

# SCHOLA

Cantorum of Oxford

**Patrons:** John Mark Ainsley, Lord Armstrong, Dame Liz Forgan  
Laszlo Heltay, Dame Emma Kirkby, Andrew Parrott, Roderick Williams

**Conductor:** James Burton

## Poland 2008 - Wratistavia Cantans Festival

### Introduction

In September 2008, Schola travelled to Poland to perform at the Wratistavia Cantans, a major European festival of classical music, joining artistic director Paul McCreesh, the Gabrieli Consort, the Wrocław Philharmonic choir, the Poznań Boys' Choir, a chamber orchestra formed of some of Britain's most distinguished instrumentalists and the National Orchestra of the Polish Radio in two performances of Britten's *War Requiem*.

In addition to the Britten performances, Schola travelled to towns in the surrounding region of Silesia to sing four *a cappella* concerts of our own. As the theme of the festival was British music, our *a cappella* programme sought to combine masterpieces from our own long and rich tradition of choral music with important Polish works from the Renaissance to the present day.

Schola has made it something of a trademark to sing music in the native language of the countries to which we travel as accurately as possible; on this occasion we were proud to present to the Polish audiences Szymanowski's little performed *Six Kurpian Songs*, having first had some crucial guidance from Eva Strusinska, an expert in the pronunciation of the Kurpian dialect. We also presented two works by living Polish composers Łukaszewski and Koszewski, as well as a piece by Britain's own Tarik O'Regan.

It was an extraordinary opportunity for Schola to be part of the massed forces required for the monumental and elaborate *War Requiem*—a truly life-changing experience. It was especially a privilege to sing the piece for the Polish audience, many of whom will have understood better than any of us the horrific inhumanities described in Wilfred Owen's poetry, the true consequences of that "old man" who "slew his son—And half the seed of Europe, one by one", and what it really means to sing the desperate words of the Requiem, "*libera me*", having waited for generations for freedom from imperial and communist oppression.

This tour was a wonderful opportunity for us to encounter Poland and Polish music-making— an unforgettable experience.

### Rehearsals and first arrival

3rd – 6th September

It's always a wonderful feeling to be returning after a delinquent Summer's escapades to beautiful Oxford and the preparations for Schola's latest trip. As well

as the delight of being with the Schola team again, greeting the familiar faces, there's also the business of getting to know the new people joining us for the first time. Given the rustiness, it's crucial in these rehearsals that we wake our voices and ears out of their hibernation as quickly as possible and become a team again. These days were particularly exhausting because we needed to perfect the music ready for performance on the 7th, the day after we'd arrived in Poland.

On the 6th September we convened at the appallingly early hour of 4am (give or take fifteen minutes—for which the present writer apologises!) ready for the coach trip to Stansted and the Ryanair flight to Wrocław airport. Once at Stansted the palaver ensued of weighing luggage and redistributing our excess weight—all done with the minimum of the unjustly fabled "Schola faff".

From rainy England to an unexpectedly sunny Poland: our thoughts immediately turned to the search for sunglasses and sun cream. We discovered a colourful historic centre focussed around the elaborately gothic Town Hall, and explored the imposing Germanic brick churches dotted around, one of which, the church of Mary Magdalen, was to be the venue for the Britten performances. From the 90 metre-high tower of the 15th century church of St Elizabeth, one was able to survey the whole of the city.

We were also able to meet our wonderful guide for the tour, Agnieszka, who was to take such care of us and really become a part of the group.

The evening brought a treat: an open-air performance outside Wrocław's magnificent cathedral of Handel's music for the Royal Fireworks—with real fireworks! The streets were full of people and there was quite a buzz, which left us with great expectations for our own musical contribution to the festivities—a perfect introduction to this thrilling place.

### **First concert: Milicz**

Sunday 7th September

Our first performance on Polish soil took place in the peculiar wattle-and-daub styled church of the town of Milicz. One highlight was performing the *Magnificat* by Polish composer Zielenski from the balcony in three separate choirs, in imitation of the performances that might have taken place in Renaissance Venice. The audience were treated to a perfect view of Jamie's conducting as alone stood on the stage for the piece!

This first well-received concert filled us with confidence that we could iron-out the few remaining creases for the later concerts.

### **Bardo: Hiking and Concert #2**

Monday 8th September

The coach took us to Bardo, a town set in spectacular scenery in the hills outside of Wrocław. After a long wait to use the only available loo in a local mechanics, we set off up a wooded track, aiming for a church at the top of the hill and a large cross visible from the bottom, which oddly we never managed to find! After some doubts about which of the many pilgrim paths we were supposed to take (and some mildly daring reconnaissance from the present writer, scrambling up brambly

slopes) we did find the church and enjoyed a very pleasant and satisfied lunch in the sunny glade at the crest of the hill.

The church in Bardo boasts a fabulous organ façade and an altarpiece with an ancient carved wooden relic. Also in the building was a curious exhibition of historic Polish religious art. The concert was well-received by a packed church, and at the end we received a sunflower each (apparently in season in Poland at the time) and very warm speeches from a local dignitary and his wife. We truly felt appreciated, and consequently on the coach home there was a lively mood and much singing!

## **Oleśnica—not quite the church we expected...**

Tuesday 9th September

One of the joys of travelling to foreign countries is the cultural exchange that takes place between us and the wonderful musicians we meet there. On Tuesday we had our first rehearsal with the immensely powerful voices of the Wrocław Philharmonic choir, who would make up the majority of the singers in the *War Requiem*. We also got to meet Paul McCreech for the first time, who interrupted the rehearsal briefly to amuse us with a joke about the Polish for “one beer”, “two beers” and “three beers”—not very useful if you prefer Zubrowka (a wondrous vodka).

