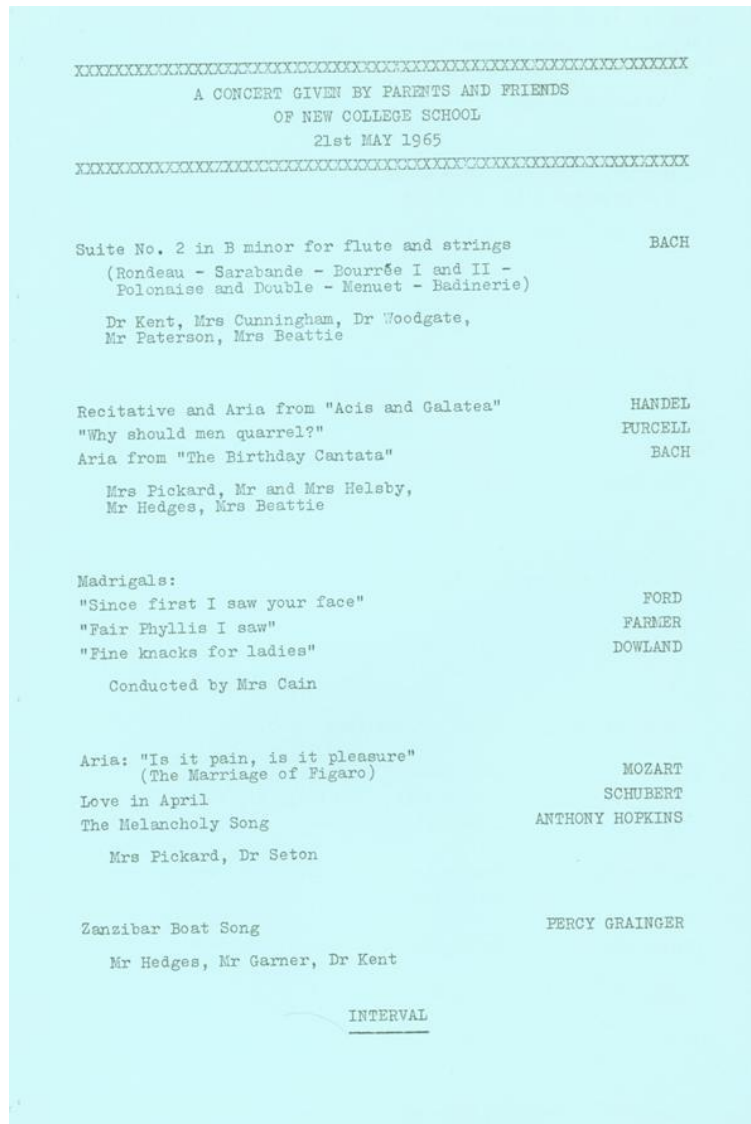


## New College School Choral Society

On 21 May 1965, there took place at New College School ‘A Concert Given by Parents and Friends’ of the school. It comprised a variety of performances, ranging from three pianists playing Percy Grainger’s *Zanzibar Boat Song* at the same piano, to Mozart, Schubert, and Hopkins songs sung by Mrs Pickard, to an apparently hilarious finale of Leopold Mozart’s *Toy Symphony* featuring ‘Mr Helsby’s gentle cuckoo and Mrs Hedges’ watery nightingale’. Also prominent were a number of madrigals and part-songs, performed by ‘a large group of enthusiastic singers, directed by Mrs Cain’, mother of a then sixth-form chorister. This group of singers—choir—did include such luminaries as the college organist (1959–1976) David Lumsden and his wife Sheila, and the school head of music Mr Y. Caloutsis. It seems to have been the first attempt to involve a wider, in many cases highly talented, community of musicians in the musical life of the school.<sup>1</sup> This was also not too long after parents had become more involved in fund-raising for the school with the formation of the New College School Equipment Fund Committee at a meeting of parents on 3 February 1959. Its purpose had been defined as ‘raising funds for additional equipment for the new school buildings’. By 1965, it was well established and into its role with a trust deed promulgated on 1 October 1964, minutes of committee meetings and AGMs, annual accounts, and regular events such as an annual bazaar, a jumble sale, dinner dances, fireworks, and social evenings.<sup>2</sup> In short, there was already greater parent involvement in the school, and the logical extension of that might well be also into the school’s musical life. Another factor of parents just being around the school more was of course the shift from boarding to day status for its pupils. The then headmaster,



