

THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS

by John Woodward

SLOUGH PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY was created as part of the grand design conceived by Slough Estates Ltd. in the Thirties, which encompassed not only the building of factories but the development of housing, medical facilities, sporting and cultural pursuits for the workforces which occupied the many new sites created by the company.

The centrepiece of this welfare philosophy was The Community Centre, constructed by SEL in Farnham Road. On one site could be found multi purpose halls swimming pool, athletics and football facilities, and perhaps most important of all the Industrial Health Service Medical Centre. The project was thought sufficiently important to justify its opening by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1937.

All these desirable activities did not begin on day one following the opening. Professionals were installed to run The Centre and whatever plans they had must have been constantly called into question by the gathering storm clouds of war. Most readers will know that so far as Britain was concerned the period immediately after the debacle at Dunkirk in June 1940 was known as the "phony war" and it was probably during this time that The Centre authorities decided to press on with the creation of an organisation to promote and perform "classical" music using The Centre as its base.

It is frustrating to report that archival searches at Slough Estates Ltd. have failed to locate any extant meeting minutes for this early period but it does not need much imagination to see how, by the early part of 1941 the decision to continue with this project was an extraordinary act of faith. Germany's air war against this country had begun in earnest and virtually the whole country was under siege by the Luftwaffe. In his book "The Way We Were Then" Norman Longmate tells us that in early November 1941, 80% of the civilian population was taking cover in air raid shelters overnight while most of the rest were on duty as auxiliaries in various civil defence forces. We must never forget the fortitude and courage required by our predecessors in this Society as they struggled against the blackout, the obligatory carrying of gas masks and the ever present threat of air attack.

The Community Centre management invited a recently retired regimental music director to be its first Director of Music. Lt.Col. Miller accepted what was essentially an administrative role and obviously went about it with a will. He seems to have been appointed in the Spring of 1941 and the orchestra rehearsals commenced at the end of November. Choral rehearsals could not have started much after that for the inaugural concert was given in The Grand Hall of The Centre on 16th February 1942. Appropriately perhaps it was a performance of Handel's "Messiah".

The brief to Miller had been ambitious even had there not been a war in progress. He was to arrange eight concerts per year, but he actually organised no less than ten in the first year. About the only concession made to the war was the concert start time of 3p.m. on Sundays to minimise the chance of disruption by air raid.

There are two factors which go towards explaining how all this was possible. Firstly there were no financial problems, for the whole operation was paid for by The Slough Social Fund, the charitable arm of Slough Estates. Secondly, the presence of the headquarters of the RAE Central Band at Uxbridge and of a guards band at Windsor ensured a regular supply of extras to bolster the orchestra's ranks.

Many distinguished professional orchestral players, mostly in uniform, can be found in orchestral lists at this period. Programmes reveal the presence of Denis Brain, the incomparable horn virtuoso, his brother Leonard, an oboist, Gareth Morris, the future principal flautist of the Philharmonia and Harry Spain, later chosen by Beecham as bass trombonist when he founded the Royal Philharmonic after the war.

Lt. Col. Miller had recruited Sir William Harris, in charge of music at St. George's Chapel, as chorus master, whilst the orchestra was rehearsed and conducted by James Withers a professor at the Royal Academy of Music. Professor Withers enjoyed immense popularity amongst the regular players, witness the sense of outrage when, in 1945, The Centre management attempted, ultimately successfully, to oust him from his post.

This particular decision was taken because of a change of policy direction by The Social Fund, which was by then feeling the financial squeeze afflicting the whole country.

The manner of its implementation however reflects little credit on those involved. The Fund decided that SPS should continue but that the local education authority would have both financial and manpower input. Simultaneously the Society's management structure was modified. It would still be supported financially by the Fund, but the previously unlimited subsidy would be withdrawn and replaced by a generous (by the standard of the times) fixed grant.

