

**1975**

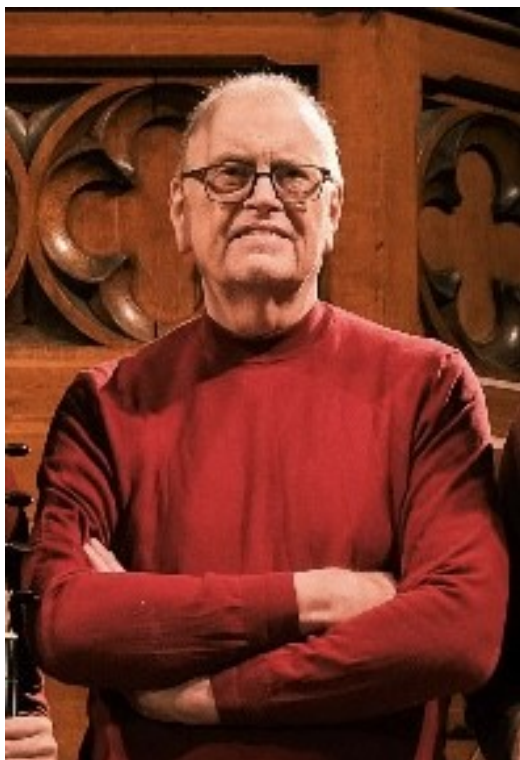
**Keele Bach Choir**

**2025**

**50th anniversary**



## KBC Musical Directors from 1975 - 2025



Founder, John Sloboda (1975-1995)



Marion Wood 1995-2000)



Christopher Hand (2000-2002)



Matthew Willis (2003-2010)



Matthew Hamilton (2010-2015)





Chris Cromar (2016)



Pete Durrant (Nov 2016)





Neil Taylor (2017 -)



The choir on the steps of Keele Chapel, about 1976





Acton Church about 1978. Nelson Mass



KBC Reunion on the steps of Keele Chapel, 1989

## THE KEELE BACH CHOIR

The Keele Bach Choir was founded, as the Keele Chamber Choir, in 1975 by its current President, John Sloboda, to provide opportunities for members of the University and friends in the area to develop the particular skills called out by music designed for smaller choirs where a high level of accuracy in part-singing is needed. It has grown to be a medium-sized choir of about 50 members, but on occasion splits into smaller groups or draws in additional singers for works which call for a full symphony orchestra and an appropriately large chorus. Applications from those with good sight-reading ability - particularly students and other young people - are always welcome.

## THE CONDUCTOR

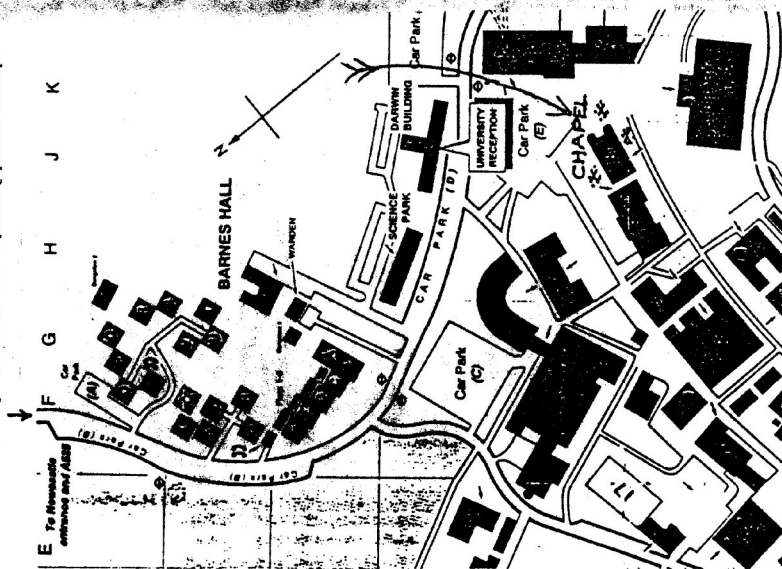
MARION WOOD took over as conductor and musical director of the Keele Bach Choir on John Sloboda's retirement in 1995. She is herself a former member of the choir and a graduate of Keele University, where she read Music and Electronics. She went on to study conducting as a post-graduate at the Royal College of Music - only the second woman ever to be accepted for the course. Highlights there included a semi-staged production of Weill's opera *The Seven Deadly Sins* and an open workshop on Brahms's *Requiem* with the London Philharmonic Choir, with whom she has continued to work as assistant choirmaster.

Since leaving college she has worked with several opera companies: in 1996 she conducted the U.K. stage premieres of Hindemith's controversial opera *Sancta Susanna* and more recently toured London theatres with Candid Opera's production of Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*. She is also currently conductor of the Belfast Philharmonic Choir and the Keele Philharmonic Orchestra, with whom she will be giving a further concert in November 1997.

## How to find us

The venue for all three of the Keele Bach Choir's concerts in 1997-8 will be their regular home of the University Chapel, a building designed by the distinguished church architect George Pace and finished in 1965. It is renowned for its excellent acoustics and for the possession of a notable organ built to a specification designed by the University's first director of music, Professor George Pratt.

Keele University occupies the grounds of Keele Hall about two miles west of Newcastle-under-Lyme: the main entrance is at traffic lights on the A.525 half a mile east of Keele village. The chapel is in the centre of the built-up area of the campus, with extensive parking places nearby.



## KEELE BACH CHOIR

Concert Programme 1997-1998



The music performed by the KEELE BACH CHOIR ranges from Guillaume Machaut to Arvo Pärt, though, as the Choir's name suggests, centred in the Baroque. Its primary aims are to give performances of a high degree of accuracy and authenticity, and to present works which have been rarely, if ever, been given in this area. Recent performances have included Handel's great oratorios *Theodora* (anticipating the productions at Glyndebourne and Covent Garden), Mendelssohn's *Te Deum*, Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and the premiere of a new reconstruction of his *St. Mark Passion* about to be published by Bärenreiter. 20th-century composers represented have included Britten (*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*), Pärt (*Te Deum*) and Rachmaninov (*Vespers*). Each year at least one concert contains music for a *capella* choir, but the Choir is regularly joined by professional orchestral players, as well as by the Keele Philharmonic Orchestra, and makes a special point of drawing its solo singers from among young professionals.

