Cranmore School with the Will Todd Ensemble, a work especially commissioned by Vivace Chorus. This piece also featured choruses of children from four local churches and schools. After several foreign tours, the choir had a well-practised repertoire of short pieces. Some of these and a few Christmas Carols were recorded for a CD entitled 'Choral Classics' at Charterhouse School Chapel with David Coram on the organ.

During the pandemic the choir did what many choirs had to do – go digital - with weekly rehearsals taking place via Zoom. It was great to see other members on the screen, and to sing out, knowing that Jeremy could not hear any wrong notes. Many members missed hearing others in their voice part, to keep them on the right path. The choir's CD of Choral Classics came in useful, as choir members were able to 'sing along' to their own recording. They also managed to record a version of 'You'll Never Walk Alone' from *Carousel*, a firm favourite of the Liverpool FC supporting Music Director, and a Carol Concert to raise funds for the Mayor of Guildford's Christmas Appeal, both available to view on Youtube at time of writing. Because of the pandemic, Vivace Chorus will be celebrating its 75th anniversary a year late, in November 2022, with a special concert entitled 'Feast'.



The Choir on Zoom during lockdown



The Münster, Freiburg

The Freiburg connection

In September 1979, Guildford was formally twinned with Freiburg im Breisgau, a delightful historic city in Baden-Württemberg (South West Germany). The Guildford Twinning Association was formed to promote links, understanding, co-operation and friendship between Guildford and Freiburg. One such link was through music. Councillor Bill Bellerby worked tirelessly with Kathy Atkins of the Philharmonic Office to forge a link with Guildford Philharmonic Choir and the Freiburg Bachchor.

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of the twinning of Guildford with Freiburg, about 80 members of the Freiburg Bachchor travelled to join GPC in a performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* in the Cathedral on 28 April 1990. Accommodation was provided by choir members in their own homes, an arrangement that would be reciprocated later in the year in Freiburg. The concert coincided with the 75th birthday of the conductor, Sir Charles Groves, making it more of an occasion.

To continue the 10th anniversary twinning celebrations, GPC was invited to sing Handel's *Messiah* on Saturday 1 September 1990 in Freiburg. This was a memorable trip for many reasons. The choir left Guildford at 4 am on a double-decker coach. It seemed rather bouncy and after crossing the Channel the drivers stopped at a garage in La Louvière, near Mons in Belgium. The hydraulic suspension on the coach had broken and could not be repaired. It was a hot day and as the choir disembarked from the coach, they realised there was nowhere to go for any refreshments or even to sit down, so they just parked themselves on the kerb and waited in the sunshine, for 5 hours, until the replacement coaches arrived. The border guards at the Belgian/German border kindly contacted Freiburg to warn them that their visitors would be late, so when the choir finally made it to Freiburg about 1.30am, their German hosts and the Burgermeister (Mayor), complete with buffet supper, were still waiting. The choir chairman, Maxwell New, said that being in a broken-down bus in the middle of nowhere in Belgium, with no mobile connection and 56 hungry choir members was not an experience he would wish to repeat. He was extremely grateful to one of the basses, Michael Longford, who had perfect German and was therefore able to arrange for the replacement coaches,

communicate with border guards, and explain to the choir's German hosts when they did finally arrive.

The concert took place in the Münster. Concerts in this historic, beautiful cathedral are limited and it was a great honour to be allowed to sing there. Volunteers spent the afternoon bringing extra chairs into the aisles and in the evening it was completely full. The joint choir stood for the whole performance, including the soloists' arias, which was particularly hard going for the basses at the back, as there was a 15ft (4.5m) drop behind them and no safety rail. When the conductor, Hans-Michael Beuerle the Bachchor music director, approached the staging after the interval, several Bachchor sopranos and altos pointed at him, with looks of horror on their faces. None of them said anything, they just kept gesticulating, and he naturally became extremely anxious. One of GPC's altos then noticed his white bow tie was at an odd angle, so she quietly slipped off the stage and straightened it, to his great relief that there was no serious issue, and the performance continued. The audience were not aware of the British tradition of standing for the Hallelujah Chorus. However, the husband of one of GPC's sopranos, the earl of Onslow, stood for the whole chorus, unabashed. A review in a regional newspaper remarked how the two choirs 'melted into a homogeneous and unbreakable unity' and praised the rich sound.

Even the journey home was not without incident. On a trip to the Münsterplatz market, one soprano had bought some really tasty Münster cheese. Several hours on a hot coach resulted in an ever stronger cheesy odour pervading the whole coach, but at least it didn't break down.