New College Archives, Oxford, NCA NCS/C3/5  
 Programme for the 1965 concert by school parents and friends

I am grateful to Roger Allen, Richard Poyser, Thomas Neal, and James Mitchard for contributions to this overview.  
<sup>1</sup> There may have been a precedent in a concert in the Hall on 6 December 1878 which featured John Farmer’s children’s oratorio *Christ and his Soldiers*, presumably sung by choristers and perhaps others from the school. The soloists included a soprano rather than a treble, alongside a bass, so there may have been adult participation in the oratorio, alongside perhaps the songs and piano pieces in part 2; participants are unfortunately not named: New College Archives, Oxford, NCA CH/H5/1878.  
<sup>2</sup> The archive of the Equipment Fund Committee is New College Archives, Oxford, NCA NCS/E2.

Alan Butterworth, circulated parents about this move in May 1961, though boarding was not to be finally finished until 1992.<sup>3</sup>

At the time, this 1965 concert might have been seen as the start of something. The School Magazine reviewer summed up the evening as ‘a resounding success, enjoyed by performers and audience alike. Let us hope it will not be the last’. The concert does seem to have been part of a trend then. Arranged and produced by Caloutsis, it was one of a number of initiatives that he had developed since coming to the school, at first part-time in 1960/1 and then full-time in the following year, in an attempt seemingly to broaden the range of musical opportunities at the school, the life of the school, and its ever-growing wider community of parents and friends.<sup>4</sup> A concert in Easter Term 1961 had seen ‘the first appearance of the newly-formed school orchestra’, and the similar concert in 1963 had seen the first performance by ‘the School Choir, formed out of non-chorister singers from the Upper School’, which even performed with the New College Choir in the School Concert on 20 March 1965. An opera—Mozart’s *Bastien and Bastienne* (‘a thing of beauty to linger endlessly on the memory’)—was put on in July 1962, involving choristers and non-choristers, with ‘the experiment’ repeated in the following year with Thomas Arne’s *The Cooper*.<sup>5</sup>

This burst of creative and organisational zeal may not then have persisted, though the School Orchestra and the School Choir, for those not involved in the New College Choir, have generally continued in one form or another. However, the concert by parents and friends seems to have been more of a one-off yet it is an antecedent of the present (2025) New College School Choral Society in involving and making use of the tremendous talent pool of this constituency of the school. Nowadays, this is generally in association with a choir of non-choristers from the school, known as the Chamber Choir, thereby providing both an opportunity for the boys to sing with more mature singers, and vice versa. Not to be underestimated is also the challenge that it provides for the conductor in preparing and marshalling such disparate forces to produce a balanced and quality sound.

The concept of parents, and perhaps alumni and friends, performing for or even with their progeny, seems to have been in abeyance for a little while after the 1965 concert. A Families Concert was put on on 24 June 1978 by Donald Lane, featuring especially Saint-Saëns’s *Carnival of Animals*, with various other instrumental pieces. The headmaster exulted in his newsletter ‘This must not . . . be a once-off. The conception of such a concert is a stroke of genius and the execution proves worthy of it’. His words were heeded, and the third iteration of the Families Concert, on 24 May 1980, included a vocal work, Bach’s Cantata no. 140 *Wachet auf*, featuring the joint forces of boys and parents, conducted by Michael Smedley, director of music.<sup>6</sup> This may however have been the last of its kind for a while as it is not until the era of Roger Allen as director of music (1988–2004) that the direct line of descent to the 2025 era of Choral Society and Chamber Choir can be clearly traced.

