



Volume 6, Issue 8

March 2008

The Chorus Newsletter

Published for and about the NOVA Community Chorus
www.nvcc.edu/alexandria/visual/music

Georgetown University Chamber Singers

Christine Hagan alerted us to an opportunity to hear the wonderful voices of the Georgetown University Chamber Singers on Sunday, February 24, 2008. Several NOVA Community Chorus singers were present for this concert at Immanuel Church on the Hill.

The Chamber singers, a group of twelve students, sang a program of mostly sixteenth century Lenten songs, mostly in Latin but which included one twentieth century piece in English. The singers were arranged in a semi-circle in front of their leader, Frederick Binkholder, in such a way that men and women alternated so that no two singers of a part stood next to each other. Using a pitch pipe to start them off, Mr. Binkholder was able to draw from the group exquisite a capella singing that captured the spirit of these compositions, in which the volume and emotion rose and fell in intensity as he directed. The purity and clarity of their singing was admirable, making for a thoroughly delightful Sunday afternoon.



Ralph Vaughn Williams

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born in Down Ampney, Gloucestershire, where his father was vicar. Following his father's death he was taken by his mother, Margaret Susan Wedgwood, the great-granddaughter of the potter Josiah Wedgwood, to live with her family at the Wedgwood family home in the North Downs. He was also related to the Darwins. Ralph (pronounced "Rayf") was born into the upper middle class, but never took it for granted and worked tirelessly for the egalitarian ideals he believed in.

After Charterhouse School he attended the Royal College of Music (RCM), studying under Charles Villiers Stanford. He read history and music at Trinity College, Cambridge where his contemporaries included the philosophers G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell. He then returned to the RCM and studied composition with Hubert Parry. One of his fellow pupils at the RCM was Leopold Stokowski who later went on to perform six of Vaughan Williams's symphonies for American audiences, making the first recording of the Sixth Symphony in 1949 with the New York Philharmonic, and giving the US Premiere of the Ninth Symphony in Carnegie Hall in 1958. He had lessons with Max Bruch in Berlin in 1897 and later a big step forward in his orchestral style occurred when he studied in Paris with Maurice Ravel.

In 1904, Vaughan Williams discovered English folk songs. He traveled the countryside, transcribing and preserving many himself. Later he incorporated some songs and melodies into his own music. His efforts did much to raise appreciation of traditional English folk song and melody.

In 1910, he had his first big public successes conducting the premieres of the Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis and A Sea Symphony (Symphony No. 1), and a greater success with A London Symphony (Symphony No. 2) in 1914. Being 40, he could have avoided war service. He chose to enlist as a private in the Royal Army Medical Corps and was a stretcher bearer before being commissioned in the Artillery. Prolonged exposure to gunfire began a process of loss of hearing which was eventually to cause deafness in old age.

Abstracted from Wikipedia

Next page!

Pitch?

The
Soprano

So, What Pitch IS That Anyway?

Some of our chorus members reported that the pitch of their note learning CD differs from their performance CD and/or from their piano or keyboard. So, which is correct? The idea of every band or orchestra tuning their instrument to the same set of pitches is a fairly recent concept.

I recently attended a performance of 300 year old music played on original instruments. They were tuned to so that their A string played a note at 416 cycles per second (cps) - which is a #G by today's standard which is "A440" cycles per second (cps).

Violins of that era cannot withstand higher string tension needed for today's higher pitch. Old violins have been modified to have a stronger internal brace, longer finger boards to reach higher notes, longer necks for larger hands and use today's metal and metal wrapped strings to produce louder, more brilliant tone. So, what is old? Well, violins emerged in the 1500's. Stradivari began making violins in 1680.

Handel's Messiah, first performed in 1742, has many high D notes sung at fortissimo in the bass part. It would have been easier to sing back then because the church organ was tuned a full note lower. Scholars claim that the pitch of the note "A" in the seventeenth century may have varied from 373.7 cps (between F# & G) to 402.9 cps (between G and G#).

A list of pitch standards for organs and pianos is available at: www.uk-piano.org/history/pitch. Here is a brief sample from that list. I added the equivalent A440 note in parenthesis.

1640	Vienna Franciscan Organ	A457.6 (between A & A#)
1699	Paris Opera	A404 (between G & G#)
1762	Stringed instruments at Hamburg	A405
1714	Strasbourg Cathedral organ	A391 (G)
1846	Philharmonic pitch was	A452.5 (between A & A#)
1858	New Philharmonic pitch	C522(C or 2 notes high)
1879	Steinway of England	A454

By the way, cps is now called a Hertz (Hz). Go to: www.phy.mtu.edu/~suits/notefreqs.html for a list of frequency vs notes at A440. Google "A440" for a page or more of references.

Trivia questions answered:

- Your stereo hums at 120 Hz or a B, using this A440 standard.
- Why does it hum? Because it doesn't know the words.
- Want an electrical engineering answer? See me after class.

Contributed by Fred Wulff

The Soprano

The highest part in choral music is designated *soprano*, derived from the Italian *sopra* (above), which, in turn, is derived from the Latin *supra* (above, over, on the top) from which we take the word *super*. As with the tenor and alto lines, the soprano originated with the development of polyphony in the later Middle Ages as increasingly independent parts were added above the Gregorian chant. The highest of these was labeled *superius*. In time, the name for the voice part became attached to the voices that sang it. The derivative *soprano* is now used to designate both the highest vocal part and the highest female voice.

Today, the range of a choral soprano is approximately from Middle C to the second A above it although some composers, Vaughan Williams comes to mind, ask for both lower and higher notes. Certainly, solo sopranos of the operatic variety are routinely expected to reach High C, two octaves above Middle C. Occasionally they are required to soar into the stratosphere; Mozart asks the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* to sing the third F above Middle C. What primarily defines the soprano voice, however, is not its range but its bright quality.

Soprano voices are categorized according to range and color with even more dizzying particularity than tenors. And, of course, there is considerable overlapping between classifications. These can usefully be reduced to four general categories. Light, agile soprano voices are called coloraturas. They are expected to sing both very high and very quickly; Beverly Sills and Joan Sutherland are examples. In addition to the Queen of the Night mentioned above, coloratura roles include the title role in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Olympia in *The Tales of Hoffman*, Cunegonde in Bernstein's *Candide*, and Mabel in Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*. Lyric sopranos have somewhat bigger voices for parts such as Pamina in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust*, and many musical roles, including those associated with Julie Andrews. *Spinto* (from *spinto-lirico*, pushed lyric) sopranos retain the bright quality of a lyric soprano but can be pushed for dramatic climaxes; most of Puccini's heroines, Mimi in *La bohème* and Tosca in *Tosca*, would fall into this category, as would many Verdi soprano roles. Dramatic sopranos, often darker with a slightly lower range, sing the heaviest roles in the operas of Verdi and Wagner. These classifications are far from rigid. For example, the role of Violetta in Verdi's *La traviata* calls for a coloratura voice in Act I, a spinto in Act II, and a lyric in Act III—all to be sung by one singer!

Contributed by Bill Brown

The Chorus Newsletter welcomes news, articles and photographic contributions. Are you planning a recital? Tell us when and where and we will get the word out. Call the editor, Bob Trexler at 703 978-9171 or e-mail at Rctrex@aol.com.

The Chorus Newsletter contains information about and for members of the NOVA Community Chorus. It is privately published monthly except during June and July. The College has no responsibility for its content. Members are encouraged to contribute articles and news about musical offerings and musical topics to Robert Trexler, editor and publisher, at Rctrex@aol.com