

***The Treasury of English Cathedral Music* (EMI, reissued 2011)**

**Reviewed by Paul Hale
for the Guild of Church Musicians Yearbook 2012**

The years 1965/6 witnessed a remarkable joint publishing venture by a record company, a book publisher, a small group of scholars and the organists of some of England's senior choral establishments: *The Treasury of English Cathedral Music*.

In 1965 five volumes entitled *The Treasury of English Cathedral Music*, consisting of some 1100 pages of music, were published by the Blandford Press (London). Under the general editorship of Gerald Knight (then Director of the RSCM) and William Reed (pupil of Howells, composer, and editor/collector of vocal music), these substantial hard-back collections contained a distillation of the most representative choral music in the Anglican tradition from the Twelfth century to the mid-Twentieth. Printed with an attractive music typeface, the repertoire was edited by leading scholars, those responsible for the earlier music being Denis Stevens (Vol.1, 1100-1545), Peter le Huray (1545-1650, Vol.2, with some editions by John Morehen), and Christopher Dearnley (1650-1760, Vol.3). The final two volumes used mainly existing editions by permission of other publishers (OUP, Novello, Stainer & Bell, RSCM, etc.). George Guest, of St John's College Cambridge, wrote an appreciative Introduction to Volume 4 (1760-1900), which he followed up with a seminal St John's recording (on Argo) of several core Nineteenth Century pieces from this volume. David Lumsden, of New College Oxford, wrote a stimulating Introduction to Volume 5 (1900-1965), and, like George Guest, followed this up with fine Britten and Leighton recordings on Saga and Abbey. Many of the new editions immediately became authoritative and found wide use – a use restricted unfortunately by the cost of buying a set of volumes for an entire cathedral choir.

The new editions were recorded by the Ambrosian Singers (under Denis Stevens) and the choirs of Westminster Abbey (under Douglas Guest, with organist Simon Preston), St Paul's Cathedral (under John Dykes-Bower, with organist Harry Gabb), Chichester Cathedral (under John Birch, with organist Richard Seal) and Guildford Cathedral (under Barry Rose, with organist Gavin Williams) during 1965 and 1966, and a set of five long-playing records was issued by HMV. The colour coding of the dust jackets of the books and of the LP's sleeves was co-ordinated so that one could see at once which LP

accompanied which book. It was notably stylish and remains a unique and very special venture.

The LPs have now been digitally remastered at EMI (employing the well-tuned ears of Simon Gibson, an ex Southwell cathedral chorister and EMI's expert at this work). The sound has gained an extra clarity which reveals details obscured by the slight 'wow, flutter' and hum of the typical gramophone deck. It is a joy to be able to listen to these superb stereo recordings with virtually no distortion: the music and performances can be enjoyed to the full.

Many cleverly-selected additional tracks have been included: some of these tracks are by the featured choirs and some are by Christopher Robinson's Worcester Cathedral Choir (with Harry Bramma accompanying), George Thalben-Ball's Temple Church Choir, Martindale Sidwell's Hampstead Parish Church Choir, Michael Fleming's All Saints' Margaret Street choristers, and Denys Pouncey's Wells Cathedral Choir (with Anthony Crossland accompanying). The resulting boxed set of five CDs forms not only a digitally refreshed treasury of English church music, but also a vivid and fascinating snap-shot of England's finest choirs in the mid 1960s – just at the time when some of the choir directors were at the end of their careers whilst others were just beginning to make a name for themselves and for their choirs.

The CD box comes complete with a 20-page booklet not only listing full details of every piece and performance, but also enriched by a detailed and perceptive essay from John Morehen, who as a young New College graduate edited several items for the *Treasury* and much for OUP. Prof. Morehen writes in detail of the genesis of the collection and gives masterly notes on the music. He also draws attention to other developments in the 1960s which arguably sprang from this great project. The first was the publication by Herbert Jenkins of that marvellous series of volumes entitled *Studies in Church Music*, among which stand out Peter le Huray's seminal study *Music and the Reformation in England, 1549-1660*, Christopher Dearnley's *English Church Music, 1650-1750*, as well as books on the Wesleys and on Nineteenth and Twentieth century church music. Morehen also reminds us that the British Academy's long-term project *Early English Church Music* – a major series of scholarly editions, which is still being added to – began at the same time. With *Musica Britannia* and the Purcell Society also at work in the field, the past forty-five years have brought into being scholarly performing editions of most English church music – a vast range of publications which would have gladdened and amazed that diligent pioneer in the field, Edward

Fellowes, some of whose editions are heard on the bonus tracks contained in this boxed set.

