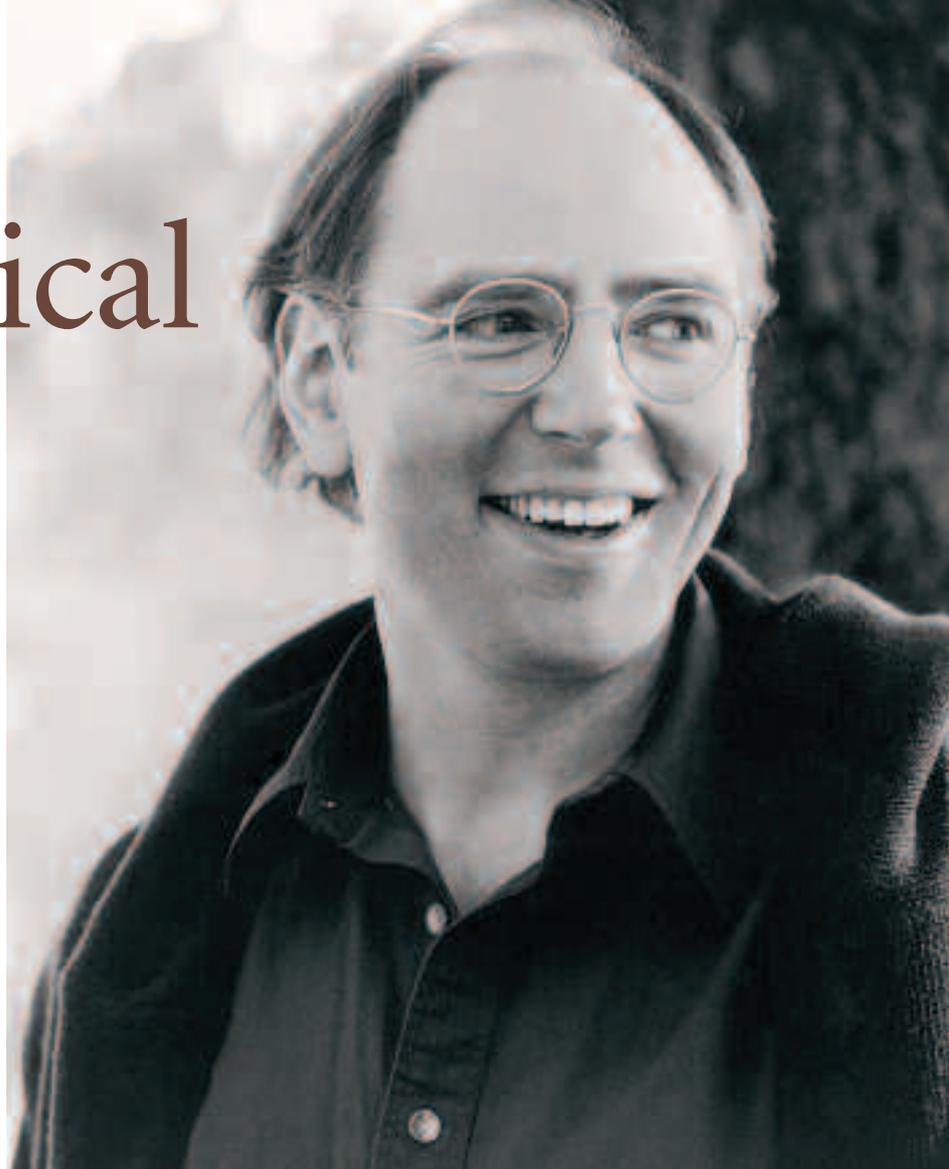


The musical explorer

It was after a tennis match on the Battersea Park courts in south London nearly 25 years ago that I first met Andrew Parrott. With his two-metre stature – his length markedly resourced in the outer extremities – I trembled at the thought of keeping up with his helicopter swing. And, as I soon discovered, his exacting serve on the court was only a glimpse of his mental and musical prowess on and off stage. It was then the early 80s and under Andrew's direction London audiences had just heard a first B minor Mass on period instruments. A seminal time in the development of period performance generally and for Andrew especially, it was a decade when London would offer his wide-reaching musical inquisitiveness fertile ground to experiment in the burgeoning world of Baroque (and earlier) music.

