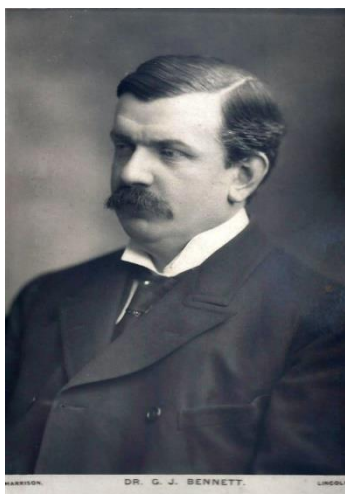


125 YEARS OF CHORAL SINGING

A Brief History of Lincoln Choral Society

The Society was formed in **1896** as The Lincoln Musical Society, with the aim of 'educating the public in the art of music' - at a time when the public took its music-making, like all leisure and artistic pursuits, very seriously. The proposal to form the Society originated with the Lincoln Oratorio Festival Committee which had been organising successful Cathedral Festivals for some time and felt the time was right to establish a Musical Society to promote secular concerts as well as to carry on the work of the Cathedral Festivals. The Dean of Lincoln was the President of the Society and there were 38 Vice-Presidents, including members of the clergy, a colonel and just three women.



The first concert, with around 300 singers and musicians under the baton of the eminent Dr G J Bennett, was on Tuesday December 8th **1896** in the Corn Exchange, Lincoln. Tickets cost 4 shillings (20p), 2 shillings and 1 shilling. The programme included Mendelssohn's Athalie and a miscellany of songs, choruses and a recitation. The poster for the event suggests that the audience should order their cars for 10.15 pm, after an 8 pm start, and two Special late trains would leave Lincoln station, one at 10.40pm for Nottingham, the other at 10.45pm for Grantham.

The triennial Cathedral Festivals were held during the latter part of the 19th and the early 20th centuries and the Musical Society formed the choral element of the major performances, along with the Cathedral Choir and often guest choirs from Lincolnshire and beyond. Instrumentalists were 'imported' too and members of the Hallé and other reputable orchestras often performed in the cathedral, all under the direction of Dr G J Bennett, the cathedral organist and master of the choristers. In the June **1906** Festival the Society gave an orchestral concert on the Wednesday, with Sir Hubert Parry as one of its guest conductors, and on the Thursday there were two Oratorio services, which included Brahms' Requiem in the afternoon and Israel in Egypt in the evening! It is reported that a vast tiered platform was constructed at the west end of the cathedral to accommodate singers and musicians. Services of this kind were hugely popular and people came from all over the county and beyond to attend them, using specially arranged public transport; many were required to stand throughout the service.

All musical events in the city at this time were extensively reported and analysed in detail in the press. Every participant was listed (and there were often over two hundred) and

detailed critiques of musicianship, tonal qualities, conducting skills, etc were given. Many of these cuttings were meticulously collected and stored by the Honorary Secretary of the time, H T Griffith. His record of the Society also includes publicity photos of the soloists, financial accounts, programmes and notable correspondence, including a letter received by the Society from Edward Elgar, confirming the pronunciation of 'Gerontius' (with a hard 'G', according to Cardinal Newman). Elgar also regretted that he was unable to conduct the work in Lincoln in **1908**. He did, however, come to Lincoln to conduct the performance of The Dream of Gerontius in **1910**.

Mr Griffith's detailed record peters out in the 1920s but a further collection from 1935 to 1943 was kept by Secretary Laurence Elvin. Another interesting source of information was Miss Joyce Pikett, who joined the Society in 1919 aged 21 and last sang in 1966. Joyce kept many items relating to her singing activities and they were passed on to the Society by her niece. They include a letter to her from Secretary J Peacock Rayner, inviting her to attend for audition at the home of Dr Bennett, and a printed card to direct Joyce to sit in Seat 71 on the concert platform in the Corn Exchange to sing in Alexander's Feast!

