
Presenting west gallery music to the general public

Mike Bailey

The Madding Crowd is amongst the best known of the groups performing music associated with the gallery tradition because of their exposure through the media as well as their successful appearances throughout the country. In this wide ranging paper, full of personal asides, Mike Bailey traces the group's background and shares many of their varied experiences with others involved in similar performances, while dealing with everything from problems with the Alternative Service Book to questions of pitch.

This is a report of some of the experiences of the Madding Crowd¹ over the 20 years since its founding. It is not meant as recommendation or advice as to how any performing group ought to proceed. There are many ways of performing west gallery music, and all I hope to show is that some work better than others for us.

One kind of performance which we all enjoy is the informal sing-in. However, here I want to concentrate on those performances which involve the general public, who are relatively unprepared, probably paying, and with a right to be entertained. In a sense, this music already belongs to them, or their ancestors, as I think other speakers have argued, and we aim to give them a sense of this with the intimacy of our presentation.

Venues

Church services

The Madding Crowd's first service and subsequent performances were prepared by Rollo Woods, who edited the music and wrote all the scripts for several years. My first performance was for a service in St Mary's Church, Kings Worthy, in 1977, in which I played the flute under Dave Roberts's baton.

By 1978 I was conducting, and beginning to edit music, when we went to Sidmouth to lead the

hymn singing in Blackmore Gardens, and also for two services. Matins in the parish church at Widecombe was a strain; the text of the service was from the Alternative Service Book (ASB), too modern, and we were not yet fully aware of the clash of style between west gallery music and ASB. Happily, most churches seem to have reverted to the Book of Common Prayer now.²

The afternoon service in Dunstone Chapel was magic. In temperatures approaching 100 °F, the choir squeezed into the tiny gallery with only a little oval window to breathe through. The band was in the body of the chapel, and much more comfortable. I remember the service in particular because we were asked for a request: 'Come Let us All with Heart and Voice' (now in the *New Oxford Book of Carols*), which several people had heard in the morning at Widecombe. The congregation would not leave the chapel until we had sung it again; their enthusiasm sustained the singers, who narrowly escaped hyperthermia.

One United Church service was a challenge. On getting home from work on Friday I found a note from the minister discarding one of the chosen tunes, and enclosing the music for her choice, 'Amsterdam' from the Foundry Collection, which was edited and copied on Saturday and thrust before the quire on the Sunday. When we arrived in the church, we were told where the regular band would sit, and they would, of course, be playing as well, so we should give them copies. They consisted largely of B \flat and E \flat brass instruments, so we innocently gave them copies, knowing that only those capable of transposing would join in. The service was held together by the charisma of the minister, and nothing went wrong.

We have continued to help with an average of about three services a year, and always they are an act of worship, never a concert. Humour is not excluded, and vicars have sometimes used our hour-glass at the beginning of the sermon, to make the point that a sermon might last an hour or more in the times we portray. At the end of this

¹ The Madding Crowd meets every Sunday evening for rehearsal or performance, and has become a close-knit community, perhaps in some ways like an old village quire. Our commitment to, and enjoyment of, the music is evident to audiences. There is an authenticity in any committed performance.

² This is probably not true of Communion services, but may well apply to both Morning and Evening Prayer. [CT]

month (August 1995) we will help with a third wedding, and in the following months a Matins and an Evensong, both for special occasions in their respective churches.

Services are the proper context for west gallery music, and it is very important for revival quires to experience them, which I know most of them do.

Concerts

Most of our concerts are for community associations, local branches of charities such as the National Trust, and church groups (Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist). The picture on the front of our recent 20th anniversary anthology¹ was taken in 1978 at Mottisfont Abbey (NT) and printed in the *Romsey Advertiser*.

Among the most memorable concerts was one on a housing estate in Southampton, where the people, who certainly knew how to enjoy themselves, had already eaten and drunk, and showed their appreciation for 'the entertainment' by rapt attention and thunderous applause, not only for every musical item, but for most of the readings too. The well-heeled are more likely to sit on their hands, it seems.

