



# Cantus in Choro

A GLOBAL VIEW OF CHORAL SINGING



The Schola Cantorum performs with Yale Collegium Players  
All photos courtesy of Yale Institute of Sacred Music

When aspiring young singers consider formal musical training, they might look to a college specialising in music or to the music department of a large university, where academic research, performance and music-education could be united; though the *sine qua non* for many still remains the conservatoire or Hochschule, those hallmarks of musical excellence from Naples to Paris, Moscow to London and on to New York. But as we now know them – though tend to forget – these conservatories are largely a 19th-century invention, designed in an era obsessed with the child protégé, whose principal *raison d'être* was the fostering of solo as well as rank-and-file talent for the burgeoning orchestras and opera houses at the

mainstay of European musical life a century ago. But neither then nor until very recently was there a serious alternative for the professional non-operatic singer.

Established in 2004, Yale University's Schola Cantorum is in many ways the template degree programme for a singer seeking a high-level option to the traditional conservatoire course. I was delighted, therefore, to be invited recently by its director, Simon Carrington, to experience the fruits of his two years' hard labour. 'I was teaching at New England Conservatory in Boston,' he explains, 'when I received a letter from the Yale Institute of Sacred Music announcing its intent to establish a new chamber choir specialising in music before

*Malcolm Bruno* visits Yale University to find out about its new Schola Cantorum

# A high-level option

‘For a young aspiring professional the competition for this incredible opportunity increases each year’



1750 and after 1900 and asking for suggestions of someone to develop such a choir as professor of choral conducting. I threw my own hat into the ring and after surviving the extended search process was amazed to find myself at Yale! I had also long dreamt of establishing a graduate programme for singers drawn more to early music, oratorio, art song and ensemble singing than to traditional opera training.’

Soon the Institute would launch its first-rate alternative to the normal course of study. For Yale, I learnt from current Institute director Martin Jean, was in a unique position to create such a programme. With a School of Divinity and a School of Music, along with its Institute of Sacred Music bridging both faculties, it could easily arrange interdisciplinary courses of study for musicians particularly interested in liturgy, or sacred or choral music generally. ‘My colleague medievalist Margot Fassler – my predecessor as director of the ISM – proposed, following a major endowment, that we use the opportunity of a second choral professorship to offer a complementary but distinct option for students not seeking the traditional “choral conducting” course. She saw that though many American universities have departments of “choral activities” which have

produced able choirs and choir directors, there was no institution which placed an emphasis on the choral chamber ensemble.’

Of course, in Europe as well there are few places for a talented solo singer to turn where opera is not the goal of his or her training, or more importantly the teacher’s motivation. And this was confirmed by Carrington’s experience: ‘One tends to forget that though early music has flourished in northern European and certain universities in America over the past 30 years, this has been essentially as an activity focused on pre-19th-century instruments.’

The structure of the Yale Schola Cantorum is unique in America (and quite possibly Europe as well). Its eight ‘scholars’, divided into two SATB quartets, are admitted as single foursomes each year to begin the two-year MA. Their staggered entry enables a seamless continuity of eight solo scholars year after year. All are endowed on a full scholarship to the University for the two years to complete their degree. Of course, for a young aspiring professional the competition for this incredible opportunity increases each year.