This year the Choir has been awarded an A4E grant from the National Lottery for its performance of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*. In addition to the three concerts given locally, the Choir will sing Duruflé's *Requiem* in London in November in aid of National AIDS Day. All other concerts take place in the Chapel of Keele University.

**Telephone: 01260 274353**

*Tickets are also available from the Keele Concert Society Box Office, Darwin Building, Keele University, Keele, ST5 5BG (telephone 01782 717058), from members of the Choir, and at the door.*

**All standard concessions apply.**

**Sunday, 7th December 1997 at 7.30 p.m.**

**BACH: WEIHNACHTSORATORIUM**  
(CHRISTMAS ORATORIO)

Ruth Gumme, soprano     Robin Tyson, counter-tenor  
James Gilchrist, tenor     Henry Herford, bass  
John Cox: Evangelist

**The Birmingham Conservatoire Capelle Baroque**

Orchestra

**(leader Michaela Combetti)**

A grant from the National Lottery has enabled the Choir to mount a full performance of one of Bach's greatest masterpieces - the sequence of six superlative cantatas celebrating the Birth and Epiphany of Christ. For the first time ever in the region, the work will be given entire and in authentic Baroque style with a group of outstanding soloists and a hand-picked period-instrument orchestra.

[illegible]

**Saturday, 21st March at 7.30 p.m.**

**SHOSTAKOVICH: FESTIVE OVERTURE**  
**RACHMANNINOV: PIANO CONCERTO NO 2**

**IN C MINOR**

**BRAHMS: EIN DEUTSCHES REQUIEM  
(4 GERMAN REQUIEM)**

**Richard Pain, piano**

**Hester Highton, soprano   John Cliffe, bass**  
**The Keele Philharmonic Orchestra**

For a new annual event the Choir joins forces with the Keele Philharmonic Orchestra in a concert which includes one of the world's most popular concertos, played by a highly talented young pianist currently a student at the University, and another masterpiece of the choral repertoire, a work of heart-warming tenderness and grandeur, inspired originally by Robert Schumann's death and completed as a memorial to Brahms's mother.

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**Saturday, 6th June at 8.00 p.m.**

**HAYDN: PAUKENMESSE (MASS IN TIME OF WAR)**  
**BRUCKNER & STANFORD: MOTETS FOR A**

CAPELLA CHOR

**CARELLA CHOR**  
**Pamela Clarke, mezzo-soprano** **Marjorie Seddon, alto**  
**John Cox, tenor** **John Cliffe, bass**

**The Keele Bach Orchestra**

The *Pavane*messe, so called because of the prominent part given to kettle-drums, is the second and in some ways the most dramatic of the six great settings of the Mass composed by Haydn towards the end of his life: a fully symphonic work in which soloists, choir and orchestra are welded seamlessly together. Unaccompanied motets by two late 18th-century masters provide a striking contrast in settings of sacred texts.

### Season Ticket Offer

A season ticket covering all three concerts given by the Keele Bach Choir is available for £18 (concessions £10) from either of the addresses below.

**Please send the following tickets:**

Season ticket for all three concerts (full rate) @ £18 .....  
Season ticket for all three concerts (concessions) @ £10 .....  
Tickets for Bach *Christmas Oratorio* (7.12.97) @ £10 .....

..... Concessions @ £6 .....

... *viem* (21.3.98) @ £7 .....

..... Concessions @ f4 .....

... Concessions @ £4 ....  
... (66 98) @ £7

Concessions @ £1 .....

**TOTAL**

Send your cheque or postal order, payable to Keele Bach Choir, and post to either of the addresses below. Please note that we cannot accept credit-card bookings.

**Keele Bach Choir, c/o 18 Ambleside Court, Padbury Park,  
Congleton, Cheshire CW12 4HZ.  
Keele Concerts Society Booking Office, Keele Hall, Keele  
University, Keele, Staffs ST5 5BG.**

Name.....  
Address.....

Post code .....

Please tick if you would like to be entered on the mailing list for future concerts by the Keele Bach Choir.



## KEELE BACH CHOIR

The Keele Bach Choir has prepared for this concert under the direction of its President John Sloboda, who founded the choir for a performance of the Bach *B minor mass* which was so successful that the choir became a fixture on the North Staffordshire music scene. The eminent music psychologist Professor Sloboda went on to conduct the choir for the first twenty years of its life. During that time one of its many successes was a joint performance of Delius' *Mass of Life* with the Ceramic City Choir.

Four years ago Keele alumna Marion Wood became musical director and the choir has continued to flourish, giving the first "authentic" local performance of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* with the Birmingham Conservatoire Baroque Capelle Orchestra in 1997. This year Keele marked the centenary of Poulenc's birth with a masterful performance of his challenging but plangently beautiful *Stabat Mater*. The choir has appeared on tour in recent times at Edinburgh, the Ayton Castle Festival in the Scottish Borders and in London at St. Paul's, Hammersmith and St. John's, Smith Square. Last year Marion took the choir with the Belfast Philharmonic Choir and the Keele Philharmonic Orchestra to the Czech Republic to perform Brahms' *Requiem* at the spa town of Manánské' Lzně (Marienbad) and in the Dvořák Hall, Prague.

As Marion moves on to give full time to her conducting commitments in Belfast and London, Keele looks forward to its future under the direction of Christopher Hand, an experienced lay clerk from Worcester Cathedral and teacher at that city's renowned King's School.

