

Memories of the early years of the Crofton Singers

I believe Flo (Florence James) made a quite remarkable impact on Loughton (County High School). I can't be much of a judge of the details of this impact because (I think) her appointment began in the same year as I was a new girl (1941) so I had no experience of how things were before her arrival. But it was clear even to eleven-year olds that transformations and innovations were taking place, and to older girls that some feathers - though not all - in the Common Room were being ruffled from time to time. Music was becoming all-pervasive, perhaps to the detriment of other subjects.

Soon after Flo's arrival, a fine Bechstein piano appeared in the Hall, and we were all taught to respect and reverence it. We filed into morning Prayers to beautifully played Handel and Purcell pieces, and the whole school sat and listened to a couple of minutes of recorded music each morning, as part of Prayers. Towards the end of each Autumn term the school carol service became a dominant feature in our lives. It was scrupulously planned and everyone, staff and girls, was involved. Each form contributed a carol and drew and painted programmes, and third formers, who were the new intake of eleven-year olds, appeared in Christmas tableaux on the hall stage. I mention these things just to give examples of how music gradually seeped into every corner of the school's life. As well as all of this, Flo used to secure concert and recital visits from eminent musicians, among them Leon Goossens, Sidonie Goossens, and the Dolmetsch family.

I do not know, but others may, whether the idea (c.1945 or 1946, I suppose?) of forming the combined choirs came from Bancroft's or Loughton. When we were told about it, I was in a whirlwind state of thinking that I had become so completely involved with music at school that I should ask if I could have piano lessons with Flo, rather than at home, privately, with Miss Lockwood. And when I asked Flo about this, the short of it was, yes, I could, as long as I would abandon my aspirations to read English at Cambridge and switch to music and the RAM instead. I made that switch pretty promptly and with scarcely any thought, and embarked on what would nowadays be called a steep learning curve. It included having a first go at conducting the combined choirs and hating it (I just couldn't do it and miserably asked to give up) and then, after a while, begging to try it again. Then I loved it, and was immediately happy to take on the school orchestra as well. I don't know what change had occurred in me. Suddenly I felt completely confident in both conducting and in (very small-scale) composing. I suppose I had managed to acquire some musical literacy.

Going immediately from school to the RAM and from conducting the Combined Choirs to conducting the Crofton Singers was a smooth transition, enhanced by the bonus element of what seemed like total freedom. We young Crofton women had the fun, as the strictures of clothes rationing gradually fell away, of choosing some blue material from which we made, or had made for us, (depending on our seamstress abilities or lack of them) the dresses we wore when giving concerts. I do not remember that there was ever dissent in choosing that material, or over what we would sing, or how we would pay for our music, travel, dresses and food etc. But perhaps that is just a failure of my memory. I hope that at the time I remembered to thank properly all the kind and helpful people who gave us refreshments and saw to our needs when we turned up to sing in their church or hall.

It was always marvellous to have Rae (Bridgland/Roome) singing in the Crofton sopranos. Her voice was a lovely and distinctive one, and at the same time had a sweet and sustaining quality that she seemed able to use to bind the other sopranos together. It was as if she could effortlessly spread her voice to flow into any gaps or chinks that might occur, but without any kind of domination. I always hoped that our concert audiences were as much captivated by

the Croftons' wonderful young singing as I was. Conducting them, I think, was probably an easy ride.

The spontaneous concert in Trafalgar Square was a good happening. We had decided to go there for the fun of carol singing and to see the newly-arrived and decorated Norwegian Christmas tree. After a while we gathered under the tree and unasked and unprompted started singing carols. Some of us had music with us, but in any case we had a whole repertoire acquired largely from the Oxford Book of Carols that just poured out of us. Festivities in the Square were due to end at 9pm but shortly before that time I was approached by an 'official' person who said that if we would go on singing 'they' would be happy to keep the lights and microphones on for a further half-an-hour. (How gentle and innocent it all sounds!) Well of course, that suited us very well. Next morning, on the front page of the Daily Telegraph, there was a photograph of us singing under the Christmas tree. Beneath the photograph was a brief paragraph reporting that I had announced the thirty minute extension to the assembled crowds.

Don Francombe's quiet, understated way of seeming to dream along through his physical existence while the real, passionate stuff was taking place cerebrally, has probably been a lifelong and massive influence on most of us who knew him. I can't think how he did it. His ethos was somehow inferred rather than seen, but it was utterly compelling. He wasn't, in the least afraid of being a grown-up in front of us (as Flo was) and I liked that. At the same time I have no memories of his ever saying anything directly instructive or even 'musical' to us, though perhaps he did to the male voices when he had them to himself. His witticisms were of the dry kind, often wonderfully oblique - I recall enjoying an absolutely characteristic remark of his on the aptness of the hymn line, 'Peace perfect peace, with loved ones far away....'

I hope the Crofton Singers of that time enjoyed it all as much as I did. I was Croftons conductor for two-and-a-half years, I think: Autumn 1948 to Spring 1951. It's awesome to think the choir has stayed alive and that it is now being conducted by Andrew Pusey's son, Simon. I have a delightful memory from later in 1951, after Dennis and I married and were living in Cambridge, of Andrew, early in the morning, taking a Hoffnunesque wind instrument to the top of a church tower - was it great St Mary's? - to take part in a musical offering for Ascension Day.

I hope there are more generations of musical offspring waiting in the wings to continue the tradition.

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