

FORTY YEARS ON

One of the really pleasing features of classical music is the way so many of its devotees are keen to encourage and promote its performance. As early as 1961 a group of members of the Amersham and Chesham Bois Choral Society led by Carol Gray, the Secretary, John Voss, the Chairman and Michael Pelloe, the Musical Director, staged an evening by the Jacques Orchestra. Michael knew Dr Jacques. The following year the orchestra performed again but this time with Leon Goossens. In January 1963 and in October 1964 Opera for All were the artistes; in June 1965 Phyllis Sellick and Cyril Smith. Twelve months later, there were two concerts in one year - the Jacques Orchestra, and La Traviata enacted by Opera for All.

It is not surprising that, out of all this musical activity, John Voss, Carol Gray and others should, on 16th March 1967, hold the first meeting of the Steering Committee to arrange the founding of the Amersham Concert Club. They produced a draft constitution. The inaugural meeting was held in St John's Church Hall on 23rd May 1967 and there was a reception in October in the Crown Hotel, Old Amersham. They invited Gerald Moore to become the Club's first President.

A season ticket for the winter season's three concerts was priced at one guinea, and single tickets at 10 shillings. On the 4th November Denis Matthews performed at Dr Challoner's Grammar School, two months later, on the 12th January 1968, Opera for All staged a concert at Dr Challoner's High School and the season finished with the Allegri String Quartet on the 4th May, back at the Grammar School. The Concert Club was launched! Denis Matthews returned for the Club's 21st birthday party and played much the same programme, based on Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata.

The following season John Shirley Quirk and Martin Isepp charged £155, the Melos Ensemble £150 and Enloc Wu, a pianist from Hong Kong, £25. Elon College Choir from North Carolina gave an extra concert at the end of the season on which we made a loss of 28 shillings.

The Committee has always spent up to its financial limit in an effort to obtain the best possible musicians. Committee meetings devoted a lot of time to discussing money. In 1969-70, the number of concerts increased to four. The artistes' list included Gerald Moore himself. A cloud burst of immense proportions had reduced the audience for Geraint Jones and his orchestra to 12, and Gerald Moore gave a concert free to balance the books.

In a separate concert in February 1970, Janet Baker sang for us. She had been invited by Gerald Moore, who was her accompanist. To hire a Steinway D grand piano in 2007 costs over £800, whereas, in 1970, the cost for a Steinway piano for Gerald Moore was £68. Even so, the price of the season ticket had to be increased to thirty-five shillings and a single ticket to twelve shillings and sixpence to cover costs. There were 250 members and we made a profit of £16 on the season. This is a good moment to mention David Chesterman. Over the years, David wrote excellent reports on our concerts for the Bucks Examiner. His articles did a great deal to advertise the Concert Club's achievements and were much appreciated by club members.

The next few years saw a steady growth in interest. Paul Tortelier came in October 1970 to the Grammar School. In March 1971 Peter Katin played at the Brudenell School. The Gabrieli Quartet changed the date of their Yugoslav tour to play in Amersham. In 1974 the Kings' Singers and Radu Lupu both performed. I think it was on the second visit by Paul Tortelier that he failed to get off the train at Amersham and Carol just managed to catch him at Little Chalfont on his way back to London!

As he works his way through the Minutes, the writer is fascinated by the names of Committee and other members as they come and go. Dennis Holman, the Headmaster of the Grammar School, who had chaired the Committee virtually since its inception, moved to a post in Hampshire and was replaced as Chairman by Charles Padgham, whilst Carol Gray succeeded in bullying the new Headmaster, John Loarridge, to become a member of the Committee. It was at this time that young Bernard Pritchard arrived and took a growing interest in compiling the programme. There is also a whole list of ladies who are still very much our supporters but whose names it would be less than tactful for the writer to mention and so indicate the length of their membership! They each made an immense contribution. I think the only exception I dare make to this rule of diplomatic silence is to say what tremendously knowledgeable inspiration Carol Gray gave to all aspects of the Club throughout the whole of the period of its foundation.

The 1971-2 season saw the start of covenanting and the club becoming a charity. We gained a grant from the Rural District Council. We started to have patrons. We had our first end- of- season cheese and wine party at the Beacon School. We served coffee in the intervals. John Ogden was a distinguished performer during that period. He came by train - he didn't drive because he felt a car accident might do irreparable damage to his hands. In the same period saw our first visit from the Amadeus Quartet and from the winner of the Leeds Piano Competition. We enjoyed the Kings' Singers, Alfred Brendel, Andras Schiff and Ruggiero Ricci. The Tapiola Choir, an outstanding choir of teenagers, came to us from Finland. We held a concert in St Mary's Church because of a caretakers' strike. It was at this time that we discovered the Countess of Munster Trust which still provides us, at a subsidised rate, with young musicians of great talent who have won awards from the Trust.

Talk began about purchasing our own concert grand piano. In November 1977, we obtained a grant of £2,500 from the Arts Council whilst the school provided £1,000 and the Concert Club £1,500. We purchased a Steinway D grand piano which had been used by the BBC. The Arts Council required that we loaned it to neighbouring societies. What happened after that was a huge learning process. The bulk of the expense of hiring a piano is the cost of transporting it and competent piano removers with the expertise to transport a concert grand are very difficult to find. The rate was £43 to Jordans and back, £10 for tuning, £10 for insurance and just £5 for ourselves for maintenance. If we charged a higher rate we were not seriously competitive. One remover put the piano legs on the wrong way round. The legal dispute about this went on for nearly two years and we eventually received £345 in compensation, which was only part of the settlement as the firm had gone into liquidation.

During this period we entertained the Eastern Orchestral Association. Colin Kennedy built a temporary extension to the Grammar School stage. We still have copies of the most elaborate programme for the orchestra of St John's, Smith Square when they played in September 1979. The following year we continued our important practice of starting the season with a great name. Elly Ameling came. She had a beautiful singing voice but we learnt the hard way that a solo singer, unless with the reputation of a Janet Baker, does not attract a large audience, and we lost money during that season.

Meanwhile we were trying to invent a lift to put the piano on the stage and thus save a considerable lifting fee. By this time, we were receiving grants from the Chiltern District Council and the National Federation of Music Societies. The Bucks Examiner paid for the programme covers and Radu Lupu, partly because his reputation had grown and partly because of inflation, was now charging £1,500 rather than his £450 fee of 1974. Stephen Isserlis cost as much.

Then, sadness upon sadness, Carol Gray retired to the New Forest. She had inspired, motivated and worked ceaselessly for the Club. We created a new position of Vice President, which she still holds, and arranged for two people to take over from her. We gave Carol a watch as a token of our gratitude and Gerald Moore presented her with a spray of 15 red roses.

We talked much of trying to enlarge the Grammar School hall to 600 seats and of giving the hall a green room. I remember one scheme being priced at £350,000. The Lindsay Quartet played for us that year and, had we sold their four instruments, we could have had our hall and made a substantial profit!

Our first concert in 1986 was given by Igor Oistrakh. I remember he came from the Russian Embassy at a time when Russia was still less than at ease with the western world. The car, blinds down, was driven all the way round to the steps of the Grammar School hall and it was waiting there for him at the end of the concert. The memory seems to be that he was neither happy with playing in a school hall nor with the school's lighting. There had been other problems too but we managed to avoid an international incident.

It was in the same season that we had to engage on a major repair of the piano, running into £2,000+, but, over the years, we had saved a lot of money on piano hire and the School had had use of it for its outstanding young pianists.

The sad event of 1987 was the demise of Gerald Moore aged 87. He was a superb pianist and a charming man. A service of thanksgiving was held at St Paul's Church, Covent Garden. Dame Wendy Hiller read a lesson and, later in the service, a poem by Hilaire Belloc. Dame Janet Baker sang three songs by Franz Schubert. Felicity Lott, Thomas Allen, and Graham Johnson, amongst many other distinguished musicians, also contributed.

