

1889 First meetings

“Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.” Following Julie Andrews’ advice, this article takes us to the Balmoral Hotel on March 13th 1889. The Society’s minutes give no clue as to who had the idea of forming the society, or as to how the first office-bearers were chosen*. This first meeting started in a straight forward way: “After a short opening address from the Chairman, the Secretary explained the aim and methods of the Society.” That was all the minutes recorded, before the meeting turned to the main purpose of the evening, namely the performance of two pieces of music. A Mr Peterson played Bach’s Fugue in G major (presumably on a piano) then Mr Peterson was joined by Mr Dace in playing Bach’s Suite in D major for Orchestra, arranged for piano duet. “At the close of the meeting members were enrolled.”

It may be worth reminding readers at this point that while the Edinburgh Bach Choir was established as the public face of the Edinburgh Bach Society in 1909 the Edinburgh Bach Society had already been operating for twenty years, raising awareness of the works of JS Bach through seminars and chamber performances.

The first meeting must have been a success as the second meeting was held less than a month later, on April 3rd 1889. 36 members attended, now in the Charlotte Square Institution. Mr Peterson was back, this time with the Prelude and Fugue in E flat minor and with the Concerto in D major arranged for piano duet (playing with a Miss Peterson). A Miss Charteris was the first person to sing at a Bach Society event, performing “Prepare thyself, Zion” from the Christmas Oratorio. She followed this with two hymns, BWV 466 and BWV 452.

The third meeting was held on April 17th 1889 with the first president, Mr Montgomerie Bell, in the chair. 37 members were present to hear a programme that featured the first instrument other than a piano, a cello.

By the end of the fourth meeting on May 8th the membership numbers had risen to 60. That meeting featured the ubiquitous Mr Peterson giving a talk on the St Matthew Passion, with musical illustrations provided by singers (Mrs Hopkinson, Miss Duncan, Miss Simpson and Miss Lichtenstein). Mr Daly accompanied them on the violin, and the choruses were played as piano duets by Messrs Peterson and Dace.

And thus the pattern was established for the early meetings of the Edinburgh Bach Society.

David Dow
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* While the minutes are silent on the subject, the archives contain a copy of an open hand-written letter from Mr Franklin Peterson of 121 Princes Street, dated February 15th 1888. He writes: “It is proposed to form an Amateur Bach Club for the study of that Master’s works. The meetings will be held fortnightly and at each a paper will be read or an analysis of some interesting work will be given. Several well known professional and amateur friends have promised to give illustrations It is hoped that in time the Club will be able to undertake the private [Peterson’s underlining] performance [of] ... vocal music. Subscription 2/6.”