

Sojourners in a strange land

Dr Christopher Dearnley was formerly a member of the Court and organist of St Paul's Cathedral.

THE FOCAL POINT of my first year in Australia was Christ Church St Laurence in Sydney. An historic church by Australian standards, it has a notable and splendid tradition of worship (Anglo-Catholic) and music going back 150 years.

It was my good fortune to have the opportunity of taking the Director of Music's place while he was away on leave for a year.

This gave a base for a variety of other musical activities: lectures, workshops, master classes and recitals in Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle. Most important were The Royal School of Church Music festivals, whether national or regional at cathedrals in Goulburn, Newcastle, St Andrew's Sydney, Brisbane, Devonport in Tasmania. The annual RSCM Summer School brings together participants from all states and offers an action-packed week of study and music making.

Opportunities

In Australia these festivals and Summer Schools provide vital opportunities for church musicians to sing together, to learn from each other, and to enjoy good company. Such events are especially valuable in a country where distances are vast and where, often too little encouragement is given to the ministry of music. Through the initiatives and hard work of local organisations, choristers and organists are given the chance to renew their skills and refresh their enthusiasm. Anything that nurtures a common European heritage of sacred music is important where there are many different cultural traditions and where the churches are relatively young.

Musical activity

I write this during a 3-month period "job sitting" for the organist of St David's Cathedral, Hobart. For a town of its size there is more musical activity, whether amateur or professional, than in many other comparable places. But let me return to last year at Christ Church St Laurence in Sydney.

This was the first church in Australia to have a robed choir, and music there has always played an important role. Its present choir (up to 30 adults) continues to maintain standards of excellence, and with its singing richly adorns the liturgy at Mass, Evensong and Benediction on Sundays and Holy Days throughout the year. The music covers a full spectrum from



Outside St Saviours Cathedral, Goulburn, N.S.W.

Gregorian tones to Anglican chant, Byrd to Stravinsky.

Also the church is in the happy situation of having an eclectic congregation that relishes the choir's contribution as much as it enjoys singing heartily a wide range of hymns. Its services are a spiritual staging post for many who are weary of more prevalent, mundane and prosaic presentations of the liturgy. The dignity of the worship and the friendliness of the parish, understandably make CCSL a point of pilgrimage for Sydneysiders and visitors alike.

Memorable year

1990 was a bumper year of music making, but it was in fact, no different from any other. The choir and I shared many exciting challenges, not the least being mastering the great settings of The Mass by Vaughan Williams and by Stravinsky. At all times the choir members' musicianship and awareness, their commitment and loyalty, was a continuing stimulus in our striving for excellence.

Once I had settled in I could enjoy with them the great moments such as The Holy Week and Easter liturgy, The Lent Concert on 1st April, a performance in The Opera House alongside the "Salvos", Mozart's Coronation Mass on Whitsunday, Haydn's "Missa in Angustis" for Christus Rex, The Advent Carol Service, and Schubert in G, with a string quartet drawn from the choir at Christmas.

Equal inspiration and pleasure was gained on less spectacular occasions. As with all good choirs, just as much care is taken with the ordinary routine as with the high festivals. I recall particularly the singing of the plain song psalms at Evensong, or a simple anthem like Blitheman's "In pace". Also the way the choir

honoured Newman at his anniversary on 5th August, skilfully singing the specially composed anthem "None but the holy".

Perhaps the secret of the choir's success lies in its close-knit homogeneity. At least that could be suggested by the year having three splendid choral weddings for members of the choir.

The year at CCSL passed too quickly for Bridget and myself. We were sad when we had completed our last service on 27th January. But in that year we had been made to feel totally at home as latter-day settlers. It is not just the excellence and beauty of the liturgy that hit us between the eyes.

We appreciate the fact that there is a church in the centre of Sydney that reveres God in a worthy way. That makes us kneel in heartfelt adoration. It is the way in which the parish reaches out from the superb enactment of the liturgy in natural love and affection to the busy and secular world outside the four walls of Christ Church.

Friendliness

And, on a personal level, it is the way Fr. Austin and his team, the church wardens, the choir, the servers, the whole congregation took us in as sojourners in a strange land, accepting us with the utmost friendliness, and embracing whatever we have been able to offer in the life of this unique talented and active parish.

Long may CCSL prosper, especially its music. All strength to Neil McEwan and the choir as together they help the congregation savour what George Herbert called the "Sweetest of Sweets". For church music was for him, and is for us all, a travelling companion that "knows the way to heaven's door"
C.D.