# THE FESTIVAL FINALE

This Concert is given with the generous sponsorship of  
**BARCLAYS BANK plc**

## ROYAL LIVERPOOL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

*Leader: Malcolm Stewart*

**Donald Hunt** (*Conductor*)

**Sally Burgess** (*Contralto*) • **Arthur Davies** (*Tenor*)

**Laurence Albert** (*Bass*)

*with The Festival Chorus of*

**THE CERAMIC CITY CHOIR, THE KEELE BACH CHOIR,  
THE ELGAR CHORALE OF WORCESTER, THE BARBARA WALTON SINGERS,  
and THE KAMMERCHOR GRILLEN ERLANGEN**

## THE DREAM OF GERONTIUS

*Edward Elgar - (1857-1934)*

*Please note that the performance will proceed without an interval,  
and that applause should be withheld until the end of Part Two.*

We make no apologies for anticipating the celebrations that will surround the centenary of the first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*, which falls in October of next year. In reviving an English choral festival at the end of the twentieth century it seems absolutely right that we should celebrate a work which has made such a great impact on choral singers and their audiences during the hundred years since it first appeared; a work which has become revered as much as even Handel's *Messiah*, and one which has been close to the hearts of North Staffordshire singers ever since Elgar conducted one of its earliest performances at Hanley in 1903. Some years earlier Elgar had said that 'I hope some day to do a great work, a sort of national thing that my fellow Englishmen might take to themselves and love', and with *The Dream of Gerontius* he achieved his ambition, even though the nature of the work would

*North Staffs Music Festival '99*

**5**



# NORTH STAFFS MUSIC

triennial

## *festival*

VICTORIA HALL AND  
REGENT THEATRE, HANLEY

**SUNDAY**  
**17th OCTOBER '99**



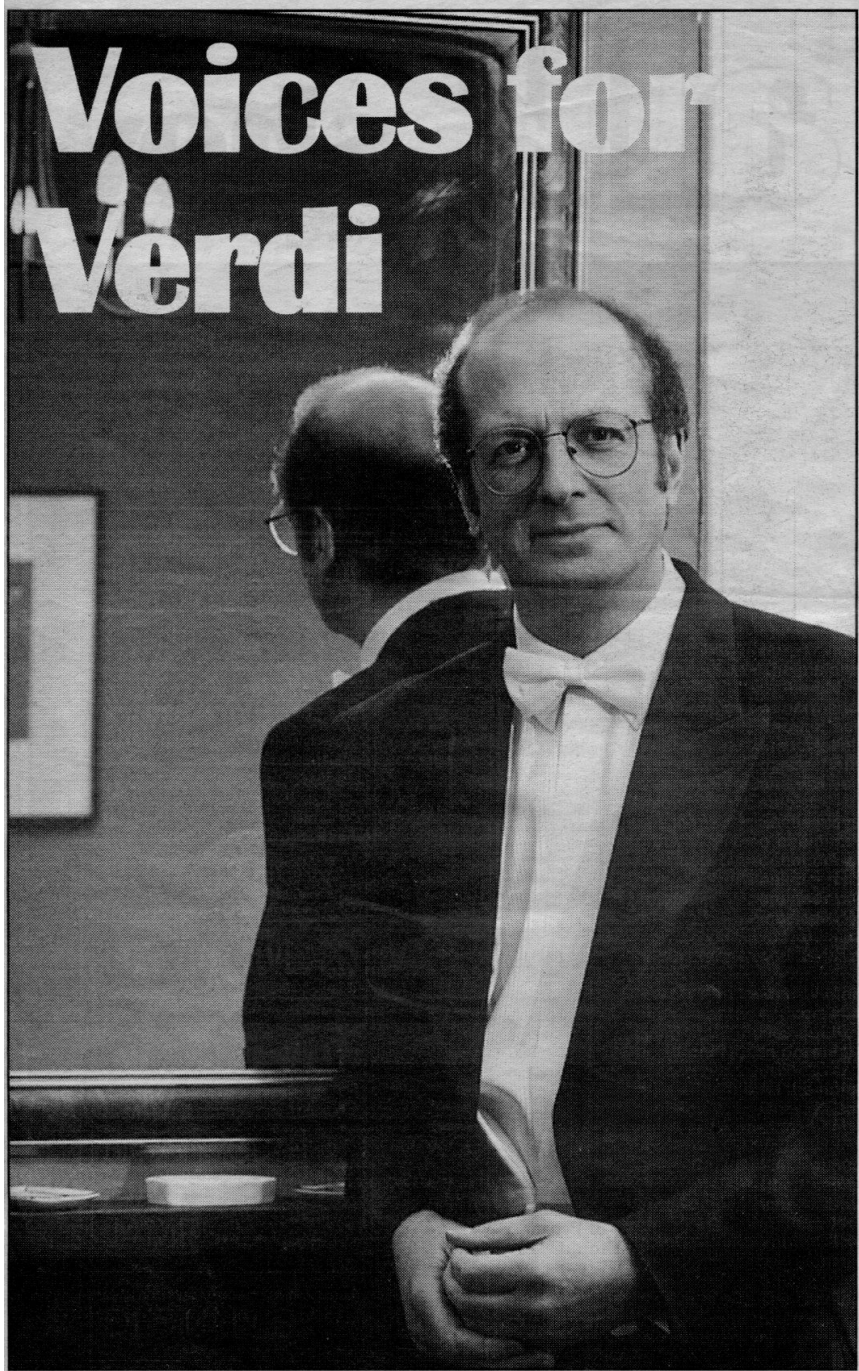
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North Staffs Music Fest 17 October 1999



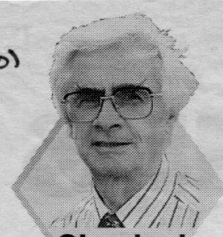


Berlioz Grande messe des morts (with Ceramic City Choir and other choirs in Victoria Hall), 2005 with Matthew Willis.