The really significant change was the decision to remove Prof. Withers and put in his place the newly appointed County Music Adviser. This action did nothing for the Society's morale, given the esteem accorded to Withers and virtually guaranteed that the Fund nominee would find he had a hard act to follow.

It is not clear why Sir William Harris resigned from the post of chorus master at this time but one must assume a certain lack of enthusiasm for the imposed regime. The result was that the new Adviser, James Dawes found himself fighting a considerable amount of membership hostility, less because of any perceived shortcomings, but because of what he represented. There is a certain contrivance in Dawes' pleas that LEA matters will occupy more of his time, so that he must first surrender choral and then orchestral conducting.

When the post of chorus master became vacant, The Society, which by now had acquired some measure of autonomy in the running of its own affairs succeeded in engaging Dr. Sydney Watson, at that time Precentor at Eton College and for the 1947 season he was invited to accept the post of Director of Music, which almost overnight became a "hands on" appointment, something it had not been before.

The Society was, had it realised it, at the first of several important crossroads. It could now hire and dismiss its appointed professional musicians without consultation/interference as a result of further devolution of control by The Centre management whose financial support however was being reduced.

At first Dr. Watson's tenure of office was a flourishing one. He is still remembered by local musicians with great affection as an incomparable choir trainer and as an orchestral conductor with a clear and decisive beat - the very opposite of his spoken instructions which were often halted for many seconds by a crippling stammer.

The Society's committee emerged with great credit from its first brush over policy with Sydney Watson, when it refused to countenance his scheme to merge the choral section with Windsor & Eton Choral Society which he also conducted. He made two attempts to carry this proposal but was defeated on both occasions.

For a man accustomed to getting his way most of the time in matters musical at Eton, these two rebuffs must have seemed very irritating and may explain Watson's obstinacy in two other areas requiring compromise - the addressing of the falling audience attendance and the cost of hiring an increasing number of professional players ordained as essential by The Director.

During the war, the shortage of live entertainment was such that audiences flocked to The Society's concerts in a way which we can only envy now - no need for box office hype - just announce that the event was to take place. Matters such as strict adherence to fire regulations, seen as so important now, were then totally ignored as over 800 people at a time squeezed into The Centre's Grand Hall.

Now in the late Forties and early Fifties, public attitudes had changed. No longer did crowds rush out to any live entertainment. Promoters now needed to sell concerts and attention had to be given to what was "box office." Neither The Director nor the managing committee heeded this change in public attitude. Total subsidy followed by generous grants had bred alarming complacency.

As the television age dawned, audiences dwindled. Even a performance of the (then) popular choral work "Hiawatha", with piano accompaniment only lost the then considerable sum of £42. The Society was spared the task of dismissing Sydney Watson (if he refused to compromise), when he accepted a professorship at Oxford in 1955. Before he departed

Watson engineered the engagement of The Society's orchestra by The Eton College Music Society, financed it must be said with considerable generosity and with a resultant profit of £72. No doubt the committee of the day was profoundly relieved, but their gratitude must have been tempered by the knowledge that every one of Sydney Watson's thirty-three previous concerts had lost money (over £1000 in aggregate), but much more damaging was the year on year effect of declining audiences and membership morale.

Still looking to the past for its solutions, the Society re-engaged James Dawes briefly and then Dr. Geoffrey Leeds whose rehearsal techniques brought the orchestra close to mutiny. At last the committee acted decisively and dismissed him.

A new Director was needed for the 1957-8 season and the committee then did what perhaps it should have done several years before when it gained managerial control of its own affairs. It now looked forward and appointed a young man whose musical training and attitudes would take the Society into the second half of the century.

The selected candidate, John Wellingham might be described as "New Eton Man" - the Society subsequently numbered several more among its membership - who wanted to make a positive contribution to the fabric of local society. Wellingham's enthusiasm and drive were catching and although he was working with depleted forces, there was a feeling that the Society, under his direction and with his acknowledgement of the financial imperatives, would climb out of the abyss into which it had - almost - plunged. It was a severe blow when he announced his resignation in the Spring of 1959 to take up a more senior post at Dartington Hall.

