

NORWICH PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY



Norwich Philharmonic Society is in celebratory mood to mark a very special anniversary. BBC Radio Norfolk's culture culture, Tony Cooper, finds out more

Norwich Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus under Matthew Andrews, Photo: Bill Smith

There are two performing sides to the Norwich Philharmonic Society, referred to nowadays simply as 'The Phil' - the orchestra and the chorus. And they play a vital part in the well-being and lifeblood of the classical music and choral world of Norwich. This year, however, is a special year for both of them as they're tuning up and getting on-song to celebrate a milestone in The Phil's grand and illustrious history - its 175th anniversary. That's a score any English batsman would be proud to knock up!

Crowning their year of years, The Phil's presenting a gala celebration concert on Saturday, 21st May

(8pm), as part of the 2016 Norfolk & Norwich Festival, at a new Norwich-based venue and, in some ways, an unlikely one, too, the Norfolk Showground Arena housed on the Norfolk Showground site at New Costessey

It's a big flexible space with a large seating capacity of well over 2000 therefore it needs a big orchestral work to radiate round the vastness of its auditorium. The Phil has certainly picked the right work: Mahler's E-flat major eighth symphony - one of the largest and most spectacular to be found in the classical-music repertoire.

And because the work - composed in a single-inspired

moment at Maiernigg in southern Austria in the summer of 1906 - requires vast performing forces, it's frequently referred to as the 'Symphony of a Thousand', although it's often performed with far fewer than a thousand performers. In the case of The Phil, there'll be about 500 performers on stage.

The composer (who, by the way, did not sanction its nickname) conducted the first performance in Munich in 1907. Heavenly, it instantly found favour with the critics and public alike.

But to mount this sort of stuff shows just how far that The Phil - which grew out of a handful

of like-minded musicians who formed a 'society of amateurs' entitled the Hall Concert in 1789 to present occasional concerts in St Andrew's Hall, Norwich - have travelled since this time. But from small acorns and all that, this small enthusiastic group flourished like no other and sufficiently grew in size and stature to enable it to stage larger choral and symphony concerts although the choral side had to be curtailed when a move was made to smaller premises in Barge Yard, King Street, in 1794.

However, a further move to the music room of the King's Arms near Gurney's Bank on Bank Plain (now occupied by the OpenYouth Trust) reinstated the

chorus. And several moves later, an offer came along of a specially-adapted concert room within a building which now forms part of the Norwich University of the Arts in St George's Street - as long as interest was paid on the initial outlay.

Here the Hall Concert thrived from 1816 to 1834 after which the organisation was dissolved and its assets sold off, each member having a share of the proceeds. But Frank Noverre, who was one of the most active and passionate music supporters in the city at the time, stepped into the frame determined that the aims of this enterprising music society should not be forgotten.

Incidentally, Noverre was the grandson of the French-born dancer, Augustine Noverre, who came to England in 1775 with a corps de ballet at the invitation of David Garrick, one of England's greatest actors, who at that time managed London's Drury Lane Theatre where the dance troupe appeared. When Augustine retired from the stage he settled in Norwich and set up a dancing academy at the Assembly Rooms in Theatre Street.

Inheriting the Assembly Rooms from his grandfather, Noverre expanded the business and also rounded up a number of prominent people encouraging them to found a new musical society at a specially-convened

meeting held on 5th October 1839. It was from this meeting that the Norwich Philharmonic Society officially came into existence with Frank acting as secretary/treasurer and his brother, Francis, as librarian.

Public spirited and enterprising in every conceivable way, Noverre's enthusiasm was infectious and, therefore, this new musical organisation he was instrumental in founding soon attracted support from many of the city's finest musicians. The inaugural concert (held on 5th March 1841 at St Andrew's Hall) was led from the violin by local musician, Richard Bray. At the time, Queen Victoria was 21 years old and the mother of a three-month-old daughter named Victoria, Princess Royal. And in November of that year she gave birth to a son who became King Edward VII and, as Prince of Wales, purchased the Sandringham estate.

The opening programme included Beethoven's first symphony, Mozart's fifth and the overture to *Così fan tutte* plus a Handel concerto and a good dose of trios, glees, songs and duets - rather longer than the programmes which today's audiences are accustomed to.

