When John Bertalot conducted the first rehearsal of his newly formed BLACKBURN BACH CHOIR on 20th May 1965, he little thought that exactly 50 years later (plus 10 days) he would be invited by the present director, Samuel Hudson, to conduct the renamed choir in a gala concert which would be attended by former alums, including 7 founder members, with two more former conductors, Gordon Stewart and Richard Tanner.

The first rehearsal of the Blackburn Bach Choir was photographed by the Lancashire Evening Telegraph.

We aimed at the very highest standards mixed with fun, and within two years we won the national rounds of the BBC’s international singing competition Let the Peoples Sing. In other words, we were rated as the finest mixed voice amateur choir in the UK – and we achieved this for two years in succession.

Our annual carol concerts in King George’s Hall, Blackburn, attracted capacity audiences of 1,500, and our regular ambitious concerts in the cathedral inaugurated the cathedral’s concerts’ series, which we enjoy today.

We also recorded a wholly unaccompanied Wednesday Choral Evensong for the BBC which was broadcast on JB’s 51st birthday – 15th September 1982. That included not only the longest psalm in the BCP but also a long anthem, Bach’s double choir motet, Be not afraid (in English!), Gray’s double choir Canticles and JB’s double choir Festive Responses.

In December 1982, after 18 eventful years as the cathedral’s music director, JB left the cathedral, and also the RNCM where he was a Senior Lecturer, to take up similar posts in Princeton, New Jersey.

The choir was renamed The Renaissance Singers, and they have been directed ever since by all succeeding Directors of Music of Blackburn Cathedral.

And so, after much hard work by the current Singers’ committee, headed by Jean Duerden, who had traced many past members of the Singers to invite them to attend this half-century milestone, and by Samuel Hudson who had worked on the programme, and by Alizon Elliott, a long-time member of the Singers, who wrote a fascinating article about the Singers’ eventful history which was included in the printed programme, the day arrived for the 50th Anniversary concert.

The Nave was packed and the atmosphere was electric because of the historical significance of this 50th Anniversary Concert, and also because in the audience were many former members of the choir, including 7 founder members.

L-R: Founder member Dorothy Wade and her husband, David. Lindsey Cooper, widow of the choir’s 2nd conductor, David Cooper (1983-94). Concert pianist Martin Roscoe (who had been a harmony student of JB’s at the RNCM!) and long-time former member, Margaret Robinson.

And seated immediately in front of them, in the seat of honour in the front row, was Bernard West (96) who was our founder secretary/treasurer/librarian/archivist … and bass. It was his organizing efficiency which enabled the Blackburn Bach Choir to become a cohesive body. Our debt to him is incalculable.

Bernard was also a long-time bass in the cathedral choir where he was also the efficient librarian. Many of the choir’s older sets of music still bear Bernard’s allocating of parts in his neat handwriting such as ‘Dec Bass 1’.

The four conductors took their bow:

Jean                          Sam
Alizon

Samuel Hudson had generously invited JB to conduct the first and last items on the programme.

1. Vaughan Williams’ *Linden Lea* had been a firm favourite with the Blackburn Bach Choir, for they had ‘realised’ the meaning of the words so creatively, such as singing the word ‘hush’ with a slight break (*hu-sh*) and really feeling that the apple tree really did ‘lean down low’ for me!

The Renaissance Singers sang this timeless setting with equal sensitivity, so much so that several members of the audience said that they really felt that this essentially English story was being told to them!

2. Then Samuel Hudson conducted a masterly performance of Bach’s double-choir Motet: *Der Geist hilft, (The Spirit also helpeth us).*

This was probably the most demanding item of the whole concert, for whenever the word ‘Geist’ appears, Bach uses running semiquavers to illustrate the appearance of the Holy Spirit as a rushing mighty wind upon the disciples at the first Pentecost. (Acts Chapter 2). The Singers sang magnificently.

3. Then came one of the evening’s most unusual anthems: *Stars*, by Eriks Ešenvalds (b.1977), for as the choir sang this ethereal music, they also played tuned wine glasses. The sound was magical.

