

That strain again – where have we heard this before?

The village music-makers

From the Crouch End Festival Chorus to The Kinks, for decades now a corner of north London has seen classical and rock meet in true harmony, finds local resident Philip Clark

Two degrees of separation between Olivier Messiaen and The Kinks? That's the kind of thing that happens in Muswell Hill, north London. Let me tell you how.

Looking up the hill from East Finchley tube station, take a sharp right along Fortis Green. Back in the mid-1950s a young boy – Raymond – went to a Church of England school there. He relished singing in the school choir, which was accompanied by Mr Bate, the organist from the local church in Muswell Hill. Later he started listening to the bebop and Elvis Presley records that his eldest sister, who was married to a Canadian serviceman, had brought back to the UK. When Raymond joined his brother David's rock'n'roll band, they began rehearsing in the Clissold Arms, the pub on Fortis Green. "Later I learn that Mr Bate's daughter," Ray Davies

– former frontman with The Kinks – tells me, "is Jennifer Bate, the renowned Messiaen organist."

Ray Davies and I (Ray Davies! From The Kinks!) are sitting in Konk Studios (Konk! The Kinks' near-mythical recording studio) talking about his latest album, "The Kinks Choral Collection", which pairs him with the Crouch End Festival Chorus for a set of re-thought Kinks hits. The album is many things. It rocks. "You Really Got Me" – which in 1964 positioned The Kinks somewhere between The Rolling Stones' untidy urgency and the (relative) polish of The Beatles – is given a fervent, declamatory choral refit.

It swings. "Victoria", an anthem from The Kinks' 1969 concept album "Arthur (Or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire)", is transformed into authentic, swaying call-and-response gospel music. But most strikingly

– on "Waterloo Sunset", and a medley from "The Kinks are the Village Green Preservation Society" – the choir point up those strains of Englishness as essential to The Kinks + originality = success equation as their plundering of blues and early rock'n'roll.

"The great thing about working with the choir is everything can be done locally," Davies tells me. "They rehearse in Fortismere School, on Fortis Green, where I went to secondary school. "You Really Got Me" didn't come out too well at first. It's a pop song, and I'd stretched its structure too far. So we came in here to work on a final version the day before the session." Also on Fortis Green, a few yards along from the Clissold Arms, is a house called Fairport where, in 1966, when The Kinks were already rock gods, a group of young folk musicians convened. They rehearsed. They decided to form a band.



Ray Davies and the Crouch End Festival Chorus sing at Waterloo (though not at sunset)