



## *Note from a Chorister*

### **'Oddities from the Antipodes'**

by Steve August 2011

Recent travels in UK and France presented a couple of opportunities to see choral events which I could not pass up: one in Oxford, the other in Paris.

In Oxford, the community choir where I had my first experience of this pastime of ours had peppered the town with posters for their performance of Mendelssohn's "St Paul" oratorio. And that in conjunction with a choir from Grenoble with whom there has been collaboration for years. "St Paul" predated "Elijah" which we have sung bits of (and which repeatedly haunt me) by ten years. The combined choirs comprised about seventy singers and the orchestra, a local amateur group, about forty. The music was very good: orchestral and choral music are popular in Britain, and Oxford is in some ways the archetype of such eccentricity. They sang in German. The content concerned the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus and, after the interval, his missionary phase. There were some dramatic moments when Stephen gets stoned, and later when Paul gets into conflict with the religious establishment. A couple of sections were printed in the programme so that the audience could sing along. There were some sublime moments, much like Elijah, interspersed in some less memorable bits. The venue for all this was the Sheldonian Theatre, which I imagine was chosen for its large floor space and the need to accommodate all the performers. It is a pretty building, designed by Wren for the university's numerous ceremonies. The acoustics are not nearly as good as some of the other spaces in the town, but the worst of it is that the benches do not have backs, so that one is forced to slump, or sit upright, or lean back on the unwilling knees of the next level up. It achieves a high density of audience per square rod pole or perch, but turns the performance into an ordeal.

In Paris, on the tourist trail I came across a flier at Sainte Chapelle (near Notre Dame on Ile de la Cite) for a performance of "Dido and Aeneas" the next evening. Since by virtue of travelling I'd missed the show in Gosford, I had to see this. The event was in the upper chapel as the late summer sunlight streamed in through the extravagance of stained glass. I'm not sure how they got away with performing this narrative of pagan shenanigans in a church, but perhaps it is not consecrated as such, since it was built in the thirteenth century to house such religious relics as the crown of thorns, and duly trashed in the revolution. It is spectacular – gothic, with as much as 70% of the wall area devoted to windows, and quite small; the floor perhaps ten by thirty metres, but – as much as twenty metres to the vaulted ceiling, which is beautifully ribbed and decorated with gilt fleur-de-lys on azure ground. It held an audience of about 240. The performance was "Version Oratorio et costumée", which meant no dancing, and everyone dressed in what looked like sackcloth in earth colours. It was performed in English, and I derived some grim amusement watching the choir working so hard on their vowels. The orchestra was a mere five strings: 2V, 1V, C & DB, but they absolutely filled the space with sound, such was the acoustic. The singers all performed without scores, so they must have known it pretty well, but when it got going, it was apparent that the space was totally inappropriate for allegro as the echoes caught up with the singers and garbled them. Poor old Aeneas sounded like he was being chased by his shade with a pot of bubblegum, though the higher registers fared better. It was not till the whole thing slowed down at about the scene in the deep vaulted cell (our charm to prepare) that the reverberations really enhanced the show, and it became hair raising. I reckon the reverb time might have been as much as two seconds, which I judged by the time the sound endured after the line ended. Indeed, the chorus all shut their mouths at the end of a line, after which the sound carried on and on while I reflected on its duration and CB's stern recommendation to cut off from the diaphragm. And so it went on, improving as the agonies increased. In the final chorus, the intensity was beyond hair raising – it unscrewed your eyeballs, and the combined heat of the summer and the massed bodies perhaps contributed to an alto keeling over sideways at about "soft, soft, soft and gentle as her heart". She was caught by the entire row of tenors behind her, who all disappeared floorwards, still singing, and popped up again in time for the final cadence, presumably having settled the fallen who I did not see again. Poor Dido was quite upstaged. After

that, we all trooped out through the courthouse next door since the usual entrance couldn't be used after hours, and sloped off to wander dazed into the evening melt of the city.

The moral to all this is: FOPAP or whoever: (1) Don't engage Christopher Wren to design an auditorium, and (2) Don't make the ceiling too high.

St Paul in the Sheldonian



Dido and Aeneas in Sainte Chapelle