

ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS CHORAL SOCIETY

90TH SEASON

SUNDAY 28TH NOVEMBER 1993

3.00 p.m.

ASSEMBLY HALL, TUNBRIDGE WELLS

BACH

Suite No. 3 in D

Cantata 140 "Sleepers Wake!"

HANDEL

Ode on St. Cecilia's Day

Soprano

Fiona O'Neill

Tenor

Richard Braebrook

Bass

John Cunningham

CONDUCTOR

DEREK WATMOUGH, MBE

Orchestra led by PENELOPE HOWARD

Programme 50p.

SUITE NO. 3 IN D MAJOR - J.S. BACH

Overture
Air
Gavotte I and II
Bourree
Gigue

Scholarly guesswork, but not certain knowledge, dates the composition of this suite (and of No. 2 in B minor) sometime during Bach's period at Leipzig; 1723 until his death in 1750; the other two Nos. 1 & 4 being assigned to the preceding six years of service as Kapellmeister at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cothen. It is perhaps surprising that Bach wrote only two orchestral suites during this period, since the Prince was interested more in instrumental than in religious music. Moreover, as Malcolm Boyd tells us in his book on Bach "German court composers wrote 'overture-suites' of this kind by the dozen to satisfy the frenchified tastes of their employers".

The Suite begins with an Overture

which is certainly in the "frenchified" mould; but it is no lightweight affair. Trumpets are used with splendid effect, and the opening section is followed by a rapid and exhilarating but quite meaty fugue. Then comes - in the second movement - the spacious and beautifully shaped tune which has gone around the World as "Air on the G string" ever since that title was applied to a 19th Century arrangement for solo violin (a title curiously matching, in its lack of appropriateness, that of another famous tune "Handel's Largo" which is in fact an operatic aria marked Larghetto). The remainder of the Suite consists of a string of dance movements in which strength and gracefulness are most perfectly and attractively combined.

CANTATA No. 140 SLEEPERS WAKE! - J.S. BACH

Soprano - Fiona O'Neill
Tenor - Richard Braebrook
Bass - John Cunningham

The Town Council would have preferred either of the two other short-listed candidates; Telemann and Graupner; but they both withdrew and Bach was appointed in May 1723 as Kantor at the St. Thomas School in Leipzig; a prestigious job which entailed as the most important of many duties, composing, rehearsing and performing music for the

city's two main churches. Bach certainly earned his salary. As well as immense works such as the St. Matthew and St. John Passion settings, he turned out five yearly cycles of cantatas for every Sunday and Feast day; a total of about 300 of which 200 survive. Of these, No. 140 'Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme' (Sleepers, Wake!) is almost certainly the best known. Since the Gospel for the day

- the 27th Sunday after Trinity in the Lutheran Calendar is the parable of the ten wise and foolish virgins. Bach seized the opportunity to base his cantata on Phillip Nicholai's great hymn 'Wachet auf', the first two verses of which refer to the cantata's five main movements and the music throughout is vividly pictorial and dramatic.

The cantata opens with an extended chorus sung over a dotted-quaver accompaniment, suggesting drama and tension. It is night, but dawn is near. The bridegroom's procession is coming with torches. "Arise, the Lord is coming", the sopranos sing to Nicholai's hymn, supported by elaborate contrapuntal writing in three parts. After the chorus has ended and the tenor soloist has sung a short recitative - still on the "Arise, linger not!" theme the soprano and bass soloists

join in a duet; a tender love song accompanied by dreamy arabesques on a solo violin.

There follows immediately another of Bach's very famous things; a superbly elongated melody on the strings, supporting the Nicholai hymn sung in unison by the men's voices; from which Bach's tune seems oddly detached, there are dissonances, awkwardness. And yet it does fit. It is one of the miracles of music. The ensuing bass recitative echoes the words of the Song of Songs; "Set me as a seal upon thine arm; for love is strong as death" - a theme then taken up in a duet accompanied by a relaxed, light hearted tune on the oboe, in which the soprano and bass soloists sing of the joy of lovers finally united (representing, almost certainly the union of Christ with the human soul). The cantata is rounded off by the Nicholai chorale set for the choir in four-part harmony with striking movement in the bass part.

