

BEDFORD'S MUSICAL SOCIETY

A HISTORY OF BEDFORD CHORAL SOCIETY



MICHAEL BENSON
INTRODUCTION BY DONALD BURROWS



2015

THE BEDFORDSHIRE
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A History of Bedford Choral Society

Michael Benson

With an Introduction by Donald Burrows

THE BEDFORDSHIRE HISTORICAL RECORD SOCIETY

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
List of Illustrations	vii
Preface	ix
Introduction	1
<i>Donald Burrows</i>	
Chapter One	
Choral Music in Bedford, c.1800–66	13
Chapter Two	
Formation and Founding Fathers, 1867	21
Chapter Three	
Eminent Victorians, 1868–1900	30
Chapter Four	
‘Ere Armageddon came’ and after, 1900–23	71
Chapter Five	
Decline and Fall, 1923–33	99
Chapter Six	
Entr’acte, 1933–41	131
Chapter Seven	
Reformation, 1941–43	139
Chapter Eight	
Great Expectations, 1943–47	146
Chapter Nine	
Bach Comes to Town, 1947–59	158
Chapter Ten	
‘You’ve never had it so good’, 1959–91	181
Afterword	
Bedford Choral Society 1991–2015	217
<i>Ian Smith</i>	
Appendix 1	
Concerts and Works Performed 1867–2010, Bedford musical/Choral Society	222
Appendix 2	
Choral Works Performed 1920–33, Bedford Free Church Choral Union/Choral Society	252

Appendix 3	
Orchestral Works Performed 1924–29, Bedford Musical Society	254
Appendix 4	
Orchestral Works Performed 1946–57, Bedford Musical Society	255
Bibliography	259
Index of Musical Works	263
Index of Personal Names	273
Subject Index	282

Illustrations

Cover

Bedford Musical Society's choir accompanied by the Riddick String Orchestra and conducted by Norman Frost in a performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, 22 March 1946. The soloists are Isobel Baillie (second left), Muriel Brunskill, Walter Widdop and Roy Henderson (right).

Plates are between pages 70 and 71

- 1 John Brereton (1782–1863)
- 2 Philip Henry Diemer (1836–1910)
- 3 Dr Hermann Steinmetz (1826–93) and the masters of Bedford Grammar School
- 4 Clara Samuel (1856–1920)
- 5 Bedford Musical Society *Book of Words*, 27 November 1906
- 6 Harry Alfred Harding (1855–1930)
- 7 Agnes Nicholls (1876–1959)
- 8 Herbert J. Colson (1891–1951)
- 9 Henry Marshall Palmer (1906–94) and the Mary Palmer Choir
- 10 BBC Symphony Orchestra in Bedford Corn Exchange
- 11 Clarence Raybould (1886–1972)
- 12 Kate (1909–98) and Hans Freyhan (1909–96)
- 13 Frederick E. Stevens (1912–2014)
- 14 David Willcocks (1919–2015)
- 15 Michael Rose (b. 1934)
- 16 Ian Smith (b. 1951)

Preface

In 1991, Bedford Choral Society celebrated its 125th anniversary. A year earlier, as part of my degree with the Open University, I had studied the Arts Foundation course, which included units on musical performance during the Victorian period and on provincial music-making. This prompted me to ask questions about the formation of Bedford Choral Society, of which I was a member. To my surprise no-one knew very much about its origins. When I started to investigate, I found that the date chosen to celebrate the anniversary was incorrect: the Society was actually founded very early in 1867. It was a commonly held view that it was founded in 1866.¹

I set out to write an article about the Society's history for *The Bedfordshire Magazine*, and began research early in 1991 in the local studies section of Bedford Central Library. My article was published around the time of the main celebratory concert in November 1991.² Soon after I had started work on the article, I had a fascinating discussion with Kate and Hans Freyhan (both long-term members of the Society) whom many people thought would be able to give me a large amount of background information. They were not as knowledgeable about the history of the Society as I had hoped, perhaps because they had escaped to England, from Germany, just before the Second World War. They did, however, pass on to me many of the Society's early concert programmes, which proved to be enormously helpful.

I soon realised that my article only 'scraped the surface' and decided that I wanted to write a fuller history; this present book is the outcome. Since 1991, the history of Bedford Choral Society has been a constant companion, but as I was elected as general secretary of the Society following retirement in 2002, I was not able to do much work on the book during the six years that I held that post.

Undertaking the research for this book has taken me to places, libraries and archives that I would not otherwise have known about or visited, and this experience has been invaluable. But I also had a lot of luck while working on this history, including finding a second-hand music shop in Hay-on-Wye with a number of musical scores of works which were sung in the Victorian period but which are now seldom, if ever, performed, and obtaining some musical scores that had been used by members of the Society from the late 1890s onwards.³

Having sung with the Choral Society for nearly forty years, I am very fortunate to have known a number of the older choir members. Some of them had contacts going back to the turn of the twentieth century. It has been inspiring and humbling to

¹ This is stated in Joyce Godber's *History of Bedfordshire 1066–1888* (Bedford, 1969), p. 524. The error probably occurred because of confusion about how each season was numbered.

² Benson, Mike, 'Bedford Choral Society', *The Bedfordshire Magazine*, vol. 23, no. 179 (Winter 1991), pp. 100–4.

³ These were in the possession of former chorus master, Freddie Stevens, and passed to me by members of his family.

talk to these people and to learn first-hand about the work of the Society over a long period. They have helped to make it possible for me to write this book. The Internet was not available in 1991, and while it has certainly been invaluable in recent years, I might have undertaken my research differently – and not so effectively – had it been accessible when I began.

I would like to especially thank those who have inspired me, but who have not lived to see the finished result: Kate and Hans Freyhan, Sylvia Palmer, Michael Diemer, Joe Pinnock, Tom and Mollie Winter, Ken Wesley (of the Bedford Competitive Music Festival), Bill Knight, Freddie Stevens and Anthony Chapman. I am also very grateful to Deirdre Knight for all the information that she has provided, and to George Thomson, who at the age of ninety-six has been very helpful, especially with information about events that took place in the years before the Second World War. Without exception, all of the above have been very supportive and positive.

I also wish to thank the many other people who have assisted including: Boneventura Bottone, James Collett-White, Antony le Fleming, John Handley, Andrew Morris, Paul Paviour, Michael Rose, John Shayler, Ian Smith, Malcolm Struthers, John Watson and Sir David Willcocks. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the assistance I have received from Bedford Central Library, Bedford Modern School, Bedford School, Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service, Lancing College, The Royal College of Music, The Royal College of Organists and Sidmouth Library. If I have omitted anyone, I apologise.

I would like to thank my wife, Reiko who has patiently put up with me spending so much time working on this volume and has been unhesitatingly supportive. It was while staying with her relatives in Japan that I wrote some parts of the book. I am also very grateful to Professor Donald Burrows for writing the Introduction. He wrote some of the Open University course material for the musical sections of the Arts Foundation course and for the other music courses I studied, inspiring my research.

Finally, I would like to thank Richard Wildman for his help and support and other members of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society (BHRS), for accepting my draft proposal. I am most grateful to BHRS for its interest in my work and undertaking the publishing of this book. In particular, I must thank Nicola Avery, who has spent a great deal of time and done a great deal of work to improve the formatting and accuracy of the book. I have benefited hugely from her expertise and patience, and without her invaluable input, the book, if it had seen the light of day, would be a poor shadow of what she has made it.