# Voices for Verdi

3/10/01



**Classical  
Notes  
with ERIC  
SNAPE**

**A**ROUND 200 voices, from three leading North Staffordshire choirs, are being brought together at Hanley's Victoria Hall in a concert that marks the 100th anniversary of the death of Giuseppe Verdi.

It should be a memorable occasion for the work being performed is Verdi's Requiem, one of the most thrilling works in the choral repertoire.

Taking part are the Ceramic City Choir, Leek Phoenix Singers and the Keele Bach Choir. One of the country's foremost choral conductors, Paul Spicer — a professor at the Royal College of Music — directs, and the orchestra is the Birmingham Philharmonic, making their debut appearance in Hanley.

Paul has assembled a noteworthy team of London-based singers to take the very demanding solo parts: soprano Alison Pearce, mezzo-soprano Catherine Denley, tenor Ian Thompson and bass Stephen Roberts. All have well established international careers and recording experience.

The music of Verdi's Requiem is very much in the operatic tradition of most of the rest of his considerable output, but that in no way detracts from its burning sincerity.

During its composition Verdi became convinced that it might be his last work, and with this premonition in mind he lavished on the Requiem some of his most glorious melodies.

The piece requires vast choral forces to achieve its full dramatic impact, which is sometimes lyrical and tender and sometimes overwhelming and even terrifying.

Ceramic City Choir are promoting the concert, the first in their 60th anniversary season, and the Verdi Requiem is another in the long succession of major choral works they have performed to high acclaim — a list that includes the first performances in Hanley of Berlioz's *Te Deum*, Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky*, Carl Orff's *Carmen Burana* and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

The Phoenix Singers began life in 1981 as the community choir of Leek High School's staff, pupils and parents, formed by the then Head of Music, Paul Butler. In 1985 they became independent and adopted their present name.

Founded in 1975, Keele Bach Choir now have about 50 members. Their primary aims are to give dramatic performances of a high degree of expressiveness and authenticity, and to present works which are rarely if ever heard in this area.

● Verdi's Requiem is at the Victoria Hall, Hanley, on Sunday, October 14 starting at 7.30pm  
Paul Spicer, above directs

next  
as he  
4/10/01



## Review

### Music

**Requiem Mass**  
**Victoria Hall, Hanley**

MIXING choirs is often a risk, but it came off triumphantly at the Victoria Hall, Hanley, last night when the 100th anniversary of Verdi's death was marked by a performance of his mighty Requiem Mass.

On stage were the Ceramic City Choir, Leek Phoenix Singers and the Keele Bach Choir.

And they responded admirably to the subtle and paced conducting of Paul Spicer.

There was a fine quartet of soloists — soprano Alison Pearce, contralto Catherine Denley, tenor Ian Thompson and bass Stephen Roberts.

The orchestra, the non-professional Birmingham Philharmonic, lapsed jarringly occasionally but on the whole offered an effective accompaniment.

Spicer's vast experience in choral conducting was soon evident in the Dies Irae, with its cascading strings and sliding voices.

The choristers brought the terrifying climaxes off with high drama and the Tuba Mirum, with its chilling bass solo, added all the terrors of the Last Trumpet.

There was a radiant Liber Scriptus from the contralto Catherine Denley, and the two women soloists blended voices lyrically in the Recordare duet.

The soprano Alison Pearce again touched the lyrical heights in the concluding Libera Me when she soared with ethereal sweetness above the choir as the final pianissimo was intoned.

**Eric Snape**

## Review: 4/6/01

### Keele Bach Choir and North Staffordshire Symphony Orchestra, Keele University Chapel

HAYDN'S oratorio The Creation is the summit of his musical achievement and there was much to admire in the treatment it received at Keele University Chapel on Saturday night.

Considerable forces were employed in the performance — the Keele Bach Choir, the North Staffordshire Symphony Orchestra and a team of three soloists.

Under the baton of the Keele Bach Choir conductor, Christopher Hand, the great mosaic of sound was well woven indeed.

The Creation was influenced by Handel's oratorios, especially in the choral features, and the sense of sublimity is always there.

But the work also reflects the geniality for which Haydn was famous and Hand's interpretation never failed to bring out that aspect.

The soprano soloist, Ruth Gomme — a former member of the Keele Bach Choir — sang the role of Gabriel with a wonderfully incandescent tone, which she adjusted with easy grace in the part of a very warm and human Eve.

The tenor, William Unwin, was sure-voiced and lyrical and the bass James Jones, though a touch tentative at times, completed a notable trio.

All the soloists had clear diction and the disciplined choir shared the joy conveyed in the storytelling.

The orchestra alternated between hushed mystery and blazing majesty, always responding sensitively to Hand's direction.

**ERIC SNAPE**

2002 arrival of Matthew Willis  
(only 25 years old).

The male voice choirs never have any trouble filling the Victoria Hall. While, the Ceramic City Choir, Barbara Walton

singers and Keele Bach Choir maintain high standards and are secure in their audiences.

Ceramic City Choir easily rode the difficulties caused when Welsh singing star Aled Jones cried off from their Christmas concert through illness, and undoubtedly something good has happened to Keele Bach Choir.

That something might well be the appointment of 25-year-old Matthew Willis as Artistic Director. The programme he conducted at Keele University Chapel three weeks ago revealed more potential than anything else I heard last year.

Of the festivals, Buxton went off well though I have to say that the all-female performance of Puccini's Suor Angelica at St John's Church was the aspect of it that I most enjoyed.

By Eric Snape

REVIEW OF YEAR ?

December 2002

## REVIEW Music

Keele Bach Choir — University Chapel

Dec. 2002.

ARTISTIC director and conductor Matthew Willis, still only 25, is obviously bringing fresh ideas to Keele Bach Choir in all sorts of ways. Open-necked shirts in place of black ties is one of them. The startlingly unusual choice of programme for Saturday night's concert at the University Chapel was another.