The chamber-size orchestra comprised just 15 string players, a small woodwind section and a piano. *The Norwich Mercury* noted that the items were 'all respectably performed'. Noverre devoted



Cellist Thomas Igloi, soloist with The Phil in St Andrew's Hall under the baton of Julian Webb (1972). Picture reproduced by courtesy of EDP/Archant (Norwich)

a great deal of time and energy into this musical initiative and after his death in 1878 his son, Frank William Bianchi, continued the task. He also enjoyed a good relationship with the Norwich arts fraternity which led to him to found a Ladies' Orchestral Society in the 1880s which enjoyed a considerable vogue for a number of years.

But good relationships are so important within arts' organisation - or, indeed, any organisation for that matter - and The Phil has always harboured such relationships with musicians and singers alike bringing many famous names and personalities

to Norwich. As early as 1905 they pulled off a major coup (their first, in fact) by engaging the legendary Austrian-born violinist, Friedrich 'Fritz' Kreisler, one of the most famous violin masters of his day, to show off his talented and technical wizardry on his chosen instrument. And another coup was securing the services of the great Hungarian-born pianist Benno Moiseiwitsch who dazzled a full house for his solo recital in the late-1950s in which he included works by Chopin.

And some of the famous singers that have come The Phil's way include the likes of Isobel Baillie, April Cantelo, Heather Harper, Owen Brannigan and John Shirley-Quirk while Lesley Garrett came and sang like a lark in 1980 becoming English National Opera's principal soprano four years later.

The list continues *ad infinitum* and would more than put to shame



Matthew Andrews, conductor of the Norwich Philharmonic Orchestra, Photo: Bill Smith



FEATURE BY:
Tony Cooper
WRITER
TC@TONY-COOPER.CO.UK

Michael Nicholas rehearsing the combined forces of the Norwich Philharmonic Society in St Andrew's Hall (1981). Picture reproduced by courtesy of EDP/Archant (Norwich)



Ko-Ko's 'Little Mikado List'. Take a look at this tally: the Catalan-born cellist Pablo Casals made his Norwich début under the auspices of The Phil in 1912; the acclaimed pianist Clifford Curzon made two visits in 1941 and '42 followed by the virtuoso horn player Dennis Brain in 1947 and '55. John Ogden was a regular guest from 1960 to '64 while fellow British pianist John Lill made his first appearance in 1968 making a couple more within two years. Other pianists who have delighted audiences at Phil concerts include Moura Lympny in 1972 and '76 and the Australian-born pianist, Piers Lane, in 1980. And that brilliant superstar cellist, Jacqueline du Pré, came in 1965, making her Norwich début, followed by fellow British cellist, Julian Lloyd Webber, in 1974.

The Phil had the honour, too, of Sir Malcolm Sargent conducting them in 1926 and Sir Thomas Beecham in 1937 while Sir Benjamin Britten shared conducting duties with Sir Philip Ledger (a former patron of the society and the first director of music at UEA) for two performances of *War Requiem* in Norwich Cathedral in honour of the Suffolk-born composer being installed as a Doctor of Music at UEA in 1967. And in January 1963, the society was bestowed the honour of a Royal visit by The Queen Mother, patron of the society.

But good relationships are part and parcel of The Phil's *raison d'être* and one relationship that has blossomed since the days of Dr Frank Bates is the bond that exists between the director of music and organist of Norwich Cathedral and the choral conductor of The Phil. They go hand in hand.

The relationship, however, between orchestra and choir was not stabilised until 1930 with the formation of the Norwich Philharmonic Chorus as a separate entity thus replacing the previous arrangements whereby choral works were given in collaboration with the Norwich Choral Society. That society had been founded in 1824 (Frank Noverre, incidentally, was its treasurer) the same year in which the Norfolk & Norwich Triennial Festival was founded by Richard Mackenzie Bacon, editor of the *Norwich Mercury*, who was the brother-in-law of Augustine Noverre.

A celebratory concert of The Phil was actually held in Noverre's Assembly Rooms - now the Assembly House and still in use today as a concert room - in 1901. It was the first concert to be conducted by Dr Frank Bates who succeeded Dr Horace Hill who was preceded by Dr F E Gladstone, Norwich Cathedral organist, who succeeded James Harcourt. He took over from

Richard Bray, the original conductor, holding the post for 35 years.

