

BOYS CHOIRS.

My definition of a boy's choir was simple – that boy trebles sing the soprano part/s. In some choirs, especially in Europe, unbroken – or more usually breaking - male voices are also used in the alto line. (I have not included what are termed in America “Boychoirs” with no tenors or basses). The presence of unbroken boy's voices – trebles – gives a choir a unique sound. For many centuries girls were not permitted in the choirs of churches and cathedrals and thus most sacred music was composed with this particular sound in mind.

However boys' voices break much earlier than they did, so, authenticity – as so often – is a moot point. Girl's front lines, common now in many Cathedrals, replicate the purity of tone very well – but the sound will always be different. Choristers in the time of Tallis, even Bach, were often in their late teens before the dreaded croak hit them and thus had stronger voices, longer experience and more musical awareness than today's boys. – though there are many stories of their miserable diet! However skilled their training is there is an element of chance in how good the top line is. The life of a boy's voice is short – a number of singers can reach their peak at the same time or a choir may lose several of their key voices leaving the top line impoverished. That said the best choirs manage this uncertainty well and always produce a strong and confident sound – and of course the quality of the men's voices is crucial too.

All my choices are English – their Cathedrals and Oxbridge chapels have the funding, the long tradition and there are many recordings. There are a number of fine American boys choirs too – I have visited St Thomas, Fifth Avenue, New York and listen to their webcast services with much pleasure, and those from Regensburg and Dresden in Germany, Vienna and St Florian's in Austria and Versailles have made some fine recordings. I hesitate to mention Irish choirs – for fear of receiving angry letters from members of those I have omitted. Suffice it to say that this is a unique and wonderful tradition which deserves support – and remains by far the finest musical education any child can have.

Some choirs are much better served by recording companies than others. I heard Canterbury live some years ago – they were excellent but have rarely recorded. Hyperion is particularly supportive (see the CD accompanying the Gloria Book) There are a number of excellent UK companies specialising in choral and organ music – releases on PRIORY, HERALD and REGENT may be relied upon.

Again I commend the UK mail order company Presto Classical – their website is user-friendly, up to date, informative and reliable.

My current Top 5 are :-

WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL, LONDON.

Their discography on Hyperion is as impressive as any, especially in the music of 2 great Renaissance names, Palestrina and Victoria and their performances of romantic music, Brahms, Rheinberger and 20th century Masses – Frank Martin, Britten, Janacek, to Maxwell Davies, Judith Bingham and MacMillan are well served by the bright continental edge of the treble line – and some of the best men in the business.

My CD choice. Exultate Deo - Hyperion CDA 66850 - This is a lovely collection of choral favourites - including Allegri's Miserere.

WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL.

The ancient city of Winchester has 2 world class groups of boy choristers in Winchester College, the oldest public school in England (where they are called Quiristers) and in the Cathedral. Sometimes – with spectacular results, they join up. The Cathedral recordings are always excellent – again with a brighter boys sound than usual. David Hill was their Master of Music for many years and a recent re-release of William Byrd's 5 part Mass would be my top choice for this masterpiece.

My CD choice. Byrd Mass a 5 - Hyperion Helios CDH55348

NEW COLLEGE, OXFORD.

Edward Higginbottom was at the helm here for over 35 years and the treble sound is again renowned. Many recordings have delighted, on Hyperion, on Avie and on CRD, now being re-released on Regis, and they are the first Oxbridge choir to launch their own record label, Novum. The first issues are wonderful, including a Mozart programme and, bold choices, Bach Motets and Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers. Some Couperin is lovely too, the French Baroque is Higginbottom's speciality and sadly few French boys choirs have recorded this charming repertoire. The choir have a stunning set of boys at the moment – no wonder they wish to record as much as possible before it's too late!
My CD choice. Couperin - Novum 1384

ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

When I visit my birthplace, Cambridge, in term time, there is an astonishing wealth of fine choirs, both boys and mixed, in the chapels of many of the Colleges, singing the services many times in the week. The chapel of King's College is of such breathtaking beauty, especially its fan-vaulted ceiling that I usually find myself attending Evensong there. The plainsong is wonderful – Stephen Cleobury was at Westminster Cathedral prior to King's – the boys know how to chant well too. My favourite CD – on EMI – is of plainsong for the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and they've done fine recordings too of Rachmaninov Vespers and the Brahms Requiem (with 2 pianos) but as I chose King's for my Desert Island Discs I pick St. John's here. Their series of 20th century English repertoire – Elgar, Howells, Walton, Britten, Tavener etc. on Naxos is superb, as are more recent programmes from David Hill on Hyperion and Andrew Nethsinger on Chandos
My CD choice - Stanford - Naxos - 8555794. Including some organ works and the 3 Latin Motets

WELLS CATHEDRAL.

2 Choirs from the west country vie for the 5th selection – again from wonderful buildings close to my heart. Tewkesbury Abbey with its many side chapels and strong sense of its Benedictine foundation – their recent recordings on the excellent Scottish label, Delphian, are first class. For many years Malcolm Archer was in charge of Wells Cathedral with its amazing scissor arches, its worn stairs to a glorious Chapter House and its unspoilt medieval street. His tradition is being well maintained by Matthew Owens, again with very fine programmes on the Hyperion label. I also recommend their many recordings of Anglican Psalms and Hymns - my choice however is a superb selection by my favourite contemporary composer of sacred music, the Scot, James MacMillan
My CD choice. MacMillan - Hyperion - CDA67867