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Orpheus plays the golden lyre

HALF a century in harmony - that's the proud achievement of Hexham Orpheus Choir.

The choir's concert tomorrow evening celebrates 50 years of singing throughout Tynedale and beyond.

Some classic favourites have been chosen for the concert at the Queen Elizabeth High School in Hexham.

Mozart's *Coronation Mass*, Haydn's *Te Deum* and Bach's *Jesu, Meine Freude* head the bill, plus the tricky solo *Exultate Jubilate* to be tackled by guest soprano Kathryn Jenkin.

As Orpheus choir chairman Janet Davies says, they are challenging pieces, chosen to prove what the singers can do.

"This is our Golden Jubilee," said Janet. "We have chosen major works which will show the choir off."

"For our last big birthday - our 21st, back in 1976 - the choir sang songs and choruses such as *Dashing White Sergeant* and *To Daffodils* by Roger Quilter. Very pretty but not quite right to mark a historic occasion like this."

History is important to the Orpheus. By a lucky chance the committee still possesses a volume of minutes tracing the choir back to its birth as a choral group for the 1955 Hexham Abbey Festival.

Within the slightly frayed volume with its title handwritten in Gothic italics, more than ten years of early minutes have been recorded in elegant copperplate, plus a note of

By KAY COOPER

every concert performed by the choir.

"The writing is sometimes hard to read even though it is so neat, and the minutes are a little haphazard in places," said Janet. "But it is lovely that this old book has survived all these years."

The minutes show that it was the summer of 1960 when the then Hexham Abbey Festival Choir took the name Orpheus, inspired by the mythical singer of Ancient Greece.

The first performance under the name Hexham Orpheus Choir was of Haydn's *The Creation* at the Trinity Methodist Church in Beaumont Street.

Janet explained: "They decided a new name was needed because they wanted to perform more frequently, and not just be linked to the annual Hexham Abbey Festival."

One of the choir's guest soloists in those early days was the legendary Elsie Sudaby - in her sixties when she sang with the infant Orpheus.

This broadcasting and recording pioneer was fondly known as "the Lass with the Delicate Air" from one of her popular pre-war hits.

Elsie's other main claim to fame was to be one of the 16 singers who inspired Ralph Vaughan Williams to write his *Serenade to Music*.

In 1976, when the Orpheus choir came of age, it chose as

its special guest a soprano on the threshold of fame rather than an established star.

Former Royal Academy and National School of Opera student Soo-Bee Lee left the Orpheus a poignant memory of her skill with light operetta solos, before going on to an impressive international career.

After wowing Tynedale, Soo-Bee starred at Glyndebourne, the Royal Albert Hall and on the South Bank, and latterly has taught and examined for the London College of Music.

And the Orpheus committee can still pick 'em...

Kathryn Jenkin, guest soprano for the golden jubilee concert, is a blossoming star on the operatic oratorio circuit, performing at Covent Garden, and in Paris and Berlin.

She's also in growing demand by the BBC for live and recorded performances.

The concert tomorrow also features the Orpheus choir's own contralto Susan Davis, tenor Stephen Newlove - director of music at Carmel College, Merseyside, and member of the Britten Singers - and bass Robert Seaton, the Geordie who triumphed at the Welsh Eisteddfod in 2003.

It should prove yet another red-letter day in the history of the Orpheus. There have already been quite a few.

Among them was a performance at the prestigious Gateshead Garden Festival in 1990. Several present-day choir members remember belting out the jolly *Captain Noah and His Floating Zoo*, a cantata (described as "uproarious" in review), created in 1972 by Joseph Horowitz and Michael Flanders (of Flanders and Swann fame).

The Gateshead festival also heard an offshoot of the Orpheus perform a selection of 16th and 17th-century madrigals - favourite evening entertainment of the Tudors and Stuarts.

The lighthearted but vocally complex madrigal singing style is still a regular feature of the Orpheus choir's wide repertoire.

Over the years, the 50-strong Orpheus has added its weight of musical expertise to that of other choirs round the region to produce the "wall of sound" effect for works like Haydn's *The Seasons*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, and Brahms' *German Requiem*.