Those readers who know of the original *Treasury* records or books will need no reminder of the repertoire embraced. For those new to the riches of this collection it is worth listing here at least the composers represented: plainchant, Queldryk, Excetre, Damett, Dunstable, Frye, Cornysh, Merbecke, Tallis, Mundy, Farrant, Morley, White, Byrd, Parsons, Philips, Weelkes, Tomkins, Dering, Gibbons, Child, Humfrey, Blow, Purcell, Greene, Travers, Boyce, Nares, Battishill, Crotch, Goss, Walmisley, S S Wesley, Ouseley, Sterndale Bennett, Stanford, Elgar, Wood, Noble, Walford Davies, Vaughan Williams, Bairstow, Holst, Martin Shaw, Rootham, Ireland, Howells, Warlock, Thalben-Ball, Walton, Britten, Leighton, Joubert, and Maxwell Davies. That two are still alive, and seven were in 1965/6, shows us that the *Treasury* editors were very much aware that the best of the present will be considered just as worthy as the best of the past.

So much for the collection and the well-filled CDs; what of the performances? Used as we are to the high standards of so many cathedral and professional recording choirs today, is there much in this collection which can stand up in comparison? The answer is a resounding **yes!** I have found it absolutely fascinating and indeed highly enjoyable revisiting recordings some of which I enjoyed as a teenager and then largely put away. I say 'largely' because of one set of bonus tracks: these are Elgar recordings made at Worcester cathedral in 1969, when as a teenager I was beginning to be discriminating about the sound of choirs. This was a time when Willcocks at King's and Guest at St John's dominated – and polarised – the record-buying cathedral music aficionados. The precious few recordings Barry Rose issued from Guildford were additional manna from heaven, with rare gems being polished by Stanley Vann at Peterborough and exciting things beginning to emerge from John Birch's Chichester choir. However it was an Elgar LP from Worcester in 1969, on EMI, which took our little world by storm. The tone and expressivity that Christopher Robinson produced from his boys, the taming of his more mature lay-clerks, the skilful and colourful playing by a young Harry Brama of the mighty Worcester Hope-Jones / Harrison, and above all the repertoire: Elgar's two major anthems, the *Te Deum* and *Benedictus* and a host of miniature marvels led of course by *Ave verum corpus*. On hearing this LP for the first time I became an Elgar addict overnight and have never wavered. EMI have included, on CD 5, two anthems from this LP – a poignant *O harken thou* and a stirring *Give unto the*

Lord. The whole Worcester Elgar LP has been remastered in recent years and reissued by EMI; I warmly commend it to you.

The other 'extras' from the back HMV/EMI catalogue include *This is the record of John* (Gibbons) and *Out of the deep* (Morley) sung by the Choir of Hampstead parish church. At first glance this may appear an odd choice, but not so: Martindale Sidwell was renowned for the training of his boys, thus the Hampstead choir (and his St Clement Danes choir of adult professionals) proved a magnet for aspiring young singers and choir-trainers such as Barry Rose, who sang bass at Hampstead. The tenor soloist in both these famous verse anthems was another star in the making – Gerald English. John Morehen plays the organ and was one of a long line of New College and King's College organ scholars who spent a post-graduate year acting as Sidwell's assistant or deputy at both establishments. The tales they have to tell of Sidwell the musician and Sidwell the man could fill a book. Hearing Sidwell's boys is a pleasure; hearing Thalben-Ball's is a delight. The Temple Church Choir recordings reissued here are of *The souls of the Righteous* (Nares), *Blessed are the pure in heart* and *Jubilate in G* (Walford Davies) and Thalben-Ball's own *Evening Service in C*. Recorded in 1960 and 1962 with treble soloists Robin Lough and Ian le Grice, the tone of the boys has not changed from that immensely famous recording of Robin's father, Ernest, singing Mendelssohn's *Hear my prayer* back in 1927. This beautiful *bel canto* tone and style is expressive singing at its most radiant: a warm tone with controlled vibrato, almost feminine in style, which GTB maintained right to the end of his time at the Temple Church (he was organist there from 1923 to 1982), often with senior boys and soloists well into their teens. Indeed one head chorister in the 1960s asked if he could leave the choir because he needed to sit his A-levels! GTB's organ playing is also inimitably his own; in these performances he makes the post-war Temple Church Harrison (which he never really liked) sound as mellow and beautiful as his beloved instrument lost in 1941 during an air-raid on London.