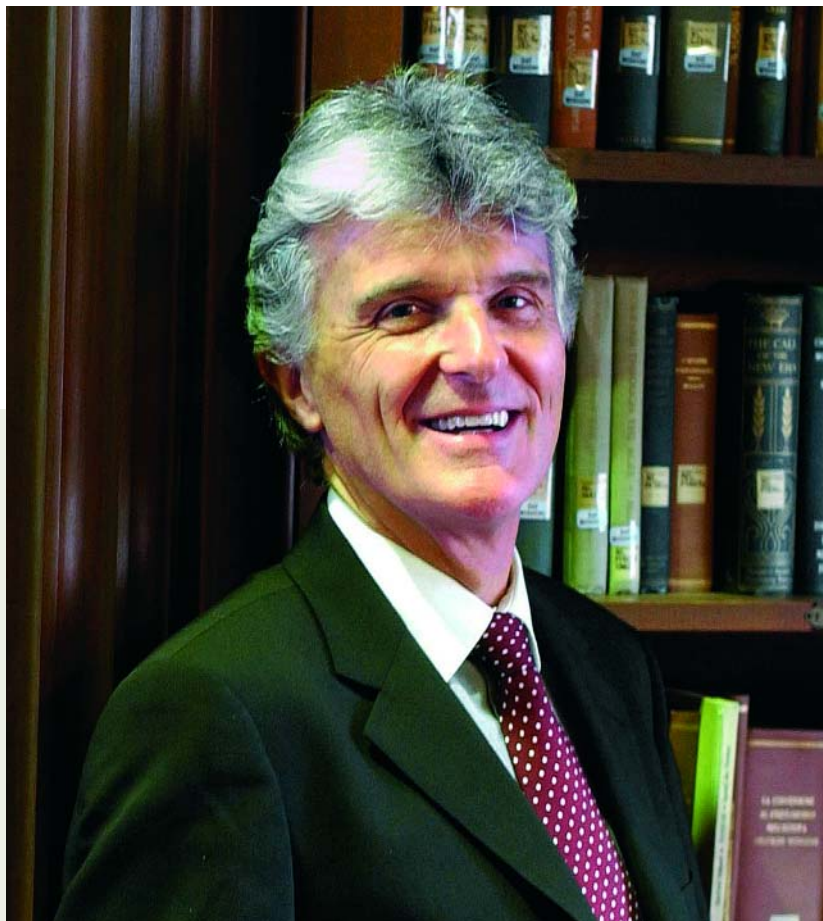
In addition to the double quartet there are 16 further singers (four more quartets) drawn from different divisions of the university. Again, this is competitive, as a stipend is paid based on a full

hourly professional rate for five hours' weekly rehearsal. The full Schola – what Carrington describes as the 'best sight-reading student choir I have had the pleasure to conduct in the US' – has three major concerts each semester along with additional performances by the eight scholars alone. The Schola concerts on campus include work with Carrington, but also with prestigious guests. In these first two years James MacMillan, Sir David Willcocks, Sir Neville Marriner and Graham O'Reilly have conducted, with Helmuth Rilling in the wings for 2007. In addition there are tours in the US and abroad (so far England and Hungary).

Last year the American tenor James Taylor returned from a 15-year residence in Germany to take up the position as professor of vocal studies in the ISM with specific association to the eight scholars. What could have motivated him to return from a flourishing career in Europe? 'Of course, I continue with my own solo work. But this is an unequalled opportunity for a professor and student alike: I not only teach vocal technique to eight very fine singers, I share with them as well a much larger view of music, especially available to a singer who has been active in Europe, encompassing everything from very early repertory to recent works. And it's a delight to be collaborating in this role with the American singer Judith Malafrente, who also has a major career of her own. Roughly, she covers the earliest repertory up to the early 17th century, and I take over from there to the present, with a concentration on the Baroque and early Classical as well as 20th-century.'

It is irresistible not to ask James if absolutely no opera is covered in the course. 'Well, of course, there is Monteverdi and Handel within the early Baroque, leading on directly from the *frottole* or *cantigas* that singers work on with Judith. But yes, I include some later opera in the music we cover, because it is important from a practical point that every singer should have at one stage sung a Mozart aria – not only to experience the exquisite sense of drama in his music that, for example, the Requiem must also have; but also, especially in Europe where many American singers end up, there are many more major smaller opera houses, where singers without voices of Wagnerian proportion are welcome.'

