

## MUSIC IN STIRLING: KNOW THE SCORE

George McVicar

*St Cecilia's Day 1999 Lecture*  
*Stirling Stories Series, Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum*

It was in the interval between being appointed the first supervisor of music (the designation advisor came later) to Stirlingshire and actually taking up the appointment in January 1956 that Her Majesty's Inspector of Music in Schools said to me, "Well, I hope you know you are going to the worst musical desert in Scotland". He was of course referring to the state of music in schools and emphatically not to the provision of music within the community. By then, the mid fifties, most local education authorities had appointed an advisor to draw up a curriculum of instruction for the classroom and to create a scheme of instrumental instruction for interested pupils. When I came to Stirling, there were primary class teachers who had never taught a music lesson and there was only one violin instructor, Andrew Dick, to serve all the schools between Grangemouth, Kilsyth (then in Stirlingshire), Killearn, Balfron and Balmaha.

However, if that was the situation in the county's schools, it was not in anyway representative of music provision here in the town of Stirling or in neighbouring Bridge of Allan. In both pre- and post-reformation times, there was music making and composition at Stirling Castle court. In 1848 Chopin stayed at Keir House in Bridge of Allan, and through the 19th century there were various music associations and choral societies. By the 20th century John M. Hay, owner of the music shop in Murray Place and later in Friars' Street, had brought to Stirling a superb series of celebrity concerts, while the Public Interests Association had begun a similar series in Bridge of Allan. This series was succeeded by the Bridge of Allan and District Music Club started by Dr Welsh in 1945 – see *Music in Bridge of Allan* (1).

Mr Hay's concerts were held in the Albert Hall. There were two or three a year and prior booking was essential. Furthermore the audience was expected to wear evening dress. Mr Donald Hay kindly gave me a loan of his father's album and from it I discovered that Dame Clara Butt gave a concert in the series in 1926 (Figure 1) and that on that occasion Sir Harry Lauder came as a guest. The following year brought Elena Gerhardt, Sir Henry Wood, and Ivor Newton. In Mr Hay's album there is a signed photograph of Sir Thomas Beecham, but it does not say what Sir Thomas did at his concert. I assume he did not play the piano, because in a radio talk I once heard him describe himself as the world's worst pianist and I remember thinking – You're saying that because you have never heard me. When John Barbirolli came, he conducted what was then the Scottish Orchestra, now the RSO. David McCallum of Kirkintilloch was the soloist. Others taking part in this astonishing series included the Lener Quartet, Count John MacCormack (then

still plain Mr and described by Mr Hay as a jovial character), Solomon, Pouishnoff, Louis Kenter and Florence Austral. When the Scottish tenor, Joseph Hislop came, two rows of seats had to be put on the platform to accommodate the audience. If Joseph Hislop's name is not familiar in 1999, that of his pupil, Donald Maxwell certainly is. What must have been an event of special local interest was the appearance at these concerts of Stirling-born Muir Mathieson. I don't know the date of the concert, but presumably by then Mr Mathieson was an established and well known conductor. He came with the Reid Orchestra, the orchestra of the Music faculty of Edinburgh University. It was General John Reid who founded the Chair of Music at Edinburgh University. The Friends of the MacRobert have sponsored some concerts like recitals by the Edinburgh Quartet. The Quartet in 1998 gave a recital here in the Smith and that gave rise to the Quartet choosing Stirling as one of only three venues for its Premiers Tour which featured, over the three concerts in each town, new works by three young Scottish composers.