In 1989, a concert seems to have heralded the inception of the New College School Concert Choir.<sup>7</sup> This was established by Roger Allen as one of the initiatives made possible by the then headmaster Jonathan Edmund’s introduction of the Saturday Morning Arts Programme. The choir’s purpose was to provide an opportunity for boys in the school who were not choristers to enjoy the benefits of singing. It also provided an opportunity for the boys, and their director, to experience performing with other choirs, and in venues outside the school/college environment,

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<sup>3</sup> NCA NCS/B1/4/1; Jonathan Edmunds, *New College Brats: A History of the Life and Education of the Choristers of New College, Oxford* (Oxford: New College School, 1996), p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> *New College School Magazine* 1963–68, summer 1965, pp. 16–17, New College Archives, Oxford, NCA NCS/GC1/4; music concert programmes, New College Archives, Oxford, NCA NCS/C3/5.

<sup>5</sup> *New College School Magazine* 1956–62, summer 1961, p. 9, summer 1962, pp. 10–11, and *New College School Magazine* 1963–1968, summer 1963, pp. 17–18; NCA NCS/GC1/3–4; music concert programmes, NCA NCS/C3/5.

<sup>6</sup> New College Archives, Oxford, NCA NCS/GC1/6; NCA NCS/C3/5.

<sup>7</sup> A November 1990 concert by this choir is heralded in the School Newsletter for Michaelmas 1990 as the ‘second joint concert with . . . the Concert Choir’, NCA NCS/GC1/8.

aspects that have very much continued. So, the Concert Choir’s first, and second, outings were in recitals with Radley College Chapel Choir, performing for instance Rutter’s *Requiem*, amongst other pieces, on 7 November 1990. These were also now exclusively choral concerts, rather than the choir doing a turn amongst other performers. The choir was also performing with quality professional musicians, such as the Kathleen Ferrier Award winning soprano Susan Gritton in the 1990 concert. A similar concert in the following year, on 13 November 1991, again included Radley’s choir, with the further addition of Abingdon School Gallery Choir. What has become something of a further theme of these concerts also appeared with a Bach Cantata, no. 95, being performed along with Britten’s *St Nicolas* cantata. Ambition was now growing, and on 15 March 1992 a performance was delivered, still under the direction of Roger Allen, but away from New College, in St Edward’s School Chapel, Oxford. With St Edward’s School Chapel Choir, the Concert Choir performed Bach’s *St John Passion*. The following year, on 4 July 1993, the Concert Choir’s horizons expanded again as it now participated with more mature choirs—the Oxford Harmonic Society and Philharmonischer Chor der Stadt Bonn—in Oxford Town Hall. Robert Secret directed the main choir, Thomas Neuhoff directed the band, and Roger Allen directed the boys in the gallery in a tremendous feat of coordination.

By this stage, this upper voice school choir had also been augmented with what was to become the Choral Society. There were then a number of high-class professional orchestral players and singers amongst the parents, and the entire enterprise enjoyed the unflagging support of the college organist Edward Higginbottom. The parents were keen to make music with their children and the aspiring soloists amongst the academical clerks in the college choir were keen to broaden

their experience of the repertoire. All this meant that ambition could be almost limitless and a large-scale choral performance by the school was feasible. So, on 20 March 1993, J. S. Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*, in English and complete, was put on in New College chapel. The eminent soloists included Philip Cave as the Evangelist, and Robert Macdonald as Christus. Roger Allen directed, and the orchestra, which went under the name of the Bach Players, consisted mostly of parents and friends of the school, many of whom were professional orchestral musicians in their own right. The singers were New College School Concert Choir (21 in total) and the choristers (18), augmented by sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses (37 in total). Participants overall were identified as old boys, parents, members of New College, and musical friends; they included the headmaster. This in effect was the first outing of the Choral Society, which had rehearsed on Saturday mornings during that Hilary term. Praise for the performance, and the organisational

