

'Song of Peace from England'

The first performance in Germany of Dona Nobis Pacem

In 1950, only five years after the end of the Second World War, a twinning agreement was made between the cities of Portsmouth in England and Duisburg in Germany. They had both suffered grievously in the war, the centre of Portsmouth and the whole of the old city of Duisburg having been destroyed by enemy bombing. The rebuilding of both, which gradually took place after the hostilities had come to an end, involved both the construction of civic buildings and the recreation of each city's social and cultural life. In July 1950, the Lord Mayor of Portsmouth wrote to the Oberbürgermeister of Duisburg: "It is the wish of the Council of the City of Portsmouth that I should write to you offering the friendship of this City to your City of Duisburg", and the links subsequently established between the two cities, the second oldest twinning link in Britain, have borne fruit in a series of regular visits by citizens of one city to the other, together with civic and cultural interchanges and events which continue to the present day.

In 1973 the Committee of the Portsmouth Festival, which had been established only two years before, received an invitation from Duisburg for the City's Festival Choir to travel to Germany to give two concerts with the Duisburg Symphony Orchestra. An impressive season of musical events, the *Hauptkonzerte*, took place there throughout each year, and the Festival Choir was invited to give one of these prestigious concerts on two successive evenings in the late spring of 1974. It was agreed between the Choir and Orchestra that the programme would consist of two works, each appropriately symbolic for both the place and the participants, Anton Bruckner's *Mass in E minor* and Ralph Vaughan Williams's cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem*.

In late 1970 a small group of friends involved in music, theatre and the visual arts had presented to Portsmouth Arts Council an ambitious plan for the first fully professional Festival in the city, which the City Council approved. Taking as its theme 'The English Contribution to the Arts', the programme included an opening concert conducted by Sir Michael Tippett, who had already agreed to take part. As Director of the Festival, with particular responsibility for music, I was also able to engage artists of the stature of Sir Adrian Boult, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, John Carol Case, the Dolmetsch Ensemble, Rudolf Kempe, John Ogdon, and the London Philharmonic and Royal Philharmonic Orchestras. In addition to the music programme, to which many local amateur chamber, choral and orchestral groups also contributed, the ensuing Festival featured a presentation by the Oxford Playhouse Company of *A Man for all Seasons*, art exhibitions devoted to 'Painters of the South' and work by local children, and 'Semaphore', a superb display of flags by the Royal Navy.

One of the aims of the Festival Committee was to bring together in the programme professional artists and ensembles of the highest standing with local amateur enthusiasts who would be encouraged to prepare work and performances each year especially for the Festival. To that end, it was decided to create both a Festival Theatre and a Festival Choir, the latter to be drawn from singers in the city and the surrounding area. Invitations were accordingly sent to several local choirs, asking whether any of their members might wish to take on the additional commitment of singing with the Festival Choir for a limited period of time each spring, to rehearse for a concert performance in the Festival. The principal choirs from which the first Festival Choir was drawn were the Portsmouth Choral Union and the Drayton and Havant Choral Societies. To stress the essentially collaborative nature of the new choir, it was decided that the ladies' concert dress would consist of a white blouse with a long skirt of whatever colour each individual singer might choose. And the visual beauty of this multi-coloured effect was to be commented on very favourably, four years later, by the correspondent of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*.

The thirty singers of the first Portsmouth Festival Choir made their début in Portsmouth Guildhall on the 28th April 1971, singing a programme of English music ranging from motets by Thomas Tallis and William Byrd to works by Benjamin Britten and Sir Michael Tippett. The soloist in *A Ceremony of Carols* was the Spanish harpist, Marisa Robles. A year later, in a concert of music by Handel, Bach and Fauré, the numbers in the Choir had risen to sixty, by 1973 it was more than eighty, and for the Festival performance of Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* on the 8th May 1974, with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, the Choir numbered over one hundred and twenty singers. Some one hundred of these comprised the Portsmouth Festival Choir which travelled to Germany two weeks later to sing in Duisburg. The soloists in the Brahms *Requiem* were the soprano Wendy Eathorne and the baritone John Carol Case, who had given a memorable recital of English songs in the first Portsmouth Festival, and both were engaged again to sing in the Duisburg performances, which were given in the city's impressive Mercatorhalle on the 22nd and 23rd May.

Conductors in this country are used to the demands placed upon them, and also upon the skills and musicianship of the orchestras they work with, to prepare for concerts on the basis of one three-hour rehearsal on the day of a performance. It was therefore a very pleasant surprise that I was offered two whole days – four three-hour sessions – in which to prepare for our concerts in Duisburg. Since the Bruckner *Mass in E minor* requires only wind and brass as an accompaniment to the voices, one three-hour session on the first rehearsal day in Duisburg was sufficient to prepare the performance with the necessary care. Work on *Dona Nobis Pacem* with the entire Orchestra thus began that same afternoon, and every player responded to the challenge of coming to terms with a totally unfamiliar work and idiom in the most exemplary way. The quality of the playing in every section of the orchestra was outstanding, with the greatest attention being paid both to the details of RVW's orchestration and the conductor's requests.

