

Wandsworth School Boys' Choir

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On the platform of the Royal Festival Hall or of the Albert Hall, where London concert-goers are accustomed to seeing them, the lines of grey-trousered, white shirted boys who make up the Wandsworth School Boys Choir add something to the atmosphere of any concert. For young amateurs, aged between eleven and eighteen, they have a remarkable professional attitude to music making, but their professionalism of manner and response is combined with pleasure in singing and a youthful delight in the occasion's excitement; the applause at the end is never, they seem to think, for themselves, and they join in it fervently. It belongs to conductors, soloists, orchestra, to whomever might be sharing the platform with them. For all that, there are many of us who invariably wish that they would accept some of it for themselves.

Their range is wide: they provide the opera with midshipmen and powder monkeys for Britten's *Billy Bud,* and fairies—tough, masculine bodyguard fairies—for his *Midsummer Night's Dream.* They pound out the rhythm of Orff's *Carmina Burana* with devastating energy, and their entry into the first chorus of Berlioz's *Te Deum* is always a moment of glory; whatever else happens in Mahler's Eighth Symphony, they are always audible; they can match the remote consolation of the children's choir in Britten's *War Requiem* with a strange remoteness of tone. At the same time they sing music by Purcell that no one else seems to know; they have the Bach Passions and the *Christmas Oratorio,* as well as a number of the cantatas, ready to hand; they sing Haydn Masses and renaissance composers but at the same time, they are called into avant-garde and aleatory works and the choir has been known to commission works for its own use. They

have been conducted by Haitink, Frübeck de Burgos, Kertesz, Solti, Horenstein and others of great international stature, and they have a special relationship with Colin Davis and Benjamin Britten, who wrote *The Children's Crusade* for them. They have travelled not only to the Aldeburgh Festival and other English Festivals, but have been heard in Festival concerts in Holland and Flanders. Between 1965, when they undertook their first public engagement, and September, 1971, they took part in a hundred public concerts and made eighteen records, some without the glamorous support of famous orchestras, soloists and conductors. Their engagements will keep them busy throughout 1972, and their diary for 1973 and 1974 is beginning to fill.

If Wandsworth School were a choir school, taking in musically gifted children of seven or eight in the same way as a cathedral choir, their record would be remarkably impressive. But Wandsworth School is a Comprehensive School (designed, that is, to deal justly with all levels of intellectual ability and to give average children the education they need from the age of eleven onwards) under the control of the Inner London Education Authority. It takes in every imaginable type of boy; some stay until eighteen to go on to university, others leave school when they reach the minimum age at which it is possible to do so, soon after their fifteenth birthday. The Choir consists of 250 singers (with a sprinkling of Staff and Old Boys)—trebles, altos, tenors and basses—out of a school of some 1,800, and is only one of the range of school activities which include a successful rowing club, drama and an orchestra in which many members of the choir play.

Because it is a school choir, from time to time it has to turn down engagements; to go off to Aldeburgh for a week, or to involve themselves in a professional opera production for part of the summer holidays, is possible ; to join a company undertaking a long tour is not, for the choir must fit the facts of school life and the needs of a general education. Music begins with them as a class subject; choir rehearsals overflow into their lunch break, occupy members when school ends in the afternoon and, two or three times a week, draw them back to the building in the evening; they rehearse, sometimes, as often as fourteen times a week. None of this is compulsory work forced on to them; members sing with the choir because they enjoy doing so and, as they are only human, because they enjoy the prestige and occasional privileges which membership brings; they are free to leave if they wish to do so. The vast majority of them remain, working hard for the pleasure of doing so and tailoring their holidays from London to fit in with engagements which the choir has accepted. Wandsworth is a typical London Borough: it houses well-to-do families in charming homes near pleasant commons and working class families, some in new housing estates and some in dreary nineteenth century streets. The choir is simply a startling vision of the possible which we rarely attain though most of its members come to the school with very little musical experience.

There is no closed season for its members while their voices " break " and then settle; they sing with the choir through the change, so that it is a large-scale version of the sort of choir which J. S. Bach controlled at St. Thomas's, Leipzig. Its full complement includes adolescent tenors and basses. In September, 1971, it was the choir picked by Britten for his Promenade Concert performance of Purcell's *The Fairy Queen,* and if there was some lack of adult beefiness in the bass line, the resulting lightness of tone sounded satisfactorily Purcellian, and the sheer enjoyment of the choral

singing made the performance specially exciting. With 250 members, of course, the choir can reduce to a smaller cantata choir and a small madrigal choir.

What I have written is intended to induce the reader to recognise that the Wandsworth School Boys Choir is a phenomenon, not only in its achievements but in its principles. Britain's educational ideas at present are based on what we like to think of as " child-centred education ". Teachers should follow the lead of their pupils, who should go where their own aims and ambitions lead them. Young boys and adolescents will be immediately hostile to the idea of singing music by Purcell, Bach, Haydn and Britten, so the teacher should do his best to exploit their enjoyment of pop, encourage them to play it rather than simply to listen to it, and hope for the day when their tastes expand to accept other varieties of music. To those of us who know how eagerly children respond to sincere, skilled leadership, who know something of their appetite for challenge and novelty, the Wandsworth boys are a justification. They have found their leader and are happy not only to follow him but to work with him.

