

1952 Coronation year

These notes from the Edinburgh Bach Society archives are being written in the spring of 2022, with the country marking Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee. It therefore seems appropriate to go back 70 years, to the year of the Coronation, to see what the Edinburgh Bach Society was up to at that time.

At the AGM in May 1952 there was a lament for the "shortage of tenors and basses" and a plea to find "more singers who can read music". It was proposed "to do as much propaganda as possible, and to make every effort to catch young members on leaving school." (The numbers going into 1952 were 29 Society members and 89 Choir members.) A landmark decision was made at this AGM: "permission was given by the meeting for the performance of works other than those by John [sic] Sebastian Bach."

We learn from the Secretary's report that the performance, in the Usher Hall, of the St Matthew Passion in March 1952 was the fifth such event. It appears that there were "certain difficulties with final rehearsals". These difficulties related to the professional orchestral players (or to the lack thereof), prompting the Conductor (Dr Grierson) to record that "she was not prepared to do the St Matthew Passion again in similar circumstances." On the other hand, she noted that the children's choir (joining in the chorales) "made a most impressive sound. When one remembers their enthusiasm and attention and at the same time remembers how little so many of them have had of musical background I think it will be agreed that the Bach Society is making a considerable contribution to the musical education of Edinburgh children." In July 1952 the committee approved a new category of junior membership of the choir, for those 16 and over who were still at school, costing five shillings.

The plan for the 1952-53 season was to start with a concert of two Bach cantatas, collaborating for the first time with the Eric Roberts String Orchestra. The financial outcome of this concert was expenditure of £60.3s.0d offset by income of £16.15s.6d, so not a good day for the Treasurer! The second concert was to consist of a cappella works by Palestrina, Vittoria and Schütz, taking advantage of the decision at the 1952 AGM to widen the repertoire. In the event, the programme had to be changed as the Librarian was unable to obtain copies of the Palestrina and the University Singers were putting on a similar programme at the same time. Three Schütz motets were performed, in what was said to be an Edinburgh premiere. The revised programme included two part-songs composed by a member of the Society, Lysbeth Melvin.

The third concert was to be the usual St Matthew Passion, but in May 1953 rather than March (as the Royal Choral Union had led the committee to believe that they were going to perform the work in March). The May date gave the opportunity of collaborating with the Haddo House orchestra. Possibly because of the clash of dates with the exam season there were fewer young singers than in previous years, though 20 did become junior members. Of more concern to the Secretary was the drop in audience numbers which "on the whole have been disappointingly small this year [1952-53]." The Treasurer reported that the 1952-53 outcome was a deficit of £206.9s.2d. "Against that we have a sum of £20 to come from the Education Committee, a grant of 10% of concert takings plus £30 from the Joint Committee of National Federation & Arts Council, these together

totalling about £75, leaving a net debit balance of £131 to be met by guarantors.” The minutes do not identify these unfortunate guarantors.

At the AGM in May 1953 Miss Melvin (presumably the composer of the part-songs) was re-elected as Librarian, and the post of Assistant Librarian was created. The first Assistant Librarian was Miss [Margaret] Berwick, who was to continue in the Librarian role until the next millennium!

David Dow
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