Michael Benson
November 2015

Introduction

Donald Burrows

In the following pages Michael Benson traces the history and changing fortunes (and indeed, changing titles) of the musical enterprise that is now Bedford Choral Society. Several historical narratives of parallel institutions in other towns and cities of Britain have been published, many of them less thoroughly researched and less comprehensive than the present work, but all reflect the enthusiasm and determination of the participating musicians. Bedford's society is one of the earliest ones of its type, and its history is both national and local: it exemplifies larger trends in Britain's musical life, but it is also individual because Bedford's geographical and cultural position provided some unique opportunities, enabling more ambitious events to be presented than in other towns of comparable size.

For the origins of the phenomenon of societies in Britain devoted to musical performance, of the type represented by the Bedford Choral Society, we need to look to two strands in the musical life of London in the late decades of the seventeenth century. There was, in the first place, the establishment of musical concerts both public and private. John Banister's public concerts during the 1670s took place in a series of dedicated concert venues, but no less important was the parallel growth of private concerts, often mixing leading professional players and singers with talented amateurs. It was, rather literally, a matter of 'gentlemen and players': it was considered unseemly for young ladies to perform (though not so reprehensible as their appearance in public events), and the amateurs were (as far as the evidence goes) drawn mainly from the professional classes – lawyers, clergy and the like. This is not surprising in view of the costs of musical instruments and music, but the patronage of the concerts was not always so exclusive: one private famous concert series took place in the room above Thomas Britton's coal warehouse in Clerkenwell. In the eighteenth century private concerts burgeoned not only in London but in provincial towns and cities: the musical society at Salisbury was one of the most successful, with concerts every fortnight, including more ambitious ones on full-moon nights when visiting players were able to travel from Bath or Oxford. The cathedral cities were at a particular advantage because they had a pool of resident professional musicians: the organists of the cathedral and the larger churches and the lay clerks of the cathedral choirs. Typically, the evening programmes were in two parts, with an overture, an aria and a concerto in each half: 'concertos' here meaning the classic repertoires of works in the Baroque Concerto Grosso style for which famous pieces by Corelli and Handel provided the classic model. Given plentiful local resources (as, for example, at Oxford), the musical society might produce a 'choral night' each month at which more substantial works would be performed, though perhaps spread over two meetings.

The second strand behind the phenomenon of the musical societies was the development of annual music festivals. An early instance was the London celebrations of St Cecilia's Day. These began with the performances of odes for solo singers supported by a (modest) chorus and orchestra; a repertory to which Henry Purcell contributed in 1683 and 1692. Through a curious series of events, this musical style moved into the church, first with a series of state Thanksgiving services at St Paul's Cathedral in the early years of Queen Anne's reign, and then to the annual celebrations in the same building for the Festival of the Sons of the Clergy. The Festival day comprised a dinner at Merchant Taylors' Hall preceded by a church service at the Cathedral; the main income for the charity in support of clergymen's children was the money collected at the service and at the rehearsal of the music a couple of days before. The classic work for the service was Purcell's *Te Deum* and *Jubilate* in D Major with orchestra in the early years, supplanted later by Handel's 'Utrecht' and 'Dettingen' settings coupled with new anthems (also sometimes orchestrally accompanied) by Greene and Boyce. As with private concerts, the model provided by the Sons of the Clergy service spread to provincial cities, beginning with the Three Choirs Festival which rotated between the cathedrals of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester. In some places (again, for example, at Salisbury) the annual festival began as an independent venture, but was subsequently presented as a charity event, for example in aid of a local hospital. (The festival at St Philip's church, Birmingham, began as a charity event of this type from the start.) The festivals gradually grew in scope to become events over two or three days, with evening concerts to supplement the church services. For the concerts the most ambitious programmes were Handel's oratorios, or works of varying dimensions by various composers in similar style.

Circumstances and musical styles changed, but this pattern of public concerts, private music clubs and annual festivals remained relevant well into the nineteenth century. The new grand halls in the large provincial cities – as at Birmingham (1834), Manchester (1854) and Leeds (1858) – were prepared for large choirs and the ever-expanding symphony orchestra, and equipped with organs of commensurate size and power. In London, Exeter Hall and St James's Hall turned out to be preludes to the extravaganza of Crystal Palace, with space for a cast and audience of thousands for the Handel Festivals, but which also had suitable venues for orchestral and chamber concerts. All this, however, would have been irrelevant had there not been an expansion in the numbers of musical performers, professional and – especially – amateur. The educational programmes of the tonic sol-fa movements brought singing to a wider social range of potential performers, but it was not the whole story: in many cases, sol-fa was regarded (and effectively used) as a stepping stone to conventional musical notation. The half-accidental invention of the octavo-size vocal score by Novello and Company in the 1840s rendered the choral classics – particularly Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation* – into a cheaper and more portable form. Perhaps the most significant development for the wider social dissemination of music was the manufacture of cheap, modest but generally serviceable upright pianos, which could be bought on the instalment system. Although the extent and velocity is difficult to measure, by the middle of the nineteenth century musical activity had spread down the social spectrum as populations and incomes increased.

With this background we can begin to interpret the early musical activities of the Bedford musicians as outlined here. The initial choral performance in 1812 was clearly of the 'Festival' type and it may have been intended to initiate an annual celebration, but neither the audience nor performing resources were sufficient for that to happen: even a performance of *Messiah* required the assistance of performers from elsewhere, and there was probably much the same experience with another attempt in 1825. Relatively little is known of the activities of the Bedford Harmonic Society because it was more on the private 'music club' model, but it had two essential features that promised some prospect of success: the leadership of a local professional musician (John Nunn) and the support of the headmaster of the Grammar School (John Brereton). The latter probably brought both social and practical prospects of stability – strong connections with the town and a place to rehearse regularly. Twenty-six performers and 118 supporters was not a bad practical basis, especially given the small size of available concert venues, but the venture broke up in somewhat mysterious circumstances at the turn of the year 1859–60. According to a later memoir, politics and sectarianism had 'something to do with it' (In London, the foundation of the Sacred Harmonic Society, which provided the core of the singers for the Crystal Palace Handel Festivals, was a reaction to the exclusion of Dissenters – and women – from the chorus of the 1834 Handel Commemoration performances at Westminster Abbey). Anglican clergy were prominent in the leadership of musical activities and, although many of them were no doubt competent musicians, it is possible to imagine the causes for resentment among nonconformists and the socially less well favoured. There was a structural problem however, in that the posts of organist in Bedford's Anglican principal churches were probably the only fully permanent and professionally paid jobs for performers. Beyond that, Bedford's musicians maintained their trade by teaching (either in the schools or by developing private practices), and eked out their livings with ancillary activities such as selling music and pianos. The Bedford economy could only support a handful of professional musicians. According to the *Post Office Directory of Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire 1869*, Bedford had four Organists (Charles Bithrey at St Cuthbert's, Miss Barker at St Mary's, Robert Rose at St Paul's and Philip Diemer at Holy Trinity), four Music and Musical Instrument Sellers (including Rose, who also appears in the list of three Pianoforte Dealers) and five Teachers of Music (Bithrey, Diemer, John Nunn, Rose and Mrs Saunders).¹

Where the Harmonic Society had failed in 1860, the Bedford Amateur Musical Society succeeded a few years later. The critical difference was probably in the nature of the leadership. Philip Diemer's professional leadership was of a new order. He came from a local family, and had received training at the Royal Academy. The Academy was not a full conservatoire in the modern sense (or as existed then in Paris or Leipzig), but Diemer had the best teachers that were available in Britain – Macfarren and Holmes. His period at the Royal Academy coincided with that of Arthur Sullivan, six years his junior: Diemer probably made out well as a student, but would have been in the shadow of Sullivan, who had been awarded the first

¹ E. R. Kelly, ed., *Post Office Directory of Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire 1869* (London, 1869), p. 322ff.

