

THE LEA SINGERS – a history
by Chris Lemar & Phil Bevan

It all started in 1960 with a chance meeting between music enthusiasts on the 8.20am commuter train from Harpenden to St Pancras. The idea of forming a small 4-part choir based in **Harpenden** was sparked. **Clive Bright**, who then worked for Boosey and Hawkes, and was the conductor of the Harpenden Salvation Army Band, set about the task of recruiting a small group of singers and on 21 September 1960, seven singers, two each of sopranos, altos and basses and just one tenor ('twas ever thus!) met at Clive's house in Crossway, Harpenden and The Lea Singers were born - an apt name given that the **River Lea** is at the heart of the local community. The subs were set at 6d (2.5p) per week and members had to pay for their own music. On that first evening they set about learning Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus* and Huw Roberton's classic *All in the April Evening*. By early 1961 the choir comprised 10 singers and was ready to perform.

The Lea Singers' debut concert took place on 18th February 1961 at High Street Methodist Church Hall, Harpenden. According to a local newspaper report "the new group of music enthusiasts made an impressive debut with an entertainment styled 'Choral Cameos'". And it was not long before the Choir felt sufficiently confident to go beyond Harpenden, and the autumn of 1962 saw recitals in Luton, Dunstable, Redbourn and Markyate, as well as in The Public Hall, Harpenden. Concerts typically comprised groups of spirituals, folksongs and classical partsongs as well as solo instrumental interludes from choir members, Norman Leighton on the violin and pianists, Ann Medley and Pauline Prideaux. There was even a concert featuring a harmonica soloist, Douglas Tait.

By 1963 Choir numbers had increased to 17 and a landmark was reached when the Capriol Orchestra was engaged at a fee of £70 for a concert at Harpenden Public Hall. Tickets cost 6 shillings (30p) and there was a full house. 1963 also saw the beginning of other associations of the Lea Singers. The Choir performed at The Bourne, a private concert hall built by Mr GHT Williams in Salisbury Avenue. This later became the rehearsal venue for the Choir for many years. Also, The Lea Singers started singing concerts in aid of local charities. Looking at programmes for these early years it is interesting to recall that concerts given in public theatre venues always concluded with the National Anthem.

In the spring of 1964, a number of singers decided that they would prefer to sing a lighter style of repertoire and left the Lea Singers to form a separate choir, **The Music Makers** which also flourishes today. New recruits quickly filled the gaps. One other snippet from around this time: in 1966 the choir attended an audition at the BBC with what is now Radio 3 and was successful – but there are no recollections of any subsequent broadcasts! Also at about this time the Lea Singers made their first recording, an "EP" which included Fauré's *Cantique de Jean Racine*, and they started a trend that has continued ever since, by giving a first English performance of, *An Ode to Music* by Zoltán Kodály.

On 11 May 1966 the Lea Singers made their first appearance at Rothamsted Manor, giving a recital organized by Rothamsted Experimental Station's Staff Union. On their committee at the time was Fred Jones, who must have been very impressed as he joined the Choir as a tenor in the following year and continued until 1986. It was through his influence that the Lea Singers' annual and very popular 'Music for a Summer Evening' concerts at Rothamsted Manor House, commenced in 1975, and continue to this day.

Clive Bright, who now lives in North Wales at Llanwnda, was known for his work as Principal at the Williams School of Church Music. In 1967, Clive's other commitments meant that he had to relinquish his role as conductor, and the Lea Singers were fortunate to secure the services of **Victor Bowden**, an accomplished local amateur organist who agreed to take on the role for 2 years while the Choir found a permanent replacement.

With the help of **Maurice Johnstone**, a Harpenden based composer and conductor, formerly secretary to Sir Thomas Beecham and then associated with the BBC, the Choir was introduced to **Clive Simmonds** who took up the Lea Singers' baton in 1969. He had recently been appointed organist at Luton Parish Church and brought not only youth and enthusiasm to his new role but also his new wife Val. He recruited a number of excellent young singers and the choir increased in size to between 25 and 30, the number we have now. Clive's style, whilst very professional, was more relaxed than his predecessors and this made a real difference to the feel of the Lea Singers. It became a social group as well as an accomplished choir. He created the atmosphere which spawned overseas tours, Cathedral weekends, dinners and parties after concerts at singers' houses. This remains and is regarded as a key attribute of the Lea Singers' experience.

