



A History of Dundee Choral Union - 1858-1989

We are much indebted to Mr Geoffrey Creamer, a former Concert Secretary, who compiled the following history of Dundee Choral Union covering the period up to 1989.

On 28 January 1858, eighteen ladies and nine gentlemen convened at a house in South Tay Street, Dundee and formed themselves into Dundee Amateur Choral Union ('amateur' was retained in the title until 1959), the designated purpose of which was 'to practise and execute chiefly sacred music'.

This event took place during a period of intense musical activity in Scotland, when many amateur bodies were created, including several in Dundee, as the breakdown of the traditional aristocratic patronage in music was accelerated by the changing patterns of social life that accompanied the Industrial Revolution, bringing music closer to the masses. As a congregational inheritance from the Reformation, most of the new musical organisations were choral, and the traditional association of popular music-making with the church is reflected in the Choral Union's stated adherence to sacred music. To this day, a major proportion of the Choral's activity has remained directed towards the performance of large scale sacred or religious based works, though admittedly this has been dictated to some extent by the availability of suitable repertoire.

The Choral's first conductor was Henry Nagel, a music teacher who came originally from Danzig (Gdansk). For 25 years, he gave unstinted and unremunerated devotion to the Society, struggling to keep it going when members' apathy and poor attendance at rehearsals threatened its very existence, and working selflessly to project the choir into the heart of the town's musical life.

The first concert, on 4 June 1860, with the choir numbering 48 singers, consisted principally of choruses from Haydn's 'Creation' and Mendelssohn's 'Elijah', and this style of programme, also including secular choruses and part-songs, was the feature of early performances.

The first large scale single work to be given complete was Handel's 'Messiah' in November 1865, and thereafter the popular oratorios of Handel, Haydn and Mendelssohn, as well as other works, were enthusiastically tackled by the choir, whose confidence and numbers grew sufficiently to be able to give, in May 1869, the first performance in Scotland of Mozart's 'Requiem'.

The financial affairs of the Choral were handled astutely from the start. The annual subscription determined by the original constitution was 10/-, with music provided free, and money was also raised from the sale of tickets to concerts. As the active membership and audiences grew rapidly and honorary membership was introduced, the Choral raised sums sufficient to enable it to make a more tangible contribution to the life of Dundee and elsewhere in the form of the donation of sizeable

amounts to charity. Dundee Royal Infirmary was a major beneficiary, but contributions were also made to other local funds as well as to national appeals, such as that for the relief of distress following the collapse of the City of Glasgow Bank in 1878, and later to sundry war funds (does anybody know if the 'Dundee Amateur Choral Union Bed' in Base Hospital, Cape Town, still exists?).

In addition to this charitable work, the Choral launched a series of orchestral concerts in the late 1860s. It also promoted four music festivals in which orchestral and choral concerts were given over four or five successive days. When this proved too much of a drain on its financial resources, it rectified the position by holding a three-day bazaar in the autumn of 1872. After outstanding debts and expenses had been paid, this event realised the incredible amount of £1,870, which was invested in a special fund to be used to promote orchestral concerts in Dundee for the encouragement of musical education, and the improvement of musical taste amongst the community, which intention it carried out faithfully and commendably for several years.

Under Henry Nagel, the Choral had become an established musical force with an active membership of 250 and, when he retired in 1883, his achievements were recognised by the presentation to him of a gold watch, a silver jug and £1,000 (equivalent to approximately £35,000 in 1989!). After an unhappy four-year period under the baton of one R.H. Turner, an excellent Edinburgh musician, Carl Drechsler Hamilton, was appointed conductor in 1887.

The next ten years were musically of the highest quality, with performances of traditional oratorios interspersed with those of contemporary British composers such as Mckenzie, Cowen, Sullivan (who had in 1875 conducted the Choral in the first Scottish performance of his oratorio 'The Light of the World'), MacCunn, Parry and Elgar, all using professional soloists and orchestras. Hamilton even took the Choral to Edinburgh to give a performance of Handel's 'Judas Maccabaeus' at the 1890 Edinburgh Exhibition.

In this period also, the Choral, having received a personal offer to underwrite any losses incurred, undertook the innovation of populist concerts with greatly reduced ticket prices for the benefit of the working classes. Unfortunately, this worthwhile venture had to be abandoned after two performances because of a poor response from the targeted audience.

The failure of these popular concerts was symptomatic of a more serious and widespread unease amongst traditional audiences, and the end of the century saw the Choral confronted by its most serious financial crisis as the expense of mounting concerts with full professional support began to exceed by far the income from falling honorary and active memberships and diminishing concert audiences. A commercial recession, which brought a general scarcity of money to the town, also brought with it an apathy on the part of members and an inability to attract new young blood into the choir. When the crisis peaked in 1899, it was decided to continue as a private society with honorary officials, and for the next few years it was only able to give concerts as annual income allowed and by reducing overheads such as professional orchestras.

