

Is Anyone Listening?

One of the Company's most recently clothed liverymen, Robert Mulholland, writes about a deep personal concern.

Robert Mulholland, founder-editor of the monthly magazine, is a journalist with a lifelong interest in music. As cornetist, he was a founder member of the National Youth Brass Band of Great Britain and later toured with the National Band of New Zealand. As journalist, he covered a wide range of subjects in New Zealand and Australia and with Thomson Newspapers and the *Daily Mirror* in Britain. Robert is chairman of Peak Press Ltd, a publishing and print company, a founder trustee of Buxton Opera House and of the Kinder Children's Choirs of the High Peak.

One of the great pleasures of my musical life in recent years has been my involvement with youth choral singing, merely as a supporter and founder trustee of one of the splendid groups that help keep alive the wonderful choral tradition of this country.

Some of these choirs reach the highest levels of excellence, performing traditional and contemporary music of sublime beauty and passion. Yet we hear precious little of them. They emerge into the limelight at some of the leading musical festivals such as the colourful International Eisteddfod in Llangollen, *Youth Music* events at the South Bank and infrequently in television shows such as BBCTV's popular *Sainsbury's Choir of the Year* and *Songs of Praise*. Yet, generally, despite their excellence, they command little national attention.

In my view, they represent a shining gem of the British musical scene. They provide immense pleasure to their audiences and introduce young people to a musical experience that enriches the rest of their lives and teaches learning and social skills that greatly benefit their all-round education.

So it is with deep concern that I hear that Britain's youth choral movement is facing a

crisis that threatens the existence of these fine young choral groups, and that, to make matters worse, it seems, no body is listening. The directors of a number of leading youth choirs speak with one voice on the subject. They believe that running their choirs and striving for excellence through the progressive acquisition of skills has been made much more difficult as a result of pressures arising from national curriculum testing in British schools.

Roy Terry, projects director with the Hammersmith and Fulham Youth Choir, recently twinned with Nadia and Lili Boulanger Conservatoire in Paris, says that so much now hangs on national curriculum test results in terms of parents' choice of school, the school's reputation and teachers' salary increases that after-school music activities are under serious threat.

"The amount of homework has increased, even for very young children, and music and other arts subjects have been marginalised in the curriculum in spite of recent declarations by the Secretary of State about the value importance of these subjects. It is very much the norm now that children in Year

6 of primary schools suffer a very narrow curriculum offer focusing on the subjects to be tested – they may eventually do some music and art after the tests have been sat, but this adversely affects the progressive acquisition of skills.

"Even when music has been squeezed out into after-school activities it is under threat there as well as a result of after-school 'booster classes' to do even more practising for national tests in English, maths and science. Rehearsals then have to take place in the evenings or on Saturday mornings, which reduces equality of opportunity since attendance is then totally dependent on the willingness or ability of parents to bring the children. All this is exacerbated because of the increase in charging for music activities."

Joyce Ellis, Founder-Director of the Kinder Children's Choirs of the High Peak, and David Victor Smith MBE, founder and director of the Farnham Youth Choir, are two other inspirational figures in the youth choral movement who have expressed serious concerns at the threat to their choirs. In his choir's newsletter, David goes as far to say: "Farnham Youth Choir is just beginning its