A highlight of Clive's leadership was the inauguration of the Christmas punch and mince pies concerts at Harpenden Public Halls. The Christmas charity concerts became so popular that they were extended to two nights and sung to capacity audiences – on one occasion 480 were packed in sitting on hassocks on the stage – no worries about health and safety in those days! They are still a regular part of our annual programme and over the years have enabled the choir to donate more than £30,000 to local good causes. Other highlights included the evensongs at St Paul's Cathedral, Norwich and Peterborough, and in 1979 the first overseas tour to Harpenden's twin town, Alzey in Germany, not to mention a hugely successful LP, "Christmas Carols & Sacred Music". Clive also organized collaborative concerts with the orchestra and bands at North Herts College where he was teaching. We sang folk songs written by his colleague John Railton, recently retired as the conductor of The Dartington Community Choir, and when Clive had to spend some time abroad examining on behalf of the Associated Board of Music, John stood in for him as conductor. In 1980, Clive was appointed as head of music at Bedford Modern School and sadly had to leave us.

By this time, democracy had arrived at the Lea Singers and the Choir as a group set about auditioning, interviewing and appointing their new conductor, a process that has continued to this day. **Paul Ellison**, Director of Music at St Mary the Boltons, Chelsea was appointed. Under his baton, the choir took on some

larger scale choral works with orchestral and organ accompaniment including works by Purcell, Handel, Bach, Dvořák and Duruflé and a performance of Rossini's delightful *Petite Messe Solennelle* at St Mary the Boltons in November 1982. Under Paul we performed Handel's *Dixit Dominus* and Bach's *Cantata 4: Christ lag in Todesbanden* with an orchestra of period instruments, which was a first for the Lea Singers. We also worked with two of the top organists in the country: Thomas Trotter (*Dvorak Mass in D*) and Stephen Cleobury (*Duruflé Requiem*) and also sang Evensongs at Peterborough Cathedral, Magdalen College, Cambridge and St, Mary the Boltons. Paul left to become resident in San Francisco, where he is still music director and organist at the Church of the Advent of Christ the King.

In September 1983 we welcomed **Peter Collis** as our conductor, and he was to stay with us for 10 years. He was at the time Director of the Cockpit Theatre in London, a small opera company specializing in performance for young people. This was a wonderful source of soloists. One in particular deserves a special mention, Graham Trew. Not only did he sing some wonderful bass/baritone solos in passions, requiems and masses but also was hugely entertaining at a number of our summer concerts, on one occasion turning up dressed as an Arab Sheik! Under Peter's direction the choir tackled a wide range of music including Bach's *St John Passion* and later his *B Minor Mass* at our 30th anniversary concert, Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, Schütz's *Passion Motets*, Vaughan Williams' *Vision of Aeroplanes* and Handel's *Messiah*. The Lea Singers established its on-going programming strategy of promoting a large-scale orchestral concert once every alternate year. This expensive venture has been possible as a result of generous sponsorship, financially successful *a cappella* concerts and other choir inspired money-raising campaigns.

Peter also introduced the choir to some wonderful arrangements of pop tunes and show songs and these proved to be very popular at our Christmas and summer concerts. He encouraged John Battley, for many years a tenor with the Lea Singers, to produce his beautiful arrangements of folk songs and spirituals and these have been regular items in our programmes since 1991. Peter took the choir on tour to Alzey in 1986, and Cosne-sur-Loire (Harpenden's French twin town) in 1987. The concert in the magnificent acoustic of Oppenheim Cathedral where our programme included a group of Bruckner's motets was a magnificent experience for the choir.

Under Peter, the Lea Singers established their Singing Days, where singers from Harpenden and around were invited to join the Choir for a day to work through a choral masterwork, and then at the end of the afternoon, give a run through performance to friends and family. The Choir continues to hold these events. Not only have they been fun days but they been a good source of recruitment for new members of the Choir. Recently we have engaged guest conductors to direct the days, with Robert Hollingsworth introducing the Tallis' *Spem in Alium* 40-part motet and Eammon Dougan leading a day's singing of Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610*. In June 19th 2011 we had a Singing Day of all ex Lea Singers on the *Victoria Requiem*.

In 1993 Peter was appointed to a position in Nottingham. His final concert at Rothamsted Manor was an emotional affair, not least because just before the Choir went on stage Peter, who is over six feet tall, banged his head on one of the low oak beams there. He said afterwards that he was probably conducting while concussed! Peter is now resident in Yorkshire and is conductor of another successful chamber choir, York Cantores.

