

WORKSHOP REPORT

SINGING WITH SIMILES – AND SMILES.

On May 22nd 2010 in St John's Church Hall, Knutsford, NWEMF members and friends from other Fora enjoyed a workshop singing responds by Taverner, Sheppard and Tallis. The tutor was David Allinson. These are the basic facts of the day – which give no impression of its quality – unless you have already experienced David Allinson's style of teaching.....

After the usual warm-up, the start of the workshop was straightforward - a read through of Sheppard's *In Manus Tuas*. David's chosen method is then to sing the music through again, but with two or three lower or upper parts at a time. In this process, we can begin to hear the riches of the harmonies - and the gems of the similes which he uses to illustrate the sounds he wants- or doesn't want! For example, "please don't spoil a word like *tuas* by sounding like the *Wurzels*." After the men had sung some plainchant, he playfully suggested that they should aim "not to sound like a very confused, jostling crowd of rugby players but more like passive monks, just letting the sound happen." The Eton Choir Book style *mellismas* are silky and mustn't be thrown out, but drawn with a passive quality in a lateral rather than a climbing line "like an arm gliding along an ironing board." Then, when the words and the block of sound require a sudden brightness, it can be "like licking your fingers and putting them in the socket." When you are singing, don't keep reviewing how you've just sung a passage; instead, keep looking ahead and assessing how it could be sung."

This Eton Choir Book inheritance was carried into Taverner's *Dum Transisset Sabbatum*. Using the chant to generate new chords from congruent entries, the sudden brightness can be "like opening the hot oven door and having your eye-brows singed off." Then when the sweetness of the melismas requires more elaborate syncopations, the sopranos need not go "dulally at the sight of the dots," but could sing them with "just a wiggle of the eye-brows", warm, supportive and more languorous "like a woman with a long cigarette holder." Then the men were advised to sing their long cadences knowing when to push the melisma and when to hold back - "like a dog fighting on the lead to explore the bushes, and then being pulled back to heel."

In *Tallis Te Lucis ante Terminum* the cantus firmus on the top line gives the impression of simplicity required by the reformation, but the other parts are free to follow a complexity of sound, which we appreciated intently as we practiced. When we sang Taverner's *Quemadmodum*, David encouraged us to enter into the meaning of the poetic utterances - "when shall I appear before the face of God." With a low- sprung longing, at first furtive, but anxiously surging into an insistent demand, "Quando veniam?"

Finally, despite the heat and the lateness into the day's programme, David maintained his own energy to encourage us to tackle Tallis 7 part "*Loquebantur variis linguis*." It was alright to sound chaotic and driven "like feeding time at the piranha pool", the altos could "hop, skip and jump while the tenors were giving a gutsy roar" of alleluia as Tallis "majorised" like kicking the ball into the net and all were seeing "*Magnalia Dei* - the wonders of God."

What a way to end a long day - completed only by thanks and cheers for David Allinson. We certainly went away with more knowledge, sensitivity to the music, and a strong feel-good factor, laced with fun.

Hannah Davies