The Choir and the two soloists arrived on the evening of the first rehearsal day and came to the hall the following morning to sing with the Orchestra for the first time. They arrived as the strings were rehearsing the eloquent string passage (reminiscent of parts of the Fifth Symphony) which leads into the words: 'Nation shall not lift up sword against nation', and Choir members spoke afterwards of how moving they had found that first hearing of music, so familiar to them, being played with obvious devotion by a German orchestra. John Carol Case, a friend now for several years, commented to me after the rehearsal that he thought the orchestral playing was as fine as that of the London Philharmonic, with whom he had recently recorded *Dona Nobis Pacem* with Sir Adrian Boult. I ventured to ask the Leader of the Orchestra, Karl Röhrig, why we had not heard of them in England, given their excellence, but his disarming reply was: 'But there are five orchestras at least as good as us within fifty miles of Duisburg!'

On the second day of the visit, the members of Havant Choral Society singing with the Festival Choir reassembled to give a lunch-hour recital in the beautiful modern Liebfrauenkirche, which had replaced the old church destroyed in an air-raid in 1942. The programme consisted entirely of unaccompanied music by Heinrich Schütz. All but one of the pieces we performed, a *Magnificat*, were taken from the *Geistliche Chormusik* collection, published in 1648, the year which saw the end of the Thirty Years War which had devastated much of central Europe. On returning to England, the Havant singers found a touching letter of thanks awaiting them from the Pastor of the church.

The Mercatorhalle was full for both of the evening concerts, and the programme, at the Choir's insistence, contained both the full English text and a German translation of the words of *Dona Nobis Pacem*. The audiences' enthusiastic response to the music performed and the artists involved was all that could have been hoped for. Many details of the two evenings remain in the memory, such as an attendant presenting himself in the conductor's room ten minutes before the

start of each concert, asking for my *second* baton, explaining that, if needed, it could be taken from a ring specially attached to the first 'cellist's music-stand, and would therefore be immediately available in the event of an emergency! A similar courtesy was the kind presentation, shortly after the end of the second concert, of a reel-to-reel tape-recording of the entire performance. One other imperishable memory, still recalled with delight by many in the Choir, is of the moment at the end of the final concert, as the applause of the audience was being acknowledged, when the tuba player, sitting at the back of the orchestra, turned to the sopranos behind him and offered them all the sprigs of lily-of-the valley with which he had just filled the bell of his instrument. At the end of the evening, as a conclusion to the visit, a reception was held for all those who had taken part in the concerts, both singers and players, together with representatives from the city of Duisburg, during which appreciative speeches were made and gifts exchanged.

This *Hauptkonzert* was reported in considerable detail by the German press. Of the performance of Bruckner's *Mass in E minor*, the critic of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* wrote: "the Portsmouth Choir's performance, with its clarity and precision, placed most emphasis on the religious faith with which the Mass is imbued." A comment in the *Rheinsche Post* added: "they sang a legato that flowed uninterruptedly and irradiated the vocal lines with shimmering light", while the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* affirmed: "the fact that Bruckner's Mass was not composed for a concert hall but for the sacred setting of a church was forgotten in the face of ... the conductor's sensitive, one might almost say deeply religious understanding of the work."

The first-ever performance of *Dona Nobis Pacem* in Germany† received appreciative attention from all the critics, in particular the contributor to the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, whose article was headed 'Song of Peace from England': "The touchstone of this work, with its setting of words from the liturgy and the Bible, as well as from Walt Whitman and John Bright, is the longing for peace, and it was composed – most significantly – in 1936. With the fluently *durchkomponiert* choral passages and the sonorous orchestral setting, Raymond Calcraft was able to build up great arching edifices of sound – the spiritual commitment of the music and its expressive content moving in close relationship with the words. The high soprano of Wendy Eathorne, again and again interposing the title words of the Cantata, and the powerful baritone of John Carol Case, with his excellent declamatory style, contributed satisfyingly to this noble performance."



Forty years have passed since the Portsmouth Festival Choir's performances in Duisburg, in particular of *Dona Nobis Pacem*, but the significance of the event remains a very special memory for all those who took part. Having had the honour of studying and discussing the work with Sir Adrian Boult, and then to have been responsible for its first-ever performance in Portsmouth's twin city in Germany, with the associated emotions of grief, reconciliation and goodwill which were shared by everyone present, both artists and audiences, was the greatest of privileges.

Raymond Calcraft

Exeter

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† Although it was always believed that this was the first performance in Germany, I am very grateful to Mr Guy Thomas of the Oxford University Press Orchestral Hire Library, who kindly contacted OUP's agents in Germany and received confirmation from them that ours was indeed the first ever performance of *Dona Nobis Pacem* in that country.

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