20 MARCH 1993

New College School  
presents the  
**St Matthew Passion**  
by J. S. Bach

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<b>Philip Cave</b>	<b>Evangelist</b>
<b>Robert MacDonald</b>	<b>Christus</b>
Susan Winnicott	Soprano
Fergus McLusky	Alto
Daniel Norman	Tenor
John Bernays	Bass
Adrian Finch	Pilate
Julian Wright	Peter, Judas

**with the Bach Players**  
**(leaders Mariette Richter and Gillian Secret)**

conducted by  
**Roger Allen**

New College Archives, NCA NCS/E3/1  
Programme for Roger Allen’s first *St Matthew Passion* in 1993

effort that led to it, was extensive: ‘to have pulled together all those dissimilar strands . . . hugely significant for its artistic and social impact’, ‘I was in such rapture that I feared I missed one or two entries’, ‘greatly enjoyed singing and was very impressed by the spirit with which the rehearsals and the performance were conducted by everybody’ were amongst the feedback from participants. It was seen as ‘an expression of the community of the school’. A further sentiment that was stressed, again, was that this could/should become an annual occasion.

This indeed occurred. There were further performances of the *St Matthew Passion* in the four years following up to 1997. The 1994 performance also involved Christ Church Cathedral’s Chamber Choir, who felt ‘privileged’ to have been part of ‘a most powerful and moving performance’. (The New College Choir was on tour in Australia at the time.) The packed audiences of the 1993 and 1994 events in the college chapel necessitated a move to the University Church in 1995 as a more practical location for such large forces (around 120 participants in 1995). The 1997 performance was especially poignant as it was given in memory of Alan Butterworth (Headmaster 1955–1988). All five performances were full. Then in 1998, changes were made. The piece was changed, from J. S. Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* to his *Mass in B Minor*, albeit minus the Credo. Also, an orchestral piece was added: Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto* no. 6. Still directed by Roger Allen, his programme note outlines the rationale of putting on such large scale works with a school, as being to provide an opportunity for like-minded players and singers from the wider community of the school (staff, parents, former parents, senior members of the college, staff of senior schools, friends of friends, musicians from the City of Oxford) to come together annually and to explore an acknowledged musical masterpiece, thereby acting as a great educational experience for members of choral societies of the future, that is the school’s pupils. The date was shifted from later March to early May and the event returned to its perhaps natural home of the college chapel. The Bach choral repertoire was explored further in succeeding years with his *Ascension Oratorio* (Cantata no. 11) in 1999 and Cantata no. 80 in 2000. By now, another feature of these concerts had been well established: the ‘superb post-concert hospitality’ provided by the Warden and Mrs Ryan. The 2000 concert did also mark a new departure in that a non-Bach piece appeared on the billing in Vivaldi’s *Concerto for Four Violins*. The boys’ Concert Choir had meantime been continuing to explore other repertoire and venues. They performed Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* in Wantage parish church on 11 November 1995 under Roger Allen’s direction with the parish church choir and the college’s singing teacher Colin Baldy as a particularly memorable Elijah. On occasion, in the choristers’ absence, they also took on their role at evensong in the college chapel.<sup>8</sup>

Richard Poyser arrived at the school as the new director of music in 2004 in succession to Roger Allen who went on to become Fellow and Tutor, and Director of Music, at St Peter’s College in Oxford. This heralded further development in the musical life of the school and its wider community. The various assemblages of parents and friends of the school, also known as an ‘adult chorus’ over the years, was formalised as the New College School Choral Society in 2006. At the end of Poyser’s time as director of music, a special concert was put on—*Let All the World in Every Corner Sing*—in the college chapel on 25 March 2018 to celebrate its 12th anniversary. It featured the suitably celebratory Vivaldi *Gloria*, Fauré’s *Cantique de Jean Racine*, and ended appropriately with Poyser’s own *New College Prayer*. By 22 November 2008, the Concert Choir had also morphed, into the Chamber Choir, when it participated with the Oxford Harmonic Society and the Bonn Philharmonia in a performance in the Oxford Town Hall of Britten’s *War Requiem* under the direction of Robert Secret and Thomas Neuhoff, as in 1993.

