

Tonbridge Philharmonic Society – then and now: 1946-2016

Tonbridge Philharmonic Society – known colloquially as TonPhil or TPS - was born in the aftermath of the Second World War. As current Hon Secretary, it has been fascinating looking through the minutes of the meetings that have taken place over the last seventy years, and it seems to me that allied with the joy of making music, this organisation provides a chance to bring some peace into our everyday lives. The act of singing, of playing an instrument, takes the individual out of her/himself while at the same time focussing in on making the sound in the best way one can. A big concert leaves performers exhausted, exhilarated and, for me, as if the soul has been washed and ironed smooth again. If this is true for others, this effect must have been so welcome in the shock of the end of the war, when the purpose of lives had changed so greatly and so quickly, when the bombsites were greening over and food rationing was increasing, making life even more difficult than before.

The opening chapters:

The Report of Public Meeting to inaugurate a Tonbridge Philharmonic or Choral Society, held on Friday 7th June 1946 at 8 o'clock pm. Thus opens the first entry in a large dark book, cloth-bound and with leather corners. The endpapers are marbled and there is an annotation 20/2 in pencil. Was that the price? If so, the first investment the Society made would have been worth more than £25.00 today.

The first few pages have tabs and letters, like an address book, and then there are two blank pages before the minutes start, written in ink in a flowing hand, probably by Mrs AR Hurst, the very first Hon Secretary.

There is little to indicate what prompted this first meeting, except that it must have been only one of many movements to enliven the drabness of the immediate post-war period. Some of the 5 million serving personnel were still to undergo demobilisation (it took 18 months from June 1945). The 18,000 people then living in Tonbridge had understood almost as much as Londoners what it meant to be at war. Tank traps and barbed wire had been installed in the High Street and defensive 'pillboxes' were installed along the banks of the River Medway. As 620 trains ferried over 300,000 troops away from the chaos of Dunkirk, local people turned out to provide food and drink from their own limited supplies. On 16th December 1942 bombs aimed at the station destroyed homes in Albert Road and Chichester Road. Three people died and around thirty were injured.

Notables of the town present at this inaugural event included the Vicar of Tonbridge, the Rev Russell White, who presided over the proceedings, together with the Headmaster of Tonbridge School. The purpose of the meeting was declared to be *to build into a strong virile fellowship all who valued the practise and performance of great Choral Works as well as other musical activities.* The Vicar stressed *the hope that any action decided upon that evening would not militate against any choral society existing in Tonbridge, but rather that it might help to strengthen their interests.* The motion that a society be formed was then put to the meeting and carried unanimously.

After some considerable discussion it was agreed that the society be called 'The Tonbridge Philharmonic Society', and the meeting elected a committee to carry this

intention forward. It was agreed that the first annual meeting should take place on October 4th 1946. A discussion regarding the most suitable day for rehearsals concluded that they would gather at *8 o'clock pm prompt* and should last one and a half hours. The Parish Church was placed at the disposal of the members for rehearsals, with the first to take place on Friday 14th June 1946. Some eighty people signified their intention to become members of the society. Starting as they meant to go on, the meeting concluded with the singing of certain choruses of Handel's *Messiah*, conducted by Dr AW Bunney DMus, organist of Tonbridge School, and accompanied by Mr EM Dent. It had been proposed that the first work to be presented would *be rendered in Holy Week 1947*.

The large committee, thirteen people, met for the first time in the Parish Church Vestry on 28th June 1946. The first matter under consideration was the proposed set of rules. It is not recorded which was the more contentious, but there were some changes made, and the final rules were set out as follows:

