

The Barber Concert Series at 75: some thoughts and reminiscences...



Archive photograph of the Barber's concert hall. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

DATE	NAME	ADDRESS
19.11.69.	Wanda Duma	19A Waterbury Green SW5.
19.11.69	Miguel Lopez	London
19.11.69.	Jan Duman	St. Nelson Herts
	<u>The Pirrot Players.</u>	
		
*	Harvini Burburth.	Tennifer Ward Clarke
	Stephen Prudine	Duncan Duce
*	Peter Maxwell Davis.	Mary Thomas
	James Mueschel	26 Fitzroy Sq. W.1.
	North Peare	
	Alan Hacker	↑

Autographs by performers at the Barber, between 1967 to the mid-1980s. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to today's Tuesday talk. I'm Andrew Kirkman, Peyton and Barber Professor of Music here at the University of Birmingham and resident in the Barber in the music professor's office, at the opposite end of the corridor from the Director. Since 1939, the two offices have stood as twin symbols of the Barber's dual role in fostering the visual and musical arts, ongoing testaments to the Trust's unique vision.

The foresight of that vision, formed in distant pre-War years, could scarcely have embraced the situation in which we now find ourselves, and which has prompted this series of talks. Doubtless the first trustees would have been as relieved as the rest of us to see the recent return of the gallery's patrons, but dismayed at the sepulchral silence that greets them. Any break in that silence awaits the arrival either of external air conditioning or of a universal vaccine.*

The poignancy of prevailing circumstance is sharpened by the fact that this year marks the 75th anniversary of the Barber concert series, all the more reason to celebrate the glories to which our lovely concert hall has played host. A survey of the concert programmes, stretching from those early years to last season, can hardly but give a sense of pride to any of us who have been associated with this series over the years.

But let's start at the beginning: imagine, if you will, being present for a performance in the 1947-8 season, to mark the birthday of Franz Schubert (then only a stripling 150 years old), of *Winterreise* by Peter Pears accompanied by his partner Benjamin Britten; or hearing, in 1950, another legendary singer, the French baritone Pierre Bernac, being supported at the piano through Poulenc's song cycle *La*

fraîcheur et le feu by the composer himself. The 1949 programme, under the great doyenne of twentieth-century pedagogy Nadia Boulanger, of vocal and orchestral music spanning the twelfth to the twentieth century offers a breath-taking reminder of just how much things have changed since those early days. But we gain a very different kind of temporal perspective from the staging, just two years later, of Handel's *Susanna*, an early marker – astonishing if we consider their ubiquity today – in the modern revival of Handel's operas.

Contemplating Boulanger's whistle-stop tour through eight centuries of music prompts a few more general reflections on the programming of 70-odd years ago. As a violinist, I can hardly imagine the excitement at hearing the Hungarian virtuoso (and close colleague of Béla Bartók) Joseph Szigeti play here in 1946, supported by no less an accompanist than the great Gerald Moore. But concert perennials in his programme like Bach's E major partita and Beethoven's Sonata Op. 12, no. 1 nudge against odd bedfellows including a Concerto by Tartini arranged by the violinist himself, and an evocative-sounding 'Buncomb County – North Carolina of an Afternoon' by one Ernst Bacon. A survey of early Barber programmes would offer a salutary lesson for our students in the vicissitudes of the musical canon: the shop window of the 1940s has, in at least some of its aspects, become the Old Curiosity Shop of today; similarly, those students' counterparts in 50 years' time may doubtless experience surprise at today's lists of standards.

One of the most striking heirlooms of the past 75 years is the autograph book signed by performers spanning the years 1967 to the mid-1980s. For someone of my generation this is an absolute treasure-trove, packed as it is with the starry names of my own youth. The signed memento of a concert, on 14 February 1968, by

the Amadeus Quartet jolted me immediately back to a – simply astonishing to the teenage kid I was at the time - late concert in the phenomenal career of that ensemble that I heard in Nottingham at the end of the 1970s; but it brought me up short too, reminding me as it did of the death, only in April of this year, of the Quartet's last surviving member, the 'cellist Martin Lovett, one of so many of this country's elderly victims of – yes, you've guessed it – Covid 19.

A particular joy for me personally was to be greeted on a page-turn by the flamboyant signature of Emanuel Hurwitz, then leader of the Aeolian Quartet, who invited me onto his mastercourse in Perugia in 1980 and sold me a clunker of a violin it took me years to sell... (I couldn't help loving him though!) Characters and quartets go together: I couldn't resist adding for you here the flamboyantly inscribed memento of the visit by another of the great quartets of that time, the Smetana Quartet, on 29 January 1969, complete with their listed programme.