Not that Russell Burgess, who has made and who sustains the Wandsworth School Boys Choir and the School Orchestra, finding time somehow to be Associate Chorus Master of the New Philharmonia Choir and to work with the Aldeburgh Festival Singers, sets out to demonstrate the *Führer-Prinzip*. He does not parade block-busting personality in the style of a virtuoso conductor; there is never any suspicion that he has lashed, goaded or tyrannised, or even put on the minimal conductorial show. He is cheerful, good-humoured, friendly, ready to draw attention to the music, concentrates on it and somehow—this is the mystery of the method—induces others to concentrate as firmly; he trusts the music to do the rest. There are, he knows, the tricks of technique and personality which help, the sort of jokes which spur his singers on; obviously it helps to tell a youth whose close-cropped hair and large boots mark him as one of a teenage fraternity dedicated to an idea of toughness to " put the boot in " (an unamiable idiom anyhow) rather than to sing *fortissimo*. But his standards are fiercely perfectionist and professional, and they are standards with which he has infected his choir; so long as the boys take part in professional engagements, he tells them, they must do so in the spirit of professional musicians, doing their best for works which they dislike or which bore them; such works are a job that has to be done, and while the choir has the privilege of working with musicians of the stature of Britten, Haitink and Davis, their conductor insists, they must show by the quality of their work that they appreciate their good fortune. Somehow, one feels, this kind of admonishment is rarely necessary: every large school, perhaps, could have a choir of Wandsworth standard provided that it remembered to equip itself with a Russell Burgess.

Burgess, when he had finished his training at the Royal Academy of Music, spent two years as a National Serviceman, but ended his time in the army in charge of instrumental music in the Royal Corps of Signals band. Determined to teach, he accepted a post at Wandsworth before the school became Comprehensive; it was at that time a Grammar School, specialising in the education of boys selected for their potentially higher academic ability. After two years it became a Comprehensive School and Burgess, in charge of a cinderella subject, found himself head and for a time sole member of the music department. Six years of persistence, determination, patience and hope passed before his plans began to develop and music slowly

began to become an important part of the school's life, with a lively orchestra trained by peripatetic specialist teachers and the beginnings of the choir.

Great teachers are as rare as great conductors; Burgess's special gift is that he knows how to win the trust and confidence of his pupils. They will work with him, discuss with him, talk to him, and he says, come to him sometimes with unusual insights into works which do not appeal to him but in which the choir has been engaged to sing; when his pupils have a point of view, he takes it seriously.

But choirs are made with techniques as well as by personalities. The English Cathedral choir, for example, specialises in the boy's head voice, producing what can be a depressing hoot but what is very often a tone of disembodied, ethereal beauty. Continental choir boys produce a stronger, harsher, more plangent tone. To Burgess, a human larynx, properly trained and exercised, should produce both, and other styles too, changing as the tone of an organ changes when a new set of stops is drawn. A boy shouting at a football match can make an enormous noise, so that there is no reason why a boys' choir, singing *fortissimo,* should not hold its own in Mahler's Eighth whatever the strength of the opposition. A breaking voice is one which, for a time, has an enormously enlarged range; it can be controlled and used musically. Difficulty and easiness are not, for him and his choir, a matter of the looks of the notes on paper but of the interest those notes arouse: it is easier to tackle a difficult Haydn Mass, which challenges voice, technique, mind and imagination, than to master a work which has little to say to its singers.

It is easy to mention the Wandsworth School Boys Choir repertory, but really the term is a misnomer. Boys who are trebles at eleven in their first year at school, are probably altos, and possibly tenors or basses within a year or two. The works which they sing—and these include Berlioz's *Te Deum* and *Requiem,* Britten's *War Requiem* and the Bach Passions—are never in the repertory of the trebles; they have to be retaught every year, just as new altos, new tenors and new basses have to be taught. There is never a lucky year which maintains the *status quo.*

Relatively few of these boys begin to look to music as a possible career; they sing because, in Burgess's words, it is enjoyable to join in a communal activity, and it seems that once they begin to demand high standards from themselves as musicians, they begin to demand similar achievements in other spheres. Their education as a whole gains, apart from the fact that, as their conductor says, nothing could be more educational than making great music with great conductors and great orchestras.

If anybody thinks that the "meaning" of great works sails over the boys' heads offering no more to them than a job they intend to do as well as they can, Russell Burgess will talk of a recent performance of Bach's *St. John Passion* conducted by Britten in his concert hall, The Maltings, near Aldeburgh. The performance was dedicated, profound, rising to the greatness of the work. When it ended, the boys for once made their way quietly from the hall and walked about the open space behind it, pretending not to see each other because they were not capable of talk until the spell was broken. Of course, you can find them, during an interval at a Promenade Concert in the Albert Hall, stirred by Mahlerian grandeurs, almost setting the building on fire with the excited intensity of their enjoyment.