

# THE RENAISSANCE SINGERS' 50th ANNIVERSARY

When John Bertalot conducted the first rehearsal of his newly formed BLACKBURN BACH CHOIR on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1965, he little thought that exactly 50 years later (plus 10 days) he would be invited by the present director, **Samuel Hudson**, to conduct the renamed choir in a gala concert which would be attended by former alums, including 7 founder members, with two more former conductors, **Gordon Stewart** and **Richard Tanner**.

*The first rehearsal of the Blackburn Bach Choir was photographed by the Lancashire Evening Telegraph*



We aimed at the very highest standards mixed with fun, and within two years we won the national rounds of the BBC's international singing competition *Let the Peoples Sing*. In other words, we were rated as the finest mixed voice amateur choir in the UK – and we achieved this for two years in succession.

Our annual carol concerts in King George's Hall, Blackburn, attracted capacity audiences of 1,500, and our regular ambitious concerts in the cathedral inaugurated the cathedral's concerts' series, which we enjoy today.

We also recorded a wholly unaccompanied Wednesday Choral Evensong for the BBC which was broadcast on JB's 51<sup>st</sup> birthday – 15<sup>th</sup> September 1982. That included not only the longest psalm in the BCP but also a long anthem, Bach's double choir motet, *Be not afraid* (in English!), Gray's double choir Canticles and JB's double choir Festive Responses.

In December 1982, after 18 eventful years as the cathedral's music director, JB left the cathedral, and also the RNCM where he was a Senior Lecturer, to take up similar posts in Princeton, New Jersey.

The choir was renamed **The Renaissance Singers**, and they have been directed ever since by all succeeding Directors of Music of Blackburn Cathedral.

And so, after much hard work by the current Singers' committee, headed by **Jean Duerden**, who had traced many past members of the Singers to invite them to attend this half-century milestone, and by **Samuel Hudson** who had worked on the programme, and by **Alizon Elliott**, a long-time member of the Singers, who wrote a fascinating article about the Singers' eventful history which was include in the printed programme, the day arrived for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary concert.



Jean

Sam

Alizon

The Nave was packed and the atmosphere was electric because of the historical significance of this 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert, and also because in the audience were many former members of the choir, including 7 founder members.



L-R: Founder member **Dorothy Wade** and her husband, **David Lindsey Cooper**, widow of the choir's 2<sup>nd</sup> conductor, **David Cooper** (1983-94). Concert pianist **Martin Roscoe** (who had been a harmony student of JB's at the RNCM!) and long-time former member, **Margaret Robinson**.



And seated immediately in front of them, in the seat of honour in the front row, was **Bernard West** (96) who was our founder secretary/treasurer/librarian/archivist ... and bass. It was his organizing efficiency which enabled the Blackburn Bach Choir to become a cohesive body. Our debt to him in incalculable.

Bernard was also a long-time bass in the cathedral choir where he was also the efficient librarian. Many of the choir's older sets of music still bear Bernard's allocating of parts in his neat handwriting such as 'Dec Bass 1'.

The four conductors took their bow:



**Samuel Hudson** (from 2011), **Gordon Stewart** (1995-1998), **Richard Tanner** (1998-2011) and **John Bertalot** (1964-1982)

Samuel Hudson had generously invited JB to conduct the first and last items on the programme.

1. Vaughan Williams' *Linden Lea* had been a firm favourite with the Blackburn Bach Choir, for they had 'realised' the meaning of the words so creatively, such as singing the word 'hush' with a slight break (*hu-sh*) and really feeling that the apple tree really did 'lean down low' for *me!*



The Renaissance Singers sang this timeless setting with equal sensitivity, so much so that several members of the audience said that they really felt that this essentially English story was being told to *them!*

2. Then Samuel Hudson conducted a masterly performance of Bach's double-choir Motet: *Der Geist hilft, (The Spirit also helpeth us)*.



This was probably the most demanding item of the whole concert, for whenever the word '*Geist*' appears, Bach uses running semiquavers to illustrate the appearance of the Holy Spirit as a rushing mighty wind upon the disciples at the first Pentecost. (Acts Chapter 2). The Singers sang magnificently.

3. Then came one of the evening's most unusual anthems: *Stars*, by Ēriks Ešņvalds (b.1977), for as the choir sang this ethereal music, they also played tuned wine glasses. The sound was magical.