The Musical Society, under the baton of Dr Bennett, presented sell out annual concerts at the Corn Exchange with a vast chorus and orchestra, performing such works as Hiawatha's Wedding Feast, the Overture to Tannhäuser, the Pied Piper of Hamelin, Carmen, Scheherazade and The Damnation of Faust. Musical Services continued in the cathedral and included such works as Brahms' Requiem, Dvořák's Stabat Mater and Bach's Christmas Oratorio. The Drill Hall was also used as a venue for mainly orchestral concerts. The fact that Lincoln did not have a dedicated concert hall was regretted then - as now, well over a century later!



Afternoon rehearsal of Carmen in November 1921

1930 was the year in which Dr Bennett, who had conducted the Society since its inception, died. His funeral was a major city event and representatives of the Society attended, along with many notable musicians, organists and civic dignitaries, forming a sombre procession from the cathedral, where the funeral service was held, to Eastgate Cemetery. At the society's annual concert in December that year the orchestra played Sullivan's In Memoriam prior to the concert proper as a tribute to the late Dr Bennett. The Grand Concert at the Corn Exchange in Lincoln, also included works by Mendelssohn, Rimsky-Korsakov and Massenet. It featured over 250 performers, with many members of the Hallé Orchestra taking part.

1937 was a busy year for the Society. In February it held a Social and Dance at Boots' Café, for subscribing and singing members. Burdell's Dance Orchestra was engaged until 1am and there was provision for whist and bridge playing. Members of the Chorus sang and Mr Bert Wilmot presented monologues. A double ticket including supper cost 6/6d.

In March the St Matthew Passion was performed. Adverts for new singers were placed in the local papers, the Chronicle and the Echo. Rehearsals began on 1st February and the performance was on 19th March. Singers received a formal invitation to take part and had to return a signed card to confirm they would be participating.

The Society's annual meeting followed soon after this, when the Bishop of Grimsby, then President of the Society, announced a Special Coronation Recital would be given to mark the coronation of King George VI. At this meeting the Society also presented an armchair, a case of pipes and a cigarette lighter to Mr Peacock Rayner, who had served the Society as Honorary Secretary for 32 years.

The Coronation Recital took place on 10th May, two days before the coronation. The music included several of Handel's Coronation Anthems, I was Glad and Flourish for a Coronation, a new work by Vaughan Williams. Its performance in Lincoln was one of the first in the provinces and it was reported as 'an inspiring setting of words from the old testament and from Chaucer, an important and ambitious item in the programme'.

Later in the year the Society performed Handel's Solomon, at their annual concert in the Exchange Kinema. Rehearsals were held in the Wesley Schoolroom, Clasketgate and new singers, especially tenors and basses, were sought through newspaper adverts. The concert, conducted by Dr Gordon Slater, was on a Wednesday evening; the orchestra was made up

of members of the Hallé, with a number of local musicians in addition. A near full house of devoted supporters of choral singing attended, many with their own scores, and because of 'exceptional demand', the afternoon rehearsal was open to the public on payment of 1 shilling.

The year ended with a 'magnificent' performance of the Messiah on 29th December, in which 160 Society singers were joined by 350 singers from village choirs in the Lindsey council area and an orchestra of mainly local instrumentalists under the leadership of Frederick Mountney. This was one of the largest choirs ever assembled in the cathedral and all performers were arranged in the space between the stone screen and the nave altar, spreading out into the transepts on either side. It was said that every note reached the crowded nave without distortion and that 'many listeners must have had a glimpse of the vision that Handel himself is declared to have seen whilst composing the work' in the soaring rendition of the Hallelujah Chorus.