That has all been about listening to music and going to concerts, but music lovers have also wanted to make music. In 1951, the Stirling and District Choral Union was formed. Its predecessor was the Stirling Choral Society founded in 1866, but disbanded in 1938. Derrick Cantrell was the first conductor of the new Choral Union which, with a choir of '100 voices' and an orchestra of 18, was launched with a performance of Messiah. Roy Lennox took over from Mr Cantrell in 1954 and since has brought to Stirling such soloists as Duncan Robertson, Pat MacMahon, Neil Mackie (now head of Vocal Studies at the RCM), and Neil's wife, Kathleen Livingstone. The repertoire has ranged over the centuries from Purcell (*Dido and Aeneas*), Handel (*Messiah*, *Judas Maccabeus*), Haydn (*Creation*, *Nelson Mass*), Brahms *Requiem*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah* (Figure 2), Elgar (*Gerontius*), Kodaly and Vaughan Williams. The conductor we most associate now is George Farmer. I rang him to ask him to name three highlights of his spell as conductor. He had special praise for the artists at his first concert. There was no money for fees and Kate Lafferty, a former pupil of his own at St Modan's High School, Neil Mackie (still a student at the time) and Alan Wilkins, the organist, gave their services free. A highlight was the Dvorak *Stabat Mater* in 1991 because neither choir, orchestra, nor soloists knew it beforehand and George was introducing it to them. He has affectionate memories of his final concert (*Elijah*) when, as he said to me, the Choir "pulled out all the stops for me". The highlight was in 1993 when he had a choir augmented to 160 and an orchestra of 60 for the Verdi *Requiem*. Two of the soloists were Margaret Marshall and Frances McCafferty. (A new conductor takes over this season and I'm sure he has all our good wishes).

The Rosenethe Singers came into being as the choir required for a demonstration of choir training organised by SAMA with Arthur Oldham as the tutor. The group was intended for the training weekend only, but, at the suggestion of Arthur Oldham, stayed together. At first the singers concentrated on part songs and short choral works that did not infringe on the repertoire of the Choral Union. As time went on we got around to more extended works, the first of which was *Dido and Aeneas*, given in a concert performance in 1969

(Figure 3). Kate Lafferty sang Dido, Margaret Marshall was the Belinda and Alexander Bilsland the Aeneas. By that time we had formed an orchestra consisting of teachers and pupils and led by James Montgomery. The Rosenethe's ambitious project was Britten's *St Nicholas*, given during the 1970 Stirling Festival. Alexander Oliver sang the part of Nicholas. Ronald McIntosh and John Fraser were the piano duettists, David Frame played the organ and on this occasion, Geoffrey Lynn led the orchestra. The work requires a semi chorus (Britten calls it the Gallery Choir) and pupils of Stirling High School provided this. It is very gratifying to me that the singers keep going and flourish. Both George Farmer and George Wilson succeeded me as conductor and Matthew Beetchen of Dunblane Cathedral is the present maestro. Under Matthew they have aspired to the lofty peak of the Matthew *Passion*. They now work with the Scottish Bach Consort and I would urge you to go and hear them together.

The various churches have their choirs and the Dunblane, Bannockburn and Stirling male voice choirs combined to form the present Stirling Male Voice Choir. Under the conductorship of Sandy Sinclair they perform a repertoire of part songs. They give concerts locally and these feature guest artists (Figure 4). The choir also takes part in combined male voice choir festivals and in 1992 joined the Stirling Orchestra in one of their concerts.

There is also a Stirling Gaelic Choir. Founded in 1948, Sandy Sinclair was their conductor for 22 years. He was preceded by Archie MacLean and Kirsteen Grant, both of them Mod gold medallists and by Elaine Brown. Under the direction of Kirsteen Grant the choir won the National Mod's coveted Lovat and Tullibardine Shield and later, with Sandy as their conductor were runners up for the Lovat and Tullibardine and have taken prizes in the port a beul competitions. There is also a junior Gaelic choir. It has at present a membership of 18 singers. The applicants for a place need not necessarily be native Gaelic speakers. Like all Gaelic choirs, so far as I know, they have a Gaelic tutor. Under their conductor, Mrs Sheena MacKenzie, they take part in local and the National Mods and, Mrs MacKenzie modestly admits, took prizes under their previous conductor. The National Mod has come three times to Stirling in 1961, 1971 and 1987 and I have specially happy memories of the first of these when the adjudicators were Herbert Howells, Herbert Wiseman and Gordon Slater, with all of whom I had by that time become friendly. Together we had a number of happy social occasions. Herbert Howells was senior professor at the RCM, Herbert Wiseman was Head of Music, BBC Scotland, and Gordon Slater was the director of music at Lincoln Cathedral, a distinguished line up and an example of the standard of musicians at competitive festivals in those days.