In October 1992 the Freiburgers were back in Guildford for a performance of Brahms' *Requiem*, conducted by Hans-Michael Beuerle in the Civic Hall. Again, over 80 Germans came, many staying with the same choir members as they had in 1990. Then GPC returned to Freiburg to sing Britten's *War Requiem* in the Stadthalle on 14 November 1993. In rehearsals, the two choirs were sitting mixed together. The Bachchor had been rehearsing with choral scores which had just the choral parts, so when the choirs rehearsed with the tenor and baritone soloists several members of the Bachchor were hearing Wilfred Owens poems for the first time. They were very moved by the words and realised that the work was written as a reconciliation. When words such as "I

am the enemy you killed, my friend" were sung, they understood why one soloist should always be English and the other one German. This time the solo tenor was British (Ian Bostridge) and the bass was German (Klaus Häger). Sitting next to each other and following the words of the Wilfred Owen poems in a shared copy was an extremely emotional experience, particularly for those from both towns who had lived through the difficult years 1939 -1945. Again the reviewers commented on how perfectly the two choirs blended together and responded well to the conductor, who was Neville Creed on this occasion.

Guildford Philharmonic Choir and the Freiburg Bachchor continued to visit each other every two to three years, putting on joint performances of works by Bach, Beethoven, Dvorak, Handel and Verdi until 2008, although a small number of the Bachchor joined Vivace Chorus in 2012 for Britten's *War Requiem* in the Cathedral. In 1998 the choir sang Handel's *Israel in Egypt* in Freiburg with Jeremy Backhouse conducting. He was amazed at the difference between the two choirs' funding and facilities. The Freiburg Bachchor had a beautiful, purpose-built, and dedicated rehearsal building on the outskirts of the city, a state-of-the-art concert hall, and the luxury of seemingly endless rehearsal time that stretched for days before the concert. This was very different from what everyone was used to in the UK. It was so much harder for the Bachchor's conductor, Hans Michael Beuerle, when he came to conduct in Guildford, having only one three-hour rehearsal to put things together!

Over the years some strong friendships developed, with choir members visiting their hosts in between choral trips. Individual choir members may have had small adventures on their visits to Freiburg (boozy lunches in the Black Forest, nude saunas, trips to beer gardens, celebrations of the spargel or asparagus harvest, etc) but no journey was as eventful as the first.

Vivace in Europe

Northern France 2009

After almost twenty years of collaboration between the choirs of Freiburg and Guildford, the time seemed right to branch out to other European destinations. The first foray was to Northern France for a five day, three concert tour. The choir was based in Rouen, a beautiful medieval city with an abundance of timber framed buildings, some standing at a jaunty angle. The first concert was there, in their Notre Dame Cathedral which is famous for its three towers, each in a different style. The programme included parts of Vivaldi *Gloria* and Mozart *Requiem*, but also pieces by Tallis, Byrd and Tavener among others. The organist for this tour was Andrew Earis.

The next day the choir visited Monet's garden and took far too many photos of the lily pond, before continuing onto Beauvais, which is the highest-vaulted cathedral in Europe. Inside, the columns look too thin and tall for the height of the building, and parts of the cathedral did in fact collapse in the 13th and 16th centuries. It now has both internal and external supports to prevent further collapses, and the choir's singing did not have any bad effects.

The final concert was in Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, where the programme was greatly reduced to fit the specific half hour slot and was a surprise to the tourists visiting the cathedral.

Alsace 2012

Following the success of the French tour, the choir's chairman James Garrow organised another one in 2012, this time to Strasbourg and the Alsace region. The first concert was in the Herz Jesu Kirche in Freiburg where many choir members were able to catch up with old friends from the Bachchor. The programme this time started off with *Zadok the Priest* and ended with Parry's *I was Glad*. In between were some tender, beautiful pieces by Brahms, Fauré, Rachmaninov and Swingle. The choir's organist David Coram struggled with the idiosyncratic organ in this venue.

The next day the choir stayed in Strasbourg for the second concert, in L'Eglise du Temple Neuf. The old part of the city is beautiful and surrounded by canals,

so a canal trip was a must. There were flowers everywhere, along the canals, on balconies, wherever a basket could be fixed.

The following day the choir travelled first to Heidelberg, and then onto Schwetzingen, 10km south-west of Heidelberg for a tour of the beautiful Baroque castle and gardens, before giving the final concert. It was a warm evening and the Stadtkirche was packed. This concert ended with Swingle's *Give us this day*. The final words 'That we may cherish the earth before it dies' hung in the air for what seemed like an age. There were a few damp eyes in both audience and choir.

Northern Italy 2014

Continuing Vivace's exploration of Europe the choir flew to Verona in June, and went straight into concert mode on the first evening there with a very varied programme which included Vivaldi, Rachmaninov, Will Todd and Gershwin. Once again the organist was David Coram.