1. *The name of the Society shall be 'The Tonbridge Philharmonic Society' and its object shall be the practise and performance of great Choral Works and other musical activities*
2. *The Officers of the Society shall consist of the President, Vice President, Hon Musical Directors, Hon Secretary, Asst Hon Secretary, and Hon Treasurer*
3. *The management of the Society's affairs shall be in the hands of the Officers and a Committee of four members (one from each vocal part) with power to co-opt not more than two additional members. In the event of emergency any three of the Officers shall have the power to act*
4. *The Officers and Committee shall be elected annually*
5. *The subscription of vocal members shall be ten shillings per annum*
6. *The subscription of subscribing members shall be not less than five shillings per annum*
7. *New members shall be required to sign a form of application, and to give an undertaking to attend rehearsals as regularly as possible and to advise the Hon Secretary of their resignation should it become necessary*
8. *An attendance register shall be kept by the Committee Member for each vocal part*
9. *The final decision regarding the choice of music shall be in the hands of the Committee*
10. *The Society does not undertake to provide music at less than the retail price*
11. *The funds of the Society shall be deposited at National Provincial Bank, Tonbridge Branch, in the name of the Society and the Hon Treasurer and Hon Secretary for the time being are authorised jointly to sign and endorse cheques*
12. *The Annual Meeting shall be held on the last Friday in June of each year*
13. *Any other matter not provided for in the rules shall be dealt with by the Committee*

Quite a set of rules! The structure has not changed so much in the intervening years, except that the orchestral players have now swelled the ranks of members. And when the average income was £416, the subscription of ten shillings was actually a smaller percentage (0.12%) than the current subscription of £150 against the current average income, which is 0.35%.

The first meeting also decided that the choice of soloists for the forthcoming performance of *Messiah* should be left with the Musical Directors, and agreed that *they should obtain the services of two really well-known and two lesser known singers, at a*

total cost not to exceed forty guineas. This budget of £1600 might be considered as less than generous by today's Musical Director, but they managed to secure the services of Miss Dorothy Bond, a coloratura soprano who became a favourite of Sir Thomas Beecham, before her untimely end in a road accident at the age of 31. She was to be joined by the tenor Mr Thomas Soames, who found fame as an interpreter of Peter Warlock's music, with a highly-regarded recording of *The Curlew* to his name. We can only assume that the other two, Miss Bodey and Mr Tate, fell under the category of 'lesser-known'.

The Secretary was instructed *to accept the invitation of the Tonbridge Council of Social Service that the Society should join them*, and then agreed that he should represent them on their General Committee.

The issue of finances was already a hot topic and it was suggested that, after the *Messiah*, they should concentrate on a Festival Evensong, for Ascension Day 1947 – which could be undertaken without engaging soloists.

The first AGM took place, on 4th October in the Parish Church Hall, with 75 members present, at which *the Musical Director's report was received with acclamation.* The Treasurer was happy to announce that £50/10/- had been received and expenditure had been £9/1/10, so that there was £41/8/2 in the bank. A great state of affairs.

Things were not quite so rosy as regarded attendance at rehearsals, with average absentees amounting to 30% - although this might have been influenced by the holiday period.

There was a unanimous acceptance of the Rules, and an enthusiastic discussion on future programming.

November 1946

More detailed work on preparations for the concert was underway. 100 posters were to be printed, along with 1,000 programmes, to be sold at 1/- each. Curiously, the record then states that *to facilitate distribution, each member will be allowed 6 programmes at a charge of 5/-, additional copies will be provided on application at 1/- each.* Special invitations were to be sent to the Chairman and Members of Tonbridge Urban District Council, the local Member of Parliament, Heads of Schools, Clergy and Ministers of local Churches and a number of prominent local people.

The subject of the recently inaugurated Tonbridge War Memorial was considered, and it was unanimously decided that proceeds raised from the Society's Ascension Day 1947 performance, after all expenses had been met, should be donated to this Fund.

The first time a dress code was raised was when Mrs Groom *sought guidance on behalf of the lady members respecting the wearing of hats in church, and it was agreed that they should be worn, and that the Committee could safely leave this to the good taste and discretion of these members.*

1981

Thirty-five years later, and halfway through the Society's history, the records are no longer handwritten, but are typed and stapled into the Minute Book. The Society was moving forward in terms of technology with the purchase, for £464, of a *duplicator and*

rotary scanner. This was partly funded by a donation of £250 from the National Westminster Bank.

