

Silence is Golden Choir & Organ Magazine

Matthew Provost | November-December 2002

Best known to British audiences as one of the longest-serving members of The King's Singers, Simon Carrington is now a renowned choral expert in the USA. As he celebrates his 60th birthday, he reflects on his career with Matthew Provost.

On a warm summer morning in Boston, Massachusetts, I talk with Simon Carrington as he celebrates his 60th birthday and marks his second year as director of choral activities at Boston's renowned New England Conservatory. Asked to play continuo under his direction, I am anxious to know more about Carrington, so well known from nearly 3,000 performances and 72 recordings with the legendary British vocal ensemble The King's Singers. The Simon Carrington I meet is so much more than that debonair baritone, second from the right, of commercial fame. His numerous concerts and masterclasses reveal a cast-iron professionalism and boundless energy, his authoritative direction wrought from a wealth of experience and a profound musical mind. Carrington is choral conductor, clinician, consultant, double bassist, and one-time King's Singer; moreover, Carrington is charisma.

How did you see your future in 1968 [debut year of The King's Singers]?

Only very few of my generation of Cambridge students and choral scholars had career plans at that time. We were taking life one day one year at a time. By 1968 it was looking as though my professional music making was going to take hold, although when we asked David Willcocks whether or not we should make a go as The King's Singers, he said, "Absolutely not. You have no chance whatever of success!" Although we had given a very successful debut, we were soon to hit all kinds of problems, the saddest of which was when our lead voice, Martin Lane, was struck down with a tumour on the brain. We struggled through the next two years before really getting started in 1971. After that we would often say, "Let's give it another year, or two, or five." Suddenly we discovered we'd been singing together for ten years, and a jubilee had crept up on us.

Were your ideas about the future shaped mostly by your relationship with The King's Singers?

Yes. I didn't start thinking about what I might do after the group until we were past the 20th anniversary. I still thought I could go back to playing the bass, which I enjoyed as long as I was specialising in continuo work, but later I started giving summer courses in England and Austria and found that I enjoyed working with community singers. So perhaps at that time an idea was germinating. I'm not sure when I realised that 25 years with The King's Singers would have to be enough, but I do recall the moment when Stephen Connolly joined the group [1987], and both Alastair Hume and I realised that we were five years older than Stephen's mother a discovery that made us focus on our future somewhat.

If The King's Singers hadn't happened, can you imagine what you might have done?

I started my double-bass career in 1966. I was practising hard and already playing in fellow student John Eliot Gardiner's various ensembles at that time. I played basso continuo for him well into the Seventies as his star was rising. I also went to Manchester to play in the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra: a very good, hard graft experience. The studio orchestras work at a phenomenal pace, whizzing through music, which was great for honing my sight-reading skills. In addition my life as a chamber player with the London Sinfonietta was beginning to develop. I also regret now not having paid more attention to all those world famous conductors (Klemperer, Solti, Szell, Barenboim, Boulez, etcetera) for whom I played in the back desk of London's five symphony orchestras.

In what ways were you aware of the movement toward historically informed performance practice?

I sang and played with David Munrow during our years at Cambridge. Although I was never a scholar, the [early music] movement was vicariously part of my development. This has allowed me to interpret intuitively while still producing a stylistically appropriate sound. Performance practice questions seem relatively simple in the choral field because we are merely letting the ways in which texts are set become our guides toward interpretation. Obvious vocal issues aside, I tend to focus on the elegance of line in combination with a natural, not over-trained, yet stylistically informed treatment. That has always struck me as being the most effective way to teach. If you can persuade the singers to sing their lines with real understanding, you've reached the heart of the matter.

How might those questions affect your pedagogical approach?

I encourage students to develop as many sides to their voices as possible. This allows them to step over here and sing one way and step over there to sing another. I must also be conscientious of the restraints my voice-faculty colleagues may put on them. Mostly I need the students to be open to stylistic differences, so I do play them recordings when I have the opportunity, to place a particular sound in their heads. I have always tried to teach young singers to be independent and yet responsive to everything around them. Too many singers become obsessed with their technique and are in danger of suppressing really important matters like expression, phrase shapes, and, most of all, reverence for words.