It had music by Palestrina and Charpentier before the interval; and works by Respighi and Poulenc afterwards. This mix of syncopation and sprung rhythm, ancient and modern, proved a revelation.

The polyphony of Palestrina's Miss Papae Marcelli was well sung throughout, with Matthew twinning the seven separate vocal parts of the second Agnus Dei to a shattering climax.

The prelude to Charpentier's Te Deum is used to glorify the Eurovision Song Contest — which might have put some people off — but it was the least impressive offering of the night, with choristers, soloists and the accompanying Ba'Rock Ensemble seeming nervous. Karen Radcliffe sang the role of the Angel with unearthly, cutting radiance in Respighi's rarely performed Lauda per la Nativita del Signore and was strongly supported by Richard Newman as the Shepherd and Becky Hughes as Mary. The choir sang with sensitivity and Michael Bell was an excellent accompanist at the piano, making the most of the work's jazzy dissonance. Organist for the concert was Andy Winter.

by Eric Snape

March 2003 Nelson Mass

## REVIEW Music

Keele Bach Choir — Keele University Chapel

MARCH 2003

NEW conductor Matthew Willis has certainly imparted youthful exuberance to the Keele Bach Choir (KBC).

If you missed Saturday night's KBC performance of Haydn's 'Nelson' Mass at Keele University Chapel, you missed a treat. Despite its sub-title, 'Mass in times of fear', the 'Nelson' is by its nature a joyful work: with Matthew directing the choristers, soloists and accompanying band of performers from the North Staffordshire Symphony Orchestra (NSSO), it became incandescent. Highlight of the presentation was the singing of the soprano, Karen Radcliffe — radiant throughout, but especially so in the emotional heart of the Mass, the *Et incarnatus*. The other three soloists — alto

Harriet Goodwin, tenor Glyn Aubrey and bass Jonathan Pugsley — were effervescent, tender, grave and reverent, as the music required, and the four blended voices effectively and dramatically.

Main point of the choir's singing was that they really seemed to be enjoying themselves. And the NSSO instrumentalists played with supreme confidence.

Another plus: the singers used Germanic Latin pronunciation, instead of the more usual Italianate church Latin.

The concert began with the choir rendering a collection of Bartok's Folk songs into English. Spiky, dissonant and often amusing, they were never less than interesting.

ERIC SNAPE



14/06/2003 Sea Symphony with Matthew Willis in the Victoria Hall



# REVIEW Orchestra

**The Bach Choir — Victoria Hallm Hanley**

KEELE Bach Choir's foray into Hanley's Victoria Hall last night for the performance of Vaughan Williams' Sea Symphony was not well supported by the public.

But those who stayed away were the losers, for the occasion was inexhaustibly exciting and often quite glorious.

The Bach Choir was supported by the Keele Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir, the Charing Cross Chamber Choir and the North Staffordshire Symphony Orchestra.

All were under the baton of a barefoot Matthew Willis who, by the end of the concert, looked like a boxer who has just fought 12 rounds — and no wonder.

Sea Symphony is a work of deeply emotional thrust; there are big dramatic moments and tender, quieter passages. Willis treated it not merely as a colourful

cantata, but as a straight symphony and the result was a revelation — the music of a young composer interpreted by an even younger conductor.

The soloists, soprano Karen Radcliffe and baritone James Rutherford, were always impressive, especially so in the rapt epilogue 'O my brave soul!', which follows the thunder of the 'Sail forth' chorus.

The choristers, in fact, were always forward and crisp in their approach, and the orchestra explored the wide-ranging musical subtleties with great confidence.

The other work on the programme, Gordon Jacob's Trombone Concerto, was satisfying. Tarik Mecci played a good solo and the Keele Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Willis, quickly recovered from a nervous start.

**Eric Snape**

## Classical

**Keele Bach Choir**  
Keele University Chapel

KEELE Bach Choir devoted Saturday night's concert at Keele University Chapel exclusively to the composer after whom they are named. And they did him proud. Everybody knows, and admires, the sacred music of the immortal Johann Sebastian, and conductor Matthew Willis, the soloists, choristers and City of Stoke-on-Trent Chamber Orchestra gave the audience a sublime example of that — Magnificat in D, BWV 243. However, preceding the Magnificat we heard Cantata 212, BWV 212, the Peasant Cantata, described in the programme as essentially a "short comic opera". Be that as it may, in the work's last verse the singers all assert enthusiastically that they are going to the pub, to get drunk.

The two soloists and choir achieved a fine balance, though the orchestra occasionally got over-excited.

Soprano Karen Radcliffe and bass John Lofthouse sorted well together, while the arm-waving exuberance of the conductor kept things moving with vigorous good humour.

The switch, after the interval, to the spaciousness of the Magnificat was a touch jarring, though the performance was always exhilarating with a tempo that was brisk but never breathless.

Alto Harriet Goodwin and tenor Richard Newman joined Radcliffe and Lofthouse to form an impressive team of soloists, and the orchestra again demonstrated the gusto that had been earlier evident in the Peasant Cantata and Orchestral Suite No 4 in D, which opened the concert.

**Eric Snape**

## Concert

**Keele Bach Choir and Orchestra** Keele University

FRESH from his Victoria Hall triumph in the Berlioz Requiem, one of the world's most romantic masterpieces, Matthew Willis turned his attention to an English master of the baroque, Henry Purcell, at Keele University on Saturday night.

Conducting the Keele Bach Choir and Orchestra — and ably assisted by Corda, a chamber ensemble made up of Keele's most gifted young singers and instrumentalists — he presided over a most poignant yet delightful rendering of Dido and Aeneas, Purcell's only true opera and a veritable mine of melody.

It was semi-staged, with the costumed characters moving in front of the choristers and behind the orchestra, and indeed all over the auditorium. And one thing is for sure — it was a production that worked.