4. Samuel then conducted yet another modern anthem: *Viri Galilaei* by Patrick Gowers (1936-2014). This was skilfully accompanied on the organ by Assistant Director of Music Shaun Turnbull and Organ Scholar Joseph O’Berry.

   Samuel had heard this anthem sung earlier that month by the choir of King’s College, Cambridge during the Cathedral Organists’ Conference. The Renaissance Singers’ performance was equally thrilling.

5. It was the turn of Gordon Stewart to conduct his chosen music – which was a set of Three Yorkshire Folk Songs arranged by Robert Cockroft (b. 1951).

   Gordon introduced the music to the audience with great good humour (notice the Singers’ smiles, and Bernard West on the front row).

   Gordon’s style of conducting is irrepressible and he was so gracious as to share the applause with the arranger.

6. After the interval Richard Tanner conducted an expressive performance of Byrd’s *Ave Verum.*

And the Singers applauded Gordon, too!
It was Richard who greatly expanded the cathedral’s music programme during his 13 years with us.

He not only founded The Friends of Blackburn Cathedral Music (FoBCM) – a body of dedicated musicians who help raise funds to sponsor our ambitious concerts (with professional orchestras and soloists), but he also founded the Girls’ Choir and instituted daily choral services.

Our 1969 Walker organ was also rebuilt and enlarged during his time with us, and a Tickell chamber organ and a superb grand piano were purchased as well.

Richard certainly left his mark here!

Samuel Hudson then conducted four very varied items:

7. Britten’s demanding Hymn to St Cecilia.

8. Byrd’s exciting Laudibus in sanctis.

9. And then an anthem commissioned for this 50th anniversary composed by former Assistant Director of Music, James Davy, Singers to Come.

This is a demanding anthem in multiple parts which the Singers relished.

James was the ebullient and highly talented Assistant Director of Music of our Cathedral, whose ability to foster firm friendships as well as to promote high standards of music, endeared him to us all. He also met his wife, Sarah, here, through their love for riding horses!

James is now the ebullient Director of Music of Chelmsford Cathedral from where he drove all the way to be with us that evening after playing for a wedding.

James had been acting Director of Music during Richard Tanner’s Sabbatical. So he, too, had been an inspirational conductor of the Singers.

10. Samuel chose for his final piece, Bob Chilcott’s popular setting, In a golden world – which was highly appropriate, for this was our Golden Anniversary, and all musicians wore golden roses.

11. Samuel Hudson had generously invited the Singers’ founder to conduct the final anthem: JB’s arrangement of Amazing grace which enabled the audience to stand and join in the penultimate verse: ‘When we’ve been there ten thousand years…’

JB rehearsed the audience who responded magnificently – making a thrilling crescendo on ‘bright shining as the SUNNNN!’

Shaun Turnbull ‘pulled out all the stops’ for his splendid accompaniment, and the choir sang their hearts out!

The audience just wouldn’t stop clapping – but they had to as there was a photo session of the Singers, the Conductors and all the Alums – including the 7 founder members – taken by Canons’ Virger, Alex Barnes. (See the last page for this photo.)

The Singers, Conductors and Alums then enjoyed a celebration party in the Cathedral’s South Transept.

Founder-members: Constance Heald, Margery Howarth, Joan Naya, JB, Dorothy Wade, Millicent Sleight and Ian Hollin.

(Past and present Directors, James Davy, JB, Richard Tanner & Gordon Stewart, and present Director, Samuel Hudson.

Pride of place was taken by a two-tiered cake created by Renaissance Singer Helen Davies, on which she had inscribed the names of the Singers’ conductors, as well as the Singers’ logo which had been created by founder singer, Peter Heald.

Past Directors: James Davy, JB, Richard Tanner & Gordon Stewart, and present Director, Samuel Hudson.

The 50th Anniversary party in full swing.

Photo (R) of Helen Davies (L), cake creator, and Jean Duerden Singers’ Chairman both of whom, with so many others, had worked so hard to ensure the success of this unique and ever-to-be-remembered evening.

Jean wrote: ‘It was an exhausting but exhilarating day which none of us will ever forget. We are all very privileged to sing in such a wonderful choir and to have experienced such marvellous directors of music over the years.’

Final bows: