



The London-based Elysian Singers are celebrating 20 years of performing challenging repertoire.

*Caroline Gill* talks to their director, Sam Laughton, and finds out the secrets of their success

# Always discovering

In a city such as London, bursting at the seams with chamber choirs and choral societies, it is hard for an amateur group to stay together beyond one concert, let alone two decades. But this year the Elysian Singers celebrate a milestone anniversary: 20 years of music-making of the most varied and resourceful kind, at the same time maintaining a reputation as one of the best non-professional chamber choirs in the country.

Founded in 1986 by Matthew Greenall as a group of friends from various Oxbridge colleges that wanted to continue singing together, the Elysian Singers are now six years into the directorship of Sam Laughton. Although Greenall has continued to pursue a career in music since handing over the choir, Laughton lives a dual life, running a moonlight music career while pursuing the profession of barrister in the Chancery Division by day.

'I've always been a man of many parts,' says Laughton, who was organ scholar at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. 'I didn't go into full-time music because I didn't know precisely what I would do. Or focus on. I spent a couple of years after Cambridge doing miscellaneous musical jobs, as people do. Music publishing, a bit of conducting, a bit of playing, a bit of this, that and the other. And then I decided to get a proper job and trained to be a barrister. It was never part of The Grand Plan, though. I didn't have one!'

Before taking on the Elysian Singers, most of what Laughton pursued as a musician was self-promoted, a strength of self-motivation first instilled in him by his experience of conducting at Canford Summer School immediately before university. There he met Simon Halsey, 'who was inspirational. It set me up for my Cambridge days

Photos Linda Dawson

'I spend a lot of time on programming and I like to get it right:  
I want it to be a good experience for the audience from every angle'

and I spent most of my time setting up concerts, conducting in chapel and learning how to be an impresario, apart from anything else.'

When Laughton took over the Elysian Singers, though, he was joining a set-up that was already permanent and ongoing. The choir, over its 20-year history, has established a reputation as one of the best amateur choirs in the country. Although it originally comprised ex-Oxbridge choral scholars, it has gradually spread its wings and now welcomes members from many different musical backgrounds. Its trademark clear sound, however, means that a

large proportion of the choir still have roots in university chapel music. 'They tend to have come down to London after university,' says Laughton, 'and been in work for two or three years, realising they're ready to spread their wings and go back to singing. Often they come to the audition and say "I'm a bit rusty", but I can tell whether they're a good singer or not. So most of my recruits are younger, usually in their early-to-mid 20s, which means we're always building from the bottom, which has been a really strong part of it in the time since I've been there.'

The university chapel music background of many of the singers means the choir members all display an enviable level of sight-reading which, in turn, allows them to tackle the sort of challenging music for which they are best known.

'I do insist when auditioning that people can sight-read extremely well,' Laughton explains. 'That is part of the test. It means we can get on with some of this difficult material without spending weeks getting our heads round it. Some of it's still quite tough, obviously, but we are able to tackle some pretty hard music and contemporary music does tend to fall into that category.'

Although Laughton maintains that the choir tackles a vast array of repertoire, it is the recording (most notably a collection of James MacMillan's choral music under the title *Cantos Sagrados* – 'his music is fantastically well written for us, and is very powerful and accessible, without cutting any corners,' Laughton says), broadcasting and performance of contemporary music for which it is best known. 'That is what tends to get highlighted because it attracts people's interest,' Laughton smiles. 'We've done several concerts that are just contemporary music, but that's pretty rare because any concert promoter will tell you that's not the way to get an audience! But having said that, Matthew himself set the choir up with a special interest in contemporary music because that's his own speciality. I don't have his expertise but I try to carry on that heart of the choir as its remit.'

That heart has led to some of the biggest successes of the choir's history. Their performances of new music frequently include world, UK and London premieres, along with rare performances of older, lesser-known works.