The recurring presence, dating back a long way, of the late, lamented Peter Cropper, long-term stalwart of the Lindsay Quartet and more recently of a trio with Martin Roscoe and Murray Welsh, reminded me (in case I needed any reminding..) of my own advancing years. I can't imagine that anyone who knew Peter won't have stories to tell, but for me unforgettable experiences of him came from the period when, as a young lecturer at Manchester, I had to take care of the Lindsays' concert series in the Music Department. Following an evening of Haydn, Beethoven, Dvořák or whatever it happened to be, we'd pile out of the department and into the nearest (invariably rough) Moss Side pub, where Strads** and other treasures would be unceremoniously dumped in a corner while we jostled for a few post-concert pints with indifferent locals. I doubt any of the other pub-goers had ever attended one of the concerts; at any rate I can't

recall anyone ever firing up a conversation about the niceties of timing of the conclusion of the 'Joke' Quartet... But Peter – obviously the same wherever he happened to be – is one person I can easily imagine trying to get just such a discussion going with whatever bemused individual he happened to be standing next to.

Another autograph-book curio is a signature marking a 1969 concert by Janet Baker (one of the very greatest mezzo sopranos of the twentieth century and a regular Barber performer, in concerts and opera), who - she wells up - 'is very proud to be Hon D. Mus. Of this University'; the appended 'Yeuch!!' by an unknown (student?) hand betrays the presence at the time of at least someone who didn't share in Dame Janet's pride! Just over the page the contemporaneous performance by the Pierrot Players, set off by a little cartoon of the eponymous *commedia dell'arte* figure, reads like a who's-who of late-'60s/early '70s English contemporary music performance: the signatures of composers Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell-Davies are joined by those of musicians who, if less resonantly name-checked today, were big fish in that pool at the time: Alan Hacker, Jennifer Ward Clarke, and Mary Thomas, whose *Pierrot Lunaire* with the London Sinfonietta blew me and my fellow sixth-form pupils away when it was fresh off the shelves (I still have the LP...). A similar jolt must have come the way of the Barber audience in early 1972, when the same ensemble treated them to the same landmark cycle, plus Boulez's then still only teen-age *Le marteau sans maître*.

Witold Lutosławski (complete with his Warsaw address), Ruggiero Ricci, James Galway, Jill Gomez, the ever-gracious Anthony Rooley and Emma Kirkby ('Thank you!'; 'Lovely audience'...) and a certain Julian Lloyd Webber... Need I go on? But classics are classics precisely because they're from yesteryear; today's performers will be

classics in their turn. Regular audience-members will know exactly what I'm saying: you don't need to go back into the mists of time to think of events whose glow – burnished by the coming years – will continue to envelop those fortunate enough to be able to remember them. To muse on a few of the treasures in my own recent memory: Richard Goode, who, following a recital of truly astonishing insight, magnanimously ventured that he preferred our hall (and piano) to those of the Wigmore Hall (and that after whacking his head – audibly – on the low doorway on the way offstage); the electrifying incisiveness of the Pavel Haas Quartet; the staggering virtuosity and range of the guitar trio of John Williams, John Etheridge and Gary Ryan; and the peerless and emotionally shattering solo Bach violin recital of James Ehnes that – coming at a point of tragedy in my own life – will always be imprinted in my remembrance. And let's not forget the song recitals: coming full circle from the Pears-Britten performance mentioned a few minutes back, more recent patrons have had the luxury of being able to compare a twilight *Winterreise* by Thomas Allen with the starkly personal take of Ian Bostridge, one of its landmark interpreters today.

A good part of the joy of these experiences, though, derives from the fact that they are shared: like those who adore small, jewel-like galleries, communities of concert-goers develop a bond, a special connection deriving from mutual pleasures in the same lovely surroundings, mused on during interval conversation and recalled over casual encounters: a bond that links the excitement of first-year students with the deep satisfaction of decades-long regulars; a pleasure oblivious to age and events that divide us, bringing instead an experiential joy that transcends both. Let us all hope that those days will soon return and continue to accumulate into the next generations. In the world we're facing, we need them more than ever.

* Whilst the galleries are fully air conditioned, the original external ventilation to the concert hall was lost as a result of the 1980s development which added a glass roof to the building. Anyone who has been present particularly for heavily attended concerts will be aware of the resulting high temperatures in the hall both in the summer months and during colder months when the heating is in operation. A consequence for current, Covid-enforced circumstances is that performance in the hall is permitted neither with nor indeed without an audience.

** Violins made by Antonio Stradivari (1644-1737) are traditionally the most sought-after and expensive string instruments.

Interested readers are referred to Colin Timms's excellent essay 'The Barber Bequest and Music at the University of Birmingham', in *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts: Foundations of a Collection* (Scala Publishers in Association with the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, 2012), pp. 118-30.

Andrew Kirkman is Peyton and Barber Professor of Music at the University of Birmingham. Prior appointments were at the universities of Manchester, Bangor, Oxford and Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. He has published widely on music and culture of the late Middle Ages, including books with Cambridge and Oxford University presses and in the major journals in the field. He is also director of the award-winning Binchois Consort, familiar from regular performances in the Barber concert series, and with which he has recorded thirteen CDs on the Hyperion label.