At various concerts in and around Hampshire, museum services, local history groups and archivists have always been supportive, because they are interested and on our side from the beginning. We took a weekend trip to Liverpool to contribute to the museum's season on music through the ages, with afternoon and evening concerts on the day we travelled. We were too tired on the coach home even to sing!

We have only done a couple of evening concerts for business conferences, and the reactions were surprisingly good, considering the irrelevance of what we do to the purpose of the conferences. Probably the audience selected itself, so again they were on our side.

Although it seemed a good idea to perform at a hotel as part of its Christmas offering, we performed the agreed concert and subsequent dances with a total audience of three for part of the concert, and two for a dance or two.

Folk festivals

Apart from 1978, mentioned above, in the era before the West Gallery Music Association we made occasional visits to the Sidmouth folk festival for workshops, and one for a concert in the

parish church on a weekday evening, the 200-mile round trip being rather too much in one evening.

Concerts, and workshops often leading to services, have been part of the Winchester festival programme since the earliest years of the group.

English Heritage special events

We worked with Howard Giles, Karen Cooper, and their team to re-create an outdoor country wedding, first performed at Old Sarum. It includes a shortened form of the 18th-century service, and an abridged contemporary sermon. A few days before, the curator of the Keswick Museum sent us a photocopy of a poster for just such an event,² a public wedding with games and even a pantomime in the evening. Rollo Woods had spotted it while on holiday, and obtained permission for us to adapt it; it is reproduced in *Good Singing Still* (Woods, 1995). The wedding has been a great success, and we have performed it also at Old Wardour Castle, Sherborne, and Portchester Castle. Since we do not allow our members to carry cameras while in costume, we only have pictures of events to which we can take supporters, and those undertaken for English Heritage events have supplied the majority of our photographs. Many were taken by Bob Patten, and I thank him for those shown here .

[A selection of transparencies were shown, two of which are reproduced in Panel 1. The others showed the various types of entertainment and games which the Madding Crowd performed following the wedding celebration. They included dancing, a tug of war, and a sack race which was rewarded with a bunch of garden flowers.]

The church within the walls of Portchester Castle was packed, with people standing on seats as in some Rowlandson prints. We estimated 800, but counted seats for only 250. The singers sat among the congregation and fought their way up the aisle to sing. When the 'parson' arrived late (as intended), there were so many people outside the door that he could hardly get through – indeed one person said to him 'You won't get in there, mate, it's heaving'.

Other games we play are: grinning through a horse collar; skittles; and jingles, a blindfold tag-

¹ The anthology *The Madding Crowd 1975–1995* is available from Mike Bailey. [CT]

² At the conference, Fenella Bazin told me that mock weddings are a popular public festivity in the Isle of Man, and afterwards she kindly sent me copies of a programme for such an event in 1952. Ian Russell told me that mock weddings are known in northern England. It is possible that the Keswick poster is for one of these. Perhaps we can find out whether the marriage was registered or not.

Panel 1

Parade to the 'church'



Inside the church



ging game. The games are well documented for the period, as are the flowers.

Other performing groups, such as the British Social History Group and military re-enactment groups, are prominent at some of these events. I believe we stand up well in comparison to them, and we enjoy working with them. We have had soldiers make an arch of rifles for the bride and groom, and we have provided labourers for a hiring fair.

Thomas Hardy Society

Concerts, workshops, and 'Going the Rounds' have all worked well. We are working with Furze Swan to plan the 1996 Rounds, and this time there will be a workshop about three weeks' beforehand to encourage more participation.

Television and radio

Specific BBC programmes, such as *My Cousin Rachel*, were handled with stunning professionalism. We were dressed head to foot even though we were only in the background and partly obscured, so that it didn't matter what showed. I wondered what the hairdresser would do to me, having worked hard on others (I had more hair than I do now, and it was pretty unruly). She looked, poked at it a little, and said, 'Well ... that's just you, really, isn't it.'

In contrast, Southern Television invited us, on Christmas Eve, to a live half-hour magazine programme suddenly converted into a Christmas party. Star guests, interviewed just before our spot, were two members of Spandau Ballet; the tenuous link, for which STV was famous, was 'How do you like carols?' to which they intelligently, and with one eye on us, replied 'Yeah, they're OK.' I forget what we sang, but the final spot was a solo treble singing something like 'Silent Night'. During the preceding item we were given four copies of his piano arrangement between 28 of us and asked to croon a backing.