Mendelssohn scholarship to study at the Academy and then in Leipzig. Inevitably, if Diemer was to earn a living in Bedford he had to take posts as an organist, but his professional status probably enabled him to avoid too close an identification with the previous problems of the Harmonic Society and, above all, he seems to have formed a good working relationship with Robert Rose, an established local musician, who presumably accepted his authority and was able to co-operate. Both Diemer and Rose brought with them essential contributions to the success of the Society in the participation of their relatives and pupils.

It is difficult to assess the significance of the fact that two of the founders – Diemer and Steinmetz – were of German origin. The musical influence of Germans in mid-century provincial Britain is a topic that still awaits attention, though the prevalence of German band-masters is well documented. Diemer, although he was professionally (necessarily) attached to the Anglican churches, came from the Moravian community, which had always valued the role of music. (The hymnody of the Wesleys had been influenced by their experience of the Moravians during their visit to Georgia (USA) in the 1730s.) Steinmetz's origins were Lutheran, and he probably carried with him German cultural assumptions about both domestic music-making (*hausmusik*) and larger-scale musical activity. In Britain, professional musical activity in the 1860s was only just developing alternative centres to London, principally in the cities of the midlands and northern England. In Germany, the honeycomb of courts (the historical result of the absence of the principle of primogeniture) meant that almost anywhere you were not far from an establishment with its own *capella* and chamber musicians, even a modest court orchestra. (Some of these institutions, in various civic forms, survived unification in 1870, and even into the late twentieth century.) Famously, in 1914 a book about 'England' was published in Germany under the title *Das Land ohne Musik* ('the land without music'). By then it was not true, and arguably had never been true of London, but Steinmetz may have thought it quite natural to assist in the promotion of music in the Bedford community in a comparable manner to that he would have known in or around Sachsenhausen. It is fortunate that the Bedford schools had need of a German teacher and thus the Musical Society gained an efficient manager.

In its inception the Society was close to the 'club' model: the concerts in the early years were events for the performing and subscribing members, not for the general public. The participants in the early years had probably the same type of social mix in the membership as we see later, though this is difficult to analyse without a full list of names and occupations. Inevitably, more is known about the people who were in some way locally prominent or institutionally significant – the physicians, lawyers, industrial employers or agents and (for example) policemen. The choruses needed women and men singers, and the names of women appear from time to time in the early years in other roles, as for example piano accompanists. At the start the numbers of participants make an interesting comparison with the earlier figures quoted for the Harmonic Society: an orchestra of eighteen and about one hundred singers, the expansion in the latter probably attributable to Diemer's activity as a teacher. The balance of these numbers, however, already raises a question about the Society's centre of gravity – was it 'musical' or was it 'choral'?

Given performers, an audience, a place to rehearse (courtesy of the Grammar

School headmaster) and a place to perform (though the Assembly Rooms quickly proved inadequate even after the addition of balconies), the next requirement for success was to develop programmes which would retain the momentum that had been achieved at the foundation. The formula of the first concert – a longer work for the first half and then a miscellany of shorter pieces – worked for a time. There was something of a limitation in the availability of half-programme works, though contemporary composers such as van Bree composed for this ‘cantata market’, and Diemer himself eventually contributed with *Bethany*, which took its place in the repertory published by Novellos in London. It was not long, however, before the situation gravitated towards the attempt at full-length works for the complete programme, beginning, inevitably, with *Messiah*.

Once programmes moved up onto this new plateau, however, the dynamic changed. While the ‘Amateur’ Society initially prided itself on performing from its own resources, the larger-scale works required help from outside: a string quartet to lead sections of the orchestra, and then fully professional soloists. Diemer once again was a fortunate asset in this situation: his Royal Academy days must have left him with contacts for the necessary professional musicians from London (and elsewhere). Thus, as early December 1868, the performance of Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus* brought to the Society the tenor Edward Lloyd, on his way to a national reputation. (Officially he was called in when a local tenor became unavailable, but this could have been a diplomatic cover when the local singer realised that he was not up to the job.) With a hotline to the best available from London, Diemer brought to Bedford some of the leading performers of the day, and also contemporary composers such as Julius Benedict and Emanuel Aguilar to direct performances of their works; the experience was apparently eccentric when it came to Edmund Chipp. It is not clear whether Sullivan ever really intended to come, but Diemer did justice to the performances of *The Prodigal Son*, *The Martyr of Antioch* and *The Golden Legend*. Old Academy influence is also to be seen in the representation of Sterndale Bennett and Macfarren in the repertory. The mainstream, however, remained with works by Handel, Haydn’s *Creation* and Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*. The more substantial orchestral scoring of *Elijah*, and the large orchestral element in ‘The Hymn of Praise’, meant that a rather haphazard local minstrelsy supplemented by harmonium and organ was really insufficient. And, as the repertory moved towards larger works and professional soloists, the choral element inevitably became less dominant. It is not surprising that ‘Amateur’ was dropped from the title of the Society in 1880: the music of the solo parts for soprano and (especially) tenor in Rossini’s *Stabat Mater*, first performed that year, would have been well beyond the capacities of amateur singers. Meanwhile, the opening of the Corn Exchange in 1874 had provided a new home for the Society’s concerts, and it is then that there was a definitive move from the ‘club’ structure towards public concerts. The new venue was, however, not without its own practical problems, and the provision of an organ had to wait nearly a quarter of a century: the latter was, perhaps, not entirely a disadvantage, for it meant that there was little cover for an inadequate orchestra, and indeed orchestral music featured largely in one of the opening concerts for the Corn Exchange.

When Diemer moved into retirement at the turn of the century, the Bedford Musical Society was fortunate to find a comparable successor in Harry Harding.

Inevitably the day-to-day course of Harding's musical activity in Bedford was as an organist and a teacher, but the Society continued to flourish under him partly because, like Diemer, he had suitable professional connections in London. He was recommended for his post in Bedford by Sir Frederick Bridge, organist of Westminster Abbey, and he gained national importance within the music profession as secretary to the Royal College of Organists. He brought Bridge to Bedford to conduct one of his own works, and also similarly Frederic Cowen, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor and Charles Stanford. Among the singers were Agnes Nicholls, Plunkett Greene, Gervase Elwes and Elsie Suddaby; orchestral players brought in included Aubrey Brain and Marie Goossens; miscellaneous programmes included contributions from the leading pianists Backhaus and Busoni.

Harding's taste ran mainly to contemporary, large-scale, romantic-period works, including Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens* and Brahms's Requiem. There was an experiment with Wagner (needing some additional players from London); Mendelssohn and Gounod stayed in the repertory, but Handel nearly vanished, with only one performance each of *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt* in the period 1900–13. It was under his direction that the major works of Elgar, requiring a full modern symphony orchestra as well as an exceptionally competent choral contribution, were taken up – *King Olaf*, *The Dream of Gerontius* and *The Apostles*. His surprise resignation in 1923 followed after two performances of *The Apostles*, and it seems plausible that it came because he had fulfilled his ambitions with the Society, and wished to move on instead to other areas, including Bedford's competitive music festival and a more active national role with the Royal College of Organists. (He remained in post as organist of St Paul's church and director of music at Bedford School and Bedford High School.) From the beginning, the Society had relied on Diemer and Rose for its leadership, but with the appointment of Harding, and the fact that multiple facets of his career inevitably took him away from Bedford from time to time, further distribution of responsibility onto chorus masters and accompanists had been required.

