

The Birth of the Crofton Singers

The Croftons first met as such in the autumn of 1947, but their origins go back two years earlier to the formation of the Combined Choir of Loughton High School for Girls and Bancroft's School (for boys) in the autumn of 1945, the heady year in which the war ended. This was the brainchild of Don Francombe the classics master who was also in charge of music at Bancroft's and Florence James (always known as Flo, though not to her face!), the music mistress at Loughton. It really was a most unlikely alliance between two very different people working at two schools with quite different musical traditions. Don was a gentle man with a very strong imaginative vision. He wasn't a professionally qualified musician though he played the organ tolerably well for school chapel services (for those of us who were boarders) and his teaching of music in the school was confined to the rudiments of music and singing with first year classes. I think what really influenced us boys was his taste in music, literature and drama - he ran the Bancroft's Players with splendid productions each year. Flo, on the other hand, was a professionally accomplished music teacher, choir director and pianist and expertly taught a full music curriculum at Loughton.

I don't know which of the two first had the idea of the collaboration, but it was certainly in the best musical interests of the 6th formers in both schools in that it opened up for them the great music of the choral repertoire that neither the Loughton girls could enjoy without male voices, nor the senior Bancroft's boys without a choir school to coach young trebles. What is perhaps surprising is that we started off with a work, Brahms' Requiem, suggesting a quite different direction from what they (and the Croftons) were later to take. The Requiem was duly performed in St. Mary's Loughton in the spring of 1946 with accompaniment on the organ very capably played by an Old Bancroftian John Hunt. Why did they choose it? Well, of course it is a great piece with rewarding choral writing: but perhaps the real reason was that Denis Quilley was available. He had only just left Bancroft's and was later to achieve fame as an actor: but he had a lovely baritone voice even at that age, and sang the two big solos with real distinction. One innovation was that one or two of the pupils from each school conducted the concert. This suited Don, who got too nervous at concerts to be a conductor at all. but it showed a wonderfully self-effacing attitude from Flo in giving us this opportunity.

As I remember, the Brahms performance as a whole went reasonably well, but Flo and Don must have had a "council of war" soon afterwards and decided on a new and incredibly bold strategy for the following year. Instead of a Loughton church, for our next big collaboration in May 1947 we sang at St. Bartholomew the Great, Smithfield, which was then a leading centre for choral concerts in post-war London. And we sang a cappella works that few choirs at that time were attempting: Byrd's 5-part Mass and Bach's 11-movement motet "Jesu Priceless Treasure". The concert was a very big occasion for us, and having done all the preparation it was good to sing the music again in the lovely mediaeval church at Thaxted later in the summer, the Mass in its proper Eucharistic context and again in an afternoon concert with the Bach. There are extant photos of the choir at Thaxted, in the churchyard and outside the village hall. This was a great experience for us all, and so it was natural that those of us leaving school at the end of the year wanted to carry on singing together. We decided on our name, with its obvious derivations, and we elected Don and Flo our joint presidents. But the organisation of our continuation was far from easy at first.

The problem was that although the war was over there was still compulsory military service for the men. For the first year, (1947-8) the St. Bartholomew's authorities very kindly offered us their church for a weekly rehearsal. Those of us stationed in places like Aldershot and Guildford could quite often get their Wednesday evenings off and come in by train. I personally failed my army medical exam (flat feet!). There was no possibility of my taking up my university place before 1949 so I took a job as a school teacher and could always be free to conduct the choir. We just about kept quorate! I remember in that first year doing a 4-part Palestrina mass, some madrigals and some compositions by Diane Wickerson (who took over from me as conductor the following year) and by myself. We gave two concerts in Loughton, one each in the school and St. Mary's and, something quite different, a light-hearted Gilbert and Sullivan entertainment in a church hall in my home district of Sydenham, south London. We also sang carols in hospitals and Trafalgar Square. After the high point of our St. Bartholomew's concert these were quite modest occasions and I sure we would have been surprised as well as delighted if we had known that the new choir was to survive another 60 years!

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