



COURTESY LPC

# Rapid response

C&O last spoke to the London Philharmonic Choir's artistic director in 2008, but much has been brewing since then. **Harriet Clifford** catches up with Neville Creed to find out more

**A**fter a rehearsal of Poulenc's *Seven Tenebrae Responses* with the London Philharmonic Choir (LPC), the French conductor Bertrand de Billy turned to the LPC's artistic director, Neville Creed, and said, 'Are you sure this is an amateur choir?' Creed replied, 'Yes, absolutely'. Since its inception in 1947, formed after the 'Philharmonic Choir' disbanded at the outbreak of war, the LPC has grown in size and reputation to exist as a 200-strong pool of singers who work in close relationship with one of the world's top orchestras, the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO). 'We are amateur in the finest tradition in this country,' Creed explains, speaking prior to auditions and a rehearsal in the cavernous acoustics of Hinde Street Methodist Church, a peaceful sanctuary just around the corner from the chaos of Oxford Street.

Creed – the choir's artistic director since taking over from Jeremy Jackman in 1994 – explains that his pool of singers has gone from strength to strength since C&O spoke to him in 2008: 'It's a process of

continual development. Luckily, being in London, there's an influx of good singers coming to the city and I've been auditioning increasing numbers over the last 10 years. It means that the standards can rise.' The 'adventurous and interesting' repertoire selected by the LPO's principal conductor, Vladimir Jurowski, has helped to keep the good singers interested and has been paramount in the choir's development. Jurowski has been at the helm for 12 years and is in the process of handing over to Edward Gardner for the 2021-22 season. 'The orchestra has shown great confidence in us and we've responded by, I hope, providing a very good quality of choral singing.'

These highly competent singers come from all walks of life, with students, underground train drivers, actors and lawyers all in the ranks. In an audition, Creed explains, 'the main thing is the ability to blend, being musically intelligent. It's not a question of outstanding soloistic voices – in fact, sometimes that can be unhelpful – it's more a question of a good

▲ 'Amateur in the finest tradition': the London Philharmonic Choir brings people together from across the city to serve one of the world's top orchestras





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◀ choral contribution: blending well, understanding the intricacies of music, particularly being responsive.' This ability to react quickly is key, because in a rehearsal with a top conductor, things are not said twice: 'It's that flexibility which I'm looking for, and that's crucial for producing a fine performance.'

Creed feels encouraged by the increasing popularity of choral singing, and in particular of performing the 'big' repertoire, such as Verdi's Requiem or Mahler's Eighth Symphony. This desire to perform these works alongside a world-renowned orchestra undoubtedly encourages those who may have sung in university chamber choirs to join a larger choir. In Poulenc's *Seven Tenebrae Responses*, 'the choir has to be able to produce a big sound with the orchestra. And then there are lots of unaccompanied, very rich dissonant harmonies that need to be beautifully balanced, which you would expect

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from a chamber choir. We like to be flexible.'

On 4 April, the LPC performs Beethoven with the LPO at London's Royal Festival Hall. 'Of course, it's the Beethoven anniversary this year, so a lot of people are doing a lot of Beethoven. The Ninth Symphony is cropping up frequently, but Jurowski has decided that he'd like to perform some of the more unusual repertoire.' To fit this brief, the rarely performed *Cantata on the death of Joseph II* has been selected, a 30-minute cantata written when the composer was just 19 and performed here by 80 of the LPC's singers. Written for (but not performed at) the memorial of Joseph II – Holy Roman Emperor from 1765 – the piece has remained relatively obscure: 'There's a lovely soprano aria in the middle, which is used by Beethoven in his only opera, *Fidelio* – it's the moment when the hero, Florestan, is released from prison and this beautiful aria is sung; and it's in this cantata.' At the end of April (25), the orchestra performs the increasingly popular *Glagolitic Mass* alongside a 200-strong choir, under the direction of new principal conductor Edward Gardner. 'We're looking forward to working with him more regularly. We've done various projects with him, but he's going to be increasingly on the scene.' Thinking ahead to next season, the programme includes John Adams's *Harmonium*, Sofia Gubaidulina's *Über Liebe und Hass (On Love and Hatred)* – a 'tremendously challenging work' – Enescu's Third Symphony, and *Götterdämmerung*, as the *Ring* cycle comes to an end in February 2021.



▼ Artistic director Neville Creed looks for an ability to blend well, to understand the intricacies of music and to be responsive