Apart from the Youth Orchestra which had its first residential weekend at Kilsyth Academy (followed by many others, not to mention even visits abroad) (Figure 5), Stirling has had three orchestras, the Snowden Orchestra, the Rehearsal Orchestra and in 1982 the present Stirling Orchestra, a splendidly organised orchestra as I discovered from their archives kindly loaned to me by Campbell Hanna whom we must congratulate on his recent provost's award

for his services to arts in the Burgh. Their first conductor was Hugh MacDonald, now Head of Music, BBC Scotland. I first heard them under Paul MacAlinden and the present conductor is Timothy Redman. The orchestra has a distinctively Scottish leaning and I don't mean by that, that they play reels and strathspeys. They have commissioned works from a number of Scottish composers, and play in the Holy Rude. Frances McCafferty, Kathleen McKellar Ferguson, and her sister Angela in the Poulenc organ concerto, have been soloists, and Caroline Sparey Gillies in a work by her husband Robert Sparey Gillies.

The Stirling Festival began in 1958 (Figure 6) and the schools came into their own then giving a concert called Songs of Britain with six choirs and a verse speaking chair from Stirling High School. *St Nicolas* which I referred to earlier was part, in fact the first part of the opening ceremony of the 1970 festival. Another Stirling Festival presentation was Britten's opera *Noyes Fludde*. Its presentation was very much a local effort, school pupils taking part came from Bannockburn High School, Riverside, St Ninians, Bridge of Allan, Borestone, Raploch, Holy Trinity, St Mary's schools of both Bannockburn and Stirling, Stirling High, St Modan's High, and Dunblane High. The part of Noye was sung by Jolyon Dodgson, then director of the MacRobert Centre with Ian Ainsworth replacing him for one of the four performances, Mary Griffiths was Mrs Noye. Members of the teaching staff formed the chamber orchestra but the work also calls for ripieno strings, recorders, bugles, percussion and hand bells and these were all played by pupils, assisted in some cases by teachers. Still other pupils sang the parts of Mrs Noye's gossips, Sem, Ham and other smaller roles.

Just prior to the performances I had been in Ballymena adjudicating at their festival. One class was for solo boy trebles and one boy was head and shoulders above all the others. Unfortunately he sang the wrong arrangement of the set test piece and could not be awarded the prize. In my adjudication I foolishly said that I was going to be conducting performances of *Noye's Fludde* and would he like to come and sing the part of Sem for me. The next day he arrived at the adjudicating table asking if I was serious about him singing in my opera (I wonder what BB would have made of that!). I said I'd love to have him singing Sem, but the performances were in Scotland and not Ireland. "But my mother said I could come". It was then I realised the extent of my gaffe. What would Margaret Gray the producer, say?, I am pretty sure Margaret was taken aback, but gave in at once when I told her that the boy's mother had said that a child brought up in Northern Ireland at that time was a deprived child. David, now a priest in Belfast, came over and sang gloriously. I think *Noye's Fludde* was the most satisfying conducting experience of my life. When I told HM's Inspector of Music – the same one of the 'musical desert' – he said he wasn't surprised. *Noye's Fludde*, he said, had everything in it (Figure 7).

After Richard Galloway succeeded Bradley Catto as adviser, he formed a large and encouragingly enthusiastic youth choir which performed an enterprising repertoire which included such works as Bernstein's *Chichester*

*Psalms*. They combined with the youth orchestra which had grown out of all proportion to that first group that spent a weekend at Kilsyth. They even undertook overseas tours. There was even a junior choir conducted by Frances McCafferty before she left teaching to pursue her very successful career as a professional singer. One of Brad Catto's innovations was the Young Musician of Central Region competition. It was first held in the Albert Hall but Brad then decided that it should be part of the Central Region Music Competitive Festival. That festival was a flourishing affair about which Herbert Howells said to the local press, "I know no festival outside of Winnipeg with a better choral entry". In contrast to every other festival in Scotland even perhaps the whole of the UK, it has all but ceased to exist. The only class left is Brad's Young Musician competition.