An intelligent interview long ago on local radio, during which we sang 'Grace 'Tis a Charming Sound' to Cranbrook, was followed by an inane continuity man wondering why we were singing 'Ilkley Moor Bah't 'At' in the background. *Facing the Music* and *Songs of Praise* have been excellent.

I have to conclude that magazine programmes are unlikely to display the deserved respect for the material and for the performance, but dedicated programmes are very supportive.

On stage

One concert programme was a fully dramatised enactment of a rehearsal for 'Going the Rounds', a good excuse to discuss the whole activity, reminisce, and practise the carols. It worked fine on the open floor of a village hall, but failed on stage. We put it on for a local amateur dramatic society in their theatre, in exchange for a video tape of it. It seems that an audience has different expectations as soon as the performance is framed by a proscenium arch. Our tableaux did not move enough, I think.

Repertoire considerations

Concert programmes have been written and refined continually on the following subjects:

Round the Year with the Village Quire;
History of the Quires;
Harvest;
Christmas;
Thomas Hardy; and
the Country Wedding described earlier.

Besides the religious repertoire of anthems, metrical psalms, canticles, hymns, and carols, we also include a small proportion of rounds, glees, catches, folk-songs, and set pieces such as 'Save Great George our King', and 'Britannia's Sons Rejoice'. Concerts usually include one or two dances, which add movement and life to what is often a rather static tableau.

In services, the congregation must sit and lis-

ten to the canticles, so they are given lots else to sing.

Widcombe and Jackson canticles have been used for both Matins and Evensong. Well-known hymns, but in village settings with interludes and codas, are used, for example 'Old Hundredth', 'Hanover', 'Evening Hymn'. Words are handed out for a metrical psalm, to a well-known or easy tune. We teach the tunes before the service starts, so that the flow of worship is not interrupted later. 'Cambridge New' is an especially successful tune; line 1 is the same as line 3; line 4 is divided between men and women.

We always have audience participation in concerts. Words can be written on banners, and the tune taught rapidly as needed. We have used the Lade manuscript Christmas round, and a Hampshire wedding round, 'Blest is the Man who Fears the Lord' (Ps. 128). Audiences have some difficulty with the cumulative chorus of the Barley Mow, but enjoy trying.

Sometimes we hand out words, for example for 'Christians Awake', and various different words for 'Cranbrook'.

Sometimes we just teach and ask the audience to memorise something, for example the chorus to Thomas Clark's 'Harvest', or the repetitive chorus of 'The Fox Jumps over the Parson's Gate'.

Performance style vs. authenticity

We have in mind the expectations of a modern audience, and also the different circumstances. West gallery music was in part intended for the performers alone, and not for an audience, so the aesthetic considerations could be quite different then.

On the whole, we don't use galleries. Congregations have commented that they were pleased to be able to see us easily, although they knew the gallery was the 'proper' place for the quire.

We keep our choir reasonably balanced with four to six singers on each part. There are no trebles at the moment. Well over 100 people have been through the group over the years, but we have always created an artificial balance not in evidence in documented quires.

The band is also balanced, with an ideal of one wind and one string on each part, for variety.

We permit modern instruments, although we prefer the real thing. The old flutes and clarinets seem happy at A440. If forced to standardise, which I do not favour, I would prefer A430. Some of our manuscripts have settings which seem up to a minor third higher than comfortable, and we have transposed some down a tone, or even more for audience participation.

We try to keep in tune and in time, not necessarily important parameters to our forebears, who, Vic Gammon has argued, were more devoted to polyphonic heterophony. This helps us to make the words clear; we assume that the audience doesn't know the words and needs to hear them. Our only experiment with singing an accent was for 'God Save the King', soon abandoned. Several members have a genuine Hampshire accent, which is useful for readings.

However thrilling the tune, if you're just listening to it, it palls after a few repetitions, so we usually limit ourselves in concerts to four verses of a psalm. When congregations sing a psalm, they need four to six verses to get into it, so we generally sing about ten. We have two dynamics, loud and soft, and the occasional crescendo or sudden diminuendo. Expression is sometimes needed to keep the longer musical items interesting, although the frequent changes of section, with changes of rhythm and voicing provide sufficient variety.