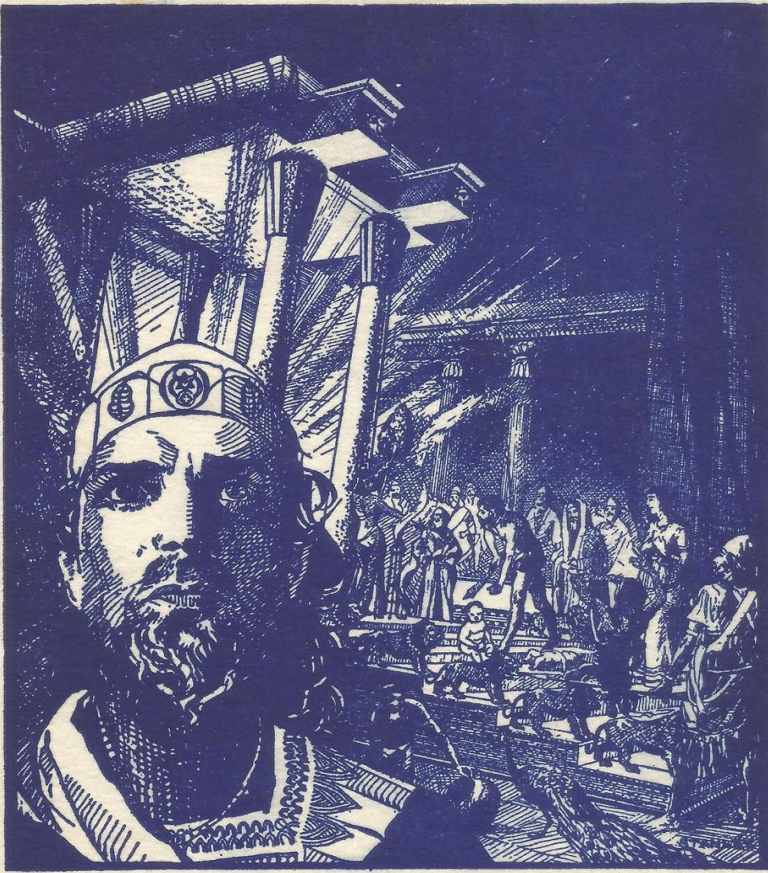
The Cathedral's Musical Services, in which the Musical Society took part, performing works such as Bach's B Minor Mass and St Matthew Passion and Handel's Messiah on a regular basis, were open to all and a special collection was taken to help cover costs. Apparently, there was often a considerable short fall and at the first AGM after the war the conductor, Dr Gordon Slater, announced that he had calculated that on average donations worked out at no more than sixpence a head. On this particular occasion the Society agreed to make a grant of £50 towards the cathedral's costs from its funds. They also decided to raise the annual subscription from 2/6d to a minimum of 5 shillings in the expectation that they would need to help to cover the costs of concerts regularly in the future.

The losses from other concerts had been discussed and reported on in great detail in **1938**. For a number of years concert income had failed to cover expenses and there was consternation over the declining balances of the Society, which began that year with £31 and ended with £14. The committee decided to choose works for their next annual concert which needed only two soloists instead of the customary four and adopted a plan to try to sell more tickets. Then, as now, this was seen as the key to breaking even!

The following year, after a concert regarded as a great success musically, the Society found itself with a £12 overdraft. Disappointment was expressed, particularly that members had not taken as many tickets as previously and they were urged to pay subs in excess of the minimum to improve the financial position of the Society. A subscription scheme was set up in which supporters could donate 10/6d and receive two 3/6d tickets for the annual concert. The Dean of Lincoln, at a Musical Service at which Bach's Christmas Oratorio was presented, urged the congregation to give more generously to support the Special Services Fund (whose Reserve fund was also now overdrawn with the bank). He encouraged attendees to donate what they might pay to go to the cinema - 'silver, rather than the coppers they give now'.

The Musical Services were temporarily suspended when the 2nd World War broke out but in **1940** it was decided to perform Brahms' Requiem, a work known to be popular, which drew a large congregation. At a performance of Messiah later that year the audience was one of the largest ever seen in the cathedral, estimated between 1000 and 1500, which hopefully boosted the funds considerably. The singers numbered around 350, the cathedral choir and Musical Society being joined by evacuees and members of the Armed Forces.

In **1943** the quatercentenary of the birth of William Byrd (organist and master of choristers at Lincoln Minster from 1563 to 1572) was celebrated with a Commemoration Service and a week of recitals. Many of Byrd's motets, anthems and service settings were featured, including O Quam Gloriosum, Sing Joyfully, Fantasia in C arranged for organ and the Easter motet Haec Dies. The Musical Society participated with the Minster Choir and a string orchestra, led by Frederick Mountney.