Remarkably, though, his entry into the world of pre-Romantic repertoire was not the typical path of a harpsichordist or other 'early-music' practitioner. Always a musician attracted to a wide span from Taverner to Tippett (via Purcell and Elgar) and never forgetting Monteverdi and Bach, Andrew had begun making music like Charles Ives – unpretentiously and very provincially.

'I had known before I was ten that I was drawn to music above all else: singing, playing and reading about it in equal measure. But as my brother's piano lessons had passed by without success, my parents deemed further tuition for his younger sibling a waste of money, so my first lessons were destined to be from my sister!' His first major academic break-through was entry into the local grammar school, Queen Mary's in his native Walsall. 'Though I was off the acceptable edge of the 11-plus exam, it was in an interview with the headmaster that my eccentric knowledge of Elgar came to the rescue! Music, French and German were my subjects for A-level, with ample hours to compose music for school plays as well. And in



the non-school hours there were always the local hymn-singing non-conformist congregations needing an organist.'

Queen Mary's led to Oxford, where Andrew chose Merton College because 'it had the best food'. His new home also catered for his insatiable appetite for a wide palette of music unknown back in Walsall. 'As a schoolboy I had had no idea of what a professional musician was. And London, where all famous musicians ended up, was daunting – a great city a long way away – heightening for me the appeal of a "provincial" composer like Elgar.'

Andrew flourished during his Oxford years, with all his energies (aside from hockey!) focused on performing: 'There were opportunities to conduct the Kodály Choir and Merton College Chapel Choir, and eventually the Oxford Schola Cantorum. I also played the viola in the University Orchestra, was secretary of the Contemporary Music Society and took on challenges like playing Stravinsky's Sonata for Two Pianos as well as conducting *Pierrot lunaire* and then the first British performance of Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass* in Glagolitic.' He adds that

Andrew Parrott, 60 this year, is one of Britain's most influential early music scholars and performers. He talks to his colleague of 25 years, *Malcolm Bruno*

Andrew Parrott's insatiable appetite for a wide palette of music has led him to conduct repertoire from Taverner to Tippett, including (here) an EMI recording of Bach's *Easter Oratorio* in 1994 Photo Jason Shenai/EMI Classics, courtesy of Taverner Concerts



‘Bach is the consummate all-round musician: not locked in an ivory tower, but fully immersed in the everyday world that surrounded him’

his tutor, Frank Ll. Harrison, later admitted that he’d attended more of his student’s concerts than Andrew had his tutorials.

For the open-minded (and students at Oxford were no exception) the 1960s were an incredibly stimulating decade – the era of the Beatles as well as the exotic sounds of folk music uncovered by the likes of A.L. Lloyd – from Indonesia to Romania. ‘But most of the breadth of my musical education had come from listening to [BBC] Radio 3; then, ironically, about early music I really knew nothing when I arrived at Oxford. I had simply decided to specialise in Medieval and Renaissance music because I knew I’d have the rest of my life after university to think about familiar composers like Brahms – whose music,’ he adds with a grin, ‘I still haven’t got to...’