Encouraged by what might be called The Wellingham Experience, the committee sought in some way to duplicate it. They were fortunate in not having far to look. David Wilson had not long previously been appointed as Head of Music at what was then Slough Grammar School. Almost at the same time Susan Hall had taken a similar post at St. Bernard's Convent. They both played bassoon and had joined our orchestra sharing the principal's chair. Several members had already played under Wilson in Beaconsfield where he had begun to conduct the choral society and had been impressed.

Consequently, David Wilson was invited to succeed to the post as Director from September 1959. Whilst he certainly inherited a new spirit of enthusiasm amongst the membership from Wellingham, nevertheless audiences still needed to be wooed away from television in 1959 and there were numerical deficiencies in choir and orchestra which gave rise for concern over the next decade. However there was to be no looking back in the area of repertoire selection. Wellingham's programmes had introduced work by Britten, Stravinsky and Prokofiev, whilst Wilson's first season included music by Copland, Mahler and Finzi. A judicious mix of music challenged players and halted the hitherto ever circulating roundabout of standard 18th. and 19th. century items, which together with the odd "safe" modern work had hitherto been thought of as being within reach of amateurs.

After a short while, David Wilson reverted to the original arrangement of employing a chorus master. The Society had the good fortune to secure the services of Kenneth Weller who had at that time established a considerable reputation both in the fields of operetta and church music, setting high standards in both. Together this pairing has been responsible for the Society's musical development for thirty years.

In 1961, Sir Geoffrey Byass relinquished the chairmanship after thirteen years' loyal service during a very difficult transitional period. With the benefit of hindsight it is easy enough to see now that his reactive rather than proactive stance relative to the dynamic of social change at the time was not the best response, but in that regard he was certainly not alone. When three members of each section were to be elected to the committee in 1958, it was noted that although 50% of the orchestra was aged under 30, not one officer or existing committee member was of like age save the Director of Music.

It was at this point (1961) that the committee made its most significant decision to date. It induced Fergus Dunlop to accept the role of chairman. There will be not a few current members who will never have heard of this remarkable man so a few relevant biographical details follow. Trained as an opera singer between the wars, Fergus Dunlop had enjoyed modest stardom when playing minor roles in the legendary productions by Busch and Ebert at Glyndebourne in the Thirties. The second war put a stop to all that. Afterwards Dunlop joined

the British Council where he promoted British artistic enterprise abroad. After retirement, he applied himself with his characteristic vigour to energising Slough Arts Festival which had drifted into cosy stupor and he did not hesitate, when invited to apply the same medicine to Slough Philharmonic.

Dunlop was a man of vision. He wanted SPS to represent the very best in amateur music making, insisted that its profile must be raised, declaring his intention of taking initiatives and began by urging the Borough Council to accept the fact that a society of proven quality deserved a venue in the town worthy of performances it was and would be giving. It was absolutely typical of the man that he had no difficulty in reconciling his status as a retired opera singer of distinction with singing bass in The Society's chorus.

After regular rehearsals in The Community Centre, The Society, first the chorus and then the orchestra was obliged to look elsewhere as the atmosphere of The Centre became steadily seedier. The estimable vision of the founding fathers, like those of the Cadbury and Lever families earlier in the century was beginning to look irrelevant in "the swinging sixties".

Concert venues had to be changed as well as Saturday dates in The Grand Hall became much harder to obtain. No sooner had the hall of Slough High School for Girls been selected and used briefly, than the Fire Authority banned its use for public performance and issued prohibition notices on every location in the town with a capacity in excess of 300. Fortunately some concerts were transferred to School Hall at Eton College, but The Society certainly lived on a knife-edge at this time.