In the afternoon we found ourselves in Oleśnica, in what we'd thought would be another beautifully resonant church, but turned out to be a performing arts theatre without much of an acoustic and hot stage lighting; as Jamie put it, we knew we were in for a “sweat-fest”. In true Schola fashion we persevered and made a good concert of it, nonetheless—and predictions of another “Dalian” (the Chinese town where one year earlier we had performed perhaps the sweatiest concert in performing history) proved unfounded.

## **The final a cappella concert - Protests and paint**

Wednesday 10th September

Another rehearsal for the *War Requiem* in the morning, followed by our musical triumph of the tour—our fourth and final *a cappella* concert, in the charming town of Oława. We were told that they had freshly painted the church especially to celebrate our coming—which precluded our singing from the gallery for fear of paint-fumes! We were all reaching a point of exhaustion, and the rehearsal was particularly fraught, owing to a protest from members of a particular Christian group who, Agnieszka told us, object to the use of churches for anything other than services. Throughout the rehearsal we had to compete with their quiet but incessant chanting, and we feared lest even more disruptive action should take place during the performance. Fortunately the protestors did not return, and we were able to do our best performance of the programme so far: the Kurpian songs felt particularly good. We had another standing ovation, and we left Oława feeling jubilant.

And it was time to let our hair down! Without commitments until the following evening, we knew we could have a proper night of partying, and that's certainly what we did, going *en masse* to a karaoke bar and onwards to another bar which we had to ourselves for the rest of the night!

## Seeing Wrocław and performing the War Requiem

11th – 14th September

In our free time on Thursday we had a chance to see the sights of Wrocław; Agnieszka took a group of us on a tour to see the Panorama of the Battle of Racławice, one of Europe's important panoramic paintings, housed in a specially-built concrete rotunda; we picnicked in the Park Szczytnicki (*sic!*), noted for its modernist curiosity, the Hała Ludowa ("People's Hall"). This was built in 1913 for the centenary of Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig—a relic from the city's past life as the German Breslau. Then there were the wonders of the Wrocław Aquapark with its fearsome slides and therapeutic wave machines—a much needed relaxation!

These final four days of the tour were solely devoted to the estimable task of rehearsing and performing Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, and as the piece gradually took shape we all came to see what a colossus of a piece it is. Thursday evening brought our first opportunity to sing with the Gabrieli consort, the "Gabs" as we came to know them. Then on Friday we had our first rehearsal with all the instrumentalists, and we started to understand the tremendous volume of the orchestra we'd be (in some places almost literally!) fighting against.

We performed on both nights in a packed Mary Magdalen's Church—a few hundred performers and many hundreds of audience members all gathered for the culmination of the Wratislavia Cantans festival. There was some apprehension during Saturday's rehearsal, with some worries about the safety of the staging (which was secured for the performance), but the Sunday performance was a great success and a very powerful experience—particularly the hauntingly sparse final Owen setting, *Strange Meeting*, which gives way to the transcendental and hopeful *tutti* of the *In Paradisum*.

It is a tradition for Schola to have an end-of-tour party, during which awards are given, memories shared and much revelry takes place. The Polish end-of-tour party must have been the strangest Schola has ever known: a convoy of taxis took us to 'the middle of nowhere', a small village hall hidden amidst allotments on the edge of town (thanks to the party organisers for their great efforts in finding us a venue). Ever resourceful, we made a great party of it, and stayed there into the early morning, celebrating our musical, social and cultural successes! Amazingly, we were all there the next morning, bright and early to catch the coach to the airport and the flight back home.

Thanks to:

Andrzej Kosendiak and Paul McCreesh of the Wratislavia Cantans festival

Agnieszka Franków-Żelazny of the Wrocław Philharmonic Choir

Eva Strusinska for coaching in pronunciation of the Kurpian dialect of Polish.

*Tour report by George Holloway*

## Concert details

### Choral Masterpieces From Poland And Britain

Thomas Tallis, Mikołaj Zieliński, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Karol Szymanowski  
Sunday 7th to Wednesday 10th September, 7pm  
Milicz, Bardo, Oleśnica, Oława (Poland)

Schola Cantorum of Oxford  
James Burton - conductor

Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) O clap your hands

Thomas Tallis (c.1505-1585) If Ye Love Me

Thomas Weelkes (c. 1576-1623) When David Heard

Nikolai Zitelnski (1550-1614) Magnificat a 12

Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924) Beati Quorum Via

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) Nunc Dimittis

Andrzej Koszewski (b.1922) Miserere

Tarik O'Regan (b.1978) Surrexit Christus

Paweł Łukaszewski (b.1968) Ave Maria

Peter Warlock (1894-1930) Bethlehem Down

Elizabeth Poston (1905-87) Jesus Christ the apple tree

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) Wassail Song

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) Six Kurpian Songs

Encore: Jaakko Mäntyjärvi (b.1963) Pseudo-Yoik

### Benjamin Britten - War Requiem

Saturday 13th September & Sunday 14th September, 7pm  
Wrocław, Poland (Katedra Polskokatolicka św. Marii Magdaleny, ul. Szewska 10)

Susan Bullock – soprano, Mark Padmore – tenor, Neal Davis - baritone  
Gabrieli Consort  
W. Lutosławski Wrocław Philharmonic Choir  
Schola Cantorum of Oxford  
Poznań Boys' Choir  
Festival Chamber Orchestra  
National Orchestra of the Polish Radio Katowice

Paul McCreesh - conductor