One of the other additional choirs is that of Wells cathedral, recorded in May 1965, near to the end of Denys Pouncey's reign as cathedral organist (Vaughan Williams *Te Deum in G* and Rootham's *Evening Service in E minor*). The boys make a pleasant sound and the men are typical of the provincial lay-clerk of the day (as are the Worcester men). It would not be for another ten years or so that the present-day custom arrived, where the typical cathedral back row is at least partially staffed by young ex choral scholars. This development changed the tone, the blend, the speed of sight-reading and the degree of stylistic awareness of cathedral choirs and enabled the repertoire

to grow hugely, as it has done over the past forty years. Michael Fleming's choristers from the All Saints' Margaret Street Choir School (which sadly closed in 1968) make a fresh, charming, rather intimate sound which is heard here above a group of singers drawn together by Simon Preston (the New English Singers) including some stellar names such as James Bowman and Brian Kay, at the start of their careers. Recorded in 1968, they sing Byrd's *Victimae Paschali*, Tomkins's *My beloved spake*, and Purcell's *Hear my prayer* in a beautifully-paced, long-lined, expressive performance where a perfectly-placed climax subsides to a magically hushed ending.

Now to the five choirs who featured on the original LPs (some of which also feature on bonus tracks recorded 1964-8). The music from 1100 to about 1500 is sung with conviction by the Ambrosian Singers, a small professional chorus founded by Denis Stevens and John McCarthy in 1951, who over the years have made many opera recordings, sung as the backing choir for recordings in all musical styles and have recorded on numerous film tracks. Despite initially sounding rather full-voiced for this music, used as we are to a more bland twenty-first century approach, they refresh the listener by injecting more personality from individual singers than is the case with today's perfectly-blended, rather homogenised recording choirs. I enjoy their committed performances. It is still rare to hear items from the Old Hall manuscript (Queldryk, Excetre and Damett), the Eton Choirbook (Cornysh), or even Dunstable and Frye sung liturgically, so these recordings remain a delightful treat.

Barry Rose, inspired by Martindale Sidwell and others, was blazing a fresh path at the new Guildford cathedral where almost overnight he created a superb choir of fine lay-clerks drawn to him by an inkling of what was to come, and of a set of boys whose tone, diction, tuning and musicianship rivalled all others in the land – and all this having started from scratch in 1961, with no choir school. Their recordings proved an inspiration and even lifted Stainer's *Crucifixion* from its place in the doldrums with a performance for EMI's *Music for Pleasure* so radiantly beautiful that many gramophones (including mine) must have worn out the LP. Just to hear Rose's boys start the hymn *Cross of Jesus*, is to slip into another world – a world inhabited by a tiny number of choirs and choir trainers over the decades. Curiously it is the Guildford men who have the lion's share of the work on these recordings as they tackle the longest verse anthems – by Humphrey, Purcell, Greene, Travers and Boyce. Volume three of the *Treasury* is one of the most useful sets of Blandford's editions; Dearnley's realisations of the keyboard parts are masterful, Boyce's *The heavens declare* being particularly fine. I always feel

that it is a huge pity that these superb editions have never been issued as individual copies. Perhaps digitally scanned printed copies will in the future be available; they would sell well.

The other newly refreshed cathedral choir which contributed much to the recordings is that of John Birch at Chichester. Like Rose, Birch (who moved to Chichester in 1958, from All Saints' Margaret Street) was attracting able young men to sing and play for him (such as baritones Anthony Holt, Harvey Lansdale and Michael Morton, and assistant organist Richard Seal, shortly to make his name at Salisbury when Christopher Dearnley left in 1968 to succeed Sir John Dykes Bower at St Paul's). Like Rose, Birch was a most effective trainer of boys' voices. Listening to the diction of the boys from all the choirs, the vowels were generally brighter than is heard to today (more of that below); Birch's boys just stray into the 'precious' end of the spectrum. The Chichester choir became known for the breadth of their repertoire, a range of which is recorded here, from the early Chichester organist/composer Thomas Weelkes (four anthems, including the exciting *Alleluia, I heard a voice*), to twentieth century works by Howells (*Collegium Regale Magnificat*), Walton (*Set me as a seal*), Maxwell Davies (*Ave Maria*) and Leighton (*Give me the wings of faith*).

With only six men at Chichester, the balance in general favours the boys. Quite different is the balance of the Westminster Abbey Choir (which has the lion's share of recorded performances) and that of St Paul's Cathedral, both of which, then as now, have a large number of strong-toned lay-clerks. The St Paul's men make the more homogeneous sound, which reaches up and blends with the quite warm, slightly old-fashioned but very musical boys' tone. This was the choir that James Lancelot knew as a boy – their February and March 1966 recordings were made only months after he left for Ardingly. He and many other cathedral organists of today were moulded by the choirs in which they were choristers; St Paul's then as now would provide as thorough a musical training as could be desired. The repertoire they recorded for their *Treasury* LP fitted them like a glove. They sing classic anthems (several written by St Paul's organists) by Battishill, Crotch, Goss, Ouseley, Wesley (*Cast me not away*, and *Wash me thoroughly*), Sterndale Bennett, and Walmisley's D minor Magnificat, Noble's B minor Nunc dimittis and Stanford's B flat Te Deum. The sound is big and splendid, the tempi moderate to slow, and the organ played in a surprisingly 'full' manner with elegance and sensitively by the always scrupulously-prepared Harry Gabb, who was from 1946-1974 Sub Organist at St Paul's and from 1953 additionally Organist at HM Chapel Royal. The St Paul's Willis had at the time

