

1962 Cuban missile crisis

1962 was an eventful year in British politics. In a by-election in March the Conservative government lost the supposedly safe seat of Orpington to the Liberals. The EEC agreed the principles of the Common Agricultural Policy while the British government delegation, led by Heath, persevered with difficult negotiations over joining the community. (These negotiations were finally torpedoed by de Gaulle in January 1963.) In July Macmillan sacked a third of his cabinet in what became known as the 'Night of the Long Knives'.

Internationally, tensions were already high over the security of West Berlin, where the East Germans had started building the wall in 1961. In October 1962 the Cuban missile crisis drew the world to the brink of nuclear war. Britain's nuclear bomber force was on Alert Condition 3 (15 minutes to take off), substitute prime ministers had been designated (in case of Macmillan's death), and the cabinet had prepared to decamp to a secret underground bunker ('Stockwell') in the Cotswolds.

Meanwhile, what was exercising the minds of the committee of the Edinburgh Bach Society?

On 15 May the committee was in a mood to distribute largesse and agreed to pay a £3 honorarium to each of the two pianists who had played in the third concert of the 1961-62 season. They also agreed to give 100 cigarettes to the servitor of the Music Classroom. How times have changed!

In his 1962 annual report the Secretary stated that: "As in most choirs today, the Tenor situation is not good numerically, but we are fortunate in being able to make up for lack of numbers by the quality of the few that we have." So not everything has changed!

At the AGM in 1962 the outgoing Treasurer had a lot to get off his chest: "I wish [the next Treasurer] all success in his endeavours to drive home a realistic appreciation by all members of the Society of the financial state of all our activities and dispel the roseate outlook which some of us seem to have about money matters - at least where the Purse of our Society [his underlining] is concerned." Unusually, the AGM decided that most of one paragraph of the Treasurer's report should be deleted, it seems because it was too despondent on the subject of fund-raising from social events.

The programme for the 1962-63 season, the 75th, is a reminder that the Edinburgh Bach Choir was constituted as an adjunct to the Edinburgh Bach Society. Thus the first concert of the season was a piano solo programme, with no involvement from the choir. The second concert was choral, with Bach and Purcell, and the third, again choral, was Bach and Handel. All three concerts were performed in the Reid School of Music.

There is no record of any meeting between June 1962 and January 1963 (where the main business was the decision to seek charitable status). It is not clear whether the absence of any committee meeting was because there was no autumn concert or because the committee were all hiding in their cellars for fear of a nuclear holocaust. Either way, it is reassuring that the Edinburgh Bach Society and Choir kept calm and carried on through that eventful year.

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PS I am sure that you all want to know that the minutes of June 1962 report that the Music Classroom servitor had asked that his thanks for the cigarettes should be recorded.