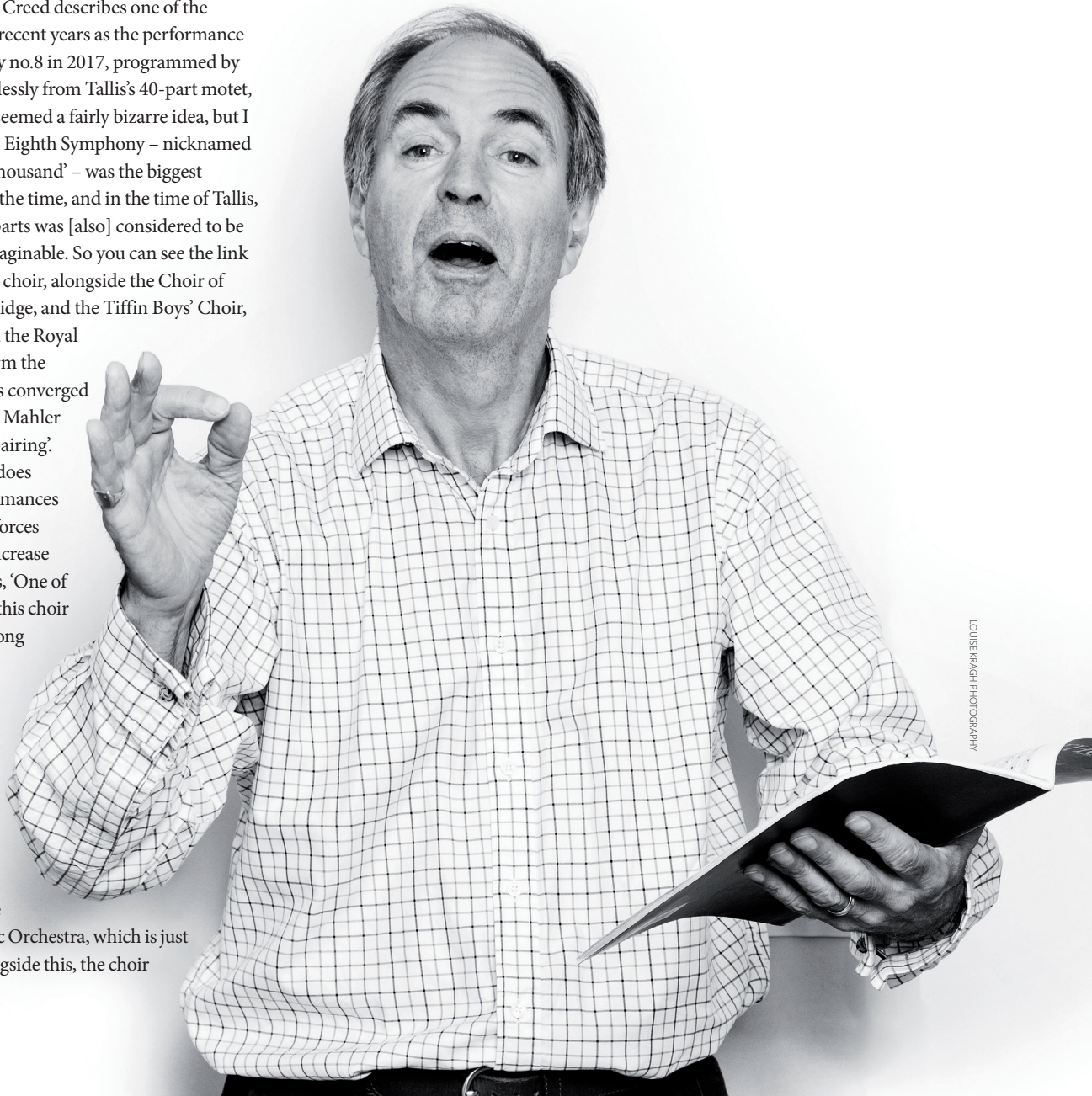
This selection of repertoire is a far cry from the clichéd image of the aged choral society tackling Bach Passions with warbling voices, chatting their way through weekly rehearsals at a leisurely pace. Instead, the LPC's singers seem sharp, professional, and responsive, in both their performances and their twice-weekly rehearsals. 'We have to be excellent,' says Creed. 'We're working with one of the top orchestras, and we're working with top composers, conductors and soloists, so it's absolutely crucial that we are at the top of our game and performing at the very highest level, able to respond to huge demands.' This, of course, does not come without its challenges, which in November 2018 came in the form of Magnus Lindberg's *Triumph to Exist*, performed on the eve of the centenary of the Armistice: 'That was exceptionally challenging music, but the choir responded really positively and produced a magnificent performance.'

More traditional works still have a place in the orchestra's repertoire. Creed describes one of the choir's high points in recent years as the performance of Mahler's Symphony no.8 in 2017, programmed by Jurowski to run seamlessly from Tallis's 40-part motet, *Spem in alium*. 'This seemed a fairly bizarre idea, but I suppose that Mahler's Eighth Symphony – nicknamed the 'Symphony of a Thousand' – was the biggest project imaginable at the time, and in the time of Tallis, writing a piece of 40 parts was [also] considered to be the biggest project imaginable. So you can see the link between the two.' The choir, alongside the Choir of Clare College, Cambridge, and the Tiffin Boys' Choir, was dispersed around the Royal Festival Hall to perform the Tallis, then the singers converged for the opening of the Mahler in a 'highly effective pairing.'

Although the LPC does present its own performances and sometimes joins forces with other choirs to increase in number, Creed says, 'One of the great strengths of this choir is that it has a very strong relationship with the orchestra. They will always ask us about repertoire and its suitability for us, and we will always respond positively wherever possible. That's our primary purpose – to serve the London Philharmonic Orchestra, which is just a huge privilege.' Alongside this, the choir

is involved in a number of outreach projects, including commissioning a Christmas carol by Paul Fincham in 2017, which continues to be performed annually by choirs around the UK, to raise money for the charity appeal Crisis at Christmas. This year's outreach includes performances with the London Youth Choir, and participation in the Beethoven 250 series organised by Southbank Centre, where the orchestra is in residence.

Looking ahead to the future of the LPC, Creed says, 'I hope it will continue on its road of development. We never want to sit still – we want to grow, both musically and in size. I think growing in size is really important – to fill large concert halls with appropriate sound – like the Royal Albert Hall or Royal Festival Hall, where we do most of our concerts – it needs at least 120 singers, ideally 150, and sometimes 200. My hope is to grow in all respects, and most importantly, musically, to be ever responsive.' ■



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