

# Preface

The stimulus to write this history of the Bach Choir was provided when I was appointed as secretary and became custodian of all the minute books since 1875, together with copies of past accounts, certain documents and correspondence and access to a complete library of all the concert programmes. An organisation which has been in existence for more than a century is bound to have developed a certain resilience but it was only when I began to probe beyond the documents that an increasingly fascinating picture emerged. Tracing and interviewing descendants, relatives and contemporaries of past officials and members has thrown new light on matters drily referred to in the minutes and brought to life many of those who have served the choir in past generations. The names of those who have provided this vital information are included in the list of acknowledgements, together with others without whose generous assistance this task would never have been completed.

To those readers who are, or have been, members of a choir, the constantly recurring problems of rehearsal attendance, committee representation, financial difficulties and performance practice to be found within these pages will be all too familiar. The narrative attempts to show how successive officials have sought to confront these problems, within a changing social environment, to ensure the continued existence of the choir. It records how a succession of Musical Directors of national and international standing have constantly striven to produce performances of the highest possible standard with a balanced repertoire designed to appeal to the public and existing and aspiring members.

An appendix has been included which gives financial details and membership information at ten-year rests. This shows how a wealthy membership covered the financial losses in the early years. At the beginning of the twentieth century a considerable growth in numbers and the use of some cheaper concert venues, such as Westminster Abbey, for performances of Bach, contributed to an improvement in the financial position. Finally, in the 1960s and 1970s, the expansion of activities through other engagements, recordings and television appearances brought relative financial stability. Specific financial problems which affected artistic policy are covered in the text.

The concerts of a major choir performing in central London have attracted a large quantity of reviews during the period covered by this survey and in order to avoid wearisome repetition a selection has been made to illustrate reception of the programmes and the standards of performance achieved. For the last quarter of the nineteenth century the *Musical Times* and the *Athenaeum* are the principal sources of this material. In the twentieth century, with some decline apparent in the overall standards of the *Athenaeum*, *The Times* has been substituted as a principal source with a few other leading journals when the review is considered to be particularly pertinent and/or covers such questions as performance practice and musical style.

An account of other major choral activities in London throughout the period is included in the relevant chapters. Much of the material for this has been gathered from the comprehensive particulars of repertoire, organisation and reviews of concerts of London choirs which appear in the *Musical Times* during the years covered by the survey. Further details have been obtained from other sources including the British Library collection of Annual Reports of the Sacred Harmonic Society, documents of the Royal Choral Society deposited in the London Metropolitan Archives, and the papers of the Alexandra Choir in the library of the Royal Academy of Music.

While this book covers the first century, the story has continued. First under David Willcocks and now under his successor, David Hill, the choir has striven to uphold its traditions while adapting its activities to meet changing conditions. Recordings have been made for film soundtracks and invitations accepted to perform at outdoor events including the celebrations for the eightieth birthday of the Queen. There have also been major tours to Europe, the Middle East, Hong Kong, the United States, Australasia and South Africa. The choir is on course to complete a second century which should provide an opportunity for an exciting account from another pen.