'Newish pieces that have gathered dust – that's the old problem,' says Laughton. 'We do a lot of London or UK premieres of things I've come across. I think it's really important for us to





promulgate and carry forwards. One can apply the same thing to music of less modern times: I've been looking a lot into the choral music of Granville Bantock. He may be a name to people, but he was a prolific composer who wrote some extraordinary settings of pseudo-Hebridean folksongs. There's a huge amount out there and I like finding a way to revive some of it.'

That sort of evangelical zeal is evident behind all Laughton's programming and I ask him about his preferences and how he goes about putting a concert together.

'My preferences are extremely wide,' he enthuses, 'and the way I go about programming varies tremendously, depending on what it is. I love it: it's almost the best part of the job to me. It helps that I have a burgeoning pile of scores on my piano which bubble up from time to time: anything that takes my fancy goes into the pile of "music I'd like to perform at some point". One or two numbers begin to come together as going well together and then I almost invariably programme with a theme [their most recent concert was entitled *Journeys without Silence*]. I spend a lot of time on it and I like to get it right: I want it all to fit in and be a good experience for the audience from every angle.'

Laughton feels that it would not be productive or in the choir's best interests to have an enduring relationship with one single composer, but he does advocate building lasting bonds with the composers whose music they perform. In addition to their recording of MacMillan, which Laughton states was not done in any collaborative way, the choir has worked closely with Cambridge-based composer Julian Allwood, as well as giving premieres of works by more mainstream composers such as Gavin Bryars, Philip Glass and Diana Burrell.

Most recently, however, Laughton and the Elysian Singers have showcased music by the much-lauded young composer, Tarik O'Regan. Although O'Regan is now based in New York, the choir has worked with him on the London





premieres of his *Ave Maria*, *Dorchester Canticles* and *Surrexit Christus*, culminating with the commissioning of *Bring rest, sweet dreaming child*.

Commissioning works – as well as the O'Regan, the choir has commissioned works by John Woolrich, Aidan Fisher and Andrew Hugill – is one part of the choir's varied calendar. Once every two or three years, Laughton involves the choir in competitions. It is something he feels tightens choral discipline as well as bringing the group together. In 2003 they won the UK heat of the Let the Peoples Sing competition, along with an earlier place in the final of Sainsbury's Choir of the Year.

'It's an area we dip into,' he says. 'We're not one of those choirs that's competition-mad, but I do think they're an opportunity to do something a bit different to the normal way of doing things. Typically you're being asked to sing for 15 or 20 minutes rather than a whole concert so you're focusing very keenly on stuff and actually produce a performance that is usually in a sense better than we normally do. You really tighten up your act. But competitions aren't really what I'm in it for, competitiveness not being part of the musical framework.'

I wonder if it is that lack of competitiveness and amicable atmosphere that has kept the choir going for 20 years and ask Laughton how the group has been celebrating its anniversary.

'We've been marking it during this calendar year, having been thinking about it last year,' he says,

'rather than having one single event. What we have done so far is highlight music written during the choir's lifetime. Our first concert this year was of music written only in the last 20 years; we're having a special concert in October which is a slightly more self-indulgent part of the celebrations in that we're inviting all past members to come back and sing.'

So what about plans for the future of the choir, with a formula so successful? 'There's endless repertoire,' says Laughton; 'so you never dry up. There's a great deal to do, always discovering. And of course, there are always new pieces being written. I would also love to try to perform in a wider variety of venues. Choirs can perform in churches, largely because they're cheap and chamber choirs are always strapped for cash. But wouldn't it be interesting to do a concert in a railway station or office block? Kind of take the music to people. Persuading them to come into a church isn't always someone's cup of tea, and it's a rather staid performing space. Anyone that comes to my concerts regularly will know that I try to avoid simply standing at the front and singing at people. I move the singers around, split them up. Just try to change the experience.'

'One is always trying to present a professional performance and push the envelope out in interesting ways.' ■

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