But there is more. Stirling boasts an operatic society which annually fills MacRobert for a week with performances of contemporary musicals. Included in the instrumental instruction in the schools is piping and at one time there was a group playing traditional fiddle music. The school scheme covered all the instruments of the orchestra and we can boast that Stirling was the first county in Scotland to offer solo instruction in solo singing. A peak achievement was James Melville's inter-house music festivals at Stirling High School. The school's four houses competed against each other in different musical skills. There were 16 choirs all conducted by pupils, classes in solo singing – it was at one of these that I first heard Margaret Marshall, solo instrumental classes, and both vocal and instrumental ensembles. St Modan's gave us Kate Lafferty, Martin McHale, a trumpet player now in the orchestra of Welsh National Opera, John Woods now on the staff of Brisbane Conservatoire and still other musicians. Wallace High has produced some accomplished musicians that I've had the pleasure of meeting and also some blossoming composers. I must have missed out some who perhaps have not been brought to my attention and I apologise to them. Stirling High produced performers and teachers too numerous to mention.

During the course of this year, I have attended two choral concerts which well nigh filled the Holy Rude. One was a charity event in aid of Strathcarron Hospice. The other was given by the National Youth Choir of Scotland. At the latter the soprano and tenor soloists in Benjamin Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb* were respectively Catriona Lang, a former pupil of Stirling High and Graham Boyce, ex-St Modan's. Look out for them; in both cases I predict a bright future. Only the week before last the schools' orchestra gave a concert that included a commission by the Scottish composer, Eion Hamilton. It was scored for orchestra, choir and pipes and so involved a representative section of all the county's young music makers. On Saturday last the Rosenethe combined with the Endrick Singers, the Crieff Choral Group and a choir from Morrison's Academy and made quite some progress in persuading me that after all *Carmina Burana* is perhaps not the worst work in the choral repertoire.

Earlier on I spoke of the tenor, Joseph Hislop filling the Albert Hall to such an extent that extra seats had to be put on the platform. If Ian Bostridge, by far

and away the most distinguished concert singer today were to be invited to Stirling, would he even half fill the MacRobert Centre? People do not go to concerts as they once did. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, before the next St Cecilia's Day, we were to witness a turning of the tide?

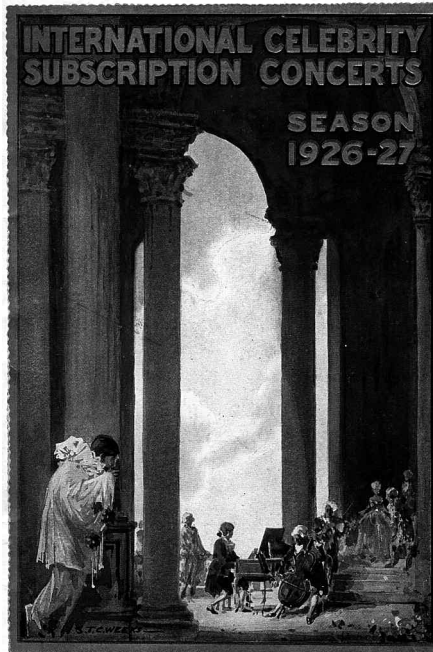
### Acknowledgements

We are grateful for assistances and illustrations to a number of people, including – Donald Hay, Margaret Gray, George Farmer, Sandy Sinclair, Peggy Roddan, Bob McCutcheon, and the Smith Art Gallery and Museum.

### Reference:

- 1 *Bridge of Allan, A Heritage of Music, and its Museum Hall*. FNH pamphlet and FNH Vol. 17, 75-88 by Gavin Miller and George McVicar.

Figure 1



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Figure 2

## ROSENETHE SINGERS AND ORCHESTRA

Leader—JAMES MONTGOMERY

Continuo—RONALD McINTOSH, 'cello  
JOHN FRASER, harpsichord

Conductor—GEORGE C. McVICAR

Characters in order of singing in

"DIDO AND AENEAS" .....	Purcell
Belinda, a lady in waiting .....	MARGARET MARSHALL
Dido, Queen of Carthage .....	KATHLEEN LAFFERTY
Aeneas, a Trojan prince .....	ALEXANDER BILSLAND
Sorceress .....	MARGARET DEMPSEY
First Witch .....	MARGARET FARMER
Second Witch .....	CHRISTINE PRICE
Spirit .....	GRACE KINLOCH
A Sailor .....	GEORGE STEWART

ALBERT HALL, STIRLING

SUNDAY, 20th APRIL, 1969

At 7.45 p.m.

