AMBLESIDE 2006 NWEMF SUMMER SCHOOL – 25 YEARS ON

1. A newcomer's view.

Being new this year to the Course I was asked to write a short article, giving my impressions of the week at a very sunny Ambleside in July.

I was slightly apprehensive about booking this course, not knowing whether I would fit in or be the right standard for the various groups. But my worries were needless. Everyone was so friendly and the tutors, under the benign direction of Roger Wilkes were excellent. They were incredibly hard working and never seemed to go off duty.

I enrolled chiefly as a recorder player but as I also sang (massed and one to a part) and also did some viol playing I had hardly a minute to myself.

The days were broken up into sessions – two between breakfast and lunch, two between lunch and dinner, and then two after dinner – the last one finishing at about eleven o'clock for those who had the stamina. So there was plenty to do but you could opt out of sessions if you felt it was all too much.

As well as playing and singing, we had some very informative lectures on Renaissance Music in Italy, and William Byrd to name but a couple,

My accommodation was of the four star variety as I treated myself to an en suite room. The food was good – and I certainly came home a few pounds heavier.

The week finished with a musical banquet where various groups performed pieces that they had worked on during the course.

All in all it was a splendid week. The things I will remember is firstly the friendliness of the other participants, the delight of singing verse anthems with the professional viol consort, and lastly not forgetting a couple of evening swims in Rydal Water with some new found friends!

I certainly hope to be back next year.

Mary Stamp

2. A personal view from a tenor participant

This was my fifth year at Ambleside. How would the Summer School of 2006 compare with the previous four? My friends know how much I love the opportunity 'to sing from morning to night in different combinations'; love 'to be introduced to an enormous range of new but singable music'; love the friendly atmosphere; and, love the beautiful surroundings.

The Summer School of Renaissance Music has evolved over 25 years. Our tutors told us that the standard of music-making has improved, year on year.

Every day started with 'Warm Ups', shortly before 9. Deborah Catterall is an outstanding singing teacher and warmer-upper; we progressed from body balance to relaxation, Alexander-style; we graduated from deep to controlled breathing; we made sounds, then notes, then harmonies. After 15 minutes, we were superbly poised for the singing and playing to come.

The singers assembled in small matched choirs, the viol-players and wind players in matched consorts. In the course of an hour and a half, each choir had tried two or three motets or madrigals, all of the music

new to us. The principles of singing together were emphasised, in different ways, by different tutors, on successive days. It helped that I was an experienced sight-reader, but this was not an essential.

After coffee, we singers were combined with instrumentalists, in consorts of 10 to 15. I was doubled with a flute, a recorder and a viol, on different days. A spirit of mutual support prevailed under these circumstances, probably reflecting the camaraderie of the musicians in a Spanish cathedral, where the music (of Morales, for example) was composed and originally played. The emphasis was on enjoying the experience of performing an unfamiliar piece of music, re-creating the atmosphere of the Renaissance.

A vast range of options opened up in the afternoons; one-to-a-part consorts, two-to-a-part consorts, try a consort for 'terrified' beginners, sing a lute song, try a lute, try a viol, try a recorder, try other winds, try verse anthems, try singing from facsimiles, try improvisations, try singing or playing with Renaissance viols (brought, one day, by Richard and Vivian Jones), vocal technique. . . not to mention the opportunity to buy a CD, a recorder, music or books about music. Here was a wonderful pot-pourri of choices, deftly arranged in suitable groups with tutors with suitable music. Or, the delights of Ambleside or the beautiful countryside, could be enjoyed.

After a cup of tea, we enjoyed the intellectual bit; 'Music and Rhetoric' one day, 'Byrd, the Catholics and the Consort song', (an illustrated lecture delivered by a PhD student from Lancaster University), another day. A 'Grand Tour' of Renaissance Italy featured each of our 8 tutors; for 10 minutes, each shared their knowledge and enthusiasm for a musical aspect of 8 different Italian cities. Striggio's 40-part motet, 'Ecce, beatam lucem', was the after-tea delightful sing on the last day.

After dinner, there was something for all 83 of us. Often one or more polychoral pieces:- a Mass in 12 parts by Phillipe Rogier, Exultate iusti by Hieronymus Praetorius, Venetian pieces – O ben felice a pieno and O passi sparsi by Striggio, So ben mi c'ha ben tempo by Vecchi, Maria stabat and Canticum di dio by A Gabrieli and O magnum mysterium by G. Gabrieli. On these occasions, all of us were assigned parts.

One night it was singing for all – two lovely motets by Hans Leo Hassler – O sacrum convivium and O altitudo divitiarum. Another night, we enjoyed dancing for all; a pavane, a 15th century ballo and a bransle, led by Elizabeth Dodd, provided a useful complementary activity to our music-making.