In 1965 Andrew heard the broadcast of the premiere of Tippett’s *Vision of St Augustine*. ‘I couldn’t make sense of it until later, when for a performance with the Schola I took it apart and then re-assembled it, layer by layer. Terrific though that experience was, I was left with the nagging

uncertainty of why one would really want to write music whose overall parameters couldn’t be perceived without such analysis. This was the mid-60s, the height not only of the Darmstadt school, but of the music of the young Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle. But for me, the more music I encountered – from the Renaissance and earlier through to the familiar world of Elgar and on to Britten and then Tippett – the more the horror of the blank page paralysed me. But I know,’ he adds emphatically, ‘that I will feel unfulfilled as a musician if I don’t get back to writing at some stage soon, though not necessarily for anyone but myself. Bach is for me the essential Kapellmeister, the consummate all-round musician: not locked in an ivory tower, not divorced from the institutions for which he worked, but fully immersed in the everyday world that surrounded him. I have still to make that performer-composer connection, if only for my own satisfaction.’

Andrew arrived at Oxford in the autumn of 1966 and after his first degree stayed on a further two years, to 1971, as Director of Music at Merton College, a position created for him to fund a



further research period in English choral practice 1500–1700. During this postgraduate period, as director of Schola Cantorum, he met Tippett as his choir prepared for a performance of the *Vision of St Augustine*. Andrew's talent with Tippett's music led beyond Oxford. '[Tippett] was then artistic director of the Bath Festival, and a few years later – for the Festival in May 1973 – he asked me to book a choir that could perform a programme including the Monteverdi 1610 Magnificat.' The 26-year-old Andrew christened his singers for that occasion the 'Taverner Choir' and the name stuck, along with Tippett as the choir's patron.

The early 70s offered an assistant chorus master position at the LSO that included conducting off-stage bands and the chance to work with Abbado, Horenstein, Stokowski, Colin Davis, Boulez, Marriner and Robert Shaw. 'But where was I headed?' he asks. 'I knew that music-making would always be at the centre of my life, but I had no specific ambitions as a conductor or instrumentalist. One of the most important experiences I had during these years was as conductor for Michael Morrow's *Musica Reservata*. It was a crazy, eccentric and ground-breaking group, and a tremendous window into pre-Baroque repertoire.'

At the same time Andrew moved with his young wife, a Classics scholar from Oxford, to Reading, where she took up her first teaching post in a secondary school. As he embarked on performances of Bach, Monteverdi and Purcell, he regularly tempted her away from Latin duties to take part. It was a radical proposition then to promote such a singer: a non-conservatoire-trained, non-operatic soprano with a seamless technique capable of employing vibrato only as an ornament. But as with many of Andrew's subsequent calculated risks, his capacity to swim against the tide yielded high rewards: the fledgling singer was none other than Emma Kirkby.

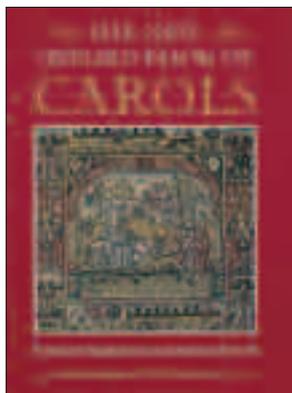


'My love of research continued unabated, as I felt increasingly that a historical perspective was indispensable for vital performance.'

From Oxford to Reading, and then to London and beyond, the 70s and 80s saw Andrew's inventiveness as a performer and scholar united in many definitive performances with his newly-formed Taverner Choir, Consort and then Players: Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers at a first Monteverdi Prom in 1977, subsequently recorded for EMI, a performance that first recognised the significance of transposing clefs; Purcell's *Dido* with 'reduced' forces and with a vintage Kirkby in the title role; and a B minor Mass and *St John Passion* taking up the research of Joshua Rifkin with consorts of single voices instead of the traditional 'choir'. Towards the end of the 80s major reconstructions with his Oxford contemporary Hugh Keyte included a Handel *Carmelite Vespers* and the massive Florentine intermedii, whose 400th anniversary in 1989 gave the opportunity to lure Channel 4 TV into using the Taverner EMI recording made in 1986 after a Prom performance.