Part of the joint choirs’ increasingly regular and expansive programme—and they did now generally perform in tandem—included a Remembrance Day Concert such as on 11 November 2009 featuring Fauré’s *Requiem*. The Choral Society had become more of a year-round activity, regularly coached on Monday evenings by Richard Poyser. He was assisted by his wife Lianne-Marie Skrinari, a professional singer and Kathleen Ferrier prize winner (2001), who embellished

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<sup>8</sup> NCA NCS/E3/1; NCA NCS/GC1/8.

many of the concerts with some accompaniment, and more frequently soprano solo parts, particularly in such as Mozart's *Requiem* and the impressive high line in *Carmina Burana*. She also featured in the Christmas Concerts which became part of the regular programme each year in the college chapel, including individual numbers, readings, and complete works, such as especially Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Christmas Carols*. There was also an Easter concert and a less regular Summer concert which was even sometimes away from Oxford, such as in June 2012 at Chigwell School. Within Oxford, the University Church and the Sheldonian Theatre were occasional alternatives to the college chapel where evensong might be sung on occasion. A programme of light music was also provided in the Cloisters for an annual strawberries and wine evening. This all helped to give the Chamber Choir members—still formed of non-choristers at the school—access to larger scale choral works that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to experience. Along with the college choir's touring abroad, all this also assisted in promoting more widely the school, and even the college in general.



New College Archives, NCA NCS/GC1/9 2005/6  
The Choral Society in the Cloisters (June 2006)

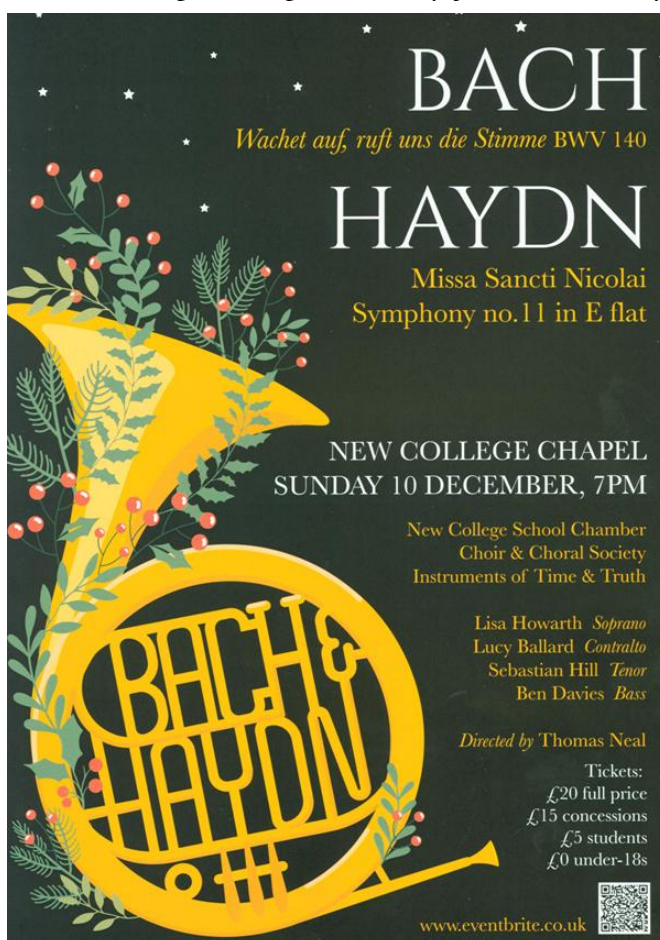
Membership of the Choral Society became established as parents and friends of the school. The repertoire still featured Bach's cantatas as something of a cornerstone, but other pieces performed since have included such as Handel's *Messiah*, Vivaldi's *Gloria*, Haydn's *Missa Sancti Nicolai*, Saint-Saëns's *Oratorio de Noël*, Purcell's *Come Ye Sons of Art*, Fauré's *Requiem*, and Ravel's *Pavane*. Operas have also featured, such as Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, *King Arthur*, and *The Fairy Queen*, as have English classics by Vaughan Williams (*Fantasia on Christmas Carols*), Holst (*Christmas Day*), and Britten (*Saint Nicolas*), and more contemporary works by James MacMillan (*In Splendoribus Sanctorum*) and Alexander L'Estrange (*Wassail!*). The choirs' ambition has not been limited to established repertoire, and they have also undertaken several projects of historic importance, including the UK premieres of Margaret Bonds's *Ballad of the Brown King* in 2022 and a new reconstruction of Bach's lost *St Mark Passion* in 2023, and the world premiere of Richard Poyser's *The New College Prayer* in 2013.