The consequences for the Society of Harding's departure were not happy. Two competent local musicians offered themselves as his successor, but they did not have the flair or connections of their predecessors, and attempts to get them to work together did not last long. Under Herbert Colson some good programmes were given. The choral works were mainly repeats of pieces previously performed by the Society, though this period saw the first attempts at works by J. S. Bach and an experiment with a concert version of *Carmen*; an orchestral concert became a regular element in the annual programme. The foundation of the Musical Society had coincided almost exactly with the completion of St Pancras station, and the ease of travel to London should have put Bedford in a beneficial position for the addition of professional players on concert days, had the timetable of the London, Midland and Scottish Railway been more co-operative with evening trains for their return. Singers with national careers, such as Roy Henderson, Parry Jones and Elsie Suddaby once again came as soloists, but local musical politics sapped energy, membership and audiences as other choirs established themselves, in particular the Bedford Choral Society that developed from the Free Church Choral Union. The type of repertory on which the Musical Society was now based required substantial choral and orchestral resources, which could probably only be delivered in a monop-

olistic situation and without the distraction of local competition. Furthermore, the polarisation of repertory, with works by Handel and Haydn going to the Choral Society, in effect restricted the variety of the Musical Society's offering. There was little motive at that time to challenge the organ-accompanied oratorio performances of the Choral Society with more authentic performances using orchestral accompaniment. Also, there was a tendency to abbreviate the major works: at earlier periods, complaints about the length of *Messiah* or *Elijah* suggest that they were performed uncut. As the works performed gradually required more ambitious resources, particularly in the orchestral contribution, ways had to be found to meet the expenses. Financial security relied considerably on sheer numbers – the quantity of performers, and the paying audience they brought with them. Once in a declining situation, the more concerts that are given, the more money is lost. One response was a reduction in the number of performances. At foundation, the Society's plan was to give four concerts a year; at the changeover from Diemer to Harding this was reduced to three, on a rhythm approximately coincident with the school terms. (The abandonment of the May concert was initially attributed to the loss of performers to the modern craze for cycling: in the last quarter of the twentieth century, late-spring concerts became even more vulnerable to changes in holiday habits and gardening.) In the Colson era, choral concerts went down to two per year, but even so by 1930 the financial outlook of the Musical Society had become uncertain, as had morale and membership numbers. In this increasingly insecure environment, the public concerts of Musical Society died in 1931 with scarcely even a whimper.

The Society revived in the circumstances of the Second World War. This probably could not have been predicted, because the policy in the First World War had been to close things down: the Society's only performances had been of *Messiah* for the troops in November 1914. This time, however, after an initial period of hesitation the emphasis was rather on maintaining national morale by sustaining established social activity, though the Society rather better fitted the description of 'abandoned social activity'. Henry Wood and the Promenade Concerts in London continued after the destruction of the Queen's Hall and Malcolm Sargent dashed around Britain keeping the larger choral societies, as well as the London Philharmonic and the Liverpool Philharmonic orchestras, active when some other prominent British conductors had left the America. The catalyst for Bedford's recovery was the exceptional good fortune that resulted from the relocation of the BBC's musical staff at the end of July 1941, with the personnel of their orchestras, bands and choirs resident (indeed, virtually billeted) in the local community and a number of buildings adapted for permanent studio use. Marshall Palmer, under threat from his post as organist at the magnificent instrument in St Mary's, Woburn, took the initiative to attempt the re-foundation of the Musical Society, and this was successfully accomplished as a choral institution. The Society only rarely participated in broadcasts (the BBC bodies included choral groups), but the resident professional musicians weighed in with their assistance: concerts with substantial programmes of choral and orchestral items were again possible, and the Society's concerts had the assistance of great names such as the violinist Paul Beard and the bassoonist Archie Camden. The Society (which restored the name Bedford Musical Society, but declared its aim to 'perform the major works of the choral repertoire') began with

Handel's *Judas Maccabaeus*, already with one hundred performers (itself remarkable during wartime) and soloists from the BBC singers: subsequently it could muster the forces for works that demanded a full symphony orchestra – Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens*, Elgar's *Sea Pictures* and *The Music Makers*. When Palmer departed from Bedford in a career move, his role was energetically continued by Norman Frost, who wanted to shift the repertory towards more orchestral music and extend the range of the choral repertory.

The bright sunshine bought by the BBC's presence, through the willing contribution of their musicians and the general level of local interest in music that was generated by the opportunity to attend free broadcast concerts, lasted until the summer of 1945. With *Jesu meine Freude* in December of that year, Norman Frost introduced the first choral work by Johann Sebastian Bach since the Society's foundation, and the performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* the following March was a landmark in its re-establishment, with nationally-famous soloists and a large choir, but a rather skimmed orchestra based around only eighteen string players. By then, as it happened, problems about orchestral participation, and the broader question of the repertory for which the Society should be responsible, were on the horizon. The chorus was formed, as it always had been, from amateur singers, but it was now fairly well established that, with the exception of a few minor contributions, professional singers would be hired from concert to concert for the solo vocal roles. The orchestra had hitherto been gathered largely from local players, supplemented with others brought in and paid as necessary, according to the demands of particular works and, as noted, the BBC players had been willing to participate. Much depended on keeping definitions of status in the background, and the mixing of 'amateur' and 'professional' players was a matter for local negotiation: those brought in could be impatient or patronising, but sometimes they had the magic touch and made everyone else play better. A rather abrupt movement towards 'professionalization' in music took no account of local situations: vocal soloists now had to be booked through agents rather than personal connections, and rigid unionisation produced its own definition of the orchestral player. In terms of orchestral players who entirely earned their living by performance the defensive move towards a closed shop is understandable, especially since the phasing-out of cinema orchestras had substantially reduced the opportunities for employment. However this drew a rigid line within the music profession, separating full-time players from equally professional musicians who (for example) had received the same training but had taken a different path as teachers, from choice or necessity, and maintained their credibility as teachers by keeping up their playing as local opportunities arose. It also took no account of professionals of the type represented by Philip Diemer and Harry Harding, serving in posts as organists and teachers, but trained as general practitioners with an understanding of musical composition, choir training and orchestration.

Norman Frost, in the Diemer/Harding tradition, fell foul of this situation. In response to the prohibition in the mixing of (so-defined) professional players with others, the concerts in December 1946 and April 1947 employed entire orchestra packages for *Messiah* (the Boyd Neel Orchestra) and a Brahms concert with the *German Requiem* and the second symphony (the New London Orchestra). There followed, however, the demand that these players would not perform except with 'a conductor of national reputation', or their own designated conductor. That Frost

had probably proved his competence in recent concerts with professional orchestras apparently counted for nothing: his position was untenable and Clarence Raybould was appointed as the Society's conductor. In the circumstances Raybould was a good choice, as he had become known locally during the BBC period of residence, and indeed continued to live in Bedford until 1950. The orchestral tail wagged the choral dog, however: during the 'Raybould years' (1947–1957) the Musical Society gave as many orchestral as choral concerts. There were some excellent programmes and no doubt some first rate performances. For the singers, much of the value of their experience must have depended on the succession of chorus masters (Daphne Braggins, Charles Farncombe, Freddie Stevens and Kate Freyhan); while there was a gain in the efficiency of the 'on-the-day' professional orchestra, there was no opportunity to evolve a performance over a number of rehearsals with choir and orchestra. In the programmes the choral 'standards' (*Messiah*, *Elijah*, *The Creation*, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*) were mixed with ventures into new repertory, including works by Kodály, Holst, Ireland and Vaughan Williams.

