



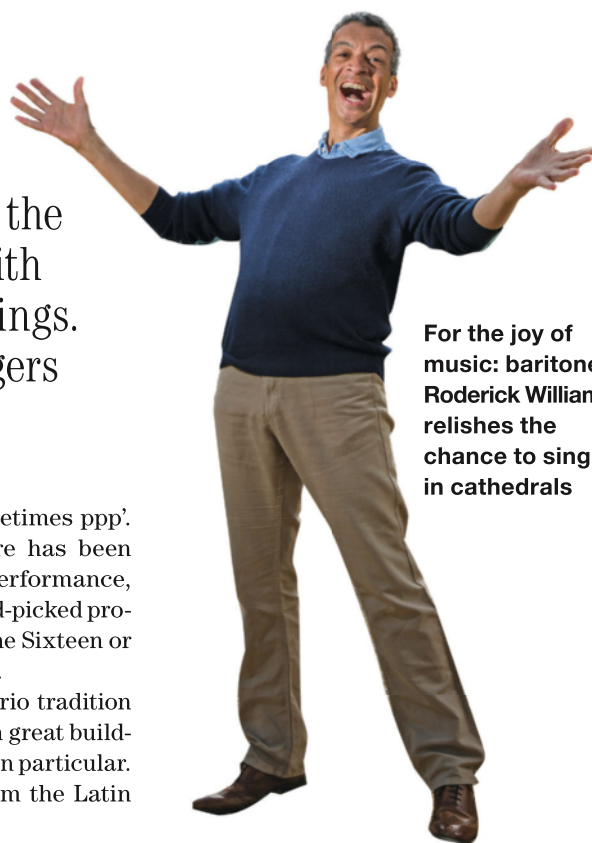
# Pure singing

The exhilarating music of oratorios allows the bringing together of amateur choruses with professional soloists, often in glorious buildings. **Henrietta Bredin** talks to two leading singers about the much-loved art form

**S**AY the word oratorio and the vision that is conjured up may still be that of Joyce Grenfell singing *Joyful Noise*, in which 'three lady choristers, silver voices all, sing oratorio at the Albert Hall'. It is a song that celebrates the old-fashioned amateur chorus, travelling doggedly to rehearsals, boundlessly enthusiastic and inexhaustibly keen, who 'sometimes sing in churches and at the BBC, and

sometimes sing FFF and sometimes ppp'. More recently, however, there has been a drive towards 'authentic' performance, with much smaller forces; hand-picked professionals in groups such as The Sixteen or the Academy of Ancient Music.

What has inspired the oratorio tradition above all is its connection with great buildings; churches and cathedrals in particular. The word oratorio comes from the Latin



For the joy of music: baritone Roderick Williams relishes the chance to sing in cathedrals



Filling the Barbican with song: Sir Simon Rattle conducts the London Symphony Orchestra in Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*

*orare*, to pray, and the form, albeit similar to that of an opera, with orchestra, chorus and solo singers, is specifically devoted to sacred subjects. When staged performances were prohibited by the Catholic church during the season of Lent, oratorios, especially in 17th-century Italy, became a hugely popular alternative.

Edward Elgar was so familiar with the cathedrals of Worcester and Hereford that he knew exactly how his music would sound when set free into their vast, vaulted interiors. The celebrated baritone Roderick Williams relishes the opportunity to sing in such places and loves the comparison with the dramatic staged works that he performs. 'It was an amazing breakthrough for a composer such as Handel, to realise that he could compose in the language of the country he was living in—England for many years—and that the audience would be able to understand in real time what was going on.'

Oratorios don't come with props and costumes, but they do sometimes have stage directions, which, Mr Williams points out,

can't always be followed. 'In *Saul*, there's a bit where it says "He throws his javelin"—no, I don't think so! Not when I'm standing there in a church or a concert hall, in my white tie and tails, holding a copy of the score.'

**'You have to conjure up a character and a narrative drive, as well as standing and delivering'**

He explains the difference in the preparation process between opera and oratorio. 'There are occasions with oratorio when you jump off the train, have an afternoon rehearsal and then perform with a chorus behind you who've been working on it for three months. It's more fulfilling than you'd think from that description, because there's

a real intentness of focus when you have so little time. You have to conjure up a character and a narrative drive, as well as standing and delivering, so that the audience can follow and do all that work in their heads.'

The restraint of oratorio, the fact that the singers are holding their scores and are not giving a full-blown acting performance, has its own impact. 'I could do a lot of oratorios from memory,' says Mr Williams, 'but that's not the point. I've known times when one of the performers decides to "act" and it doesn't work, you want them to stop. They've crossed the line into opera and are doing a different show.'

He adds: 'A number of oratorios have been staged now and many of them have been very successful. It's hard to remember that Handel's *Semele*, for example, was not intended to be an opera, but Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ* would be impossible to stage and works wonderfully well in the imagination. The scene transitions are done perfectly in music.'