A particularly large-scale venture was the 22 April 2016 farewell concert for Warden Curtis Price held in the Sheldonian. This included a piece written by Richard Poyser for the whole school: *David and Goliath*. The part of Goliath was sung/played by Alexander Armstrong, David was sung/danced by chorister Oscar Ross, the armies of the Israelites and Philistines were sung by Years 3–8, David's sheep were sung by the pre-prep, the choristers provided an angelic choir, parent/actor Paul Ansdell was the narrator, the visiting music staff made up the band, and the Choral Society sang as well. The director of music 'genuinely could not have imagined it being better'. As the Choral Society has grown in size (to some 65 singers in 2025), quality, and stature, it has also contributed sections to concerts, and away from its natural New College base, as when just the altos and sopranos performed, with the Chamber Choir, in Mahler's *Symphony No. 3* on 29 June 2024 in Merton Chapel alongside the inhouse girl choristers and the Cowley St Christopher's School Choir.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> NCA NCS/E3/2–3; NCA NCS/GC1/9–10.

Aside from the choirs, the scratch orchestras of parents and friends had morphed by 2025 into a more regular partnership with one of the country's leading baroque orchestras, Instruments of Time & Truth. The soloists often had school connections but always an assurance of quality, all of which meant that performances were frequently sold out well in advance. Performances have been directed by the school's director of music (Thomas Neal since 2018), only deferring on occasion to such as the composer for Alexander L'Estrange's *Wassail!* Performances have generally occurred in the Michaelmas and Hilary terms with sometimes further ones in the Trinity term. The usual venue has been the New College chapel, with the Sheldonian Theatre being taken over on occasion in Trinity term. These concerts have necessitated a regular programme of rehearsals in the school gym and then, since Michaelmas 2023, in the new school auditorium in the Gradel Quads. Rehearsals have often been throughout the three terms requiring commitment and dedication from singers. They have been provided with not just an opportunity to learn how to sing the pieces, but also to understand and appreciate the context of the music, and so to enrich their own musical education and development, as befits an educational institution. In Michaelmas 2024 singers were also offered the opportunity to receive specialist vocal coaching, either 1:1 or in small groups. Furthermore, not the least significant aspect of the status of this music-making has been the creativity, colour, and vibrancy of its concert posters, produced by Jemma Kilkenny, helping it to stand out in a sometimes rather crowded marketplace in Oxford. Finally, the provision of distinctive music folders for the choir in 2023, helped further to enhance the impact and sense of a quality outfit.

The Choral Society, and the Chamber Choir, had become well established and crucial aspects of the school's musical life by 2025, remaining very much integral to the school. The Choral Society, albeit a society, had then no separate constitution nor officers nor website and had been very much underwritten by the school. However, national budget changes to the funding of such schools meant that, in Michaelmas 2024, contributions towards its expenses had to be sought from its members. This was very much part of its ongoing development from an intermittent and occasional assemblage of supporters of the school coming together for a particular event into a consistently trained, well-honed, and developed society able to tackle a range of repertoire, and providing exemplary and unique musical experiences in a city not short of such quality.



New College Archives, Oxford, NCA NCS/E3/3  
Poster for a 2023 concert

Michael Stansfield  
Archivist & Records Manager  
New College, Oxford