Among the innovations were the Society's first performances of the Requiems of Verdi and Fauré. The Kodály/Verdi programme in March 1949 was probably the first time that the Society had performed a work in Latin in the eighty-plus years since its foundation. The early programmes had included Mendelssohn's *Lauda Sion* and Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, but in spite of the Latin titles these would have been sung to English texts as found the Novello vocal scores, in the latter case bearing little relationship to the Latin original. (The word 'mother' does not occur anywhere in the translation.) The Twelfth Mass attributed to Mozart (performed in 1868) and his Requiem Mass (performed in 1885) would similarly have been rendered in the alternative English versions. It took even longer for the choir to come to grips with German texts. Bach's *Jesu meine Freude* (1945 onwards) and *Wachet auf* (1954) would have become 'Jesu priceless treasure' and 'Sleepers awake', though *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben* (1970) made it into German. Brahms's *Ein Deutsches Requiem* had to wait until 1985 for a German performance. The Kempe/Fischer-Dieskau German recording in 1962 had helped to make this work better known in its original language, and a similar awareness arose from recordings of Bach's cantatas, including John Eliot Gardiner's more recent complete cycle of these cantatas.

The Raybould/professional orchestra phase was unsustainable in the long term because it relied on two things: a honeymoon period with Bedford audiences who had developed a taste for orchestral music during the BBC years, and substantial grant funding. When the latter came under threat in 1952, a re-grouping was forced upon the Society. Orchestral concerts continued as before, but the choral concerts had to be performed at slender expense with organ accompaniment; the only exception was a performance of Handel's *Samson* with full orchestra, conducted by Raybould in 1955. By then he was no longer resident in Bedford and the orchestral concerts must have seemed increasingly like visiting engagements. Responsibility for the choral programmes was with Freddie Stevens, the chorus master and the occupant of a new professional post as Bedfordshire's first county music adviser. Stevens made the best of the job by developing the repertory of unaccompanied choral music, including the Society's first performance of Palestrina's *Missa Papæ Marcelli*. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* (or rather, the first half of it) and *St Matthew*

Passion, and Handel's *Messiah* were performed, but with organ accompaniment: this was not really satisfactory, even though first-rank organists were employed, but the deficiencies were probably not appreciated as they would have been a couple of decades later when the first recordings of performances with 'early-instrument' orchestras revolutionised the aural experience. (The Society's organ-accompanied concerts moved out to St Paul's church: the Corn Exchange organ had been disposed of in 1951.) In 1958, an external proposal relating to orchestral concerts concentrated the minds of the committee, and the Society withdrew from the presentation of orchestral concerts, though orchestral items continued to be included in choral concerts. The Raybould era was over, but it took until 1988 to catch up with the consequences and rename the Bedford Musical Society as the Bedford Choral Society.

Although Stevens, assisted by Kate Freyhan, had worked positively on the programmes within the given limitations, the choir really needed the restoration of opportunities for performances of works with orchestra, and preferably at least one major work of that type each season. The solution came again as a result of good fortune in Bedford's geographical location, this time not from the south (London) but from the east. David Willcocks, recently appointed to King's College, Cambridge, came in to direct a performance of Bach's *St John Passion* with the Jacques Orchestra, involving a manageable cost because the orchestral requirements were less than those of a full symphony orchestra; similar performances of Bach's Mass in B Minor (the Society's first) and the *Christmas Oratorio* (again Parts 1–3 only) followed. Willcocks conducted all of the concerts in the 1959/60 season, including one for which he brought his full orchestra from the Cambridge University Musical Society. This, it turned out, would provide the Society with a way forward. By 1960 the national improvements in instrumental tuition were beginning to work through the school systems and Cambridge University attracted excellent young players, many of them participants in the National Youth Orchestra and some who trained to professional level at the music colleges either before or after their degree studies. By doubling up on performances of major works in Cambridge and Bedford, Willcocks was able to bring his carefully-trained orchestra to the Choral Society's performances, and it was thus that Beethoven's 'Choral' Symphony was performed at the Corn Exchange in 1961, followed by Verdi's Requiem in 1966 and 1972 and Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* in 1968. When Willcocks moved from Cambridge to the Royal College of Music, a similarly proficient student orchestra from the College followed on. For works involving an orchestra of less than symphonic proportions, Willcocks could still call upon the Jacques Orchestra, and for another type of concert repertoire he brought the Gabrieli Brass Ensemble or the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble.

Willcocks's contribution was essential to the success of the Musical Society not only on account of his ability to provide an affordable orchestra, but also because he presented more modest concerts, including Christmas-season celebrations, in an engaging manner. He had many professional engagements beyond Cambridge/London and Bedford, however, and although he was effectively the principal conductor from 1959 to 1987 it was not practical for him to take on the complete programmes for the seasons. Nor was it diplomatic for him to do so, because the Society faced another new situation. The growth and improvement in the area of musical education was

working through to produce a larger number of graduate musicians with practical competence from universities and music colleges. The procession of different names involved with the Society as conductors, chorus masters and accompanists from the 1960s onwards becomes rather fast-moving. Other first-rate musicians (Roy Rimmer, Michael Rose) followed Freddie Stevens as county music adviser, and it was both practical and beneficial for the Society to incorporate them as conductors. Furthermore, under these two men, the orchestral scene in Bedford revived to an extent that there were local alternatives to the Willcocks orchestras. Anthony le Fleming, Rimmer and Rose were all associated both with the Society and with the founding and development of Bedford's orchestras, including the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra, the Bedfordshire Symphony Orchestra, the Bedford Sinfonia and the Bedfordshire Youth Orchestra. Under Michael Rose particular success was achieved on twin tracks: excellent executants were attracted to Bedfordshire as peripatetic teachers, and their pupils combined into one of the country's outstanding youth orchestras. Other talented musicians were also involved, including Deirdre Knight, Michael Smedley and Michael Ashcroft. Diemer and Harding had made all the running for the Society in their days, and their relationship with performers and committees would have been fairly straightforward, but the Society must have been heavily involved for thirty years in the later twentieth century with diplomatic transactions between the alternative talents, though the resulting record of performances is impressive. It was only with the appointment of Ian Smith in 1985 that there followed a return to a single permanent conductor (in 1988).

The following narrative traces the season-by season fortunes of the Society, which has had a continuous history since 1867, apart from a hiatus in the 1930s, and the re-foundation in 1941 was correctly seen at the time in terms of continuity. The Society has been fortunate in the context of a market-town base: although Bedford had no nucleus of professional singers such as would be found in cathedral cities on which to build, the essential personnel and resources were to hand, and connections to London and Cambridge provided essential supplementary musical resources. The schools and churches of Bedford and the surrounding area are part of the enabling background, though there were inevitably recurring problems about venues and finances. The essential part of the story however lies with people – the professional leadership, the membership and the audiences. The documentation from minutes and newspaper reports take us only a certain distance in understanding and recovering the musical experiences that were, and are, the reason for the Society's existence and its value. Well-attended performances that 'go well' are an obvious high point, but there are different satisfactions from different musical repertoires, and a successful performance (sometimes against the odds) can take place to a small audience: a perplexing experience for the performers and bad news for the balance sheet. As the activities of the Choral Society developed, a large part of the management necessarily involved solo singers and orchestra, in addition to the local provision of conductors, chorus masters and accompanists, but the morale of the members has ultimately been the most important factor in success and preservation. Choral singing is a social musical activity, requiring discipline and cohesion to a common purpose. There are obvious dangers to the future of the tradition from the fragmentation and atomisation of social practices, but most seriously from the decline in choral experience at school level: this is less tangible (and less measureable) than

the threats to instrumental tuition that occasionally hit the headlines on the subject of educational provision. The future of the Choral Society may be at risk as the horizons of many of today's students are limited to *West Side Story* and never reach the Verdi Requiem.