Following this concert, the main venue for The Phil switched to St Andrew's Hall but, occasionally, they used Norwich Cathedral. However, during the 1940s, The Phil presented a series of 'wartime' concerts on Sunday afternoons at Norwich Theatre Royal. On 7th November, 1943, for instance, the organist of Norwich Cathedral, Dr Heathcote Statham, took charge of the 289th concert (forming part of their fifth 'wartime' season) which featured the Australian-born pianist, Eileen Joyce, soloist in Rachmaninov's C minor piano concerto. The programme also included César Franck's D minor symphony and ended with a rendering of The Star-Spangled Banner and the National Anthem. Unity in diversity!

But track back to The Phil's 200th concert in 1924 and Dame Myra Hess - who organised an ongoing series of popular classical-music concerts at the National Gallery during the Second World War - was engaged to play Beethoven's fourth piano concerto with Dr Bates conducting. Myra Hess, it seems, was a big hit as she graced St Andrew's Hall stage on no less than seven occasions after her first visit. Her last appearance was in 1940.

Dr Bates retired in 1928 and handed over the baton to Dr Statham, who at the time had recently been appointed organist of Norwich Cathedral, where he was fondly referred to by his nickname, 'Dickey'.

A former Gresham's schoolboy as was Benjamin Britten, Dr Statham - who took charge of The Phil's 300th concert in 1947 conducting a performance of Handel's *Messiah* with Peter Pears included among the soloists - graced The Phil's podium for 32 glorious and momentous years and in that time conducted them on no less than 130 occasions. And during the period of the Second World War, he also conducted the London Symphony Orchestra.

After Dr Statham's retirement, the orchestra's long-serving leader Sydney Gould acted as conductor for three seasons sharing the duties with a number of visiting conductors until Antony Hopkins came along in 1963. Another long-serving leader was Colin Clouting while Peter Smith, Ben Lowe and Fiona Hutchings have also occupied the first violinist's chair which since 2008 has been occupied by Dominic Hopkins.

Maestro Hopkins, however, enjoyed seven highly-successful seasons and following his departure the conducting duties were split between orchestra and chorus for the first time. Julian Webb, senior lecturer in music at UEA, took the orchestra over in 1971 while the organist of Norwich Cathedral, Michael Nicholas, the chorus, in 1972. When Michael moved from Norwich in 1995 he handed over the baton to David Dunnett, the current organist of Norwich Cathedral, who commenced his duties from the 1996-7 season.

Following Julian Webb's retirement in March 2003 after 32 years' loyal service he was succeeded by Russell Keable in 2004 who, in turn, was succeeded by Peter Britton four years later with Matthew Andrews coming along in 2010 and still on the podium.

But looking back to the tenure of the Noverre family and their dedication not only to the Norwich Philharmonic Society but to the general well-being of the arts and cultural world of the city of Norwich, we have today functioning on all cylinders another



Norwich Philharmonic Orchestra and Chorus, Photo: Bill Smith

Norwich-based family following suit, the philanthropic and arts-friendly Jarrold family, whose business was founded on print and publishing but nowadays focuses more on retail and fashion with their flagship store prominently located on the corner of London Street and Exchange Street, a rendezvous spot for one and all much in the same way that the old Swan & Edgar department store in Piccadilly Circus is fondly remembered.

Caroline Jarrold (the eldest daughter of Richard and Waltraud Jarrold) is highly active and immersed in the Norwich arts scene. She's chairman of the Norfolk & Norwich Festival and also chairman of the Norwich Philharmonic Society while her uncle, Antony Jarrold, is president. Together with her sister, Michelle, Caroline's also a member of the Norwich Philharmonic Chorus.

And Caroline's German-born mother, Waltraud, who was raised in Winnigen, an idyllic and inviting wine village nestling the banks of the Mosel near Koblenz, was the force behind the twinning link between Norwich and Koblenz. Radiating through this fine partnership (which commenced in 1980) led to the Norwich Philharmonic Chorus joining forces on a regular basis with the Musik-Institut Choir Koblenz for exchange visits (they take place every two years) to perform grand works from the choral repertoire. And this year on a tour to Germany, Norwich Cathedral Choir will also be performing in Koblenz under the direction of their dynamic young master of music, Ashley Grote.

