



David Temple rehearses Crouch End Festival Chorus in a wide-ranging programme of Duruflé, Tallis and Philip Glass

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Maintaining a sense of wonder

In the 25 years since it was founded in a London suburb, Crouch End Festival Chorus has moved to an eclectic and international platform, performing with artists as diverse as Valery Gergiev and Oasis. **Shirley Ratcliffe** is impressed by a tale of success

PHOTOS COURTESY CEFC

Mention of the Royal Choral Society, the Bach Choir and the choral societies in Huddersfield and Halifax – to name but a few – immediately conjures up a picture of Britain's impressive, large-choir tradition. Added to this number is a relative newcomer, Crouch End Festival Chorus. 'Who?' you might have asked after its inception in 1984; but under the guiding baton of co-founder/director David Temple, CEFC has gone from strength to strength to become a busy symphonic chorus with an international reputation. It was with this choir that Temple found he had all the right instincts to be a conductor; over the years he has turned a group of amateur singers into a high-profile choir that sings for film soundtracks, commissions new works, appears at the Electric

Proms with Ray Davies (of The Kinks) and Oasis, makes appearances with conductor Valery Gergiev at the Proms and with Oscar-winning film composer Ennio Morricone, and has a recording schedule.

Temple's first words to me are, 'I had no formal music education and I'm still waiting to be found out!' He came to London in 1972 and joined the London Philharmonic Choir (LPC), singing tenor under its pre-eminent chorus master John Alldis, who became his inspiration: 'He was like a god to me. What made him special was that he was capable of turning base metal (us amateur singers) into gold (a world-class choir). While he was accomplished as a choral trainer, his overriding quality was his ability to encourage the "art" to come through above everything else. He looked for colour, drama and intensity rather than bland precision. He made us believe that we were all capable of creating magic. Getting the notes right was only the beginning...'

How did Temple make the jump from tenor to conductor? 'As I have never learned an instrument, conducting was the obvious alternative to singing, where I could express my music making. I discovered from my early experiences that I was able to get a response from performers, which encouraged me to continue.' Was it a case of learning on the job? 'When I began conducting I visited second-hand bookshops and bought a few old books – Boult, Henry Wood, etc. – on conducting. After I read the top ten attributes that a conductor must have, I realised I had two or three of them at the most! So, what



← Music director David Temple: 'I think my love of the "natural" human voice has attracted many to work with us'

did I do? The obvious thing was to give up immediately; but I found that singers and players seemed happy to work with me and so I carried on, and I'm still going! The conclusion I came to is that while I may be doing many things wrong, I must be doing enough things right. This lack of formal training has meant that none of the top choirs in London have considered me when a vacancy [for a director] has occurred, so I just keep plugging away with my own choir and allow myself a wry smile at where we have got to. The skill of a chorus master and conductor are better learned by watching the maestros at work rather than standing in a classroom with a knitting needle and a mirror.'

What did he learn from observing Boult, Stokowski, Haitink, Tennstedt, Barenboim, Giulini and Rattle? 'The main thing was their preparation and attention to detail, as well as having an architectural view of the music. The great conductors had many things in common: they all knew instinctively ▶



← Sir Michael Tippett takes a bow after the 50th-anniversary performance of *A Child of our Time*, given by Crouch End Festival Chorus and David Temple

◀ how far they could stretch performers. They also achieved the right balance between giving a clear and considered interpretation, and allowing the natural power and beauty of the music to come through over everything else. One unusual thing I learned which has helped me is that they were all imperfect and each had his own Achilles heel – there was always a corner of the music they found tricky and with each one it was a different corner. It showed that they were human and fallible, which I found endearing. It also enabled me to cope with my own shortcomings.

The Crouch End Arts Festival was launched in 1982 with two of Temple's friends as the driving force: John Gregson (fellow tenor in the LPC) and his partner Clive Barker (horror writer and film director). Temple was invited to be the festival's musical director.

'In 1984 John suggested that we should form a chorus to sing in the festival. We knew we could get our friends from the LPC to help out. Our first attempts at recruitment were a complete failure and I was ready to throw in the towel. John was a little more tenacious and suggested that Clive should design a poster asking for singers for the Verdi Requiem, no auditions, first rehearsal at Middle Lane Methodist Church on 22 June. When the day arrived I was shocked to see 80 singers there. By the end of the evening it was starting to sound rather good. The concert itself (with another 60 from the LPC) was a great success. Five minutes in I thought I was going to faint with nerves; but I managed to hold it together and at this point realised I had the temperament to do the job. The local singers were so thrilled and asked if they could become a permanent choir. Who was I to argue?'

