

# RSCM OXFORD ANNUAL CHOIRS' FESTIVAL

10<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2015

*He will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival (Zephaniah 3: 17-18)*

The 'mother church' of the Diocese of Oxford, Christ Church Cathedral, was the glorious setting for this year's RSCM Oxfordshire Annual Choirs' Festival. The building, which dates from the twelve century, was originally the church for an Augustinian monastery. It did not become a cathedral until the 16th Century when, firstly, in 1525 Cardinal Thomas Wolsey founded Cardinal College, and the church became a college chapel. Then in 1532 Henry VIII took over the college and in 1546, re-founded and renamed Christ Church as both a cathedral for the newly created Diocese of Oxford, and a college in the University of Oxford. As a result this church became, uniquely, at one and the same time a cathedral and college chapel. The college's founder is never forgotten however, because Wolsey's arms, which were granted to him by the College of Arms in 1525, are still used by Christ Church to this day.

The Festival followed the usual pattern for these events. All 250 singers, needed to be in their seats, robed and ready for the final rehearsal to start promptly at 2 pm (it actually started at 2.05 pm, because Christ Church still maintains Oxford Time for its services, Oxford being 5 minutes west of Greenwich!).

Since August, church choirs from Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire, which make up the Diocese of Oxford, had been rehearsing, in their own churches, the music chosen by the conductor for the festival. The week before the event, three pre-festival rehearsals are arranged for choirs to come together in larger groups, before arriving for the final rehearsal with our conductor and organist, three hours before the Festival Evensong.

Christ Church's own Organist and Director of Music, Dr. Stephen Darlington, was our inspiring conductor. He is one of the UK's leading choral conductors. He has been in his post at Christ Church since 1985 and was an Organ Scholar at Christ Church from 1971-74. It is a credit to the RSCM that affiliated small parish churches are given the opportunity, in festivals like this, up and down the country, to work under these exceptional musicians. It means our musical horizons are stretched and we are able to sing in prestigious surrounding such as England's great cathedrals.

Our organist was Clive Driskill-Smith, Sub-Organist of Christ Church. Also a wonderfully talented musician who was a Music Scholar at Eton College and Organ Scholar at Christ Church, Clive, like Stephen, has performed all over the world and made many recordings.

The rehearsal began with some vocal warm up exercises. We then sang the final hymn, which was new to most of us, *Spirit of God, descend upon my heart*. The tune *Sheldonian* was composed by Cyril Taylor (1907-1991). An undergraduate at Christ Church, Oxford, he was also ordained in the Church of England. The words were by George Croly (1780-1860). The lovely descant was composed by Stephen Darlington. As you would expect with such a large choir of disparate singers, who are not used to singing together, the first try was not brilliant. Stephen reminded us how important it was for us to look at him at all times. He said the altos, tenors and basses were not keeping up with the sopranos. The analogy he used was that they were following in the sopranos' wake like a cross channel ferry! The tip he gave to address this was for these parts to think that **they** have a tune – not that they are accompanying the sopranos. It worked and we quickly started to sing as a coherent choir.

We moved on to the beautiful Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) anthem, *O How Amiable are thy Dwellings*. The text is based on *Psalms 84, Psalm 90*, and the first verse of the hymn *O God, our help in ages past*, which is itself a paraphrase by Isaac Watts (1674-1748) of the first verses of *Psalms 90*. Stephen asked us to sing much more *legato* (smoothly) and with less saccharin. Regularly, during the rehearsal, he kept the children on their toes by asking them the meaning of the Italian musical terms. They acquitted themselves very well!

*Psalm 37* with its **41 verses** had proved a considerable challenge during our own rehearsals. Stephen admitted it was an ambitious project. The three chants had been especially composed for the occasion by Dr. David Maw (b.1967) who is a Research Fellow and Tutor in Music, Oriel College; Lecturer in Music, Christ Church and The Queen's and Trinity Colleges, Oxford. Each chant was in a different mode – Aeolian – Lydian – Dorian. For the penultimate few verses the Aeolian and Lydian chants were sung together and finally all three chants came together for the last two verses and the *Gloria*. It was a big sing, but it did make a tremendous sound and impact.

The “Mag and Nunc” chosen by Stephen was the glorious setting in *D major* by Sir George Dyson. He explained he had chosen this as it was a significant and important piece for him, because as an Organ Scholar this work was used in his first broadcast Evensong under the direction of Simon Preston in 1972.

No report of these festivals should go without reference to the tea, which is served between the rehearsal and the service. At Christ Church tea is served in The Hall. The fires had been lit and we enjoyed delicious scones topped with large helpings of Cornish clotted cream. Remembering the college's founder, the three ply napkins are embossed with the arms of Cardinal Wolsey.

The service opened with a lovely piece, *Mother of God, Here I Stand* by Sir John Tavener (1944-2013). We enjoyed singing this soft, gentle work with its most satisfactory harmonies. The responses were by Grayston Ives (b.1948), which are well-known at All Saints', but not so well known by other choirs.

The Preacher was The Very Reverend Professor Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church. He gave a fascinating address on harmony and music bringing us closer to God and God to us. He told us that the new Christians sang, and referred to Matthew 26: 30 where he writes that the disciples and Jesus sang hymns at the end of the Last Supper. Martyn said that through music we are taken to a place where words can't go. God loves music and calls us to an orchestra of praise. The prayers were led by Christ Church's Precentor, The Reverend John Paton. The musical theme continued and John closed with the famous quote from Zephaniah 3: 17-18.

Following the congregational hymn, the service closed with Clive Driskill-Smith playing the beautiful organ voluntary, *Toccata in G major* by Théodore Dubois (1837-1924).

Once again the Festival demonstrated the excellent work the RSCM does by arranging these wonderful events, thus providing church choirs with the unique opportunity to work with gifted musicians in such exceptional locations.