'The first joint venture took place in Norwich in St Andrew's Hall in 1983,' Caroline fondly recalls. 'We did Haydn's *Creation*. This was followed by a very moving performance of Britten's *War Requiem* held in Koblenz' Rhine-Mosel Hall in 1986. Over the intervening 32 years, the choirs have performed together 16 times in a variety of works from across the choral repertoire. Particular memorable performances for me were Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* in Koblenz, 1992 - a work not at all familiar to the German audience - and Brahms' *German Requiem* in Norwich in 2011, where it was wonderful to perform alongside native German speakers. Over the years, many long-term

friendships have developed between members of both choirs that underlines, I feel, the true meaning, spirit and emotion that involves twinning partnerships.'

But partnerships of one kind or other helps life to tick along quite nicely in so many ways and in the case of The Phil, Rob Barnes and Sally West-Lindell are 'fixers' for the orchestra and chorus respectively. They're also performing members, too. Rob sits with the first violins and Sally is an alto. They do a fine job keeping everything a-going in the right direction! And Sue Mitchell does likewise acting as secretary of the Norwich Philharmonic Society.

And for The Phil's 175th anniversary concert in May, a choral partnership is being forged and going, it seems, in the right direction, too, between some well-established Norfolk-based choral societies. It could be the first such collaboration of its kind in our county. Sharing the orchestral platform with the Norwich Philharmonic Orchestra is the Norwich-based Academy of St Thomas while the combined choral forces is extremely strong comprising the King's Lynn Festival Chorus, Norwich Cathedral Choir, Norwich Philharmonic Chorus and the Sheringham & Cromer Choral Society.

Eight outstanding soloists have been engaged, too, comprising Kirstin Sharpin, Katherine Broderick and Catherine May (sopranos) and Anne Marie Gibbons and Anna Burford (mezzo-sopranos) while the line-up is completed by Peter Wedd (tenor), James Harrison (baritone) and Richard Wiegold (bass). And the man with the baton in his hand is The Phil's orchestral conductor, Matthew Andrews.

But before one gets to a blitz of wonder, Mahler and the big orchestral canvas punctuating The Phil's special anniversary year, the actual 175th birthday concert falls on Saturday, 19th March (7.30pm), when St Andrew's Hall will be blitzed by a grand show of cannon-and-mortar fire effects in a rendering of Tchaikovsky's famous 1812 overture in a rarely-heard version with choir.

Jointly conducted by Matthew Andrews and David Dunnett, the concert will also serve up a roster of popular and well-loved works absolutely ideal for a birthday celebration. The audience will be treated to such classical delights as 'O Fortuna' from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, 'slow movement' from Dvořák's *New World* symphony, Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves from Verdi's opera, *Nabucco*, 'adagio' from Khachaturian's ballet, *Spartacus* and Polovtsian Dances

from Borodin's opera, *Prince Igor*. You want more! There is more! Fauré's Pavane, Rossini's overture to *William Tell*, 'Nimrod' from Elgar's *Enigma Variations* and the great showpiece that is the 'Hallelujah Chorus' from Handel's masterful, powerful and all-embracing oratorio, *The Messiah*.

And here's a little plug for The Phil's orchestral concert on Saturday, 6th February (7.30pm), in St Andrew's Hall. Conducted by Matthew Andrews, the programme comprises Vaughan Williams' *Norfolk Rhapsody No 1* and Walton's first symphony while the central work in the programme features Mihkel Poll, the talented and prizewinning Estonian-born pianist, soloist in Beethoven's *Emperor piano concerto*. What could be better? Indeed!

Tickets (*Mahler concert*): £12 to £28 (limited number of seats for under-25s at £7.50), available from Norwich Theatre Royal box office. Tel: 01603 766400 / www.nnfestival.org.uk

Tickets (*orchestral concert, 6th February; 175th anniversary concert, 19th March*): £9 to £16 (students: £7), available from Prelude Records, St Giles' Street, Norwich. Tel: 01603 628319 / www.norwichphil.org.uk



David Dunnett, conductor of the Norwich Philharmonic Chorus, Photo: Bill Smith