When I spoke to mezzo-soprano Catherine Wyn-Rogers, she was in Cornwall after →

singing a contemporary work by the Cornish composer Russell Pascoe in Truro Cathedral. ‘It was a magnificent place to sing,’ she says. ‘I often think that the roof of a cathedral echoes the roof of your mouth. When you sing, you use all the spaces in your body for resonance—there’s a feeling that you make the sound into a shape and it continues out and into the building.’

Both singers are adamant about the need to know the whole work, not only the solos. Miss Wyn-Rogers sang her first solo parts with the choral society in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, where she grew up, and where her mother was a member of the choir. ‘That meant that I was always familiar with the entire work. I knew the context of what I was singing.’

## ‘Any composer worth their salt will have spoken the words over and again to decide how to set them’

‘I often have students who bring an aria that they’ve chosen from a book of oratorio solos. Of course they’re all strapped for cash, but they need to have the full thing. I was giving a masterclass on Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* recently and a young woman was singing *Buss und reu* [Repentance and regret]. I asked her who she was and she thought for a minute and said “Am I Peter?”. Argh! “No, you’re Mary Magdalene—and you need to go away and read your Bible and understand the story and where you fit in.”

Words are important in all sung music, and in oratorio, composers have been bold in their choices of texts. Mendelssohn chose episodes from the Book of Kings in the Old Testament for *Elijah*, Michael Tippett’s secular oratorio, *A Child of our Time*, draws



Soprano Catherine Wyn-Rogers performs Mary Magdalene in Elgar’s *The Kingdom*

on T. S. Eliot, Wilfred Owen, Goethe and John Bunyan; James MacMillan’s *Christmas Oratorio* includes verses by John Donne and Robert Southwell.

‘Clear text is absolutely crucial,’ says Miss Wyn-Rogers. ‘The moment people can’t hear what you’re singing, you lose their attention. Any composer worth their salt will have spoken the words over and again to decide how to set them to music. Singers should do the same. Sound on its own is boring.’

‘There is something very special about singing in the language of the audience to whom you are performing. And it’s fascinating when, as with *Elijah*, it can be sung in English or German. It’s an entirely different piece in German. Singing *Sei stille dem Herrn* instead of Oh rest in the Lord, the German is more incisive, it’s brighter.’

Mr Williams points out that the term ‘oratorio singer’ has lost some of its immediacy. ‘If a taxi driver asks me what I do and I say I’m a singer, they immediately think I mean pop. If I say opera singer, they get a clear idea, but it’s only one element of what I do. They wouldn’t know what I meant if I said I’m an oratorio singer, but it’s a huge part of my performing work.’

Interestingly, in an increasingly secular world, the oratorio form continues to appeal to composers. Mr Williams sang the delayed UK premiere of Mr MacMillan’s *Christmas Oratorio* in December 2021. It is a work of powerful, passionately engaged belief with echoes of Bach and Beethoven, but also Janáček and Messiaen, shot through with Mr MacMillan’s own spirituality and individual expression.

Russell Pascoe’s *Secular Requiem*, first sung by Miss Wyn-Rogers in 2013 and which she is recording this month, is in standard oratorio form, with an assemblage of texts by Thomas Hardy, Dylan Thomas and Robert Louis Stevenson.

Whether you’re in the audience or in the chorus, have been practising for weeks or have joined a *Messiah* ‘from scratch’, there’s something to suit everyone. The most recent assembly of the Really Big Chorus to sing Handel’s masterpiece numbered 3,500 and, like Joyce Grenfell’s ‘Miss Clissold, Miss Truss and Miss Ivy Trembley’, they came from ‘Raynes Park, Bayswater and Wembley’ to sing their hearts out, in oratorio, at the Royal Albert Hall. 🐉

### Choral treats this year

**May 26 Britten’s War Requiem**, Royal Albert Hall, SW7, conducted by Vasily Petrenko, 7.30pm

**June 1 Verdi’s Requiem**, Royal Festival Hall, SE1, to celebrate the Royal Choral Society’s 150th anniversary, 7.30pm

**June 8 Handel’s Messiah** at Symphony

Hall, Birmingham, 7pm, with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Richard Egarr

**July 26 Haydn’s The Creation** at Hereford Cathedral as part of the Three Choirs Festival, 7.30pm, with Geraint Bowen conducting and Joanne Lunn soprano

**July 26 Mendelssohn’s Elijah** at Ely Cathedral by

the Gabrieli Consort and British youth choirs

**July 30 Elgar’s The Dream of Gerontius** at Hereford Cathedral, Three Choirs Festival, 7.30pm, with Sarah Connolly, Nicky Spence and Neal Davies

**July 15–September 10 BBC Proms**

**October 4 Haydn’s The Seasons** at Barbican Hall, EC2, with the Academy of Ancient Music, 7.30pm