By this time some names appear that would be familiar to today's members. Mr Robin Morrish (conductor until 2014 and is now the Society's president) and Mrs Eileen Best (a member since 1976) were already being recognised for their contributions. Subscriptions had risen to £6.50 and rehearsals took place on a Friday. However, some of the Committee were not entirely happy – the Treasurer wished to relinquish his post after 18 years, and Mr Harold Best was looking for a replacement to himself as Administration Manager. There was a discussion as to the need to limit how long officers should serve.

All was clearly not well. The Conductor's AGM report noted that *a considerable number of chorus members and some string players have become somewhat selective over which concerts they support*. In recognising the Committee's efforts, he goes on to say that *in these days of urban disorder ... those who serve the institutions of any town or community have a role to play which is becoming increasingly vital to the wellbeing and even the survival of our town*.

The Secretary's report for the AGM recorded the death of Dr Bunney, *a well-love musical figure in Tonbridge for very many years*. Dr Bunney had been one of the original organisers of the Society, and had latterly, albeit briefly, been President. She noted that although there were only 10 fewer members, *these numbers have by no means remained constant at rehearsal*. She had also been trawling through the archives, since she noted that it was a problem *that had reared its head ... as far back as 1964*.

In October 1981 the issue of dress appears again. A preference had been shown for 'black and white', with the men in dinner jackets when possible. Seat prices were raised to £2, with the anticipation that they would be raised again in the future. Money was clearly on everyone's mind, with a discussion as to whether commercial sponsorship would be possible to enable the society to employ *really good soloists*. There was much discussion, with one person commenting that *in an area such as ours, the Society should be able to survive without financial assistance*. One way of doing this was to hold a *Messiah for All*, with everyone paying £1.50 to take part, whether they were singing or forming the audience. The next meeting's minutes show that this was a great success

Mr Harold Best noted that the Assembly Hall (Tunbridge Wells) would be opened in the following year and that it was probably *not suitable for our use*, but that TPS should try it out.

Today

Ladies in hats? In 2016? I don't think so! TPS rehearse on Wednesdays these days, as Fridays are far too taken up with other activities. We consider it a great success if we can get everyone in black for our concerts, but who knew there were so many shades of one basic colour?

Meetings of the Executive Committee are now attended by volunteer members of the Society, rather than just the 'great and the good' of the community. Since 1951 we have our orchestra to consider, which means that we present some concerts without any singing at all.

It is interesting to see that there are some timeless themes: how to increase audiences, how to ensure people attend rehearsals, and the inevitable budget discussions. Marketing is now done through social media and the internet, we have to think about regulations around safeguarding of young and vulnerable people, and we are closing a bank account as there is now a charge for using it rather than interest earned. Seating is a still vexed issue – whichever the venue there is not quite enough space for someone

We continue to perform the ‘favourites’ – our *Messiah* earlier in the year was a huge success, with our conductor taking it at a brisk pace and encouraging the soloists to bring an operatic feel to their arias, while the ‘Proms-style’ concert at Tonbridge Castle had all the flag-waving audience involvement that you might expect.

Matthew Willis our MD since 2014 has raised standards in a way few would have anticipated. He is not afraid of presenting us with the unfamiliar – Holst’s *The Cloud Messenger* is not often performed but we will be including it in our November 2016 concert, or the demanding. 2018 will include Britten’s *War Requiem*, appropriate timing for this very emotional work.

Not unreasonably, we have no-one now singing who was part of those early days, although we have a number who have been members for many decades. Over the last two or three years we’ve focused on recruiting the next generations of local amateur musicians, and we have increasing numbers of members in their thirties, twenties or even teens. Whatever part members play, whichever voice part they take, those with more experience blend with and support individuals new to making music on a large scale.

The purpose of the Society at its outset was described as *the practise and performance of great Choral Works and other musical activities*. There is no doubt that we are maintaining this purpose and intend to do so for years to come.

Joanna Mace
September 2016