

Three Choirs

Everywhere you look in a British summer (weather permitting, of course) you can find a music festival. Just the other week, while we were holidaying in Herefordshire, our paths crossed with music lovers of all shapes and ages. There were two jazz festivals, an alternative music show (curiously involving sheep), and just down the road the great-grandmother of all music festivals, smiling quizzically at her multi-coloured progeny.

For close on 300 years the Three Choirs Meeting, to give it its formal name, has been circulating between the cathedral cities of Hereford, Gloucester and Worcester, the oldest (non-competitive) music festival in the world. Only the two world wars have interrupted its annual passage. But whereas in Birmingham the Great War brought its own venerable Triennial Festival to an end, the Three Choirs bounced back stronger than ever. War, after all, has been the inspiration for many of the 20th Century's greatest choral works.

When the festival returned to Worcester in 1920, and in an atmosphere of quiet solemnity, Edward Elgar himself conducted his setting of Laurence Binyon's *For the Fallen*, and Ralph Vaughan Williams his *Four Hymns*.

Sometime soon the Three Choirs will be celebrating its tricentenary. The tricky matter is to decide exactly when. A notice in the Worcester Postman of 1719 refers to an "annual musical assembly", suggesting that such a gathering was already a fixture in the calendar. But from how far back? The cathedral organists at Hereford and Gloucester - Henry Hall and William Hine - are known to have collaborated on a choral composition as early as 1709, and this might have been stimulated by a meeting of the three groups. For the sake of argument, however, 1715 has been declared as the year of the first meeting, albeit with no certain evidence to support it.

The festival just concluded at Hereford, then, marked the 285th such gathering. That the Three Choirs has survived so long reflects remarkable endurance, in the face of many challenges, theological, financial and logistical.

For one thing, such was the conservatism of the Church of England hierarchy in the 18th Century that no music which could not be construed as part of a church service could be performed in a cathedral. Even Handel's *Messiah* was ruled out on that score, and masses by Catholic composers needed careful Anglicanizing.

Luckily the Guildhall at Worcester and the 17th-century Music Room, behind Hereford Cathedral (demolished in 1835), provided space for singing deemed to be "secular". The powerful divisions within Anglicanism, driven on by the Oxford Movement in the 1830s, only added to differences of opinion as to what was, and was not, appropriate.

For another, the early cathedral choirs were dominated by male voices, and it was not at all easy to locate enough sopranos.

From 1772, however, conductors and composers found what they were looking for in Yorkshire and Lancashire, and from that year choruses of women, and later soloists, were imported from the chapels and woollen mills of Leeds, Barnsley and the North, where female singing was well established.

By the 19th Century the Three Choirs chorus was truly national in make-up, with singers arriving every year from London, Birmingham and the universities, as well as a nucleus from the three cities themselves. The net result, however, was that there was never enough time to rehearse all the works before the festival began.

With the appearance of singers from across the country, costs inevitably soared. Individual members received little more than their travelling expenses, but the soloists themselves could command enormous sums. Fees of 200 guineas or more were not uncommon, and when Jenny Lind, the famous "Swedish Nightingale", was offered 250 guineas to sing at the Worcester festival, she turned it down.

It was only with the advent of the gramophone and the radio that the bottom dropped out of this particular market; by the Second World War the soloists were receiving only a fraction of what they had earned a century earlier.

The nature of the music on offer went through just as great a transformation. In the 19th Century a festival without Handel's *Messiah* was almost unheard-of, just as (after 1800) Haydn's *Creation* was rarely absent, until it was elbowed aside by Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.

By the end of the 19th Century, however, new works, often conducted by the composer himself, began to take centre stage. From the point when, in 1879, Arthur Sullivan conducted his *Light of the World* at Hereford, the procession of star names has been almost constant.

Hubert Parry premiered a new work in the following year at Gloucester, followed by a Who's Who of 20th-century music: Holst, Kodaly, Dvorak, Delius, Vaughan Williams and Saint-Saens, to name only

the best-known (by me, at least). And, of course, from the moment he first played in the Festival orchestra at Worcester in 1878, there was always Edward Elgar. For the next 50 years Elgar was an ever-present influence on the Three Choirs Festival, and responsible, more than anyone, for its flourishing. In his final appearance at Hereford in 1933, just five months before his death, there were no less than five works of the composer on parade, all of which Elgar conducted. A statue of the great man, wheeling his bike, stands at the north-east corner of the cathedral close. Every three years he wears a wreath of flowers, and seems to be listening more intently than usual.