

Leicester Philharmonic Choir – Its History

Leicester Philharmonic Choir (LPC), known to its members and followers as 'the Phil', is the longest established choir in Leicestershire. Formerly known as The Leicester Philharmonic Society, the choir was founded in 1886 with a membership of around 250 by Herbert Marshall, a Leicester concert impresario and piano dealer who was subsequently knighted and became Lord Mayor of Leicester.

The choir performs with professional orchestras, soloists and conductors and encompasses the entire choral repertoire.

Throughout its history, the choir has made a notable contribution to the development of the British choral tradition in bringing most of the major choral works to Leicester and has been associated with a number of eminent figures in the world of serious music. Dr (later Sir) Malcolm Sargent and Leslie Woodgate were early chorus masters of the choir.

Leicester Philharmonic Choir is dedicated to the provision of high quality choral music to Leicester and Leicestershire, and in so doing recognises an educational obligation as well as providing entertainment. The choir members are talented and enthusiastic amateur musicians living mostly in the communities of the city and the surrounding county. Choral quality is ensured by the careful auditioning of prospective members and the re-auditioning of established members at 3-yearly intervals.

The choir has varied in size and at one time in the distant past the membership reached 440 - heady days indeed. The membership is today smaller in number, however the musicianship has always been of a sufficiently high calibre to enable performances of the vast majority of works in the choral repertoire, particularly oratorio. The performances take place in collaboration with soloists and orchestras of national and international reputation.

The choir has been associated with many internationally famous conductors and orchestras. From 1922 to 1934 Sir Henry Wood was the Phil's official conductor and it was he who established the tradition of an annual performance of Handel's Messiah. Sir Henry left the choir in the able hands of Malcolm Sargent, who he had discovered in Leicester, and a fruitful partnership ensued with the Leicester Symphony Orchestra, which Sargent had helped to establish. From 1941 until 1961 Leslie Woodgate was the official conductor. Sir Adrian Boult, Sir John Barbirolli, Sir David Willcocks, Sir Michael Tippett, Maurice Handford and Owain Arwell Hughes have all been guest conductors of the Phil and many have returned at their own request. More recently, the choir has been privileged to be conducted by distinguished conductors such as Leonard Slatkin, Hilary Davan Wetton, Paul Spicer and Jane Glover and by contemporary composers John Rutter and Karl Jenkins. Karl Jenkins became Choir Patron to LPC in July 2007.

Guest orchestras include the Queen's Hall Orchestra, the Halle, the Royal Philharmonic, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Concert Orchestra, the Philharmonia and the London Bach. The choir has a wide repertoire. The composers performed range from the baroque (Bach, Handel, Mozart) to the present-day (Bruckner, Britten, Stravinsky, Walton and Orff). In its 114th season (1999/2000) the choir commissioned a new work for the Millennium. There are also concerts of light music, for example songs from the cinema and Broadway musicals. These have included several broadcast performances with the BBC Concert Orchestra in "Friday Night is Music Night".

During a typical season, which normally runs from September until May, there are two major concerts, usually held in October and May at De Montfort Hall in Leicester. The Christmas concert takes place in St James the Greater Church, London Road.

In addition to these regular performances it is unusual for a season to pass without the choir being invited to sing in other events. Examples include a performance of Beethoven's Choral Symphony with the Philharmonia Orchestra at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, and several performances at the Royal Albert Hall which include a performance of Carmina Burana in a Henry Wood Promenade Concert, a Millennium concert of Walton's Belshazzar's Feast and Poulenc's Gloria, a performance of Verdi Requiem in celebration of his centenary, a joint performance with the Barts Choir of Berlioz Te Deum, and Elgar Dream of Gerontius celebrating the 70th birthday of the choir's Artistic Director Hilary Davan Wetton. Historically, the choir is regularly invited to perform in Leicester with both the Philharmonia Orchestra and the London Mozart Players.

The affairs of the choir, such as planning and arranging concerts, publicity and finance are managed by a democratically elected committee all of whom are members of the choir.