Young Natalie Windsor showed off her warm, unusual soprano voice most tellingly in the role of Dido, and also demonstrated a natural acting ability which she would do well to cultivate. We could have a budding operatic star here.

Tenor Richard Newman sang competently as Aeneas, while Clare Sewell made a dramatic and intense Belinda. I had never thought of Marjorie Seddon as a Sorceress, but she was here — leading the choristers and Frances Hughes and Kath Durber, the Witches, in some superb cackling. There was thunder, dancing, fine orchestral playing and an entertainment that should be long remembered.

The concert began with a crisp, confident performance of Mozart's Coronation Mass in C, in which Natalie, Clare, and Richard were joined as soloists by bass Martin Oram.

**Eric Snape**



# TRIBUTE TO A LEGEND

The New Year brings the usual host of classical music attractions, but nothing, perhaps, offering so much local promise and interest as the performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* coming to the Victoria Hall, writes **Eric Snape**



**E**dward William Elgar, composer of *The Dream of Gerontius*, was born at Lower Broadheath, near Worcester, on June 2, 1857.

So it is inevitable that the entire country will be celebrating the 150th anniversary of his birth - as it is only right and proper that North Staffordshire in general and the Victoria Hall in particular should play their part in celebrating the achievements of the Great Man, for he had links with both.

When Elgar was making his name as a composer in the late 1890s, Hanley's North Staffordshire Festival gave him an early and important staging of his *Scenes from the Saga of King Olaf*, which he conducted himself, on October 30, 1896.

By the time he had composed his finest oratorio, *The Dream Of Gerontius*, which was premiered at Birmingham Town Hall with Hans Richter conducting on October 3, 1900, Elgar had truly made his name, and this impressive and mystical work should enable a worthy salute to be to his memory at the Victoria Hall next April. On stage, singing, will be soloists James Gilchrist (tenor), Christopher Purves (bass) and Anne Marie Owens (soprano) plus the combined vocal forces of the Ceramic City Choir, the Keele Philharmonic Choir and the Keele Bach Choir, with Matthew Willis, **pictured**, conducting the mighty Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. This is certainly not a concert to be missed.





■ In control: Matthew Willis

# JEWEL OF AN ORCHESTRA

With 25% off,  
all our outdoor plants are  
endangered this weekend.



# JEWEL OF AN ORCHESTRA

**More than 350 performers are all kept in line by one man — Matthew Willis tells Eric Snape how it's done**

**W**hat is it about the Berlioz Grande Messe des Morts that so fascinates Matthew Willis, who is to conduct it in all its glory at Hanley's Victoria Hall tomorrow night?

He expresses no doubt: "It's an all-encompassing world of sound," he says. And he's right, of course. The presentation will take more than 350 performers from seven of this area's leading music groups, and there will be the equivalent of four brass bands on stage.

How on earth did so many disparate local musicians get together for such a vast undertaking?

"Initially, over 18 months ago, I talked to Geoffrey Walker of the Ceramic City Choir about putting on something really big", explains Matt, "and we did consider Mahler 8 (Mahler's Eighth Symphony).

"But Staffordshire Performing Arts were already rehearsing that for the performance they gave at Birmingham Symphony Hall last year and we had to think again.

"North Staffordshire Symphony Orchestra were especially interested in the project to help celebrate their centenary year, and the other groups — Keele Bach Choir, Keele Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus, the Ceramic City Choir, Barbara Walton Singers and Audley Brass Band — were eager to collaborate.

"Eventually we decided on Grande Messe des Morts, and all participants have been involved in active roles."

But why a composition by Berlioz?

"Berlioz was mixed-up, but his musical language was more direct than that of many of his contemporaries. He wasn't religious — he was a layman, so he spoke for Joe Bloggs when it came to contemplating the awful prospect of death.

"Berlioz speaks for us all. Verdi's Requiem is just plain opera, and the Mozart and Haydn Masses are matchless in their austerity. But it is Berlioz who displays the human emotion when it comes to depicting the terrors of the Last Judgment in sound."

"We have spent more than 5,000 man and woman hours trying to bring together into One Voice what Berlioz was attempting to define on the subject, and I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

As early as 1907 The Sentinel's reviewer was reflecting on a poor attendance that the North Staffordshire Orchestral Society (as it was then) was attracting, the lack of an audience was unfortunately a foretaste of things to come.

The time has surely arrived for music-lovers of the area to recognise and celebrate the jewel of an orchestra they have had in their midst for the past 100 years. Perhaps Grande Messe des Morts will help.

