

# History of the Grange Choral Society

The choir was formed in 1961 by Geoffrey Stark (pictured right) from members of the Signals Research and Development Establishment, Christchurch. Geoffrey had transferred from the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough where he had been a viola player with the RAE Orchestra as well as conductor of the Farnham and Bourne Choral Society. Initially, madrigals, chorales and part songs were performed.



## Widening the membership

Membership was extended in 1962, to singers outside the SRDE. With rehearsals held every other week during the winter months, the subsequent increase in members made possible in 1963 a performance of Bach *Peasant Cantata* and other items at the Red House Museum in Christchurch.

## First use of orchestras

From 1964 orchestras were used in concerts where necessary, starting with a performance of Purcell *Dido and Aeneas*. The recruitment of singers continued and it became clear that under the guidance of Geoffrey it would be possible to attempt the larger and more complex works of the choral repertoire.

## Change to present name

By 1967, with growing membership outside of SRDE, the name 'Grange Choral Society' was adopted, and a regular pattern of weekly rehearsals, and two concerts a year was established. Initially concerts were held in various churches and schools, until 1969, when Mozart *Requiem* was performed in Christchurch Priory; this became the choir's home.

## Larger choral works

From these humble beginnings the society was able to promote much larger choral works including Bach *St. Matthew Passion*, Vaughan Williams *Dona Nobis Pacem*, Bernstein *Chichester Psalms*, Verdi *Requiem* and Elgar *The Dream of Gerontius*.

## New hands on the tiller

Geoffrey Stark died in 1981, and his son, Peter, an instrumentalist and conductor with Welsh National Opera, took over as conductor for Handel *Saul*. Martin Freke, Director of Music at Bournemouth School, was appointed for the following season and the Society continued to thrive under his energetic direction. The Society performed Elgar *Dream of Gerontius* in memory of Geoffrey in 1983. New works for the Society under Martin included Vaughan Williams *Sea Symphony*.

## Anniversary Concerts

Martin chose Verdi *Requiem* for the Society's 25th Anniversary Concert in 1986, which also marked the end of his directorship. **Paul Ellis**, music master at Sherborne School, then took up the baton, conducting memorable performances of Tuckey *Stabat Mater* with the composer present, and Rachmaninov *Vespers*. **Tim Hooper** was at the helm of the Society from 1997 to 2001. During this time, the choir introduced summer concerts, performing unaccompanied works and those with organ, as well as a performance of Walton *Belshazzar's Feast* in the Winter Gardens, Bournemouth with the Dorset Youth Orchestra. Tim brought new levels of choral skill and enjoyment, culminating

in 40th Anniversary Concerts of Verdi *Requiem*, Fauré *Cantique de Jean Racine* and *Requiem* and Haydn *Nelson Mass*.

**Christopher Dawe** was appointed Musical Director in October 2001. He has worked with highly acclaimed conductors in Hungary, Russia, Brussels and with Mark Elder in Britain and his expertise and wide knowledge of the choral repertoire have been invaluable in taking the Society forward. His teaching skill is very apparent and as an accomplished singer himself, he is able clearly to demonstrate what he wants from the music. With Chris, the Society improved in many aspects of presentation, intonation and an appreciation of the music's message. Chris resigned in January 2008 to take up a full-time teaching post in London.

**Daniel Cook**, Choral Conductor, Organist and Assistant Director of Music at Salisbury Cathedral took up the baton in 2008 and under his direction brought a new energy to the choir. We achieved several very memorable performances notably *Messiah*, *Verdi Requiem*, *The Canterbury Pilgrims* and our 50th Anniversary performance of *The Dream of Gerontius*. Daniel has moved on to become Master of Choristers and Organist at St David's Cathedral in Wales.

**Marcio de Silva** was appointed musical director in January 2012 whilst undertaking his post graduate studies in conducting at the Royal College of Music. Marcio achieved his masters in July 2013 and the choir is benefiting enormously from his passion and precision as a conductor. From his own background as a singer Marcio is passing on to the choir his experience in vocal projection and tonal quality. This has resulted in some very memorable concerts featuring composers from Bach to Vivaldi and some Brazilian composers from Marcio's home country. He also brought his operatic skills in the form of Opera Gala concerts in which he was able to show his considerable vocal talent. Sadly, after our magnificent 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert of *Verdi Requiem* in April 2022, Marcio has stepped down.

**Simon Earl**, Director of Music at Christchurch Priory was appointed musical director of the Grange Choral Society in 2022. Since then, the choir has performed a variety of choral pieces from familiar favourites to new compositions from local Dorset composers.