

IMOGEN HOLST AND THE PURCELL SINGERS

The recollections of Liveryman Anne Griffin

I was delighted to hear on my car radio that a book entitled *Imogen Holst – A Life in Music* has been compiled. The editor of the book, Christopher Grogan, Librarian of the Britten-Pears Library, and Rosamund Strode, Imogen's close friend, colleague and assistant, were talking about this important publication, which will be of great interest to music lovers. Imogen Holst was a musician, composer and musicologist of outstanding ability and enthusiasm.

I am forever grateful that in the 1950s I was a member of her choir, The Purcell Singers. I learned so much from that invaluable experience and the wide range of music that we performed. It was a privilege to take part in music-making of such a high standard. Imogen Holst was indefatigable in finding just the right music for us to perform. It was her proud boast that we sang in nine languages, including Russian and Syrian.

We rehearsed for the many concerts

and broadcasts at Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears' house in Chester Gate, London. I remember Julian Bream being there, as he joined us for the Thomas Morley Quatercentenary commemoration at the Royal Court Theatre, Sloane Square on 2 June 1957. On another occasion Ralph and Ursula Vaughan Williams came to listen to us rehearse, as did Lennox Berkeley. On 6 March 1955 we gave the first performance of his *Crux Fidelis* in a Museum Gallery Concert at the Victoria and Albert Museum. *Crux Fidelis* was reviewed as:

'this rich but initially austere piece, deeply devotional in character, and of unusual sonorous beauty.'

Also in that programme we sang *The Passion according to St John* by Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672). Wonderful music!

On 15 April 1956, again at the V&A, there was a concert of interest to the Musicians' Company, which included the first performance of *Requiem for Tenor Solo and Chorus* by Priaulx Ranier, who was the first woman to become a liveryman of the Company in 1983.

The *Requiem* is the setting of a poem written for the

purpose by David Gascoyne.


From *The Times*:

'The Purcell Singers, evidently spurred by Mr Pears' artistry, brought to this musically arduous, yet ultimately satisfying, work the same refinement of timbre and musical animation that had marked its singing of Palestrina and pre-classical composers. Imogen Holst's Purcell Singers are a body that might well inspire any composer. These 25 voices are all youthful; their tone is exquisitely clear, pure and fresh.'

Benjamin Britten arranged the Choral Dances from *Gloriana* (1953) for us to sing and we performed them on this occasion, and again on 19 November 1956 at a Macnaghten Concert for the promotion of contemporary music.

A further Gallery Concert, on 11 November 1956, was devoted to the music of Schubert and Schumann. We sang part-songs by both composers and Peter Pears and Benjamin Britten performed Schumann's *Dichterliebe* – a superb programme.

To celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of the Folk-Song Society (1898-1958) there was a recital of folk songs at Cecil Sharp House with Peter



The Purcell Singers at Blythburgh Church, 19 June 1956. Far left: Peter Pears, Benjamin Britten, Basil Douglas and Imogen Holst. Front row right: Anne Griffin and Rosamund Strode