

The RSCM Archive of recordings

John Henderson is the custodian of a treasury of recordings, from 1909 to the present day



The centenary of the first recordings of English church music is soon approaching. I am being slightly vague here for we cannot be quite sure of the date of the very first recordings. For some time it had been thought that the earliest date back to 1911 when the two Westminster (Abbey and Cathedral) both issued some single sided shellac discs with the Monarch Company, later to become part of HMV. I understand that a friendly rivalry exists between the Abbey and Cathedral as to who actually made the first recordings because the HMV archive does not make this clear, indicating only the year and not the month of these recordings.

The RSCM however have a set of six single-sided records by the choir of St Andrew, Wells Street, still in their original cases and which are marked quite clearly with the owner's name and with the date of December 1909, which makes it likely that these discs were recorded before the Westminster discs. St Andrew's was one of the great Tractarian churches of London, with reputedly one of the finest choirs in the city at that time. It shared with All Saints, Margaret Street the distinction of having its own residential choir school.

The SECM years

The mass commercial availability of both church and organ music recordings dates from the late 1920s and early 1930s. The RSCM's founder, Sir Sydney Nicholson, who had already made several recordings during his time at Westminster Abbey, was quick to recognize the possibility of using gramophone records

as a teaching aid to demonstrate good practice to churches. He must have realized that one of his primary goals, that of sending trained musicians around the country to help parishes raise musical standards, might be impractical through lack of finance and/or personnel and that recordings could be of educational use. Prior to the first great Albert Hall *Festival of Church Music* in 1930, the fledgling choir of the College of St Nicolas in Chislehurst made a recording of the 91st Psalm so that choirs participating in the festival would have identical 'natural emphasis and verbal rhythm'. The very first issue of the *School of English Church Music* (SECM) journal *English Church Music* in January 1931 contained an article 'Church music and the gramophone' which began "The educational value of the gramophone to the church musician is not as widely appreciated as it deserves to be". The article went on to review recordings considered to be of educational value, and throughout the 1930s there were further reviews of new recordings thought by the editor to demonstrate good practice. The paper typescripts of Nicholson's SECM lectures include several which utilized recordings.

Nicholson himself undertook two series of recordings with the Choir of the College of St Nicholas, Chislehurst, both with Columbia Records (commonly known the BO and ROX series). The first was recorded in the chapel at Chislehurst in 1931 and the latter at St Sepulchre in Holborn in 1939. It was repeatedly emphasized in the college journals and advertisements that these recordings were not 'exhibition pieces but educational models'. The Harrison organ was installed at Chislehurst in August 1931 and so recordings made before this time will have used the 'old organ' about which I have no information. In late 1931 Nicholson recorded a lecture on speech rhythm in the chanting of psalms with vocal examples performed by the St Nicolas College choirmaster E H 'Harry' Barnes, a Lay Vicar of Westminster Abbey. This recording is of particular interest in that it may be the only recorded example of Nicholson's speaking voice outside of BBC archives. The massive Festival of English Church Music held at the Crystal Palace in 1933 was also recorded.

Of the 1939 ROX recordings of anthems and hymns, one in particular proved to be a best-seller, that featuring the two treble soloists Michael Lumb and John Evans-Pughe singing O Lovely Peace (Handel) and Brother James' Air (arr. Jacob). These were re-issued by Columbia under their own label and later as an EP record. They can now be found on the CD *The Better Land* vol. 6; aside from the fact that there have been as many as three re-issues, the recordings are notable in that Nicholson himself was the accompanist, being the only recordings we have of his playing. Three of this series are taken from a BBC Choral

Evensong broadcast on 29 January 1939 from the College of St Nicolas in Chislehurst, possibly the earliest known recording of a BBC Choral Evensong.

After the War, during 1948 at the RSCM 21st Anniversary festival service in St Sepulchre, Holborn, a set of five discs was privately recorded and I am pleased to report that a set of these has just surfaced in 2008.