Over the next four days the choir gave concerts in Mantova and Venice. There was also free time to explore Verona and some members had an evening at the opera in the ancient amphitheatre where Carmen was performed with a cast of thousands plus horses, donkeys and local children all on stage at once. They then spent an interesting day in Venice doing the tourist stuff, vaporetto rides, cornettos and gondola trips. Some members reversed the tradition by serenading their gondolier with excerpts from the Vivace repertoire. Others were given a special guided tour of the Venice Guggenheim Museum by its then director Philip Rylands, the cousin of one of Vivace's basses. The concert in the Basilica Dei Frari that evening went very well, and the audience was most appreciative.

The tour was rounded off with a delicious lunch at a winery near Bardolina and a boat trip around Lake Garda before flying home from Verona.

Austria 2016

The 'Hills were alive to the Sound of Vivace' in the summer of 2016 when the choir visited Salzburg, Vienna, Linz and Eisenstadt in Austria.

The first concert, in the Kirche St. Andra, Salzburg, was a programme of beautiful pieces by European composers including Mozart, Haydn, Mendelssohn and Elgar, with David Coram as the organist again.

On the third day the choir set off for Vienna, via Linz for the final two concerts. The next morning, in terrific heat, some members had a walking tour of Vienna closely followed by a lunchtime recital in St Stephens Cathedral with a (thankfully) shorter programme as everyone was suffering from the heat.

For the last full day in Vienna the choir visited the Schloss Schonbrunn Palace, the residence of the ruling family of Hapsburgs. Here was architecture and horticulture on a grand scale. The palace is huge and the acres and acres of grounds, lakes and fountains are beautifully kept. The last concert was at St. Peterskirche with the original programme in slightly cooler surroundings.

On the final day there was just time for a guided tour of Schloss Esterhazy, in Eisenstadt, which has wonderfully decorated ceilings and opulent décor, with a lovely little private chapel providing an uplifting end to a wonderful tour.

Cotswolds 2017

In contrast to the usual foreign trips the choir had a short domestic tour in June 2017 to Gloucester and Tewkesbury. They were singing almost as soon as they arrived, as the first concert was at lunchtime in the 11th century Gloucester Cathedral. The programme was a selection of old favourites including Mendelssohn, Parry and Brahms.

Between concerts there was time to explore Gloucester and its ancient quays, Sudeley Castle with its picturesque ruins of an earlier abbey and its many royal connections including the tomb of Katherine Parr, and Tewkesbury's fine medieval black and white townscape.

The final, evening concert took place in the impressive 12th century Tewkesbury Abbey, originally built for Benedictine monks, and the programme was augmented by an additional item, Faure's Requiem, which sounded beautiful in such a sublime setting.

Baltic 2018

The choir tours were getting more ambitious and a trip around the Baltic States of Latvia, Estonia and Finland was arranged for June 2018. The first concert was in Riga's Cathedral Church of St. Mary, the largest medieval church in the Baltic States. The programme was a lovely mix of European music which, after many foreign tours, was becoming very familiar. On this occasion it also included Latvian composer Eriks Esenvald's Trinity *Te Deum* and *The Beatitudes* by Estonia's Arvo Part. The organist for this tour was the habitually barefoot Will Nicholson. Both Riga and Tallinn had 'Old Towns' which were very picturesque and are UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The concert in Tallinn was in St. Johns Church. Before leaving the city the choir's final treat was an authentic Medieval Feast in the Old Hansa restaurant using 700 year old recipes, a truly unique experience and great fun. The last day of the tour was to the third country on the itinerary - Finland. A pleasant ferry trip across the Baltic straits took the choir to Helsinki. This was followed by a city coach tour that included visiting the Sibelius Memorial Park. Helsinki's centre is dominated by the imposing Lutheran and Russian Orthodox Cathedrals and, though the time there was limited, it was worth the trip for these architectural gems alone.

Northern Spain ~~2020~~, ~~2021~~, 2022

Vivace's Spanish tour, planned for 2020 and delayed twice by the pandemic, finally took place in the summer of 2022. Whether it was the pent-up excitement caused by delay, or the huge appreciation of generous Spanish audiences, this was a tour of many magic moments.

Our first venue was in the impressive side chapel of Burgos Cathedral where it was standing room only. Jeremy had thoughtfully included works by Spanish composers in our repertoire adding to our familiar English works. The priest said "If I had known you were so good I would have reserved the whole cathedral". Burgos was celebrating its 800th anniversary with a 5-day fiesta and we enjoyed much merriment in the town square followed by a huge firework display.

Next stop was Palencia's Iglesia de San Francisco where again it was a full house and a great reception. Jeremy was presented with a huge glass paperweight - a model of the church. The organiser said he would be ringing

ahead to San Sebastian to tell them what a wonderful choir was heading their way.