In that same year, the Choral's accompanist, David Stephen, who was to achieve some eminence as a Scottish composer (his 'Missa Solemnis' is dedicated to the Choral) offered his services as conductor free, which offer was accepted with alacrity. When he was appointed Director of Music to the Carnegie Trust in Dunfermline in 1904, he was succeeded by another local musician, W.P. Fleming.

Various money-raising ideas were mooted and attempted, such as a ticket subscription scheme, but these were unsuccessful and the Society found itself just having to weather the storm as best it could. At last there was a significant upturn in fortunes: a number of honorary members were

recruited, and the active membership began to flourish again, so that in February 1908 the Choral was able to celebrate its Silver Jubilee with a performance of Haydn's 'Creation', for which professional soloists and the Scottish Orchestra were engaged. With an obvious sigh of relief, the Committee was able to report to the AGM that 'financially the season had been successful' and noted that the active membership now amounted to 210.

On the resignation of W.P. Fleming due to ill health in 1909, the Society looked to the organist of St. Paul's Cathedral, Dundee for his replacement. The appointment of Charles M. Cowe was to prove the catalyst needed to restore the Choral fully to the pinnacle of achievement in not only local but also Scottish musical circles.

An intensely private and modest man, Cowe was a consummate musician who rehearsed the choir meticulously and who in performance motivated soloists, choir and orchestra (usually the Scottish Orchestra) to produce concerts of memorable quality. For thirty years, he gave the people of Dundee an enviable mixture of classical and modern works. At home with Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Handel, Brahms, Bach, Haydn and Verdi, Cowe proved himself equally the master of Coleridge-Taylor, Parry, Stanford and Walford Davies. He had a special affinity with the works of Elgar; it was with 'The Dream of Gerontius' that the Choral gave the opening concert in the new Caird Hall in November 1921 (concerts had previously been given in the Kinnaird Hall in Bank Street), and the Society secured an unprecedented triumph with possibly its greatest ever performance. It remains a cause for regret that Cowe's projected performance of the same composer's 'The Apostles' in 1940 had to be abandoned because of world events.

The 1930s were truly the golden age of the Choral Union, a decade of the highest musical achievement which included broadcast performances by the BBC of Handel's 'Messiah' and Verdi's 'Requiem'. There were few financial worries. Having accepted the principle of meeting the annual costs of concerts from active and honorary members' subscriptions and from ticket sales, the Choral realised that there was a fine dividing line between balancing the books and going too far over the edge and accordingly held matters on a tight rein, so that in the period between the wars there was rarely more than one concert per year. This enabled the concentration of effort and resources into the production of superlative performances; on the odd occasion when the Society did run up a deficit (usually not sizeable) a guardian angel was standing by in the form of its President, Sir William Henderson, who was not averse to reaching for his cheque book and redressing the balance.

Following the upheaval caused by the Second World War, it was inevitable that things would never be quite the same again. That the Choral rose like a phoenix (activities were suspended for the duration of the hostilities) in the immediate aftermath of the war was a tribute to the colossal strength and pre-eminent position it had attained during the 1930s. Perhaps wisely, Charles Cowe had intimated his resignation in the interim, and his position as conductor was taken up by Charles Sinclair, who reluctantly agreed to set the Choral going again until a more willing permanent conductor could be found.

Concerts began again immediately with Coleridge-Taylor's 'The Song of Hiawatha' in February 1946, and within a couple of years the pattern of two concerts a year was established, which has continued to this day. But post-War Britain was to prove for amateur musical societies like the Choral a much tougher climate in which to survive. New technologies, in the form of mass media, were drastically changing the patterns of social life; the cinema was a thriving industry, and with the development of television and of ever more sophisticated methods of domestic sound and visual production, societies like the Choral had to make more intense efforts to secure live audiences. At the same time, increases in personal leisure time and the growth of alternative recreational and adult-educational facilities meant that fewer people were willing to devote their spare time to

singing (active membership in the last twenty years has been about two-thirds of that in the 1930s). The net result was that the financing of concerts by the time-honoured means of subscriptions and ticket sales was becoming more difficult, and alternative schemes had to be pursued.

If the Choral has in the post-War period never quite scaled the heights it reached in the 1920s and 30s, it has nevertheless maintained a consistently high level of musical achievement, all the more remarkable considering the frequency of conductorship changes. In its first 81 years, the Choral had only six conductors; in the last 44 years it has had twelve: Charles Sinclair (1945-48), Alex Sutra (1948-51), James Sloggie (1951-56), Dr Bella d'Csillery (1956- 62), William Brown (1962), Elaine Ramsden (1963-66), Colin Wyllie (1966-70), Geoffrey Walker (1970-74), Tom Devine (1974-76), Richard Evans (1976-82), Alistair Mitchell (1982-87), Neil Bell (1987-94) and Neil Mantle (1995-2007) all of whom have brought different qualities to the choir and who have earned the respect and support of Choral members.