INTERVAL

ODE ON ST. CECILIA'S DAY - G.F. HANDEL

Soprano - Fiona O'Neill

Tenor - Richard Braebrook

Bass - John Cunningham

The winter of 1739-40 was not a propitious one for staging the Italian Operas which has occupied Handel, almost exclusively as both composer and impresario for the preceding 30 years. War with Spain had broken out and as Sir Newman Flower graphically puts it "War fever smote London with a sudden blast, crowds gathered, howled and were dispersed. Bells clashed throughout the City and shares dropped like plummets". Producing expensive operas would have been madness. But Handel ever an

opportunist remembered the striking success of *Alexander's Feast* three years earlier, and turned to Dryden's other poem addressed to music's patron saint. This St. Cecilia Ode, which he set in nine days (borrowing some ideas from the German composer Gottlieb Muffat) was an instant success, and in combination with the *Feast* and with *Acis and Galatea* made up a sort of Handelian pop concert which continued to draw full houses for some time to come.

Dryden's poem is on a smaller scale than the *Alexander* ode but aspires to a rather more

lofty philosophical plane; music is portrayed as the agent of the divine power which created the universe "this Universal Frame", a version of the Big Bang which, although striking and original tends to lack drama and human incident. The passions which music can raise and quell - a favourite idea at the time - are given some prominence, but there is nothing equivalent to the long sequence in the other

poem in which Timotheus' lyre moves Alexander to recount his battles, weep for a dead hero, make love to a courtesan and finally, set fire to a city. However, even if Handel's essentially dramatic imagination was less gripped by the St. Cecilia Ode, he fully entered into its spirit; the music is always effective and accomplished and in some places inspired.

Handel buffs will recognise in the lively Overture, music later adapted for the fifth of the twelve Concerti Grossi in Opus 6 Dryden's majestic opening lines are taken up immediately in a tenor recitative, with the "heap of jarring atoms" supported by murky ambiguous diminished sevenths. The chorus then takes up the theme, with scales up and down the full octave at the words "Through all the compass of the notes it ran" and organ-like sustained notes at "the diapason closing full in Man". The soprano solo which follows - accompanied by an elaborate cello obbligato, extols music's power to affect the passions, but in a gently lyrical mood with which the ensuing number "the trumpet's loud clangour" contrasts very strongly. The choir takes over from the tenor soloist, all four parts singing in unison the (very Purcellian) "Double, double beat of the thundering drum".

After the stirring March - not unlike the famous one in *Scipio* - comes a celebration of the instruments of the orchestra. In "The soft complaining flute" the soprano is accompanied by that instrument, and by the organ, in an expressive B-minor aria. "Sharp violins"

are then invoked to "proclaim their jealous pangs" - they accompany a tenor aria lamenting the pains of unrequited love. "The sacred organ's praise" is sung next by the soprano; a most beautiful aria - no Muffat here, only vintage Handel - lacking only in "heavenly length" it seems to end too soon. In a rather curious short aria marked "Alla Hornpipe" the powers of Orpheus are compared with those of "bright Cecilia" (to the latter's advantage; he can uproot trees, but she causes an angel to "mistake earth for heaven" we are told in a brief recitative). Then comes the splendid final chorus. It was music that first set the spheres in motion, but at the last Trumpet the whole process will be reversed:

*"The dead shall live, the living die
and Musick shall untune the sky"*

Handel's powers are here fully deployed. Contrapuntal writing is interspersed with massive chordal progressions, modulating freely and amazingly, at one point to the remote key of A flat. We are reminded of Mozart's tribute; "He beats us all in effect and when he so wills he strikes like a thunderbolt."

THE SOLOISTS

Fiona O'Neill - Soprano

Fiona O'Neill first studied drama at Bretton Hall only later taking up singing at the Royal Northern College of Music. She has appeared with ENO as Gerda in Delius Fennimore & Gerda, Papagena in the Magic Flute and Frasquita in Carmen. She performed the title role in Richard Strauss' Salome for the Edinburgh Festival. She has sung Peep Bo and Mabel with the New D'Oyley Carte Opera and for Travelling Opera she has sung Musetta in La Bohème, Norina in Don Pasquale, Donna Anna in Don Giovanni and Fiordiligi in Così fan Tutti. Her other operative roles include the title role in Lakme for University College Opera and Madame Butterfly. She has appeared in concert with the Philharmonic, English Chamber Orchestra, Bournemouth S.O. and the R.P.O.. Most recently she appeared on BBC television as Miranda in "Vampyre - a soap opera" and as Babydoll at the Royal National Theatre. Future plans include La Traviata for Mid-Wales Opera and Adele and Musetta for English National Opera.