Simon Berry was conductor from 1993 to 1996. He was also Director of Music at Channing School and Organist at St Mary, Brookfield. He produced a very fine programme of music by Purcell and his contemporaries to mark the 300-year anniversary of Purcell's death. Simon also led the Choir on a highly successful tour to Stockholm in 1995, arranged with the assistance of one of the Choir's long-serving altos, Åsa Mann, a native of Sweden whose family is still very influential in the choral music world in Stockholm. In 1996 Simon accepted a post in San Francisco where he is Director of Music and Liturgy at St Dominic's Catholic Church – so we have two ex Lea Singers conductors in that city!

Next with the baton was Scottish conductor, **Geoffrey Davidson**, who was then a bass with the BBC Singers. He kept the Choir entertained at rehearsals with plenty of amusing musical anecdotes. At about the same time, Jeremy and Grace Hill joined the Choir. They are both very accomplished Scottish Country Dancers and the Choir's repertoire and activities took on a flavour of Scotland for a while, including a Burns Night and, in 1998, a Scottish tour, which included concerts in Stirling Cathedral, Falkirk Abbey and Dunblane Cathedral on the banks of the Tay. There was time for a trip to St Andrews as well! Other highlights of Geoff's time with the Choir were the tour to Northern Italy in 1997, and particularly the concert in the great auditorium at Vicenza, and the CD recorded in 1999.

Perhaps Geoff's tenure is best remembered for his conducting of a new Lea Singers commission by composer Judith Bingham, who also sang with the BBC Singers at that time. Perhaps she thought she was writing it for the BBC Singers or perhaps Geoff talked up the Lea Singers' sight-reading abilities, but Bingham's unaccompanied setting of *Gleams of a Remoter World* based on Shelley's poem Mont Blanc was a real challenge. The first performance in the evening of 12th April 1997 was assisted with organ to help find the most awkward notes. Last year, on November 6th 2010, with some trepidation we gave our second performance of the work, without any assistance from organ or piano, and we now feel justifiably proud that a piece that we commissioned has since been recorded by the BBC Singers, and lends its name to their latest CD. We will be recording it ourselves in May.

When Geoff moved to north Norfolk, **Craig McLeish** took over as conductor in September 1999. He had been a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, a bass player in a rock band and musical director of the Methodist Youth Clubs Orchestra and Singers. Not surprising then that his first Singing Day was a workshop featuring pop music accompanied by a rock band. He was soon thrust into the Lea Singers 40th Anniversary Season. Not put off by the Bingham experience, we commissioned St Albans based composer Timothy Blinko to write a piece for the anniversary, but by way of precaution he was invited to choir rehearsals to get

the measure of our skills! He composed *A Stream of Fire* for choir and organ, which takes its text from the Book of Daniel. The premiere took place at a concert in Luton Parish Church on 15 April 2000. The composer attended the performance and gave a pre-concert talk. It was a great success, and was performed again later that year in St John's Smith Square and repeated again on 6 November 2010, with the composer in the audience.

In the summer of 2000, The Lea Singers hosted a celebration of its first 40 years at an evening in Harpenden Public Halls. Lea Singers past and present sang for their supper, and were directed during the evening by Craig, Geoff, Peter and Clive Simmonds. Continuing the festivities, on 18 November the Choir put on a gala concert at St John's, Smith Square, of Handel's *Dixit Dominus*, and Bach's *Singet dem Herrn*. The millennium year also saw the Choir make a tour to Dublin where the singing was excellent, the audiences rather thin on the ground and it rained a lot.

The Lea Singers have always been keen to support young musicians at the outset of their professional careers, and we have been very fortunate to engage singers and instrumentalists who have gone on to be very successful performers. In 2002 Iestyn Davies sang countertenor in our performance of Bach's B Minor Mass and again for the *Messiah* in 2004. He is now one of the leading counter-tenors on the international concert platform. Other now well-known musicians who have worked with the Lea Singers include tenors, Nicholas Hurndall Smith, and Nicky Spence, organist Jane Watts, French baritone Laurent Naouri and broadcaster Gareth Malone, not to mention Nicholas Hooper, a bass in the choir in the 1970's, now famous as a BAFTA-winning and Grammy Award-nominated British film and television composer for his Harry Potter & the Order of the Phoenix score. Craig's final concert was at Rothamsted in June 2004 suitably concluding with an arrangement of Noel Coward's *The Party's Over Now!*