PROGRAMME ..... ONE SHILLING

Figure 3

# STIRLING MALE VOICE CHOIR

Conductor: Sandy Sinclair  
Accompanist: Jean McNally

## 15th ANNUAL CONCERT

~ with ~

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~ and ~

Master of Ceremonies ~ **Jim Mathieson**

## Programme

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Figure 4

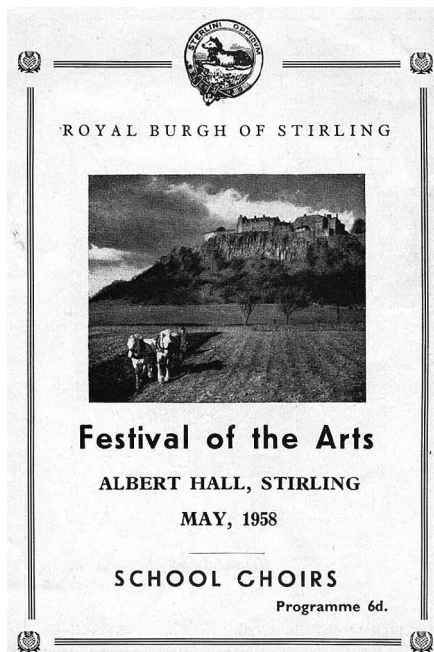


Figure 6





Figure 5 Stirlingshire Youth Orchestra.



Figure 7 Stirling Festival 1970 1-4 June. *Noyes Fludde*. Church of the Holy Rude. Above the hubbub of the storm, the hymn 'Eternal Father strong to save' is heard, sung by Noye and the others in the ark. The congregation joins in, and slowly the storm begins to abate.

## THE FORTH NATURALIST AND HISTORIAN

The Forth Naturalist and Historian (FNH) is an informal enterprise of Stirling University. It was set up in 1975 by several University and Central Regional Council staff to provide a focus for interests, activities and publications of environmental, heritage and historical studies for the Forth area comprising the local authority areas of Stirling, Falkirk and Clackmannshire.

The promotion of an annual environment symposium called *Man and the Landscape* has been a main feature, and this November 2000 is its 26th year with presentations on Biodiversity, Human modification of the Forth, Eagle Watch, Parliament and Environment, Cowane Garden, and Falkirk Wheel.

The annual *Forth Naturalist and Historian* has since 1975 published numerous papers, many being authoritative and significant in their field, including annual reports of the weather, and of birds in the locality, plus book reviews and notes. These volumes (23 as of 2000) provide a valuable successor to that basic resource *The Transactions of the Stirling Field and Archaeological Society, 1878-1939*. Five year contents/indexes are available, and selected papers are published in pamphlet form, while others eg. Ashfield Factory Village, The Weather and Bird Reports, and Flora papers, can be available as reprints.

A major publication is the 230 page *Central Scotland – Land, Wildlife, People 1994*, a natural history and heritage survey, and used in schools throughout the area, also in the form of a CD-Rom, *Heart of Scotland's Environment (HSE)*.

Other FNH and associated publications still in print include – *Mines and Minerals of the Ochils, Airthrey and Bridge of Allan* – a guided walk. *The Making of Modern Stirling, Woollen Mills of the Hillfoots, The Ochil Hills* – landscape, wildlife, heritage – an introduction with walks, *Alloa Tower and the Erskines of Mar*, and the *Lure of Loch Lomond* a journey round the shores and islands. Several of these are in association with Clackmannanshire Field Studies Society. Godfrey Maps have collaborated in producing old Ordnance Survey large scale maps of the 1890's for some 20 places in the area.

FNH publications are listed on the internet by Book Data (thebookplace.com and Bookends.co.uk), British Library (OPAC 97) and by booksellers eg Amazon and Barnes and Noble....

Offers of papers/notes for publication, and of presentations for symposia are ever welcome.

Honorary Secretary Lindsay Corbett,  
University of Stirling, FK9 4LA, and 30 Dunmar Drive, Alloa.

Tel: 01259 215091. Fax: 01786 494994.

E-mail: [lindsay.corbett@stir.ac.uk](mailto:lindsay.corbett@stir.ac.uk)

Web:

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