

## ERCU and the Edinburgh festivals

In 1953 the eminent conductor Dr Bruno Walter wrote to the then ERCU President D H M Jack thanking the members of the choir for a little gift they had presented to him. He said, "I cannot leave Edinburgh without telling you once more how happy I have been made by the excellent performance of the Edinburgh Royal Choral Union, and that it gave me the greatest satisfaction to have had again an opportunity to work for this fine choir". This missive was sent following a performance of Brahms' *German Requiem* with Walter and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra at the Edinburgh International Festival.

The idea of a festival with a remit to "provide a platform for the flowering of the human spirit" and enrich the cultural life of Scotland, Britain and Europe took form in the wake of the Second World War. Rudolf Bing, the first director, conceived of the festival to heal the wounds of war through the languages of the arts. The Edinburgh Festival Society was formed in 1946 to organise international festivals of music and drama in Edinburgh, the first of which took place the following year in 1947.

Only one mention is made in passing of the involvement of ERCU in the early history of the Edinburgh International Festival in the 2015 publication *Fifty Years of the Edinburgh Festival Chorus*. In the section headed "In the beginning", Sir Alexander Gibson, outlining his desire for a new chorus specifically for the festival, is quoted as saying in 1964, "It is not good enough to extract at random sections from the Glasgow and Edinburgh Choral Unions, Scottish Opera Chorus etc. and call it a Scottish Festival Chorus". Whilst augmenters may have been drafted in from other choirs for the EIF performances, it is the Edinburgh Royal Choral Union that is listed in performances from 1950 to 1963.

For the first three years from 1947 to 1949, ERCU had no involvement with the EIF. The Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra brought the Huddersfield Choral Society with it for performances of the Fauré *Requiem*, Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* and Bach's *B Minor Mass*. A group called the Scottish Singers was also involved for a couple of years and the Glasgow Orpheus Choir with conductor Sir Hugh Robertson performed concerts at the first four festivals.

The "ERCU years" thus began in 1950 and the choir subsequently appeared in every festival until the association was ended in 1963. Choral performances were not presented exclusively by ERCU during those years but it was certainly the house choir for the EIF. Certain orchestras brought their own choirs including the Hallé, the Royal Danish, the Philharmonia, the Royal Opera House, the RTF and the Vienna State Opera. Other well-known choirs such as the Leeds Festival Chorus, the Sheffield Philharmonic Society and the Huddersfield Choral Society were invited by visiting orchestras to perform major choral works. Perhaps the most impressive was the participation of the Chorus of La Scala Milan which sang in five of the seven concerts presented by the La Scala orchestra over a period of six days, including two Verdi *Requiem* performances.

However, let us not be distracted from the main task at hand, which is to celebrate the contribution of ERCU to the world-famous Edinburgh International Festival. Before moving on to the details of the festival performances themselves, it is fitting that tribute be given to the man at the helm in 1950. Herrick Bunney was appointed chorus master/conductor of ERCU in September 1946, a post that he held for over 20 years until January 1967. Mr Bunney was Organist and Master of the Music at St Giles' Cathedral and the Chapel of the Most Ancient and Noble Order of the Thistle from 1946 to 1996, as well as having a long-standing musical relationship with the University of Edinburgh. Apart

from ERCU's own concerts and those of the Scottish National Orchestra (for which the choir provided choral services in those days), it fell to him to prepare choir members for the Edinburgh International Festival engagements, at which they sang under some of the most famous conductors in the world and accompanied by some of the most distinguished orchestras. Unless they were singing a work with which they were familiar, that involved missing their customary six months' break, but the members willingly accepted that for the honour of singing at the festival.

ERCU members' first engagement was at the fourth festival in 1950, when they sang Fauré's *Pavanne* and Haydn's *The Seasons* under Sir Thomas Beecham, later in that festival providing a male-voice choir when Kathleen Ferrier sang Brahms' *Alto Rhapsody* conducted by Fritz Busch. They sang under Beecham again two years later in Delius's *Appalachia* and Berlioz's *L'enfance du Christ* with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Dr Bruno Walter conducted them at two festivals, in the *Choral Symphony* and Brahms' *Song of Destiny* with the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of New York at one, and Brahms' *German Requiem* with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra at another. Twice they sang under Sir Malcolm Sargent with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in Haydn's *The Creation* and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*.

In 1956 ERCU had the honour of giving the opening concert of the festival when it performed Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* (the Choral) with the RPO, conducted once again by Beecham. Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness Prince Philip Duke of Edinburgh were present for the occasion. At the close of the concert the President, Mr J D Cochrane, and Mr Bunney were presented to Her Majesty.

ERCU also sang at the opening concert in 1961 (the first under new director Lord Harwood) when Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* was performed with the London Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Leopold Stokowski. The choir performed with Sir Adrian Boult in 1959 when he conducted *A Sea Symphony* at Vaughan Williams' memorial concert. In 1961 ERCU was conducted by Otto Klemperer in a performance of Mahler's *Second Symphony* with the Philharmonia Orchestra. Heather Harper and Janet Baker were the soloists that evening. ERCU's final appearance at the EIF was in 1963 when it sang Berlioz's *Lelio* under Colin Davis (knighted 1980) with the LSO. Only a few months later Herrick Bunney was awarded Membership of the Royal Victorian Order in the 1964 New Year's honours list and was made a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order in 1996.

Although ERCU was participating in the Edinburgh International Festival, which in those days took place some time between the last two weeks in August and the first two weeks in September, it continued its own concerts during the winter and rehearsals would commence almost immediately after the festival finished.

Whilst the heady days of ERCU performing at the Usher Hall as part of the international festival were long consigned to memory, there was a comeback of sorts in the 1990s. For three years from 1994, ERCU gave an hour-long concert in St Giles' in August as part of the *St Giles' at Six* series. This would have been loosely connected to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The official stamp of the fringe was certainly there to be seen on the programme cover for an August 1997 performance at St Cuthbert's Church featuring Kodaly's *Missa Brevis* and Vaughan Williams' *Five Mystical Songs*.

This overview of ERCU involvement in Edinburgh's festivals would not be complete without mention of the contribution of four ladies of the choir who appeared at the EIF in 2009, 46 years after the last appearance. Celia Coulson, Olive Kinnear, Anne Pritchard and Rosemary Stewart took part in *Experimentum Mundi* by Giorgio Battistelli for four nights at the Traverse Theatre. This is a theatre piece, as the avant garde classical tradition knows it, but with an ironic twist: the drama, or rather

the theatricality, is provided by an ensemble of skilled artisans. The 16 craftsmen fill the house with tapping, clinking and rasping, their sounds filled out by a percussionist and four female performers whose lips patter together soundlessly, whispering almost inaudibly. Celia recalls that this involved reciting over and over again names of members of their families. Each participant received a fee, which was donated to ERCU, and also a bottle of whisky! This was certainly a world away from those earlier performances in the 1950s and '60s.