Madeleine Lovell became Musical Director in September 2004, and that same month, on only one rehearsal had to get the Choir into shape for a performance of a fairly lighthearted programme at a church flower festival. What she managed to get out of *The Teddy Bear's Picnic* and *Old Macdonald's Farm* was a wonder to hear. From the ridiculous to the sublime, the next concert was a performance of Handel's *Messiah* at St Nicholas Church Harpenden – Madeleine bringing to new life all too familiar texts with wonderful musicality. Rehearsals took on a new flavour too. Rigorous warm up exercises, followed by very focused attention to detail on notes, tuning, rhythms and perhaps most important, diction, which made pieces come alive. The Choir was singing with feeling in French, Italian and Spanish. With her own well-trained singing voice Madeleine was able to demonstrate technique, which helped all parts deal with difficult high notes, awkward intervals and rhythms. Second best was not an option!

In 2007, the Lea Singers held the first of what have become annual concerts for children. Entitled *Somewhere over the rainbow* it was presented by TV's Gareth Malone who was so popular he was booked again for 2008 to help present *Toy Story*. In 2008 the Lea Singers joined forces with Madeleine's St George's Chamber Orchestra to perform Bach's *St John Passion* in German at St John's Boxmoor, Hemel Hempstead. Other highlights of Madeleine's leadership included

weekends at Wells and Canterbury Cathedrals, and the recording of the *Sing Joyfully* CD at St George's Chesterton of Vaughan Williams' Mass in G minor. In the summer of 2008, Madeleine was appointed Director of Music at Queens' College Cambridge and her duties in that role clashed with the Choir's Wednesday rehearsals. She did however manage to direct the Choir in the weekend services at St Albans Cathedral at the end of October and celebrated her 30th birthday at a farewell dinner in St Albans after Evensong. Strangely, although The Lea Singers have sung at many Cathedrals around the country this was the first occasion they had sung services at the local Cathedral!

Whilst recruiting a new conductor the Choir had to arrange for guest conductors to cover their existing programme. We were delighted to welcome **Robert Hollingworth** to rehearse and conduct a concert for St Nicholas Day 2008 at St Nicholas Church Harpenden, and of course the programme included Britten's *St Nicholas* cantata. Other conductors who helped in the inter-regnum were Tom Seligman and Will Carslake, who directed the 2008 children's concert.

James Sherlock, the Lea Singers' current conductor was appointed in December 2008 and commenced work in the spring of 2009. James was organ scholar at Trinity College, Cambridge, and is currently organist at St Bartholomew the Great in the City of London. He is also a prize winning concert pianist, playing internationally. James' first ambition for the Choir was to work through Bach's motets, and the Choir is currently about half way through. He has also been keen to continue the Lea Singers' tradition of commissioning new works. Singer and composer Peter Foggitt wrote a piece for choir and solo cello entitled *Media Vita* that was premièred and well received on 6 March 2010. James Barralet, a brilliant young cellist, played the cello part. Maria Antal was commissioned to write a work for the Children's concert last year too.

The Lea Singers is now in its 50th Anniversary season, its "Jubilea". We have a new logo and polo-shirt to match kindly donated by 300 Million. The Season started with yet another Lea Singers "first", a *Redbourn not Glyndebourne* garden party. An excellent turnout, raffle and auction resulted in very welcome funds to help finance this ambitious Jubilee season. In October 2010, James took the Choir to sing weekend services at Winchester, where he had been organ scholar, and the following weekend directed the Lea Singers in a concert of *Choir Favorites and Commissions* with gifted 17-year-old organist Edward Picton-Turbervill, soon to go up to St John's College Cambridge as organ scholar himself.

In July 2011 James decided that he could not continue with the Lea Singers because of his extensive commitments worldwide as a concert pianist and Madeleine Lovell returned for a brief period until the end of 2011 when the search will start for another conductor to take the Lea Singers into the next 50 years.

Finally, some statistics. Over its first 50 years the Lea Singers have had nearly 200 singers. They have given 350 concerts and sung nearly 4,000 different pieces of music. The piece of music to feature most in programmes over the years is Byrd's *Ave verum Corpus* (sung 36 times). The Choir has sung at 12 cathedrals

and in 105 different concert venues. We have toured 6 different countries and have made 5 recordings.

Recordings:

EP - Clive Bright

LP - Clive Simmons - "Christmas Carols & Sacred Music"

CD - Geoffrey Davidson - "My Spirit Sang all day"

CD - Craig McLeish - "Music to die for"

CD - Madeleine Lovell - "Sing joyfully"

Next recording coming May 2011