

# HALIFAX

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## Choral Society

**The world's oldest choral society  
Making music continuously since 1817**

### **A Halifax Choral Society special newsletter on our new Musical and Creative Director, ANTHONY GRAY**

On Monday, 4th September, we welcomed organist, conductor and composer [Anthony Gray](#) as our new Musical and Creative Director!

We are thrilled that Anthony has joined Halifax Choral Society. Soprano Liz Hegarty spoke to Anthony about his background, his favourite music and his plans for the Choral Society. Read her questions and his answers below!



Q. Did you grow up in a musical household?

A. Yes - my parents are both musical, and met in a choir. They were both studying in Nottingham at the time, and joined the University choir, meeting in the alto section.

Q. As a child, did you play any musical instruments?

A. The piano was always being played in the house, whether by my parents, pupils of my mum, or me! I started playing the piano at a young age, and graduated onto the organ when my voice broke around age 14. I also attempted to play the clarinet (to a not particularly high standard), but my main musical passions were keyboard related.

Q. What is your favourite music?

A. I have a keen interest in both the Anglican choral repertoire for organ, and also in more secular organ music. I also grew into a relationship with musical theatre, through working with my head of music at secondary school on a number of school productions. Simultaneously, I developed a more fulsome grasp of the oratorio and concert repertoire through accompanying and singing with local groups in Ilkley. I'm a lover of essentially any choral music. My main passions lie in the Baroque and Contemporary repertoires as well as many of the dramatic large-scale oratorios of the Romantic era. I am especially keen on promoting new music wherever possible and engaging audiences with the 'Classical' repertoire in new and interesting ways. I grew up very fond of jazz, partly through the experience of attending gigs in Bridgnorth, where my grandad played a role in organising the annual jazz festival.

Q. You studied at University of Cambridge, where you were an organ scholar. What else did you study?

A. The academic course was very varied, and I focused a lot of my study on some of the practical aspects of keyboard technique, fugue, tonal (or pastiche) composition as well as historical study of Messiaen, Purcell and the *St Matthew Passion*. I also undertook playing at St John's college once a week, as well as deputising at other colleges, and at churches in both Cambridge and London. I also spent a lot of time as the Musical Director of a number of theatre productions, including visiting the Edinburgh Fringe twice for runs of three different musicals. I could occasionally be found 'noodling' something akin to jazz at a May Ball or other extravagant event ...

Q. As an accomplished musician, what attracted you to becoming a Choir Leader?

A. My love of choral music and its emotional engagement with an audience is at the heart of this work. Choral music speaks to me as an audience member in a way that no other music does. I also love working as a choral director with a huge variety of people from the amateur to the professional, and from young children to those who may have been singing for 50+ years.

Q. And now, Halifax Choral Society; what encouraged you to apply for the post of Musical and Creative Director of our choir?

A. I have long been an admirer of the numerous excellent choral societies around our most beautiful part of the world. We have such a proud and excellent tradition of music-making of this kind, and I have always been keen to be a part of that wherever possible. Halifax Choral Society, being the oldest choral society in Britain, brings with it an obvious historical pedigree and artistic imperative which I am hugely looking forward to rising to. I have also really enjoyed listening to some of the choir's recorded output from recent years, as well as following projects such as the anniversary commission from Philip Wilby. The choir's history of performing some of the best and most exciting pieces in the repertoire is enviable, and I was hugely excited to apply to lead the choir into the next phase of its existence.

Q. The choir has a proud heritage, 205 years continuously performing, never missing a *Messiah* despite two world wars and a global pandemic. What is your take on that?

A. This is a remarkable achievement! It speaks not only to the commitment to fine music-making, but also to the durability of both the piece (which is of course a wonderful one), and also the format of this type of concert. A programme consisting entirely of one piece, from one composer, has to be so tightly designed and consistently excellent in its creation that a 205 year history of performing the piece shows just what a special creation the *Messiah* really is. We already have a fabulous line up of players and soloists ready for this year's performance, and it will be an honour to be in charge!

Q. And now, moving forward, what is your vision for the choir?

## A1 Repertoire

I am very keen to expand the choir's repertoire such that each season's programme is more varied and interesting than the last. Whilst it is hugely important and musically enriching to perform some of the oratorio 'big-hitters' such as *Elijah* or *The Creation* (as we will do in 2023 and 2024 respectively) I am also very keen on the idea that broadening the range of styles and genres of music in which a choir sings can only serve to better the overall sound and vocal longevity of each singer. We have some really exciting programmes planned over the next couple of years, and I can't wait to see what both singers and audiences think!

## A2 Outreach and recruitment

For a large-scale chorus like Halifax Choral Society, it is very important that we make every effort to be open to as wide a range of people as possible. It is imperative as an organisation with such history that we serve to widen opportunities for learning and participation wherever possible. For much of the repertoire we will sing as a group, it is important that there is a good grounding in the basics of musical theoretical understanding, but this is a difficult thing to achieve for those who might not have had this early in their life. This is one particular area I'm very keen to nurture and grow, and hopefully as an organisation, we can offer help, support and education to anyone who wants to sing with us in some of this amazing repertoire.

## A3 Maintaining and improving our quality of sound

Whilst I have touched on the importance, to me, of singing a wide range of repertoire in a variety of styles, it is also important to look after our voices, and not to push ourselves beyond our limits. This is why I already have some different rehearsal strategies and techniques planned for our rehearsals in the near future - some of which the choir may not have been used to before! We are also very fortunate to work with some very fine musicians and accompanists, who I know will make rehearsals as efficient and enjoyable as possible. I can't wait to get started!

Thank you, Anthony. I know the choir are just as keen!

*Anthony Gray 'in conversation' with Elizabeth Hegarty. This has been edited for length; [click here](#) to read the whole interview on our website.*





#### Legacy

The choral society gratefully acknowledges a legacy under the will of Eileen Dixon, a former member of the choir. The future of the Choral Society depends on the generosity of donors and friends.

### Dates for your diary:

**5 November:** Mendelssohn's *Elijah* at the Victoria Theatre with Leeds Philharmonic Chorus and Skipton Camerata. [Tickets](#) are available now!

More about this very special concert in our next newsletter.

**2 December:** Carols and Brass with Black Dyke Band at the Victoria Theatre. [Tickets](#) are available now!

**15 December:** *Messiah* by Candlelight at Halifax Minster. Tickets will be on sale from the 1st October

If you have any suggestions for what you would like your Newsletter to include, or any queries about HCS, please email

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