Of course, medleys are unlikely to be authentic, but they allow us to sing several good tunes, and possibly words from several sources, as a concert party-piece. 'While Shepherds Watched', Psalm 65 New Version, Psalm 23 Old Version and New Version, and 'Conder', have all worked well.

We have attempted lining out occasionally, but we have the feeling that it takes an audience one line to get the idea, and two lines to get bored!

Our costume, aimed at about 1820, is nice to look at, but would not satisfy the strict historian. One of the military groups we meet at English Heritage events spends over £600 on each costume, which is beyond our resources. We do take off modern watches, however, and find suitable spectacles.

The repertoire spans Restoration to mid-Victorian. Although the mainstay of our repertoire is Georgian, many of the carols are probably later.

We use ring binders, covered in calico, for most events. With over 300 choir items and 100 instrumentals, we need to be able to put a programme file together easily. Only for English Heritage did we write out the individual parts and bind them by hand.

Discoveries

Manuscripts have been mentioned several times by members of audiences, and I have borrowed some. One printed anthem by Sir William Cope, squire at Eversley, was given to us some time beforehand, and we included it in the programme there. It dated from the 1860s, and was not very good. It cost 5 shillings, and one can im-

agine everyone in the village having to buy it to stay in favour.

A couple of people have sung items to me, which I have written down.

In several places we have been shown instruments: enough bits to make a pair of clarinets at Eversley (the churchwardens' accounts show their purchase); two flutes and a piccolo at Lavant; a bassoon and a pitch pipe at West Tytherley.

Scripts

When Rollo Woods retired to Swanage, a committee of about five started to learn how to research and create new scripts, and they have become pretty good at it, meeting over a bottle of wine or two as often as weekly.

The readings, quotations and dramatisations illustrate the social context of the music, or introduce particular pieces more specifically. The readings are shared around the members, and where direct speech occurs, as in Hardy, we can easily dramatise the conversation. Excerpts are drawn from factual and literary sources, and include some possibly apocryphal anecdotes of the kind Gordon Ashman calls 'danglers'. Folk have not changed so much, and common experiences told in the language of the time are entertaining; hindsight lends an irony which amuses. Readings are often more than half of a concert, and I can perhaps give you a flavour of them by introducing Mary Gibson, wife of the Reverend William Gibson who was rector of Fawley near Southampton from 1840 to 1863. Fawley Church now appears predominantly Norman, quite small, with a triple nave making a square space with a low roof and many arches and columns. I well remember the golden stone with the sun shining on it. In earlier

times there were extensive galleries, with seating for 400 we were told. Mary Gibson wrote in her 'Recollections':

Lady Cavan, the sister of Doctor Arnold, headmaster of Rugby, made one good reform in Fawley Church. It had been the custom for the people to sit during the singing of the hymns, indeed, through nearly the whole service, and by her example she broke through the practice and, when we went to Fawley, people always stood for the hymns.

One of the early changes we had made in the service had been to discard the band of instrumental performers who had led the singing from one of the galleries. A bass viol, a flute, a flageolet, and one or two other instruments had been vigorously played; the old clerk, Wheeler led with the flageolet. He used to walk up from his desk below the gallery to take his place among the performers before the end of the last collect, saying 'Amen', as he passed down the aisle. These amateur musicians were very troublesome to manage, and were wedded to their own tunes. It did not seem possible to make any improvement in the singing as long as they constituted the choir. We therefore bought a good barrel organ, such as were made in those days for churches. I think it played twenty-four tunes. Three or four of the men took their instruments off to the chapel and were lost to the church. I do not think the change was a wise one. I think, now, it would have been better to have waited patiently and to have let the performers die out. We soon got tired of the barrel organ and a good harmonium took its place.¹

Mary Gibson could not foresee that in 1991 Fawley Church would again resound to gallery music, this time from the Madding Crowd.

¹ *Recollections of Mary Gibson*, part 2, p. 7; Winchester Cathedral Library, ref. LVII A 26.