Apart from the normal programmed of concerts, this period has seen among other things a performance of 'Messiah' at the Pitlochry Festival Theatre in 1954, the Choral's Golden Jubilee performance of 'Creation' in 1958, broadcasts of Bach's 'Magnificat' and Mozart's 'Mass in C Minor' in 1967, and of Brahms' 'German Requiem' in 1968.

There was a mini-tour to Stirling, Perth and Edinburgh, giving concerts of miscellaneous sacred pieces in 1979, participation in two 'Friday Night is Music Night' style concerts for charity in 1981 and 1983, and occasional other guest appearances. Beethoven's 'Missa Solemnis' was also given in 1983 to celebrate the Choral's 125th anniversary.

Although in the last twenty years the Society has broadened its repertoire to take in works by composers as diverse as Vaughan Williams, Bruckner, Howells, Stravinsky, Hoist, Poulenc and Rachmaninov, financial constraints have imposed a necessary conservatism on its musical programmes. Inflation, spiralling costs, diminishing government support for the arts, and an innate audience conservatism have all meant that to attempt more ambitious programmes, including less familiar works and possibly with bigger orchestras is not economically viable under normal circumstances.

In the first thirty years after the war, the Choral eked out subscriptions and ticket sales with fundraising events like coffee mornings, dinner dances and whist-drives. By the late 1970s, it became apparent that if the Society was to be able to continue to give high quality concerts featuring top class soloists and orchestras, something more was needed, though these traditional fundraising methods have been retained as an invaluable source of income.

In 1978, the Choral became one of the first amateur choral bodies in the country to initiate a programme of local small business sponsorship; the admirable response of the local business community to this scheme is in itself recognition of the very important role the Choral Union has to play in the cultural life of the city of Dundee. This increased financial awareness has been accompanied by a major reorganisation of the Choral's committee to apply commercial style procedures to ensure that all aspects of the Society's future activity are carefully controlled - planning, budgeting and implementation of concert programmes.

At the AGM of the Choral in 1875, the Committee reported that the position of the Union financially is always the same. We spend more money than we have and yet are never in debt. Eighty years of almost stationary prices enabled this situation, with a little care, to prevail. In the cut-throat inflationary world of the 1980s and 1990s, a different approach is required. The Choral Union has laid the foundations. It possesses a high level of musicianship; it has enthusiasm; it has ambitious

plans for the future. Above all, it has a wonderful record of achievement and service to the community and the cultural life of Dundee. Please help us to ensure that record is maintained into the 21st century.

Mr Geoffrey Creamer, 1989

A History of Dundee Choral Union - 1989-Present

The following has been added to augment the history compiled by Mr Geoffrey Creamer in 1989, as well as to cover the period since 1989.

During the early years, as the active membership and audiences grew rapidly, the Choral raised sums sufficient to make sizeable donations to charity. Dundee Royal Infirmary was a major beneficiary, but contributions were made to other local funds and national appeals such as that for the relief of distress following the collapse of the City of Glasgow Bank in 1878 and war funds including a 'Dundee Amateur Choral Union Bed' in the Base Hospital Cape Town!

There was a mini-tour to Stirling, Perth and Edinburgh in the 1970s, and the Choral participated in two charity concerts in the style of 'Friday Night is Music Night' in the 1980s.

The Choral was delighted to be invited to join the RSNO Chorus for a performance of Orff's 'Carmina Burana' conducted by Christopher Bell. This was given in both the Caird Hall, Dundee and the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, for the Scottish Power Proms.

In 1991, the Choral's gift to the City of Dundee's 800th Celebrations was a performance of Verdi's 'Requiem'. This was also the chosen work for the Millennium Concert sponsored by The Dunfermline Building Society and was again the choice for the 150th Anniversary Concert.

In June 1995, the Choral organised a 'Voices of Discovery' competition open to singers of all voice parts approaching the end of their professional training. The winners received a cash prize and the opportunity to sing the solo parts in the Christmas performance of the 'Messiah' that year. The following year, a large number of the choir performed in Orleans Cathedral during the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Dundee's Twinning arrangement.

In 2003, at a concert in aid of Ninewells Cancer Campaign, the Choral joined with the Dundee branch of NYCoS in the Scottish premiere of Kashif's 'Queen' Symphony, under the baton of David Grant.

In 2005, the Choral participated in the Rotary Centenary Concert conducted by Iain Sutherland with Nicola Benedetti as violin soloist.

The Choral Union has participated in many local 'Songs of Praise' broadcasts on BBC TV, including the late Queen Mother's 100th birthday celebration from Glamis Castle and later the live broadcast from Glamis Church on the day following her death. The Choral has also appeared on ITV's 'Highway Programme' with the late Harry Secombe, filmed standing on the steps of the McManus Gallery in Dundee.

Such are examples of Dundee Choral Union's links with the wider community.