opposite Parrott recording Purcell's theatre music for Decca c.1973 Photo Decca Classics, courtesy of Taverner Concerts, clockwise from top left in 1987, correcting first proofs for the 'New Oxford Book of Carols' Photo Susan Benn, courtesy of Taverner Concerts, making an EMI recording of 'Messiah' in 1988 with Emily Van Evera and Emma Kirkby, and at the Royal Albert Hall in July 1986 rehearsing for the Florentine Intermedi Prom (subsequently released by EMI and in 1989 by TV Channel 4 in 'Una Stravaganza dei Medici')

Photos Alex von Koettlitz/EMI Classics, courtesy of Taverner Concerts



‘Remarkably,’ Andrew reflects, ‘up to the mid-80s I still had time to lend a tenor voice in the experimental Electric Phoenix group as well as in some of the Taverner recordings.’ He was also involved in the legendary Hildegard *A feather on the breath of God* for Hyperion [Gothic Voices], choosing and booking the singers as well as singing himself. The singers included young American soprano Emily Van Evera (later Andrew’s second wife), whose solo track on the album hit the commercial charts.

During the 90s the enterprises of the 80s continued unabated, with special attention to Bach. ‘Seemingly alone on the planet,’ Andrew is proud to mention, ‘I took Joshua Rifkin’s findings, which I’d first encountered in *Early Music* in 1982, seriously.’ In recordings for EMI of the *St John Passion*, and then the Easter and Ascension Oratorios, Andrew began his own experimentation with a consort of soloists complemented by a secondary ‘ripieno’ group. An invitation from Hans-Georg Schäfer, the courageous and highly individual director of both the prestigious Bachwoche Ansbach and Frankfurter Bachkonzerte, led to a series of concerts in Germany during the 90s with the Taverner Consort and Norwegian Baroque Orchestra, giving Andrew the unique chance to rediscover Bach in the presence of the major German Bach audiences. In 1995 Andrew’s own article in *Early Music*, summarising his and Rifkin’s research, fomented a protracted correspondence between himself and Ton Koopman, eventually prompting him – in time for the Bach 250th anniversary in 2000 – to compile a definitive exposition in *The Essential Bach Choir* (Boydell Press, 2000).

Now, viewing his many live and recorded performances almost as a musical laboratory, Andrew knew he needed to turn back to writing as uninterruptedly as possible. Beyond his seminal Bach work lay the project through which I first met him in

1983: a comprehensive overview of music from Hildegard to Handel. I hijacked initial progress with a proposal for what we imagined to be an innocent commercial exercise: an ‘urtext’ carol book. (The original 100-page proposal of 1984 appeared eight years later as the exhaustive 700-plus-page *New Oxford Book of Carols*).

By 1995 Andrew’s history of music project was firmly back on track with a contract from Yale. Its contents, still today dispersed throughout Andrew’s immense study, are tantalisingly overwhelming. Like the collection of a Victorian naturalist, they grow steadily: pictorial evidence, with extracts of letters, journals, and other historical documents. ‘Inching toward completion,’ in Andrew’s own words, it will be worth waiting for: opening with a fascinating exploration of the social context of music (the practical deployment of music in society), followed by ‘music and ideas’ (the world and mind of the musical ‘designers’ – the composers), it concludes with a section on performance (or the technology of music: the instruments, the voice, notation). This Yale book, like *The Essential Bach Choir* and *New Oxford Book of Carols*, will be a benchmark for our century. More than that, it will be a reflection of its creator, the inventive, curious, Ivesian musical explorer, pointing us towards a highly individual journey into music and the imagination of music no longer, or not yet again, heard. ■

Andrew Parrott has until recently been Musical Director and Principal Conductor of the London Mozart Players, and since 2002 Musical Director of the period-instrument New York Collegium. He is a frequent guest conductor for Toronto’s Opera Atelier, with Tafelmusik and with the symphony orchestra of Norrköping, Sweden, where he is recording all the Beethoven piano concertos with Ronald Brautigam for Bis.



right at Orford Church in Suffolk in 1997, recording Gesualdo’s Tenebrae for Sony Classics

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