Richard Braebrook - Tenor

Richard Braebrook was born in Huddersfield, now lives in Tunbridge Wells and is at present in his tenth season with English National Opera. He studied at the Royal College of Music, then with Gerald English and is currently studying with Keith Bonnington who is also a member of English National Opera. Since leaving the Royal College of Music, he has sung with the BBC Singers and with the D'Oyley Carte Opera Company he travelled extensively in both Great Britain and abroad. In 1983 he was first prize winner in the World International Singing Festival in Rio de Janeiro. Richard sings regularly with many of the leading choral societies in the UK ranging from oratorios of Handel and Bach Passions to the works of Elgar and Britten. Recent performances include Handel's Messiah, Elgar's Dream of Gerontius among many others, and lately in Verdi's Requiem with the Royal Tunbridge Wells Choral Society.

As well as his accomplishments as an operatic artist, Richard is just as much at home singing in cabaret as on the concert stage, including engagements at the Cafe Royal, London and aboard the SS Canberra and Sea Princess for P & O Shipping Line.

John Cunningham - Bass

John Cunningham was born in Wigan Lancashire and studied at Manchester Polytechnic. He studied singing with John Cameron and was soon fulfilling an average of four professional engagements per week in fringe opera, oratorio and work in the field of light music. On the operatic stage he has worked with the English National Opera for several years singing and understudying many roles, received with critical acclaim by the national press. Engagements also include working with the Music Theatre Company and appearing as a guest artist at many Music and Arts Festivals both at home and abroad.

John also pursues a busy concert and recital career throughout the country having sung with many choral and music societies and in the major concert halls in London. The bass timbre of his voice, allied to his unusually wide range, enables him to sing most of the bass as well as the baritone repertoire. He has experience of music of all eras and a vast collection and repertoire of artsongs and popular ballads, suitable for all occasions.

In April this year, John sang the role of Germont Pere in La Traviata for Kentish Opera. Future engagements include two performances of the Dream of Gerontius, Elijah and concert performances of Nabucco and Aida.

THE ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS CHORAL SOCIETY

Honorary Life President:

John H. Johnson

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W. Halstead-Key

Musical Director and Principal Conductor:

Derek Watmough MBE

Honorary Life Member:

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We are most grateful for the support of Patrons and new ones are always welcome. Please telephone or write to the General Secretary, Mr. L.A. Lee, 233 Greggs Wood Road, Tunbridge Wells 0892-521937.

The choir rehearses on Monday evening from September to April. New members are always welcome and there is a simple private audition. Please contact Mr. Lee for further details.

The Society acknowledges with grateful thanks the financial assistance from the Borough of Tunbridge Wells.



The Society is a member of the National Federation of Musical Societies.

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**THE ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS CHORAL SOCIETY
FORTHCOMING CONCERTS**

Sunday 12th December 1993 - 3.00pm

CAROL CONCERT, including Benjamin Britten's "Rejoice in the Lamb"

Carols for Audience

Mayfield Band

Admission Programme only £3.50

(50p concession for OAP's and children)

Saturday 21st May 1994 - 7.30 p.m.

90th BIRTHDAY GALA CONCERT

Sir Edward Elgar's

Dream of Gerontius

Joint performance with the Wiesbaden Lutherkirke Bach Choir in the presence of the Mayors of Tunbridge Wells and Southborough.

Tickets £9.00, £6.50, £4.50

(50p concession for OAP's and children.)

OTHER FORTHCOMING EVENTS

December 5th	R.T.W.S.O. - Concert	3.00pm
	Dvorak, Weber, Rimsky Korsakov	Assembly Hall
	Emma Johnson, Clarinet	
	Derek Watmough MBE, Conductor	
December 7th	La Natville -Messiaen	8.00pm
		King Charles Church
December 12th	The Opera Company - Concert -	Trinity Arts Centre
January 16th	Green Room Club Concert	3.00pm
	Schubert, Prokofiev, Dvorak	Assembly Hall
	Neil Thomson	

The Society is a Registered Charity