Chapter One

Choral Music in Bedford, c.1800–66

Catherine was fond of music but only as an expression of her own feelings. For music as music – for a melody of Mozart, for example – that is to say for pure art which is simple beauty, superior to our personality, she did not care. She liked Handel, and there was a choral society in Easthorpe which occasionally performed the ‘Messiah’.¹

Twenty-five years before the formation of the short-lived Bedford Harmonic Society and fifty-five years before the Bedford Amateur Musical Society was established in 1867, Handel’s *Messiah* was performed in Bedford, probably for the first time, in October 1812. Before the performance, Samuel Whitbread was asked by one Thomas Revis and others if he felt that there was a need for more good-quality music locally.² They wrote: ‘It having been the wish of several of the inhabitants of Bedford to have a Music Meeting on an extensive plan in the Town, by the assistance of some of the London and other performers, we take the liberty to apply to you to unite with his Grace the Duke of Bedford in affording us your interest and support.’³

The result was a performance of *Messiah*, given with the assistance of some musicians from London and elsewhere. After the event, a Mr Williamson wrote to his son, Edmond, about the performance, which his mother and sisters had also attended: ‘went to the Oratorio at Bedford ... There was very little Company – Mr. Trevor of Bromham was there and Mrs. Higgins of Turvey and some others. I believe not a hundred. I am afraid the performers will be the losers.’⁴ No further regular music meetings appear to have been organised in the immediate months or years following this performance.

In 1825, a music festival was arranged: ‘for the benefit of the Bedford Infirmary and for the support of some new established schools in the county.’⁵ The programme consisted of a selection from *Messiah*. The concert was performed in St Paul’s

¹ Mark Rutherford, *Catharine Furze* (London, 1893), p. 137. Mark Rutherford was the *nom de plume* of the author William Hale White (1831–1913), a novelist who was born and grew up in Bedford. He modelled his fictional Easthorpe on the town. By the time he wrote *Catharine Furze* Bedford Musical Society was well established. The first secretary of the Bedford Harmonic Society was a Mr Furze.

² Samuel Whitbread (1764–1815) was the son of Samuel Whitbread. He was educated at Eton; Christ Church, Oxford; and St John’s College, Cambridge. He was Whig MP for Bedford from 1790, supporting Charles Fox and opposing William Pitt and his government. He inherited the house and grounds of Southill Park, Bedfordshire, from his father, and was head of the family brewery company.

³ Margaret McGregor, ‘Music in Bedfordshire II’, *Bedfordshire Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 130 (Autumn 1979), p. 56.

⁴ McGregor, ‘Music in Bedfordshire II’, p. 56.

⁵ Ibid.

church by visiting musicians, some from the Chapel Royal, Windsor, and some from Kings College, Cambridge. Admission prices ranged from 2s 6d to 10s 6d. Among the patrons was the Rev. Dr John Brereton FSA FRGS, headmaster of the Grammar School in Bedford.

John Brereton (1782–1863) had been appointed headmaster of the Grammar School in 1811, at the age of twenty-nine, following the death of Dr Hook. He had been educated at Winchester and New College, Oxford. He then taught at Blundell's School, Tiverton. John Brereton was headmaster of the Grammar School until 1855, a period of forty-four years. He very adequately fulfilled the mission for which he had been appointed - raising the standard and the standing of the school.⁶ The quality of education available in Bedford helped to account for the growth of the town, at least until the establishment of Howard's Britannia Ironworks in the late 1850s.⁷

The next concert in the town, of which there is a record, was held in the Bedford New Rooms (later known as the Assembly Rooms, now the Harpur Suite). The Bedford New Rooms were designed by Thomas Gwyn Elger.⁸ Building work started in October 1834 and was completed in June 1836. The concert was organised by John Nunn (1805–81), and was held in July, a month after the building work was completed. John Nunn was the organist of St Paul's church, Bedford, and the borough organist (by virtue of playing at civic services). He took up the latter post in 1836 and retained it for approximately thirty years. The concert had a full programme, and many of the performers came from London. This was before the days of railway transport to Bedford, so travel to the town was comparatively slow and difficult.⁹

The Bedford Harmonic Society was formed six months later, in January 1837.¹⁰ It was not until the Harmonic Society's establishment that regular performances of choral and secular music could be heard in the town. Although John Nunn was the dominant musician, John Brereton deserves much of the credit for the formation and initial success of the Harmonic Society. According to his obituary in the *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent*:

⁶ Obituary in the *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent*, 23 September 1862, pp. 4–5. This obituary is more adulatory than Joyce Godber's description of him. She writes: 'But with the years, though he would support local activities such as concerts or the Horticultural Society he became more Olympian.' Joyce Godber, *The Harpur Trust, 1552–1973* (Bedford, 1973), p. 43.

⁷ John Howard (1791–1878) established a foundry in Bedford. By the time he retired he was successfully manufacturing a patent plough. His two sons took over the business and established the Britannia Ironworks in 1859. The Britannia Ironworks was to become Bedford's largest employer. Sir Frederick Howard (1827–1915), one of John Howard's sons, was an enthusiastic supporter of the Bedford Musical Society and was its president for many years.

⁸ Thomas Gwyn Elger was a Bedford architect. He competed unsuccessfully for the Harpur Trust's new schools in Harpur Street (now the Harpur Shopping Centre), but designed the New Rooms opposite in Greek Doric style. He was elected mayor of Bedford in 1830, 1835 and 1838. His son, Thomas Gwyn Empey Elger, a noted astronomer, was elected mayor in 1878.

⁹ The first railway to pass through Bedfordshire was the London to Birmingham railway, which opened in 1838; there was a station at Leighton Buzzard. The first railway to come to Bedford was that from Oxford to Cambridge. St John's Station, Bedford, on this line, was opened in 1846.

¹⁰ A number of other choral societies were established in the 1830s. The Sacred Harmonic Society (London) was founded in 1832, the Huddersfield Choral Society in 1836 and the Choral Harmonic Society (London) in 1837.

lovers of good music in Bedford, of all classes, owe much to him. Under his patronage the Harmonic Society flourished many years ago, and by his guidance and that of his son, contributed greatly to the formation of that taste which has since been cultivated by others with much success ... his own taste was exact and refined by high training and his voice and ear excellent.¹¹

Initially, the Harmonic Society had twenty-six performing members and 118 honorary members. Among the membership were representatives of many leading families in Bedford. No known list of members has survived. However, the printed constitution that contains the rules, several programmes 1837–42 and a poster from the end of 1842 are still extant.¹² From the programmes it is known that John Brereton was president of the Society. The names of the other officers were John Nunn, leader; Mr Furze, secretary; and Thomas Barnard, treasurer. Thomas Barnard was the owner of Barnard's Bank, a well-known institution in the town. He lived in Cople, where there is a memorial to him in the church. The committee members were Mr C. Robinson, Mr H. Mayle, Mr Riley, Mr W. Jones and Robert Rose.

The leader, John Nunn, was an active local musician. His brief obituary in the *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent* states:

For many years Mr Nunn held the appointment of organist to St Paul's Church, Bedford, and was highly appreciated as a teacher of music, having a large and select number of pupils in the town and neighbourhood. He was also conductor of the first Harmonic Society, established here under the presidency of the late Dr. Brereton by whom he was appreciated and held that important position for almost 20 [*sic*] years. Many of his contemporaries who attended the amateur concerts will recollect his energetic leadership, as well as his vocal and instrumental abilities ... Mr. Nunn was one of a talented family well known at Bury St Edmunds and by the music profession generally.¹³

The Harmonic Society aimed to put on six concerts a year with programmes that included a mixture of songs, glees and short orchestral pieces, especially overtures by Handel and Mozart. The concerts were held in the Assembly Rooms. The typical format for concerts at this time was short songs interspersed with instrumental or orchestral pieces. Robert Rose, later one of the founding fathers of the Bedford Amateur Musical Society, and its chorus master for many years, was a performer with the Harmonic Society.