I think that if my choirs have been successful, particularly those at the University of Kansas [Carrington was professor and director of choral activities from 1994 to 2001], it is because they have been more flexible and more concerned with the underlying meaning of the texts they sing than in producing more decibels! I give workshops entitled "Small ensemble techniques for large choirs", and this is where I may perhaps make the greatest impact on my colleagues. I want singers to think about the colour of their sound rather than the volume, about the way their lines interrelate with those round them, about delicacy and grace rather than weight and solidity.

Performers often place too much emphasis on being authentic and current, and it can sound as if the life has been squeezed out of their performances. I've always loved John Eliot Gardiner's interpretation of the Buxtehude *Membra Jesu Nostri*, a mini-masterpiece I have performed both at Kansas and here in Boston. There are some aspects of John Eliot's recording that may already sound old-fashioned, but the more contemporary recordings (Christophers, Herreweghe, Suzuki) can sometimes sound a little sparse and bare, to my ear at least.

I've been tinkering recently with a title for a workshop: "The distance between blend and bland, a short walk downhill!" Choral directors go on and on about blend, and it's certainly true that the King's Singers worked a lot on blend, but what's the use of pursuing a sleek, smooth, homogenous sound if it takes the heart out of the music? I'm interested in something in between those two poles. So my approach is natural, intuitive, and not primarily intellectual.

One of my biggest challenges at New England Conservatory is convincing young singers of the value of acquiring the kind of pinpoint ensemble skills we learnt under David Willcocks. It is clear to me that the most successful singers are those who learnt to refine these critical skills while still students so they were able to enter the profession unafraid when they stepped through conservatory doors in the hope of earning their living in music.

Do you still see new students that are as yet unaware of performance practice issues?

Quite a number of new students are surprised by my approach when they arrive. Many high school choral programmes are still geared toward producing the biggest sound in the shortest time. Inevitably the wide wobble develops, and the singers find out too late that they can't control it. I find this really quite distressing, as young singers must learn to sing well in as many different ways as possible.

Do you have anything particular to offer students and people that sing for you?

I suspect it is an amalgam of everything I've absorbed through the years: first as a chorister at Christ Church, Oxford, under two legendary choirmasters of the old school, Sir Thomas Armstrong and Dr Sydney Watson; then at King's School, Canterbury, in the shadow of the cathedral where I was lucky enough to find myself under the mentorship of a maverick choral director who lived and breathed music but in a refreshingly irreverent and almost anti-establishment manner. Edred Wright had been a chorister at Westminster Abbey with David Willcocks and my father. He had not followed the collegiate chapel or cathedral route but had been involved in the early pioneering days of the RSCM. He was an inspired choice as Director of Music at King's School, and I learned an enormous amount from him without realising it at the time!

When I took my University of Kansas Chamber Choir to sing at Canterbury Cathedral in 1997, Edred turned up, now in his nineties but still with that twinkle in his eye. We sang William Albright's *Chichester Mass* at a special service for the friends of the Cathedral. Edred came up afterwards and said it was the most beautiful and moving singing he had heard there for many years; a slight exaggeration I imagine, but I felt tremendously proud nonetheless.

How would you describe the reception your style has received in America?

I've not had enough time to make a mark in Boston yet, but I believe I may have made something of an impact at the American Choral Directors' Association [ACDA] conventions. I brought the University of Kansas choir to the national ACDA convention in San Antonio, Texas in 2001. In a way this was probably the highest point I could reach with the choir, and after that I felt it was time to hang up my hat and move on. I have heard numerous choirs at conventions, but some of them, I regret to say, I do find rather routine and uncommunicative. A choir must draw listeners into its own sound world. That's why I work hard at pianissimo singing. The resulting intensity tends to be more engaging than singing that's simply loud! Yet it's often immensely difficult to persuade the students to sing softly because it's contrary to what they assume is expected of soloists. Soft sound in a quiet room is still one of the most moving experiences for our listeners. With The King's Singers we concentrated on the power of an intense pianissimo; that silence between the final soft chord and the onset of applause is truly golden. You have said publicly that choral singing should be a wonderfully rewarding experience. Would you describe your own personal rewards?

I should mention perhaps the privilege of travelling and singing in Eastern Europe before the fall of the [Berlin] Wall. The first time we sang in Hungary, for instance, the tickets were virtually free. We had to repeat Byrd's *Ave verum corpus* three times only the fourth item in the concert with another two hours still to go! The involvement of that musically aware public in our music was astonishing. That situation has changed more recently because now the only people who go to concerts are those who can afford it. Those performances were a revelation for me and certainly demonstrated the inestimable power of choral music.