The emergency simply goaded Fergus Dunlop into putting more pressure on The Borough Council to bring their arts centre plans to fruition. After interminable public consultation and internal strife, work began on the demolition of a large section of the North side of the High Street, which was followed by the construction of "The Fulcrum" complex.

It was to be ten years from consultation to completion and during that time The Society had to weather the venue crisis and cope with the rise of The Pop Music Culture. It was not an easy time, yet some memorable concerts were given during this period, most notable perhaps being an Eton based choral concert comprising Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms" and Berlioz's "Te Deum" (December 1975).

After many crises, financial and political and following labyrinthine negotiations for its use, The Society gave its first concert at "The Fulcrum" in the 1000 seater Thames Hall on Saturday March 5th 1977. Nearing his eightieth birthday, Fergus Dunlop had been demonstrating (to quote from his obituary) a drive which would have done credit to a man half his age, but he had been obliged to retire at the end of the 1975-6 season because of progressive illness. Throughout his period of office he had given an object lesson in negotiating the treacherous shoals of local politics and his firm grip on The Society's administration whilst it undertook significant organisational change were acknowledged as major achievements at the time. Twenty years later there is no need to modify that judgment.

The Society's fortunes improved. Although an almost unbelievable design compromise had prevented all save the smallest scale choral concerts taking place in The Thames Hall, the concerts which were held there attracted audiences which climbed quite quickly to around 800 and occasionally exceeded that figure. That the majority of choral concerts still needed to be held at Eton turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

Almost from the start the local press had been extremely hostile to the notion of a centrally placed arts complex and in concert with forces within the Council who had opposed the concept root and branch there began a process of constant sniping at and criticism of the continuing drain on authority funds, not unconnected with the indifferent nature of the management of the complex. Eventually the Council capitulated and sold the entire project to a cinema chain. Any illusion that this would simply change the landlord was destroyed when the new owners announced plans to gut the building and transform it into a multi-screen operation. It was a very sad day when the orchestra gave its last concert in The Thames Hall to an audience well in excess of 800 on Saturday 8th November 1985. The final notes heard in this seventeenth visit were those of the last movement of Rachmaninov's Symphony No.2.

The sense of frustration felt by all those who had worked very hard to drag Slough's concert giving into the second half of the century (albeit 25 years late) may be imagined.

In the intervening six years there has been steady progress so far as technical standards are concerned, but constant anxiety about the availability of concert venues. The pressure on Eton College by societies similarly placed to ourselves is clearly reaching intolerable levels. Meanwhile a more modest alternative to 'The Fulcrum' is still as far away as that project was in the early sixties. Audiences who were becoming accustomed to the creature comforts offered at "The Fulcrum" before it was sold, are understandably not enthusiastic about the unavoidably Spartan front of house situation at Eton, nor of the all pervasive ambience of popcorn at the one remaining venue in the old buildings, originally known as "The Planet Theatre" but now called "Gallery Five". This is an acoustically hostile environment in which to play music with limited seating, but at least the audience has a good view of proceedings and it does give The Society a foothold in the town.

This has been a short history of the first fifty years of Slough Philharmonic Society. The harsh lesson to be learnt by all amateur societies with artistic aspirations during that period is that they must improve or perish. This austere message comes from the public whose expectations have been raised (some would say unrealistically) by massive exposure to professional performance (a good deal of it on television), and in the case of music to the perfection attainable on records, being given yet another boost by recent developments in the new technology.

Slough Philharmonic Society has done much to meet these demands, not it must be said without some reservations on occasion. It lacks neither good musicians, good direction nor the will to succeed. The most acute problem - performing venues - will be ever present for some years yet. After fifty years of never less than well-intentioned service, some of it musically outstandingly good by any amateur standards, it can fairly be said that The Society deserves a good deal better at the hands of its community than it enjoys currently.

At such times thoughts turn to the (then) part time City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra which was promised a concert hall in 1922. They moved in in 1991. They at least had a sizeable town hall to use in the intervening seventy years.