



A song in my heart

Olivia Rowland looks forward to the third English Music Festival and its sterling work to keep the English song tradition alive

The English Music Festival has been a long time in coming. It's been a genuine labour of love for festival founder Em Marshall, who admits that English vocal music has been an inspiration to her for most of her life. 'I first got into English music through my father singing "Linden Lea" to me as a child,' she says in a rare moment away from co-ordinating this year's festival. 'Since then I've tried to discover all the English music I can. I sang with the school choir (I went to St Paul's Girls' School because of the Holst/Howells link) and with the chapel choir at my Oxford college, and I've listened to and written about English music (and particularly song) as often as possible.'

But perhaps it's slightly unfair to suggest that the festival has been the result of decades of research. In fact it's just one of a range of projects its dynamic founder has worked on since leaving Oxford University in 2002. Inspired by conductor Hilary Davan Wetton, Marshall dreamed up the festival while still a student. 'Hilary told me: "It would be utterly crazy to set up an English Music Festival. Impossible, my gal. Do you know how many people have tried and failed? There's just not the money or interest in it. But if anyone can do it, you can, so you ought to have a go!"' Marshall recalls. 'I have had times I've thought "What am I doing? This is crazy!" but I just need to listen to some Holst or RVW or Quilter and I'm convinced by what I'm trying to do again.'

It was the combination of words and music – plus the sheer craftsmanship of some of the English songwriters – that proved so irresistible to Marshall, and which prompted her to come up with the concept of a festival celebrating English music in

the first place. 'The setting of the words is so brilliant, and so is the way they capture the atmosphere of the words. I also love the fact that music is so often nostalgic and evocative – it's really beautiful stuff but it can be very striking and forward-looking and unusual too.'

And Marshall has done her best to capture the full range of these emotions, as well as 700 years of musical history, in the festivals. The 2008 event – held last May at a variety of venues in and around Oxford – featured music ranging from Dufay to commissions by contemporary composers such as Cecilia McDowell and Ronald Corp, by way of Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Howells, Bliss and Finzi.

Vocal music has been an essential element of the festival from the beginning, not just because of Marshall's love for it but also because of its place within English music now as well as over the centuries. 'England is a country very given to choral societies and to festivals and amateur music-making – and choral music is a huge part of it,' Marshall comments. 'Much of this music was written for amateurs and large-scale choral societies,

and these bodies still exist and love to sing the music composed for them.'

The choral tradition has certainly featured heavily in the festival programmes so far. The 2008 festival included a whole morning service devoted to the music of Sullivan performed in the gloriously English Keble College chapel, as well as performances from vocal groups such as Vox Musica, the City of London Choir and the London Chorus. And while the programmes may feature a few inevitable crowd-pleasers to draw in passing trade, Marshall has focused on promoting the less well known gems of the English repertoire. In addition to the commissions, the 2008 festival included James Bowman singing the first public performances of songs by Britten, and concert performances of rarely heard works by Arne and Linley. In fact, these proved the highlights of the event: 'Many people said this wasn't the sort of thing they'd usually go to but they were stunned by how lovely it was,' Marshall reports.

If the whole festival set-up sounds a bit like one person's crazy dream – albeit a rather self-restrained, English one – then the genuinely enthusiastic audience reactions ought to quash the thought. Marshall herself admits that she might have given up had audiences not been so encouraging. Likewise, the scholarly aspect of the festival underlines listeners' interest in English music. A seminar programme on the choral music tradition in Britain looks likely to feature in the 2009 festival, as do talks on the future of choral singing in England and pre-concert presentations on composers included in the programme.

Vocal performance will be top of the bill at the next festival, to be held once again in 'middle England' – Oxford and its environs, with all the connotations of glowing Cotswold stone, college quads and rambling country roads. Marshall hopes that Vox Musica and James Bowman will return, while Hilary Davan Wetton and the City of London Chorus, who will perform Holst and Britten choral music, have already confirmed their availability. Plans are also afoot to include Oxford Liedertafel singing English part-songs. With such a diversity of artists, Marshall has already planned programmes focusing on early music (featuring the Cannons Scholars), choral music, soloists and contemporary works.

While some of the planned artists are now friends of the festival, others are as yet untried, having got in touch with Marshall after hearing about her aims. Some of the featured artists have a taste for the unexpected too: for example, Marshall has already planned a late night programme by medieval music group Joglearesa.

Marshall is the first to admit that none of this is likely to be easy. Funding for 'English' ventures remains elusive as trusts and companies ring-fence money for youth projects and world music rather than the sounds that are on their doorsteps and in their heritage. 'Funding is a struggle,' Marshall confides. 'We have no core funding, no budget for staff and the artists play for reduced fees because they are committed to the aims of the festival.'

Funding hurdles aside, Marshall remains positive. 'English music is not the anachronistic, fuddy-duddy "cow-pat" stuff that the unjustified image it has been given presents,' she says. 'It's exciting, forward-looking, striking, unusual and extraordinarily beautiful. It really should be given a chance, and I plan to spread the word.' And who would dare disagree? ■

The 2009 English Music Festival will run from 22-25 May.

www.englishmusicfestival.org.uk