¹¹ *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent*, 23 September 1862, pp. 4–5.

¹² The programmes of the Bedford Harmonic Society 1837–42 and a poster from 1842 are preserved in the Bedfordshire Heritage Library, Bedford Central Library. The constitution and rules can be found in Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Record Service (BLARS), X 274/35–7.

¹³ *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 25 June 1881, p. 5. A different light may be shed on John Nunn by a reference in an interview given by Sir Frederick Howard in the *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 15 July 1910, p. 7: 'I can never forget the sermon, nor can I ever forget the Bishop's (Wilberforce of Oxford) sad look up into the gallery where the little Bluecoat boys were singing the Te Deum from a simple Gregorian chant, the red-faced organist carelessly blundering and putting the poor little fellows into lamentable confusion. This erratic organist, having passed away years ago, I cannot think of mentioning his name, though he so grievously disturbed the service.' The visit is most likely to have occurred when John Nunn was organist, and he may be the red-faced organist referred to. Samuel Wilberforce was Bishop of Oxford from 1845–68, and is best remembered for leading the attack on Darwinism, especially his debate with Thomas Huxley at the British Association, on Darwin's theory of evolution.

Mr J. T. Brooks of Flitwick, who had supported the Harmonic Society since its inception, recorded in his diary for 20 December 1839 that he: 'went to the concert of the Bedford Harmonic Society, dining at the Witts.'¹⁴ Dr George Witt was another founder member of the Society, and was also a noted collector of scientific objects. His name appears on the plaque commemorating the opening of Bedford Town Bridge without toll in 1837; he was mayor at the time.

There are no known surviving programmes after those for the 1842/43 season, and there are no reports of Harmonic Society concerts in the later 1840s and 1850s in the *Bedford Times*.¹⁵ It is therefore difficult to trace the history of the Harmonic Society between 1843 and its brief revival in the 1850s. That it did survive is suggested by John Brereton's obituary, which refers to his involvement with the Harmonic Society for twenty years.¹⁶ It is possible that there were financial difficulties in the early 1840s, as a local paper reported that concerts were held: 'to liquidate a debt of £24 still pending for the pianoforte belonging to the Society.'¹⁷

Reports of a number of other concerts that took place in Bedford in the later 1840s and 1850s do survive.¹⁸ John Nunn conducted a Grand Concert on 2 April 1850, and Robert Rose promoted a Grand Annual Concert of Sacred Music in the spring of 1850 and 1851. He played the piano-forte and harmonium on each occasion. Mr Sanderson (who is not mentioned elsewhere) was leader of the band in 1850, while John Nunn was leader in 1851. These are not referred to as Harmonic Society concerts.

One other Bedford concert is significant because it was given by well-known professionals from London. This was Mr Jullien's Grand Concert, held on 17 August 1850. Louis Antoine Jullien was a French composer of dance music and a conductor of a wide range of orchestral music. He conducted the London Promenade Concerts at the English Opera House 1838–59. These were very popular. Despite conducting many concerts and becoming well-known and wealthy, Jullien over-reached himself financially, and he died in poverty. According to the advertisement for the Bedford concert, he was accompanied by the *elite* of his unrivalled band, and Herr Koenig was the principal 'Cornet-a-Pistonist' [*sic*]. The review states that:

¹⁴ McGregor, 'Music in Bedfordshire II', pp. 57–8.

¹⁵ This local newspaper went through a number of name changes over the years, *Bedford Times* (1845–59), *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent* (1859–72), *Bedfordshire Times and Independent* (1872–1939), *The Bedfordshire Times and Bedfordshire Standard* (1939–64), *Bedfordshire Times* (1965–95), *Bedfordshire Times & Citizen* (1995–97), *Times & Citizen* (1997–).

¹⁶ *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent*, 23 September 1862, pp. 4–5. However, a letter to the *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 20 February 1903, p. 8, states that the Harmonic Society came to an end after John Brereton died (in 1863), ten years before the Bedford Amateur Musical Society was formed. It is possible that the letter writer's memory was inaccurate.

¹⁷ McGregor, 'Music in Bedfordshire II', p. 58.

¹⁸ Margaret McGregor states that the middle years of the century appear to have been a rather dead period for music and that professional concerts were few. Margaret McGregor, 'Music in Bedfordshire I', *Bedfordshire Magazine*, vol. 17, no. 129 (Summer 1979), p. 58. The evidence does not bear this out. As well as the concerts referred to above concerts were also held on the 15 November 1848, at the Wesleyan chapel, with a selection of sacred music from the works of Handel and Mozart with John Nunn as leader and Robert Rose as organist (defraying expenses for the erection of a new organ); and 1 April 1851, a Grand Concert by the Distins, performing on their sax-horns. The Distins were a family of brass instrument manufacturers, musicians and publishers.

Herr Koenig's solo on the Cornet-a-Piston was encored; but failed to overcome our objections to the monopolizing tones of the instruments as displayed in a small concert room. In this solo however, the tones were moderate when compared with the noise of the brass in some parts of the concerted music. The tones required by the area of the Surrey Zoological Gardens must be out of place in a small room like ours. When will musicians learn that one part of their 'art and mystery' should be to find the proportionate volume of tone for the room in which they play. We should have preferred hearing some of the blasts from the Cornets, on Saturday evening, through some half dozen pairs of good Witney blankets. Or, if given from a boat at Cox's pits, they would, perhaps, have made a pleasing serenade for an audience assembled on the bridge. If this fashion for spoiling music with noisy brass continue, we must have ear-dampers ... advertised as 'indispensable for the enjoyment of modern orchestral music'.¹⁹

At the very end of 1859, an advertisement for a concert of Christmas music, scheduled for 3 January 1860, was placed in the *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent* under the auspices of the Harmonic Society.²⁰ The advertisement does not refer to John Nunn or John Brereton. Details of the concert are rather obscure, for neither the soloists nor the leader, nor even the organisers, are named. The concert was never held. It is known what happened because Philip Diemer explained this when he addressed the Bedford Musical Society, following a presentation made to him for his long service to that organisation, in May 1905.²¹ The following is a report from the *Bedfordshire Times and Independent* of his 1905 speech:

A Society existed before the present one, and he [Philip Diemer] belonged to it, not as a conductor but as a humble second violinist and also as a vocalist, now and then singing bass solos. But the Society, which was conducted by the Rev. Henry Havergal, met with some success for a time, but unfortunately there were some quarrelsome people in the society.²² He was told that musical people were very quarrelsome, but he did not think it was true, in his experience. It always took two to make a quarrel, and any way they were not a quarrelsome set in the present Society. The old Society came to a sudden, and, he thought, an inglorious end. There was a great quarrel. Politics had a good deal to do with it. Politics and music never did agree. Sectarianism was also strong in the town and had something to do with it. At any rate, the quarrel ended, he was ashamed to say, in a free fight. The ladies screamed, the boys, of whom there were a few, laughed and enjoyed it, and the next morning appeared a bill that the concert announced for that evening was unavoidably postponed. (laughter) ... That concert had never been given ... and money was still owing to the subscribers. It was a bad preparation for another Society and made it difficult to get subscribers.²³

¹⁹ *Bedford Times*, 24 August 1850, p. 3. The reference to Surrey Zoological Gardens refers to one of Jullien's 'grande music fetes' with 400 instrumentalists, three distinct choruses and three distinct military bands in May 1849.

²⁰ *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent*, 27 December 1859, p. 1.