a mellow restraint not always found in Willis's organs; on the evidence of this recording (and of Dearnley's EMI *Great Cathedral Organ Series* recording issued in 1970) the sound of the organ did indeed 'freshen up' after the Mander rebuild, though my conjecture is that cleaning the pipes thoroughly and placing them on new soundboards brought them back to the state in which Father Willis left them rather than the condition into which they had fallen – however 'mellow' – by the mid 1960s.

The Westminster Abbey choir recordings – both those made for the *Treasury* and those added by EMI in this compilation – may come as a surprise to those who imagine that this choir only came up to scratch during Simon Preston's and Martin Neary's periods in charge. They record works by Philips, Morley, Tomkins (the interesting *Fourth Service Nunc dimittis*, edited by Morehen), Mundy, Gibbons, Farrant, Byrd (*Sing Joyfully*), White, Gibbons (*O clap your hands*), Blow (*Salvator Mundi* and *God is our hope and strength*) and Purcell (*Remember not*, and *O Lord God of hosts*). In addition to this repertoire, EMI have extracted from a Christmas LP recorded by the Abbey choir in March 1967 pieces by Warlock (*I saw a fair maiden*), the three beautiful Howells 'carol anthems' (*A spotless rose*, *Sing Lullaby*, and *Here is the little door*), Joubert's modern classic *There is no rose* and Britten's imaginative and ever-fresh *Hymn to the Virgin*. The choristers sing beautifully throughout; I detect the influence of Boris Ord in their significantly 'King's College Cambridge' vowels (the 'a' sound nearer an 'eh'), the perfectly placed and enunciated consonants, the attention to tuning, the long, soaring phrases, and the lack of haste. Douglas Guest was Organ Scholar at King's College, Cambridge from 1934 to 1939, immediately before David Willcocks, following Willcocks at Salisbury in 1950 and Willcocks again at Worcester in 1957 before moving to Westminster Abbey in 1963, when William McKie retired to Ottawa. Like DVW, Guest took this supremely beautiful and well-drilled 'King's' style with him throughout his career, finding its highest expression in his earlier years at the Abbey. At the Abbey his back row was not so readily moulded, the lay vicars having tenure for life, which for some of them meant remaining in post for as long as they possibly could. Thus one hears in these recordings a unique sound: very full (overpowering the boys from time to time, as at St Paul's), and consisting of an extraordinary mixture of huge-voiced basses with wide vibratos, a tenor line with some very fine young voices attempting to blend with old-timers, and among the altos two of the country's top countertenors – Grayston Burgess (who is the soloist in Morley's *Out of the deep*) and John Whitworth (who sings the verses in Mundy's poignant *Ah, helpless wretch*). To have the opportunity to listen to their stunning singing might be considered sufficient to outweigh the overbearing and vibrato-laden

basses. Also of note are Simon Preston's organ accompaniments; he was Sub Organist at the time, and after being Organist of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, returned in 1981 to the Abbey as Organist on Guest's retirement. Preston's playing perfectly encapsulates the period of these recordings; it varies from truly stylish and informed accompaniments (for example to the Morley, Tomkins and Mundy works, played crisply and charmingly on the Abbey's Snetzler chamber organ), via a rather 'Swell to Mixture with octave coupler' sound in some works, to more full-bloodedly semi-romantic accompaniments such as that to Blow's *Salvator Mundi*, in which the Harrison & Harrison Solo Violes make an appearance as well as 'Full Swell' at the climax.

Hearing Simon Preston accompanying *Salvator Mundi* in such a colourful and dramatic way took me back to just a few years after these recordings were made, when in 1970 as an eighteen-year-old alto I was privileged to sing in the Abbey for two weeks on an RSCM cathedral course under the direction of the effervescent John Bertalot. At the organ was Roy Massey, whose playing of *Salvator Mundi* went a stage further – 32ft Double Ophicleide at that glorious climactic B major chord! The cathedral courses at the Abbey that year and the next proved an inspiration for all of us, learning and performing a classic range of English Church Music in that historical place. The influence of that week is with me still, forty years later, and listening to these reissued recordings made me appreciate that they still have the power to have a similar influence, despite the myriad recordings of this repertoire issued since the 1960s. I cannot commend this box-set highly enough to anyone interested in, moved by, or involved with English Church Music. Well done, EMI, for taking such a worthy initiative. Now we need Blandford Press to reissue the printed editions; the CDs will undoubtedly create a new market.