

GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

I gather that David Allen's article 'Of Practice and Musicians' (April 2009) has set the cat among the pigeons, as far as some members are concerned. My purpose here is to correct some apparent misunderstandings (on the part of some readers of this article), also to provide some reassurances and explanations

In the first place, we *do* want you, our members, to take part in our workshops! Leaving aside for the moment matters of performance medium (vocal, instrumental, both) or period (Renaissance, Baroque, other), Committee members strive to produce a programme which is varied, attractive and appealing, given what we know (I admit there is plenty we do *not* know) of NWEMF members' musical interests. Each of the early music fora inevitably has different specialisms, and contrasting strengths and weaknesses. I think it is fair to say that NWEMF is generally stronger with its singers than with its instrumentalists – which is why most of our workshops tend to focus on vocal repertoires, while (quite rightly) not necessarily excluding instrumentalists. On the whole, too, we are far more confident of attracting singers to events – though a 'chicken-and-egg' counter-argument could be advanced here, that singers are bound to attend events based on vocal repertoires (and so on). The Committee, though, is working increasingly hard to provide workshops for instrumentalists, even *without* singers being involved, because of our collective anxiety to cater – and to be seen to cater – for *all* aspects of NWEMF's membership.

Two further general points need to be made, the second of which particularly connects with David's article. First, while most of our workshops are *repertory*-driven, these repertoires are typically chosen with the *abilities*, as well as interests, of NWEMF members in mind. [We would all be mad to choose pieces which we know in advance would be well beyond the abilities of all except perhaps a very few who take part in our events.] The basic level of success which is *always* achieved at workshops testifies, on the one hand, to the aptness of the music chosen and, on the other hand, to those abilities which participants undoubtedly *do* possess. While, perhaps,

the overall sound-quality of our renditions might not, say, entice a visiting BBC radio producer to solicit a recording for subsequent transmission on Radio 3, that producer might yet be impressed by participants' generally good, often excellent, sight-reading skills, allied to their genuine level of musical (*and* non-musical) intelligence, also to their interest taken in various matters arising from the pieces themselves.

Second, I think our workshops can be said to fall into two broad categories: those (most Renaissance repertoires, for instance) where the requisite vocal/ instrumental scoring is flexible and may have an element of 'DIY' (arbitrary doublings or vocal/instrumental substitutions of otherwise unstaffed musical lines; that sort of thing) – and those (including most Baroque works) whose scoring is far more specific, and includes *obligato* vocal or instrumental parts, often of some difficulty. David, in mentioning workshops which he organised which featured music by J.S. Bach (Cantata 106) and Croce, touched on the second, frankly far trickier category. NWEMF, like the vast majority of musical organisations, has a predominantly amateur clientele whose individual performing abilities vary appreciably – and rightly so. [We do not, and *should not*, limit our membership to some kind of performers' elite.] On occasion singers or players of known skill will be invited to perform solos in pieces, or to take instrumental lines (such as *obligato* lines in a late Baroque composition) which make taxing technical demands, or which require instruments (such as, shall we say, oboe d'amore) of which known players, let alone proficient players, within our organisation are few and far between. Such selection is right and proper: it enables us to study, and appreciate, more technically-demanding works, we can draw on the relevant skills of our more able performers while, at the same time, providing no less important roles for our rank-and-file singers within the chorus or instrumental ensemble.

I can also assure readers that Committee members who play/organise workshops do *not* discuss in meetings the specific weaknesses or shortcomings of individual members, when planning

the workshop programme. Even if so tempted, we wouldn't have time to do so; all Committee meetings are action-packed and time-intensive – and, incidentally, they are consistently *positive*, not negative, in spirit. Any member who inferred from David's article that those of us who plan or direct workshops wish to discourage the novice or less experienced performer, and simply attract 'experts', are seriously mistaken.

Workshops topics, it must be said, are chosen not simply with a view to securing a high standard of performance of whatever the music is (any event, such as annual ones at Carnforth, with a public 'performance' at the end, are the sole regular exceptions). Our more important general aim in planning workshops is to introduce participants to composers and music which may be unfamiliar to them, and thus to extend members' knowledge and appreciation. Those of you who take part will have a variety of reasons for doing so, and different personal priorities – of which that of extending your existing musical knowledge will hopefully be an important one, if not necessarily the main motivation. Points which David is making will perhaps predominate from this point onwards. We hope that all who have elected to take part in a given event will have made an informed decision that their existing skills as singer or player will enable them to do so competently and confidently. Some instrumental or vocal parts in an event may prove technically challenging, and, insofar as those difficulties may be anticipated, wherever possible it would be prudent to try to practice something which corresponds to the anticipated difficulty. There will not be a 'blanket' answer to such a question. A singer who is not 'phased' by the prospect of singing, say, Palestrina motets along with other singers on the same musical line may – or, perhaps, *should* - feel unable to sing a particular line in Tallis's *Spem in alium* 'solo'. Similarly, a recorder player's ability to double a singer on a line from a late Renaissance mass movement does not guarantee that s/he would automatically be able to cope with the demands of a solo instrumental line in a Baroque overture. We all need to recognise, and work within, our limitations, to try to be honest and objective in

recognising what those limitations might be, also to try neither to under-estimate nor to over-estimate our various skills. It is obviously hoped (as David implies) that practise may make, if not 'perfect', at least 'better', and that, with every successive workshop, each participant may become ever more proficient in sight-reading, in singing or playing in tune, or whatever. Certain instruments pose their own technical problems – I think, sympathetically, of the challenges of intonation and articulation which typically confront brass players, for example – and, naturally, such problems will affect different individuals in different ways. This is an example of the sort of technical 'test' ideally combated before an event by some kind of practice, however regular or irregular that may be according to a member's individual circumstances, timetable, etc. 'Preparation' for a workshop, though, ideally is at least as much mental as well as physical; arriving in the right frame of mind in order to take part with the maximum 'comfort'. In much that I have written here, though, I recognise – as we all do – that these things may be more easily said than done.

To end, though, I repeat what I wrote earlier: we want you, our members, to take part in our workshops, certainly in those where you feel your abilities will enable you to participate with ease and confidence – and, to this end, your Committee members are doing well they can to make these events, in all their variety, both attractive *and attainable* for you all.

Roger Wilkes

The views expressed in David Allen's article are his alone, and do not represent those of the committee as a whole. There is nothing wrong with 'winging it' at a NWEMF workshop or anywhere else, if that's how you chose to fit music into your life.

Anne Clements