The Addington Years

During the 1960s the students resident at Addington Palace had access to a fine library of long-playing records. Church musicians are always at risk of becoming insular in their outlook upon mainstream music and the RSCM students were encouraged to listen to and learn from a wide repertoire outside the church. Not only were all the great symphonies, concertos, quartets, operas, oratorios and instrumental music represented in the Addington Palace library, but many of these were classic recordings such as Britten conducting Britten and Boult conducting Vaughan Williams. There were of course many church and organ recordings as well. Most of these LPs are now in rather poor condition through regular usage. One feature of the collection through the 1970s was the appearance of many private church choir recordings. It seems that many affiliated parish and cathedral choirs made their own LP records and then proudly donated a copy to the RSCM for posterity. This was also true of foreign RSCM choirs, mainly from the USA, Australia and Canada. A large number of these choirs no longer exist and this is an invaluable archive of their once thriving tradition. There are also early recordings of what we would now call 'music groups' featuring instrumental accompaniments to hymns, carols and songs. There was also a golden age when the recording of RSCM courses and festival services was commonplace, especially Cathedral Course evensongs. Some of these were broadcast by BBC for Choral Evensong and there is singing here of the very highest standards. What ambassadors they were on the radio for the RSCM! I wonder why Cathedral Courses are no longer used for Choral Evensong broadcasts?

During the Addington years there were a number of major RSCM festivals such as 'Rejoice', 'Jubilate' and 'Let all the World', all of which were issued on LP records and, during Lionel Dakers' tenure as director, several LP, EP and cassette recordings were made to demonstrate parish Communion settings, Psalms, plainsong and hymns. Several of these recordings were sponsored by the Church of England Liturgical Commission to demonstrate some of the new translations then becoming available.

Non RSCM recordings

A notable early recording in this category is that of Morning Prayer from St George's Chapel Windsor in 1925, directed by E H Fellowes and recorded by HMV. There are three records in the set and this was possibly the first time a complete service (minus the lessons) had been recorded live, rather than being just a compilation of pieces such as the 1909 recording mentioned above. This is a very important set of records which gives us an insight into how a complete service sounded. After the war and with backing from the British Council, Columbia records embarked on a notable series (four sets in all, 1950-1953) of church music recordings using eminent cathedral choirs.

Using our collection, the British Sound Archive division of the British Library, and some privately held records it has been possible to assemble a complete set of these recordings on CD.

To the modern ear, much of the singing in these pre-war recordings seems extremely mannered. In part this is due to the overriding prominence of public-school accents, both amongst the clergy reading lessons, the cantors singing the responses and even amongst the choirs singing the Psalms. Sir Sydney Nicholson was well known for his enthusiasm for 'speech rhythm' in the chanting of Psalms and his Parish Psalter, easy to use by parish choirs, was a milestone in the simplification of singing psalmody. However singing styles have changed over the years and, after listening to these very interesting recordings, I can't help thinking that some of the best cathedral choirs of today would astound him with their fluent and expressive singing of the Psalm texts to thoughtful pointings that often make considerably more sense of the words than his own Parish Psalter.

Our collection and the future

Apart from the SECM and RSCM recordings already mentioned, we have benefited in recent years from a number of gifts and bequests of records, notable amongst these being a set from the estate of Edred Wright (1911-2004), former Choirmaster of the College of St Nicholas during the Canterbury years. By their nature, 78 rpm recordings are very fragile and so most of these have now been transferred to CD for back-up. It may be possible in the future to make copies of these available, but copyright and other issues will need to be addressed first and I cannot offer this service at the moment.

I regularly receive requests for recordings from RSCM members who attended courses or festivals in bygone years, but whose family did not buy the recordings at the time. We currently have relatively few of these private recordings but I suspect there are a number of these lurking in dusty lofts. It would be really good to collect more of these for posterity, either as an outright gift to the RSCM or just as a loan so that we can make a CD transfer. The list of our current holdings is too long to print here, but I have put this on the WWW at www.rscm.u-net.com/rscmrecordings.html and a link to this can be found on the main RSCM website. If any CMQ readers are able add further records to our archive then we would be most grateful. Although we are fortunate to have a notable collection of 78 and LP records, we have only a relatively small collection of tapes and CDs and without gifts and bequests there is little likelihood of this enlarging.

Finally I must, on behalf of the RSCM, extend thanks to Colin Brownlee for helping us to catalogue our recordings, for making us aware of some of our hidden treasures, for burning CD backups of many of our older recordings and for supplying much general information. His website, which is at www.inquiresandplaces.com/id4.html has one of the most comprehensive lists available of recordings made by boys' choirs.

◆ John Henderson has been the RSCM's honorary librarian since 1995. He is the author of *A Directory of Composers for Organ* which won the 2006 Oldman Prize from the International Association of Music Libraries for an outstanding work of music reference by an author resident in the UK or Ireland.