# Oh what a glorious night

## REVIEW Classical

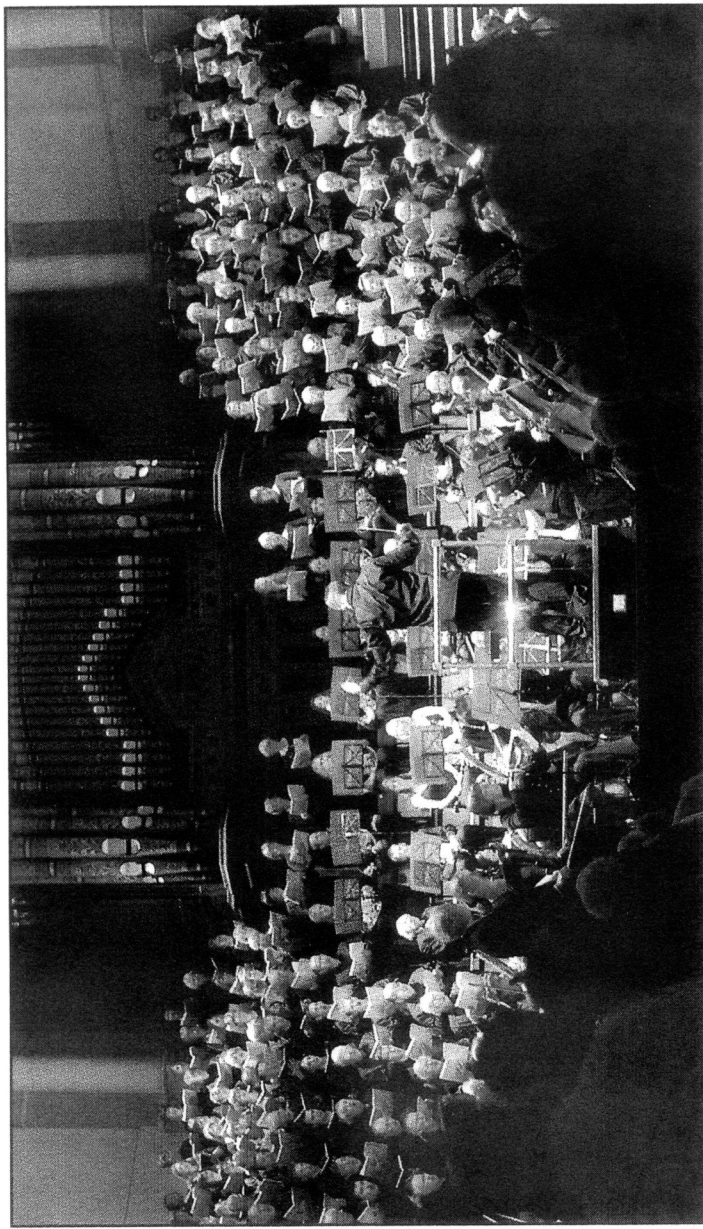
**Berlioz's Grande Messe des Morts**  
Victoria Hall, Hanley

HANLEY'S Victoria Hall has hosted many a glorious concert in its long history but it is doubtful whether any of them outshone the performance of Berlioz's *Grande Messe des Morts* on Saturday night.

This was the sort of occasion that will be talked about for years, even decades to come, as long, in fact, as North Staffordshire in general and the Potteries in particular are capable of boasting that they possess a music-loving public.

Never can the venue's renowned acoustics have been so thoroughly tested. Rarely can sheer sound, both tremendous and delicate, have been so evocative and memorable.

The list of performers taking part was almost unbelievable in itself: Keele Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir; North Staffordshire Symphony Orchestra; Keele Bach Choir; The Ceramic City Choir; Audley Brass Band; and The Barbara Walton Singers. And the man who held the 350-plus members of this vast concourse together was Matthew Willis, of the Keele Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir, who demonstrated great drive and artistry from the rostrum. Willis is clearly



**CROWDED:** orchestras and choirs from all over North Staffordshire took part in the terrific performance

a conductor with a bright future and we should make a point of listening to his music as often as we can — the opportunity may not be there for much longer. So huge was the gathering of performers that some choristers and brass band instrumentalists spilled over from The Victoria Hall's platform and had to be accommodated in both side

galleries. Of the Berlioz Requiem, as it is known, it need only be said that to hear it in such surroundings is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Few members of the packed audience could have gone home disappointed. *Grande Messe des Morts* creates its own world and it is difficult to think of any other musical work that uses

astonishingly low trombone notes, had a pathos beyond words. The only soloist in the work, tenor Mark le Brocq, sang gracefully and thoughtfully in the Sanctus, while the *Agnus Dei* which ended the requiem had repeated *Amens* which brought this terrific work to a comforting close.

Eric Snape



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CLASSICAL

## Performance a highlight of life

I was not surprised to receive a letter about the performance of the Berlioz Requiem at the Victoria Hall a week last Saturday night. It was from Geoffrey Walker, Musical Director and Chorus Master of the Ceramic City Choir, one of the (many) groups engaged in the presentation.

Like me, Geoffrey thought that last Saturday's performance was very special. In fact, he went so far as to say it was one of the musical highlights of his life.

And, more particularly, he goes on to heap praise on the skills of the conductor that night, stating that in Matthew Willis we were all in

the presence of a rare musical talent.

The letter went on to state: "He [Matthew Willis] single-handedly took the diverse musical forces which were the participating choirs and orchestras and built them into a thoroughly convincing ensemble."

"If the truth were known, the final rehearsal on the afternoon of the concert was the first time Matthew heard and saw all the participants."

"Yet he showed superb conducting skills in pulling the thing together in the less than three hours or so which were available to us (the process of

arranging all the performers on the stage alone took over an hour!).

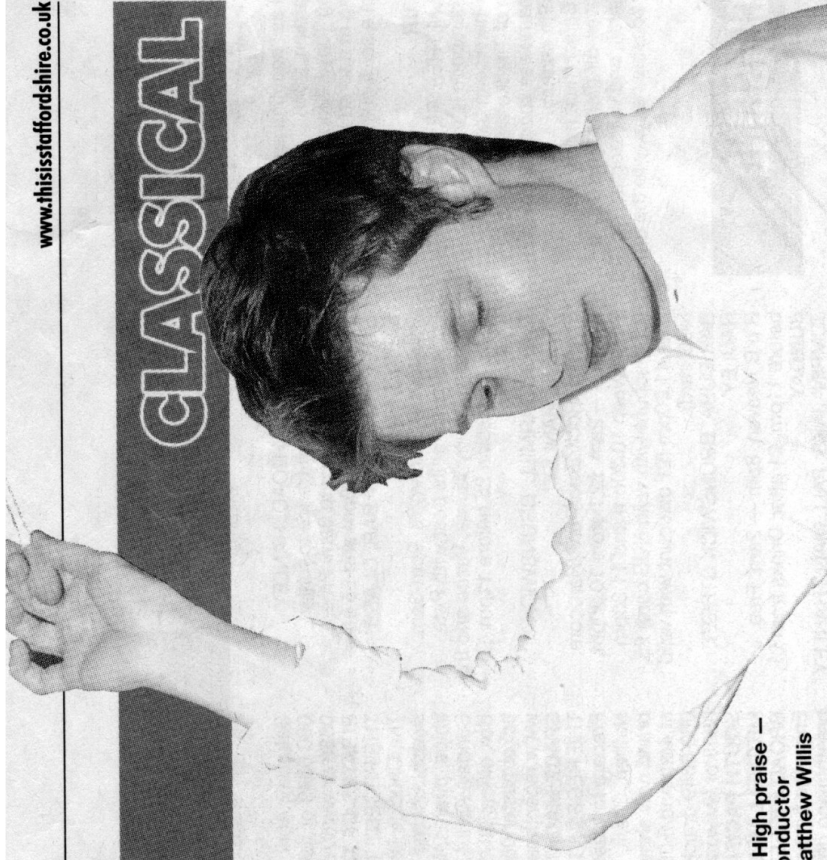
"I use the phrase 'rare musical talent' because I cannot imagine many of the distinguished 'named' conductors I have come into contact with achieving such a feat!