HANDEL'S SOLOMON

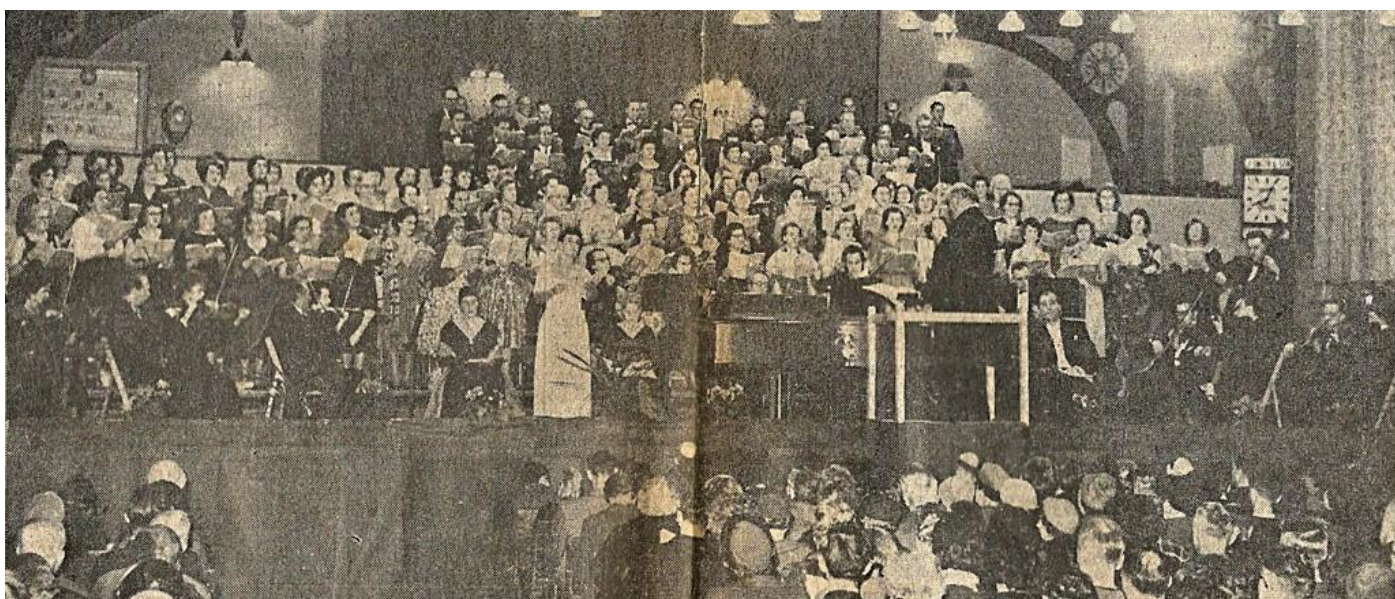
LINCOLN MUSICAL SOCIETY
GRAND JUBILEE CONCERT

CORN EXCHANGE, LINCOLN
27 NOVEMBER, 1946

For its Golden Jubilee concert in **1946**, the Society's first annual concert since before the war, Handel's Solomon was the chosen work, performed previously in **1937** to great acclaim. A special souvenir programme was produced for this concert, which included a brief history of the Society and a tribute to Dr G J Bennett who conducted the Society for 34 of its first 50 years. Dr Gordon Slater conducted and the orchestra was led once again by Frederick Mountney. It was, according to the local paper, 'a magnificent performance' given to a large and enthusiastic audience in the Exchange.

1953 was the occasion for another musical event to celebrate a coronation, that of Elizabeth II. Many traditional coronation compositions were included including Vaughan William's Flourish for a Coronation. Also included were Byrd's motet O Lord, Make thy Servant Elizabeth (composed for Elizabeth I) and Handel's Music for the Royal Fireworks.

From **1953** onwards the St Matthew Passion and the Messiah were performed every year by the Society almost without fail, first under Gordon Slater and from **1967** under Philip Marshall. This continued well into the 1990s, with the occasional substitution of the St John Passion or the Christmas Oratorio. There were often several other concerts in the season; in **1963** Bach's Mass in B Minor and Carmen were also performed and in **1973** The Sea Symphony and The Kingdom were performed in York under Sir David Willcocks.



