

ERCU 1858 - 1958

Excerpts from a short pamphlet produced to celebrate the first 100 years of ERCU's history:

The first fifty years

Edinburgh Royal Choral Union originated in the choir of St Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Broughton Street, now (1958) the Cathedral of the Roman Catholic Diocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh.

Mr Charles J Hargitt was in 1858 organist of St Mary's Church, and he thought the capital city of Edinburgh ought to have a choir of far bigger dimensions than the average church choir for the study and performance of the great classics in choral music. Glasgow had had its Choral Union then for fourteen years. Accordingly, by newspaper advertisement, he called a meeting, held in Wood's Musical Rooms, Waterloo Place, on November 25, and attended by about thirty men, mostly members of St Mary's Choir, at which the Choral Union was formed, members enrolled and a conductor, (Mr Hargitt) office-bearers and a committee of nine appointed.

Jenny Lind in Edinburgh

For a year or two after its institution, the society sang mainly at concerts organised by other people and other societies. It sang, for example, at several University Reid concerts, and at some Saturday evening concerts organised by Mr William Howard. The most notable of these outside engagements was that in November 1861, when the choir took part in a performance of "The Creation" organised by a London impresario, when two of the soloists were the famous [Jenny Lind](#), "The Swedish Nightingale", and the greatest tenor of his day, [Sims Reeves](#).

Soon the society was settling down to regular performances of such popular oratorios such as Handel's "Messiah", "Judas Maccabaeus", "Israel in Egypt", and "Acis and Galatea"; Haydn's "The Creation" and "The Seasons"; Mendelssohn's "St Paul", "Elijah" and "The Hymn of Praise"; Rossini's "Stabat Mater" and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 and the Choral Fantasia. Later they included in their repertoire more modern works like Stanford's "The Revenge"; A C Mackenzie's "The Cottar's Saturday Night"; Sullivan's "The Golden Legend"; and Guonod's "The Redemption".

Famous Soloists

From its earliest years the society had the assistance of the most famous singers in the country, among them [Madame Albani](#), [Signor Foli](#), Edward Lloyd, Sims Reeves, Madame Patey, Marie Roze and Sir Charles Santley. Later distinguished singers included Andrew Black, John Coates, Ben Davies, Ffrancon Davies, Gerwase Elwes, Durward Lely, Kirby Lunn, Agnes Nicholls and Robert Radford.

Sims Reeves, the greatest English tenor of his day sang only once for the Choral Union, and thereby hangs a tale. He was engaged to sing the tenor solos in a performance of Sullivan's "The Prodigal Son" but because of indisposition he was unable to sing two of his six solos and also "Waft Her, Angels" from "Jephtha". Mr Reeves offered to reduce his fee of 90 guineas by 10 guineas but the Choral Union declined this proposal and offered him 60 guineas and as that was the sum awarded by the Sheriff-Substitute

when Mr Reeves raised an action for his full 90 guineas fee he gained nothing by his litigation, for he had to pay the expenses of the action.

The Messiah

The Messiah was first sung by the Society in 1861 and has been sung at least once a year ever since that performance, and since 1888 at noon on every New Year's Day, uninterrupted even by two world wars.

The Jubilee of the Society was celebrated in 1908 by the publication of Mr Waddell's "History" and by a concert for which the Halle orchestra.

The Choir sang Schubert's "Song of Miriam" and Mendelssohn's "Hymn of Praise". Edinburgh Corporation also gave the members of the Society a civic reception in the City Chambers.

The Second Fifty Years

Looking back at the record of the second fifty years it can be claimed that it was just as honourable as the first, even though it embraced two world wars. But listening to good music was found to be the best escape from the anxieties of those dreadful years and the Edinburgh Choral Union did its part, particularly in the second war, in providing much of the music that was wanted. During its course the "Messiah" was given in St Giles each May for the special benefit of the members of the General Assembly, and other oratorios sung in St Giles were Mendelssohn's "Elijah" and "Hymn of Praise", Haydn's "The Creation" and Bach's "St Matthew Passion", while the Choral Union took part in several of the "Sunday Night at Seven" entertainments for the forces.

In the last year of the First World War the society celebrated its diamond jubilee with two concerts in March, for which the Halle Orchestra was engaged. At the first, Mr Greenhouse Allt conducted the choir in a performance of Elgar's choral trilogy "The Spirit of England" and at the second Sir Henry Wood conducted a programme which included Beethoven's "Choral" Symphony.

Conductor interned

When the resignation of Mr Collinson was accepted in 1913, Mr Gottlieb Feuerberg, of Perth, was unanimously appointed. Mr Feuerberg conducted the New Year's Day performance of the "Messiah" in 1914; he prepared the choir for a concert version of Wagner's "Parsifal", which was conducted later in the month by Emil Mlynarski, then the conductor of the Scottish Orchestra, and he conducted a performance of Mendelssohn's "Hymn of Praise" at the opening of the Usher Hall on March 6 of that year. But although he had been in this country for eighteen years, and had married the daughter of a Scottish clergyman, Mr Feuerberg did not apply for naturalisation until war broke out, and it was then, of course, too late. He was arrested and interned as an enemy subject shortly after the outbreak of war.

The Title "Royal"

At the Jubilee concert in 1908 the choir numbered 333 voices, almost equally divided between men and women.

In 1911 permission was given to use the title "Royal".

Centenary Celebrations

It would be quite beyond the resources of the society, even if they wished to engage an orchestra, to bring the Halle from Manchester at present day costs for a Centenary concert, as was done at the Jubilee and the Diamond Jubilee. Fortunately, the engagement of an orchestra was not necessary as the SNO called their concert on the nearest Friday to the actual date, the Centenary Concert of the Society, when the choir sang Vaughan Williams "Sea Symphony", with Sir Adrian Boult conducting and Bach's Magnificat conducted by Herrick Bunney. The Centenary was also marked by a performance of Bach's B Minor Mass, which Mr Bunney conducted. The Centenary dinner was held on November 25, which was exactly one hundred years after the institution of the society, and the Corporation who gave a civic reception to the members of the choir at the Jubilee, similarly honoured them to mark their Centenary on February 16, 1959.