Burgos Cathedral

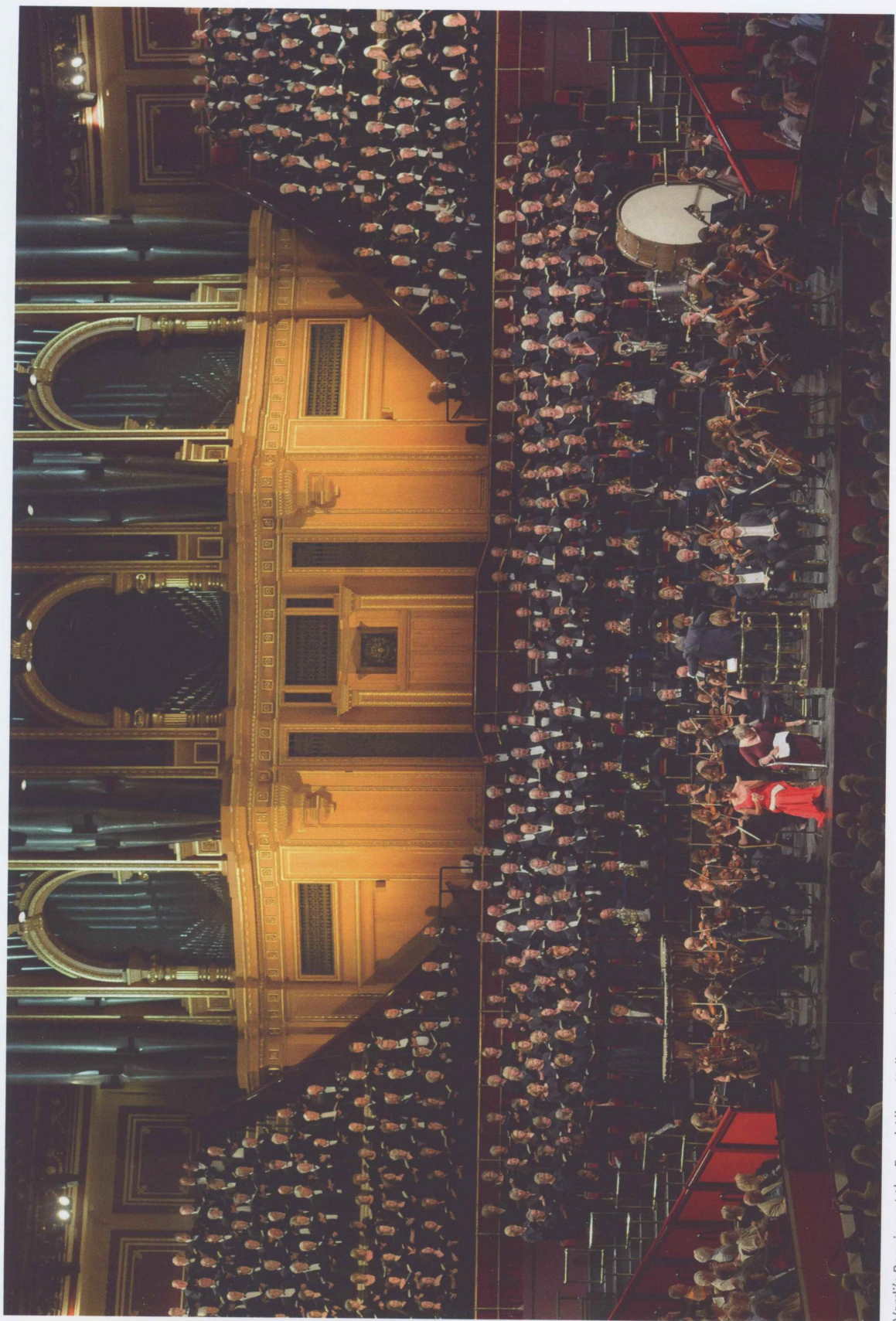
At San Sebastian's Church of Santa Maria our organist Will thought he had died and gone to heaven when he saw what a magnificent instrument he would be playing, built by the best organ maker in Europe. He certainly made the most of it during his amazing organ solo. It was another large and appreciative audience.

Our last day was spent at leisure in Bilbao and despite some Covid casualties, most of us got back home unscathed.

The choir has come a long way since that first concert in 1946. It would be fitting to end this short romp through our history with a few words from our current Music Director, Jeremy Backhouse. 'I have been honoured to be part of an extraordinary choir, leading it to places and in repertoire it might not otherwise have visited – and proud to be its Music Director for so many years, sharing so many wonderful experiences together'. We in turn feel honoured to have had such talented musicians leading us on this journey, and we sincerely thank Jeremy and Francis. After 75 years and three name changes, the aim of the choir remains the same, to bring pleasure and great musical experiences to the public through high quality performances, whilst thoroughly enjoying ourselves and making lasting friendships.



Jeremy Backhouse at the Royal Albert Hall 2014. (Ash Mills)



Verdi's Requiem at the Royal Albert Hall, May (Ash Mills)



African Sanctus at Gilve, Guildford, March 2020 (Ben Potton)