A performance of Dido and Aeneas in the Corn Exchange, Lincoln – November 1959

Another notable conductor to visit Lincoln was Sir Adrian Boult. In **1962** the ladies of the Lincoln Musical Society featured with the London Philharmonic Orchestra in a performance of Holst's *The Planets* under his baton.

The Musical Society changed its name to Lincoln Choral Society in **1987**, as the new name was thought to be a better description of its activities, performing as it did a wide-ranging repertoire of choral works.

For its Centenary Concert in November **1996**, a Cantata was commissioned from one of Lincoln's most distinguished composers, Dr Philip Marshall (formerly organist at Lincoln Cathedral, and Musical Director of the Society). The afternoon of the concert was the first opportunity the composer had had to hear an orchestra play his piece, parts for which he had handwritten for the players. Colin Walsh, the cathedral organist, conducted.

The society has also given premiere performances of some smaller scale works. One such piece was *Cantate Domino*, composed by Patrick Bennett (a Deputy Musical Director and Répétiteur of the Society) to mark his mother's birthday. Considerably earlier, in **1928**, the Society had performed *In Honour of the City*, a fantasia composed and conducted by Dr R L Dyson, which received rapturous applause and many ovations, according to the local press.



1996 – The performance of Centenary Cantata

In **2000**, Neville Turner directed a performance of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*. It was reported that this was the first performance since the composer himself conducted it in the cathedral in **1910**, but records show that it had been performed four or five times since then, under Sir David Willcocks, under Richard Hickox and a performance in **1972** with the support of York and Southwell Choral Societies. The **2000** performance had a joint choir comprised of the Choral Society, Lincoln Chorale and Louth Choral Society. The combined forces of Lincoln's and Grimsby's Symphony Orchestras, with Robert Tear and Kathryn Turpin as the main soloists, completed the ensemble.

The following year the Society took part in a massed choirs event in the cathedral to celebrate the millennium. Organised by the National Federation of Music Societies, *Gaudeamus 2001* featured Elgar's *The Music Makers*, a contemporary piece called *Horizons* (Andrew Carter) and opened with Vaughan William's *Old Hundredth*. Members of 33 choirs took part, conducted by the director of music at Eton College, Ralph Allwood, and accompanied by the Nottingham Bach Orchestra.

From then on most cathedral concerts were conducted by Neville Turner and gradually the concert repertoire evolved. A link was forged between the Society and the Liedertafel choir from Neustadt, Germany, and there followed a series of occasional combined concerts in both Lincoln and Neustadt from **2001** (*Carmina Burana*) to the present day.

Most memorable was a performance of Jenkins' The Armed Man in Neustadt, with a French choir in addition, to mark the German Day of Remembrance in **2014**.

A performance of Messiah with a difference took place in **2013**, with the Black Dyke Band (a prestigious brass band) performing instead of an orchestra. This was viewed beforehand with some trepidation but proved to be a popular concert and an interesting new experience for singers. This was the last time the Society performed Messiah in the cathedral as the Cathedral Choir have performed it annually since then.



The commemoration of the centenary of the end of the First World War in **2018** was an opportunity for a performance of great significance. The driving force behind this concert, and its lead conductor, was Mark Wilde, who took on the role of Musical Director of Lincoln Choral Society in **2016**. Combined Lincolnshire Choral Societies, with two orchestras, joined by local talented student players, took part in a moving performance of Britten's War Requiem to an audience of 1000 in the cathedral. The work drew to a close with a gentle cascade of poppies and the tolling of a cathedral bell; a memorable event for all.

In **2020** the Society was forced to cancel its Spring concert as a result of the global coronavirus pandemic. For 15 months the choir rehearsed on-line, thanks to the dedication and technical expertise of Mark Wilde and Edward Wellman, as choirs everywhere were restricted in how they could rehearse and perform. Now, at the start of the Society's 125th season, we look forward to being able to resume in-person rehearsals and experience the joy of singing together, once again bringing major choral works to the city of Lincoln.