²¹ Philip Henry Diemer (1836–1910) was a founder member of the Bedford Amateur Musical Society (later the Bedford Musical Society) in January 1867. His contribution will be considered in following chapters.

²² The Rev. Henry East Havergal (1820–75) was vicar of Cople, and built an organ for himself in the church there. He also played the trumpet. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB) refers to the fact that Henry Havergal formed a musical society in Bedford. ODNB, vol. 25 (Oxford, 2004), p. 859. His father, W. H. Havergal, and his sister, Frances Havergal (who wrote the hymn "Take my Life and Let it be") are also referenced.

²³ *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 19 May 1905, p. 5.

In the early 1860s, there was a sudden increase in the number of concerts. John Nunn and Robert Rose feature regularly as does the Rev. C. Brereton, vicar of St Mary's church, Bedford.²⁴ Philip Diemer appears too, both as accompanist and as conductor. A typical concert was that held in March 1862 at the Working Men's Institute, given for the benefit of Mr Kipps, a pupil of Robert Rose, who was leaving Bedford. The concert was under the direction of Robert Rose, but he was assisted by John Nunn, Philip Diemer and Emily Miller; it was well received.²⁵

In 1866, Philip Diemer took a leading part in several concerts, including two concerts in February and one in April in aid of the Holy Trinity Church Enlargement Fund. The latter of these concerts included his *Fantasia for Pianoforte* ('Minnie'). In November, he took part in a Grand Promenade Concert promoted by The Bedford Literary and Scientific Institute and the General Library, and in December, he organised the Grammar School annual school concert, which included his own composition 'The Angel's Song' for solo and chorus. The reviewer writes of the Grammar School concert:

Ever since Mr. Diemer has had the management of the singing class, this concert has come to be quite an annual institution, and each year have seen him bringing his pupils better and better prepared to undergo their trial of skill before their parents, school fellows and friends ... In the second half, the well-known 'Aldiborontiphosphornio' was given as an encore.²⁶

One of the boys named in the review as taking part was C. Halliley, later to become a prominent solicitor in the town and treasurer of Bedford Musical Society in the early years of the twentieth century.²⁷

In addition to the variety of concerts now being held in Bedford, both The Bedford Literary and Scientific Institute and The Working Men's Institute provided educational support to musical activity in the town.²⁸ The Bedford Literary and Scientific Institute was founded in 1846 and later amalgamated with the Reading

²⁴ John Nunn did not become involved with the - soon to be formed - Bedford Amateur Musical Society. By this time he had retired as organist of St Paul's church, though he was still teaching pianoforte, violin, singing and dancing at 16 The Crescent, Bedford. His advertisements appeared in the *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent* during the 1860s.

²⁵ 'The vocal music was pleasingly rendered by the amateurs of the town. Mr. Nunn very much delighted the audience by the effective manner in which he played a solo on his favourite instrument, the violin ... Mr. Diemer gave the *Blue Bells of Scotland*, with his own variations in a truly brilliant style; the audience applauded heartily, and the accomplished pianist was recalled ... It must have been very gratifying to Mr. Rose to have been assisted on this occasion by his old pupil, Mr. Diemer, as well as by Mr. Kipps, his present pupil.' *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent*, 18 March 1862, p. 5.

²⁶ *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent*, 18 December 1866, p. 5. The 'Aldiborontiphosphornio', a glee for three voices, by John Wall Callcott is a paraphrase of the opening lines of Henry Carey's *Chrononhotonthologos*; *The Most Tragical Tragedy that was ever Tragedized by any Company of Tragedian* (London, 1777).

²⁷ C. Halliley was the grandfather of the well-known actor John Le Mesurier, best known for playing the part of Sergeant Arthur Wilson in the television comedy *Dad's Army*. John Le Mesurier's actual name was John Elton Halliley. *ODNB*, vol. 33, pp. 324–25.

²⁸ The Bedford Literary and Scientific Institute first considered presenting a concert in 1864 and re-considered the idea a couple of years later. The minutes for 4 September 1866 read: 'The report of the sub-committee as regards the Promenade Concert was unanimously adopted. Mr. Diemer to receive £25 and to undertake the whole musical arrangement'. Bedford Literary and Scientific Institute, *Minute Book*, BLARS Li/LibB1/1/3.

Room Society and soon after with the General Library.²⁹ Regular meetings were held, from 1854, in the Assembly Rooms.

The Working Men's Institute, opened in 1855, was to some extent a parallel institution, but possibly less erudite. The building of its large headquarters in Harpur Street, now The Guildhouse, was largely funded by the Rev. Richard William Fitzpatrick, curate and later vicar of Holy Trinity church. His obituary in the *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent* says: 'Witness the establishment, mainly at his own cost, of the Working Men's Institute and of the allotment system in connection with it, which was the result of his earnest desire to benefit the numerous and important class for which it was intended.'³⁰

The enlarged Holy Trinity church, of which Philip Diemer was organist, was re-opened on Friday 26 October 1866.³¹ The church had been built, and the parish established, in 1841 as a result of a government-funded programme to build new churches and establish new parishes in areas of need. Among the many dignitaries who came for a special sung Holy Communion was the Rev. Sir Frederick Arthur Gore Ouseley, who was professor of music at Oxford from 1855 until his death in 1889 and precentor of Hereford Cathedral for the same period.³² He was also the founder of the preparatory school, St Michael's College, Tenbury Wells, in 1856, and its main benefactor. Together with the Rev. Sir H. W. Baker and W. H. Monk, Ouseley was one of the original compilers of the first edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

The churches of the town, as in the country at large, flourished in the 1860s, despite the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origins of Species* in 1859. As well as Holy Trinity's enlargement in 1866, the Howard Congregational church in Mill Street (now a night club) was also significantly enlarged. And a new organ was also installed at St Peter's church.

This expansion of the churches may have helped to provide wider interest and impetus for the formation of The Church Music Society (for the archdeaconry and county of Bedford) in 1865. At The Church Music Society's general meeting held in January 1866, the committee presented a schedule of rules which had been drawn up by the Rev. Havergal.³³ This Society survived for a number of years. Both the secretaries, the Rev. C. Brereton and Mr J. P. Piper, became actively involved in the Bedford Amateur Musical Society.

²⁹ Austin Baker, *The Library Story: Bedford Public Library and its Forerunners 1700–1958* (Bedford, 1989), p. 9ff.

³⁰ *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent*, 10 January 1871, p. 5. There is a copy of *Memorials of R. W. Fitzpatrick* (London, 1878) published by C. F. Timaeus, 90 High Street, Bedford, in the Bedfordshire Heritage Library at Bedford Central Library.

³¹ A photograph of the Holy Trinity church opening can be seen in Richard Wildman's book *Bedford* (Stroud, 1995), Britain in Old Photographs, p. 56.

³² It is not clear why the Rev. Sir F. A. Gore Ouseley was invited although there are three possible reasons: he had been a university friend of the Rev. Henry Havergal, then vicar of Cople; there was a Thomas Ouseley, who was possibly a relative, living in Alexandra Road, Bedford (Thomas Ouseley's daughter, a violinist, played in the orchestra at the Society's concerts late in the century); the Rev. Sir F. A. Gore Ouseley was by this time prominent in church musical circles and, as noted above, had recently been involved with compiling *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

³³ *Bedford Times and Bedfordshire Independent*, 30 January 1866, p. 5.

The musicians of Bedford had a busy 1866, by the end of which the stage was set for the establishment of the Bedford Amateur Musical Society. At the time, it probably seemed an uncertain move, requiring commitment, dedication and hard work. In retrospect, the formation of the new Society was a very obvious step.