The scope of the Schola's projected repertoire is unapologetically vast. 'Whereas a violinist has a repertory spanning maybe 250 years, the singer has potentially 1,000 at his or her disposal,' explains my next interviewee Markus Rathey, a Bach scholar from Leipzig and one of the principal lecturers for ISM students. 'And there are inherently many more complex musicological issues for non-operatic singers. Operatic core repertory is essentially confined to the near-recent musical past, just



touching the end of the 17th century, whereas the main sacred works really end with Mozart and Haydn, the relatively few major 19th-century oratorios being concert works. This means a considerable task for the singer dedicated to informed performances of oratorio and earlier sacred music, who must traverse a huge stylistic domain from before Machaut to beyond Mozart.'

The Schola menu for 2007 handsomely reflects a good deal of this time-span: Grand Motets of Henry Dumont, coupled with Charpentier (including his Passion *Le reniement de St Pierre*); a major Bach programme with Helmuth Rilling; more Passion music by Buxtehude (the *Membra Jesu Nostri*); southern European early Baroque (Monteverdi and Guerrero); and a commission from Tarik O'Regan for the American Choral Directors Association, preceded by Brahms motets and the US premiere of James MacMillan's *Laudi alla Vergine Maria*, originally commissioned by the Netherlands Chamber Choir and Winchester Cathedral and (appropriately for the Schola) scored for an octet of soloists and chamber choir. And lest one imagine, by the way, that the earlier Baroque fare in this list would suffer the distortion of accompaniment on modern instruments, Carrington's entrepreneurial skills have again not failed. In collaboration with the

left Yale students enrolled in the new two-year MA course, above entrepreneurial professor Simon Carrington





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outstanding American Baroque violinist Robert Mealy, who is professor at Harvard and leads the major period ensembles in Boston and New York, the Yale Collegium Players has been established uniting professional players from those same cities with as many able young Baroque players as possible from the Yale campus.

The next stop in my Yale tour is to meet two of the four 'scholars'. Soprano Mellissa Hughes is from the first intake in 2004, and her achievement is certainly a fulfilment of the Schola's aspirations. 'I was an undergraduate at Westminster Choir College in Princeton,' she explains, 'where I became very interested in early music – in polyphony and liturgy, but also in the Baroque and later repertoire. My voice is suited to many very different styles and techniques and I had no desire after my first degree to be pushed blindly into graduate training along the traditional grand-opera route.' So Mellissa has taken the opportunity during her two years at Yale to explore many musical inclinations, what she describes with a glint in her eye as a 'choose-your-own-adventure degree'. Earlier this year her consummate and stylish performances of the soprano solos in Bach's *St John Passion* resulted in the immediate offer of major solo Baroque work in New York. Though delighted, she remains equally passionate about the most difficult 20th-century canon. 'I love Bach, but I love the Second Viennese School as well, especially Schoenberg. There's no

reason why I can't do both.' And, as I soon discovered, her presence in a recent Yale recording of *Pierrot Lunaire* is simply stunning.

Mellissa's colleague Derek Chester has, meanwhile, also just completed the first biennial degree. Though still in his mid-20s, the beauty and natural ease with which he took the Evangelist's role under James Taylor's expert tutelage in the same *St John Passion* performances has landed him not only accolades from discerning audiences at Yale and in New York, but a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Germany with Christoph Pregardien. In the words of Martin Jean again, 'a goal of the Schola programme must be to produce not Helden-tenors but world-class Evangelists, with not only first-rate vocal and stylistic preparation but a thorough background in Lutheran pietism along with the unique story-telling skills Bach's work demands.' Amazingly, even a European ear would not have guessed that Derek hails from Nicholson, Georgia!

Looking finally over this whole enterprise, one cannot but help reflect back more than half a century to Paul Hindemith, one of the seminal composers of his time and a major musical presence in the history of Yale. It was his passion for polyphony that led to his founding Yale's Collegium Musicum. Though amateur by today's sophistication, it would plant the seed for what has blossomed without equal in the past few years – more than he could have dreamt. □

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Yale's Schola Cantorum would have  
made Hindemith proud