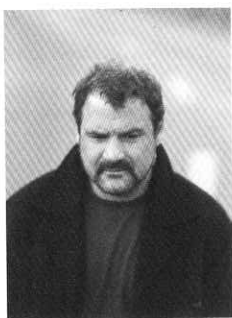
And so in 1984 Crouch End Festival Chorus was born with 80 singers. Within twelve months numbers were up to 120 and two years later figures reached 170 before auditioning started. Temple tells me the audition for new singers is an easy process, but it's tough to get into 'because I need to be, and can afford to be, choosy'. Currently singers are re-auditioned every three years. 'My policy is to audition them in groups of about twelve so they can be heard in a choral situation. It's a difficult time for the singers – and for me – but one that needs to be done.' There was a time when a new name for the choir was considered. 'This was because promoters knew we were good but did not want such a parochial, hideous name on their posters,' Temple explains. 'How times have changed: we are now being booked *because* of our name!'

Temple devises the choir's repertoire. What is his thinking behind this process? 'There are very



few major works we haven't done over the last 25 years, so part of our season is spent revisiting and improving past repertoire. I also like to introduce new works and commissions that offer a unique variety of choral riches to both choir and audience. In this season alone we've performed works by Tallis, Monteverdi, Purcell, Bach, Mozart, Fauré, Vaughan ▶

▲ 'A unique variety of styles': CEFC's repertoire includes classical oratorios and supporting The Kinks' Ray Davies at the 2007 Electric Proms



▲ In March 2009 CEFC premiered *The Tension of Opposites* by Matthew Ferraro (above), commissioned for the choir's 25th anniversary

◁ Williams, Dove, MacMillan, Britten, and our three 25th-anniversary commissions: two smaller pieces by Orlando Gough and Roland Perrin, and a large-scale work by Matthew Ferraro.

'Matthew's *The Tension of Opposites* had a strange origin. I first met him about four years ago and he told me about this work that was in the process of being written. It sounded exciting and right up our street so we decided to commission him to complete it and gave the first performance in March at the Barbican [see review, May/June issue]. Commissioning is a risky business as you are never sure if you will get a masterpiece or a turkey!'

The many important 'staging-posts' along the way for CEFC include their first record (*Soprano in Red*, with Lesley Garrett) on soundtrack label Silva Screen in 1995, 'the first company to celebrate our name instead of being embarrassed by it,' Temple adds. 'Our [1997] album, *Cinema Choral Classics*, reached the top ten in the US Billboard charts – suddenly we were on TV, radio and in the newspapers.

'In 1993 we gave our first performance in the Royal Festival Hall and the following year we gave the 50th-anniversary performance of Tippett's *A Child of our Time* in front of the composer. We went to the Barbican for the first time in 1998 and it is now our spiritual home. The singers have

improved beyond recognition and I put this down to the sheer amount of work and the unique variety of styles we tackle in the course of a season.'

Why do so many record companies and ensembles want to work with CEFC? 'I think my love of the "natural" human voice has attracted many to work with us – I don't like an "over-trained" voice. In general I use a mixture of imagery and demonstration to get the sound I want. I work on intonation, rhythmical vitality and precision, dynamics and variety of colour.'

What are Temple's thoughts about the future? 'I would like to have another ten tenors and ten basses to add to the excellent sections we already have; the soprano and alto sections are large enough to have some slack built into the numbers. We want to have enough funding to ensure we employ top orchestras and soloists. Despite the wonderful opportunities our singers experience, I do not want them to become world-weary or blasé. Once we lose that sense of wonder and freshness, it will reflect in our music-making. I still feel a little nervous before every rehearsal and I want this to stay as long as I am music director. The choir has had the most unbelievable four years. The challenge is to maintain this quality of work and these musical experiences. If we can build on these, that would be even better.' ■

Forthcoming concerts

Outdoor concert of classic Kinks

Crouch End Festival Chorus, Ray Davies
27 June, Kenwood House, London

Fauré: Requiem

Vaughan Williams: A Sea Symphony

Crouch End Festival Chorus, London Orchestra da Camera / David Temple (dir)
6 July, Barbican, London

Berlioz: Te Deum

Bach Choir, BBC Symphony Chorus, Crouch End Festival Chorus, Choristers of St Paul's Cathedral, Trinity Boys Choir, Simon Preston (org), BBC Symphony Orchestra / Susanna Malkki (dir)
2 August, BBC Proms, Royal Albert Hall, London

Britten: War Requiem

Crouch End Festival Chorus, London Orchestra da Camera / David Temple (dir)
7 November, Barbican, London