The Orpheus has performed at the Wentworth Centre under the baton of Michael Brewer, conductor of the National Youth Orchestra.

In 1990 the choir allied with the choirs of Redesdale, Corbridge and Riding Mill to take part in the Hexham Abbey Festival as the "Joint Choirs of Tynedale".

More recently the Priory Singers of Tynemouth - who share the Orpheus choir's cur-



■ Guest soprano: Kathryn Jenkin.

rent conductor Glenn Davis - have come west to perform in Hexham, and taken the Tynedalers east to sing at Tynemouth.

"We're a friendly lot," said chairman Janet, who is preparing to hand her "baby" on to someone else after fulfilling the regulation maximum stint on the Orpheus committee.

"There is 'someone in the wings prepared to be chairman, but we are not yet releasing a name," she said.

"This has been my baby for the two years that I've been chairman, but it's quite a good idea having a time limit on committee membership. It allows a healthy turnover."

"I shall keep on singing though. I couldn't survive

without a choir to sing in."

Janet, who became an Orphean when she moved to Haltwhistle in 1994, says the group is not only important to its members but to the whole of Tynedale.

"We bring performances of classical music to the area several times a year. The Abbey Festival only takes place once a year," she said.

"For the members, the choir has long been a vital focus for social events. Reading the old minutes shows that there have always been Orpheus parties, barbecues, organised walks and other light-hearted entertainments."

"But one of life's greatest pleasures is simply making music with friends. The sheer number of choirs in this area proves that people in Tynedale love to sing," said Janet.

"Sometimes it is hard to fix a date for a concert because people have commitments to more than one choir. As I've found, it is not enough to sing just once a week."

"I am sure everyone who loves singing will wish the Hexham Orpheus a happy birthday. Long may we continue making music."

■ Hexham Orpheus Choir meets from 7.30pm to 9pm on Wednesdays at St Joseph's School, Hexham. New members welcome.



■ Record book: Hexham Orpheus Choir chairman Janet Davies (left) with longest serving member Evelyn Blenkinsop and newest recruit Pip Emmer peruse the volume of minutes which traces the choir back to its birth in 1955. Photo: D160504



■ Still going strong: The Hexham Orpheus Choir are looking forward to another 50 years of music-making. Photo: D160501

Hexham Orpheus Choir 1955 - 1976 CELEBRITY CONCERT

QUEEN ELIZABETH GRAMMAR SCHOOL HALL
HEXHAM



Guest Soloist: SOO-BEE LEE

SATURDAY, 22nd MAY, 1976 Time: 7.00 p.m.

CONDUCTOR - WILLIAM SKELTON

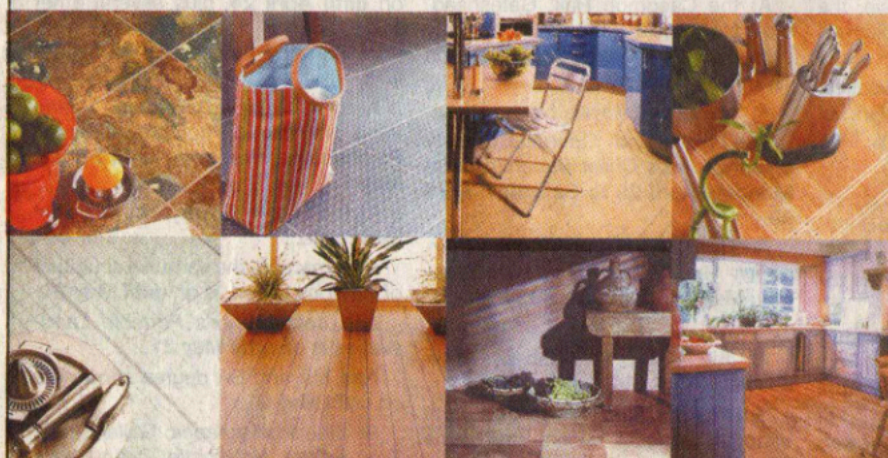
ACCOMPANIST - SHEILA BELL

ADMISSION BY PROGRAMME - 50p

■ Star performer: Former Royal Academy and National School of Opera student Soo-Bee Lee performed at the choir's 1976 celebrity concert.

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