4. Samuel then conducted yet another modern anthem: *Viri Galilaei* by Patrick Gowers (1936-2014). This was skillfully accompanied on the organ by Assistant Director of Music **Shaun Turnbull** and Organ Scholar **Joseph O'Berry**.

Samuel had heard this anthem sung earlier that month by the choir of King's College, Cambridge during the Cathedral Organists' Conference. The Renaissance Singers' performance was equally thrilling.

5. It was the turn of **Gordon Stewart** to conduct his chosen music – which was a set of *Three Yorkshire Folk Songs* arranged by Robert Cockroft (b. 1951).

Gordon introduced the music to the audience with great good humour (notice the Singers' smiles, and Bernard West on the front row).



Gordon's style of conducting is irrepressible and he was so gracious as to share the applause with the arranger.



And the Singers applauded Gordon, too!



6. After the interval Richard Tanner conducted an expressive performance of Byrd's *Ave Verum*.



It was Richard who greatly expanded the cathedral's music programme during his 13 years with us.

He not only founded *The Friends of Blackburn Cathedral Music* (FoBCM) – a body of dedicated musicians who help raise funds to sponsor our ambitious concerts (with professional orchestras and soloists), but he also founded the *Girls' Choir* and instituted *daily choral services*.

Our 1969 Walker organ was also rebuilt and enlarged during his time with us, and a Tickell chamber organ and a superb grand piano were purchased as well.

Richard certainly left his mark here!



Samuel Hudson then conducted four very varied items:

7. Britten's demanding *Hymn to St Cecilia*.



8. Byrd's exciting *Laudibus in sanctis*.

9. And then an anthem commissioned for this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary composed by former Assistant Director of Music, **James Davy**, *Singers to Come*.

This is a demanding anthem in multiple parts which the Singers relished.



James was the ebullient and highly talented Assistant Director of Music of our Cathedral, whose ability to foster firm friendships as well as to promote high standards of music, endeared him to us all. He also met his wife, Sarah, here, through their love for riding horses!

James is now the ebullient Director of Music of Chelmsford Cathedral from where he drove all the way to be with us that evening after playing for a wedding.

James had been acting Director of Music during Richard Tanner's Sabbatical. So he, too, had been an inspirational conductor of the Singers.

10. Samuel chose for his final piece, Bob Chilcott's popular setting, *In a golden world* – which was highly appropriate, for this was our Golden Anniversary, and all musicians wore golden roses.



11. Samuel Hudson had generously invited the Singers' founder to conduct the final anthem: JB's arrangement of *Amazing grace* which enabled the audience to stand and join in the penultimate verse: *'When we've been there ten thousand years...'*

JB rehearsed the audience who responded magnificently – making a thrilling crescendo on *'bright shining as the SUNNNN!'*

Shaun Turnbull 'pulled out all the stops' for his splendid accompaniment, and the choir sang their hearts out!

The audience just wouldn't stop clapping – but they had to as there was a photo session of the Singers, the Conductors and all the Alums – including the 7 founder members – taken by Canons' Virger, **Alex Barnes**. (See the last page for this photo.)

The Singers, Conductors and Alums then enjoyed a celebration party in the Cathedral's South Transept.



Founder-members: Constance Heald, Margery Howarth, Joan Naya, JB, Dorothy Wade, Millicent Sleight and Ian Hollin.

(Bernard West, our founder-secretary, had to leave after the main photo)



Pride of place was taken by a two-tiered cake created by Renaissance Singer **Helen Davies**, on which she had inscribed the names of the Singers' conductors, as well as the Singers' logo which had been created by founder singer, **Peter Heald**.



Past Directors: James Davy, JB, Richard Tanner & Gordon Stewart, and present Director, Samuel Hudson.



The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary party in full swing



Front row seated: Five conductors and Bernard West.  
Second row: Lindsey Cooper (in blue),  
[David Cooper, Director: 1983] & Rachel Fielding  
followed by founder members.

Photo (R) of  
**Helen Davies** (L), cake creator,  
and **Jean Duerden** Singers' Chairman  
both of whom, with so many others,  
had worked so hard to ensure the success of this  
unique and ever-to-be-remembered evening.

Jean wrote:

'It was an exhausting but exhilarating day which none  
of us will ever forget. We are all very privileged to sing  
in such a wonderful choir and to have experienced  
such marvellous directors of music over the years.'



*Final bows:*