Gerald Moore was born in Watford in 1899 and began his career in 1921. He accompanied Kathleen Ferrier, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Dietrich Fischer Dieskau and many others. Press reports written at the time generally acknowledged that he put the accompanist firmly in the limelight whereas, before that, the pianist was hidden away when the applause rang through the hall for the singer.

In March 1988 Philip Fowke became President and the Headmaster of the Grammar School the Chairman. Philip performed for us in the same month. He had accompanied Christopher Warren-Green, the violinist, in March 1984. He played again for us in 1990, and taught us about Gershwin in 1994. In 2002 he came with the London Piano Quartet. Other seasons saw the return of the Amadeus Quartet, the Scholars and John Lill. The costs are beginning seriously to work towards present day prices. For many seasons Floral Art provided the flowers cheaply for each concert. Jenny Faulkner joined the Committee as a potential secretary. Geoff Shepherd replaced Murray Troup as Treasurer. In 1993 Philip Fowke, our President, attended a committee meeting. The Allegri Quartet cost £1,500. We were announced on Classic FM. Ruggiero Ricci came back for £2,500. Patrons tickets rose to £13, seasons £10 and singles £4. The cost of hiring our piano had doubled and we allowed school children in free.

In 1994, after much discussion, we sold the piano, which we had purchased for £5,000 in 1977, for £10,000. We shared the money with the Grammar School and, in fact, lent them our share free of interest so that Ian Hooker, the Director of Music, could buy a new 6 ft Yamaha grand piano. The school repaid the loan over the next four years. We have an autograph album with the signatures of all the pianists who played on our Steinway. It is an impressive list and reads almost like a “Who's Who” of pianists.

The Committee has tried all sorts of ways to advertise the Concert Club. We issued a complimentary ticket to each member

to bring a guest. We toyed with the idea of a saxophone concert. We persuaded Chesham Building Society to invest what money we had wisely. Southern Arts gave us a grant of £140. We staged a concert for young people in the afternoon of the concert day. We gave grants one year from the "piano fund" to three young musicians to help with their musical education. One of the three now plays for the RAF Central Band. At this time Jenny replaced Muriel Shearme as Secretary. Like all the important people connected with music this was very definitely not Muriel's last performance but she had been a superb secretary.

Gradually Chiltern District Council stopped giving us a grant and more recently Southern Arts has disappeared and its successor, South Eastern Arts, is most unlikely to support classical music concerts. The Bucks Examiner has ceased to provide free programme covers for us. Difficulties in booking the hall moved us from the Grammar School to the High School but, on the other side of the coin, we have continued to invite artists of the quality of Emma Johnson, Martin Cousin, and John Lill. In 2004 Jonathan Hinden, a coach at Glyndebourne, came. He talked, played and sang about The Magic Flute for an evening and, later in the season, we visited the Oxford Playhouse for a production of the opera by Glyndebourne On Tour. This caught our imagination so much that this year fifty of us travelled to Milton Keynes to enjoy the same company's performance of Die Fledermaus.

The Committee alters. Ivan McNeill has become our Treasurer. Clive Morley is the Membership Secretary, Colin Gamage organises the refreshments, and Liz Chalmers the concert day itself. Ann Hardman is the Choral Society representative and Geoff Sheppard has returned to us after working in Japan. Jenny is still our hard-working Secretary and Bernard continues to juggle dates and musicians to achieve the same high quality programme of concerts each year. The world is constantly changing and the challenge for all of us is to try to change with it, so that we

respond to the new demands. Our first step into the 21st century has been the creation of our website:

www.chilternweb.co.uk/amershamconcerts

We would like to thank all our members for their support. A major lesson learnt from reading 40 years of Minutes is that word of mouth is by far the most successful form of advertising. We seek all the help that you can give the Concert Club in this respect in the coming seasons.

It is so good to welcome back the Oxford Waits, who first came to us in March 1998, as they return to help us celebrate our 40th birthday.

John Loarridge
March 2007