"Matthew had an astonishingly clear vision for the music which he communicated with authenticity to the performers and an attention to detail."

"In my experience these qualities are rare in the world of hardened professionals." Praise indeed.

**Eric Snape**

■ **High praise —**  
conductor  
**Matthew Willis**





## Celebrating 40 years with *Keele Bach Choir*

**As Keele Bach Choir celebrates its 40th anniversary members tell JENNY AMPHLETT  
what makes it one of the leading ensembles in the region**

**O**NE of the premier chamber choirs in the region, based right here in Staffordshire, celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. Keele Bach Choir was established back in 1976 by John Sloboda, a psychology professor at the university.

The choir is still going strong after four decades with around 40 members drawn from across Staffordshire and neighbouring counties.

The repertoire ranges from the Renaissance to Knut Nystedt's *Immortal Bach* and Americana such as Randall Thompson's *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

Now a series of celebratory concerts are being planned to mark the ruby anniversary.

"I joined in 1990," says Sue Coffey who sings soprano with the choir.

"For me it was the quality of the singing that made me want to leave the choir that I was already a member of and join Keele instead.

"I always thought it was a bit more special and had a certain quality. "Standards are high and choir members have to be auditioned. We don't just take anybody.

"I was also attracted by the fact that we do a lot of interesting music that is challenging and isn't always mainstream."

Members include Keele University staff and students, but most of the singers have no connection with the university or village at all.

"I have no connection and was already a member of a local choir near to where I live," says Sue. "But I wanted to join Keele for the interesting challenge.

"Our members are all sorts of people drawn from different areas and range in age from teenagers to octogenarians."

The choir rehearses in the Keele University Chapel, where most of its performances are also staged.

On March 19 there will be a performance of Bach's *St John Passion*, accompanied by the Northern Baroque Orchestra and professional soloists.

Then on June 4 there will be a summer concert with music by Byrd, Wood, Elgar and Chilcott.

The choir was directed by John Sloboda until the early 90s. He now lives out of the area but still maintains links with the Bach singers.

Artistic director Matthew Hamilton has just left the Keele Bach Choir



to take up the prestigious position of chorus director with the Halle Orchestra. Stepping into the breach for the remainder of the anniversary season is Christopher Cromar, who is well-known in the area as the musical director of Congleton Choral Society, Sandbach Voices and Salford Choral Society.

A highly respected chorus master, he regularly works with some of the UK's top vocal ensembles including the BBC Singers, Manchester Chamber Choir and the RSNO Chorus.

"The size of the choir hasn't changed much since I joined 26 years ago," says Sue. "We don't want to grow too big as we're a chamber choir and want to remain that way."

"However what has changed is the artistic director, as we have seen conductors come and go over the years."

"Christopher Cromar our new conductor has got off to a great start for our anniversary year."

Fellow choir member and semi-professional singer Marjorie Seddon was at the very first rehearsal.

"I have been with them for 40 years," she says.

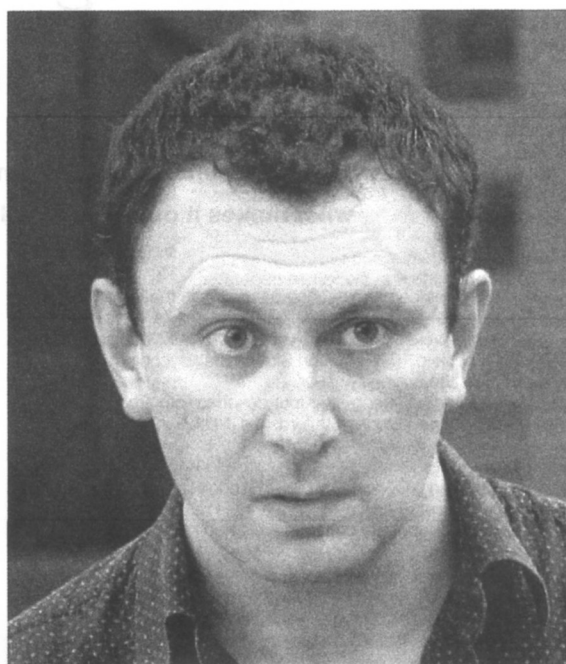
"I turned up in trepidation the first time because I personally wasn't a member of Keele, but I found the most wonderful musical collaboration."

"It was one of those chance meetings. Had I not turned up on that Wednesday or Thursday evening I really feel that my whole life would have changed."

"Initially the appeal for me was that I just loved John Sloboda as a conductor. For me he was the perfect conductor. It was all about his style of training the choir and his musical integrity."

"Subsequent conductors have been interesting and some have been very very challenging."

"The reason I've stayed is that Keele Bach Choir challenges the musical ability of all of its singers."



Artistic Director Christopher Cromar





# Concert

Eglise Notre Dame du Cap Lihou

Dimanche 23 juin 2019 à 17h30

Keele Bach Choir

Direction: Neil Taylor

Programme : Monteverdi, Bruckner, Bach, Fauré et al

Entrée Gratuite

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