

1909 A choir is formed

The Edinburgh Bach Society had been existence for some 20 years before anyone had the idea of creating a choir. In its early years the Society had flourished by holding meetings where members listened to chamber recitals of music by Bach and to lectures on the great man's music. There was no attempt to open these events to the public.

But in the summer of 1909 things started to change. The Society put on an organ recital in St Mary's Cathedral on 21 June, then a programme of voice, violin, piano and flute in the Society of Musicians' Rooms on 24 June, followed by a committee meeting on 16 July. At this meeting the apparently hyperactive committee started by deciding "to organise a string quintet for the next session, to help at the meetings of the Society, when required". Not content with forming an in house ensemble, the committee went on to consider a "proposal that a Bach Society Choir should be organised, consisting of about 30 members, and that Mr Colinson should be asked to select and train this choir. It was agreed that these arrangements should be made for one year only."

The minutes of the first committee meeting of the 1909-10 session, on 21 October, record that: "The President, reporting the progress of the arrangements for the proposed Bach Society Choir, intimated that neither Mr Colinson nor Mr Hartley could undertake to conduct it. It was decided that Mr J Millar Craig should be requested to do so. The date of the first choir rehearsal was provisionally fixed for Friday 19th November [1909]." It is not clear if the choir did in fact have its first meeting on that date. What is, however, clear is that the Society continued to offer chamber recitals and lectures. An example of the latter took place on 15 December with a Mr McEwen speaking on the subject of "JS Bach as a song-writer with special reference to his use of instrumental obbligati". Voice and instrumental illustrations were provided.

Then, on 1 June 1910, in the Edinburgh University Music Classroom in Park Place there was the first performance given by the "Choir of the Edinburgh Bach Society". While the programme consisted mainly of organ music, the central piece was the choir's performance of Bach's 5 part motet "Jesu meine Freude", sung in English.

At a committee meeting on 7 July 1910 it was agreed that the conductor of the Society's choir should be ex officio a member of the committee. A week after this meeting, on 15 July, the choir had its second outing. Interspersed with solo items, the choir performed three chorales:

 "Meinen Jesum lass' ich nicht" (7 parts)

 "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern" (5 parts)

 "O Welt, ich muss dich lassen" (7 parts)

All this activity paid off in terms of membership numbers. Between July 1909 and July 1910 the membership increased from 168 to 203. And the Society's 1909-10 season was clearly a financial success, ending with a bank balance of £1. 18s. 5d.

Season 1910-11 got off to a bad start with Mr Millar Craig's resignation as choir conductor, "much to the regret of all concerned". While a Mr Marlborough was invited to succeed him it is not recorded whether or not he took up the post. We do, however, know that by 24 May 1911 the choir was being conducted by a Mr Charles O'Brien. The choral pieces on that occasion, sung in English, were:

"Jesu meine Freude" [yes, again]

"Singet dem Herrn"

The programme states that the choir was to reprise these two motets in Morningside Parish Church the following week. Is there no stopping this new choir?

David Dow
July 2022