For me, a special part of each day starts at 10 pm, and 2006 did not disappoint. Those who still have enough energy and voice, assemble to sing informally through motets and masses. This session is ably facilitated by Roger Wilkes, who provided a wonderful succession of new pieces, and one or two favourites on request. The quality and accuracy of sight reading, and thus the ability to experience such a range of new and exciting music, was thrilling. A high spot this year was to sing two verse anthems; Sing Joyfully by John Mundy, and When Jesus Sat at Meat by Richard Nicholson, with five of our tutors playing a quintet of viols.

The week ended with the traditional Musical Banquet, where musical items are interspersed between the courses of food, illustrating all the activities of the week. This was followed by the traditional informal singing of madrigals from the Oxford Book of English Madrigals – this year 19 of them – until we retired, exhausted but exhilarated.

For me, this week was just wonderful. The standard of music was higher than ever. The range of music we were introduced to, was amazing. Here was a wealth of music, new to me, that I could take home to try again with our one-to-a-part group, or in our small choir.

The tutors were all teaching and sharing their passions, in a friendly but scholarly way. The organisation of so many different groups and combinations was meticulous, and much appreciated. The friendliness was palpable; it was lovely to meet 60 or so veterans from previous courses, but also to welcome newcomers. I was not aware of any cliques, and showing off was minimal. Grumbles were rare. Informal conversations about all aspects of music, abounded. And the weather. . . gorgeous.

Despite this superb evolved programme, our tutors were keen for feedback and suggestions for improvement. They will start with a blank sheet to plan next year's course. I am already keen to sign up for 2007.

David Adshead

3. A View from the Director.

Well, it's all over for another year; and you, dear reader, can read what two participants in the 25th NWEMF Summer School of Renaissance Music thought about it by turning to their accounts elsewhere in this Newsletter.

I think all those of us involved with NWEMF Summer Schools since the first one back in 1982 can take a fair measure of pride in its undoubted success story. To begin with, it is *still going* – still going strong, indeed! The fact that many people return year after year, while 'new' people continue to find us out, and join our 'extended Ambleside family'; the further fact that, during these past few years, we have had to place a 'fully booked' sign on our applications page on the NWEMF web site – these things suggest, at the very least, that we are doing something definitely right; this, too, at a time when several other, potentially 'competitive' early music summer schools are taking place in different parts of the British Isles, as well as overseas.

The NWEMF Summer School, then, has arguably both found *and* retained its place in the early music summer school market place – yet we cannot afford to become complacent. Indeed, this year, for the first time, we invited participants in the summer school to make their observations on the event - to tell us what they like best about it, which aspect(s) they would be most inclined to change, and any other germane comments they wished to share with us - and roughly half of all who attended 'Ambleside' this year have responded, some of them in considerable detail. At the end of November all of this year's tutorial team will hold a special meeting, at which we will review the various comments made and suggestions received, in the context of a major re-examination of the summer school programme – both its content and its format – the first such review since 1982. Major change, of course, is not an inevitable, let alone a desirable, outcome of such review; in any case, every year we had made adjustments to the programme to reflect changing patterns in participation, new interests, and all of the usual things. But we *do* need to keep up-to-date; we also need to cater for a

new clientele, not simply those important people who have supported us loyally, year after year.

Essentially, we wish the NWEMF Summer School still to be a vibrant and valuable part of the British early music scene twenty-five years from now – with however different a clientele and, indeed, a transformed tutorial team – so we are recognising the need to prepare for that future!

So what does this have to do with YOU? Firstly, however much we draw our summer school clientele from across the British Isles – as well as overseas; this year, for instance, we welcomed (back) participants from Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Mexico, and Jerusalem! – the Summer School in Ambleside is promoted by the NWEMF Committee, which in its turn represents, indeed serves, the NWEMF membership as a whole. So, YOUR views are important! Secondly, for all the positive things which may be said or written about recent NWEMF summer schools, there will always be areas ripe for improvement or constructive change. Some of you yourselves may have given our summer school a miss – for perfectly good reasons as far as you are concerned. What are these reasons: for instance, do they concern the date? the venue? the cost? the subject-matter, all or in part? or – perish the thought, but we must ask! – the clientele, or membership of the tutorial team? Have you ever been to Ambleside but come away disappointed; if so, what in the whole experience was not right for you, and is this something which we can, and ought to, change? Please let me know, in confidence if you prefer. [For that matter, please let me know what you have most enjoyed about NWEMF summer schools you have attended in the past, although you no longer come.]

A particular mission we have at present is that of attracting more viol players and recorder players; and, for the first time in several years, we hope to upgrade the lute into a 'first-study' instrument. Admittedly in common with just about everyone else, we also seek to attract more tenor and bass singers. So - are YOU a tenor or bass singer and/or a recorder or viol player, or an aspiring lutenist? If 'yes' to any of these, is it not time that you gave the NWEMF summer school a chance – or another chance? For that matter, do you know anyone else – a north-west-based early music enthusiast who is not, however, a member of NWEMF; or someone living further afield, or overseas – who might be interested in what we have to offer? Please tell them about us; direct them to our web

site; or simply put them in touch with me. We also have an ongoing mission to students – both those of school age, and others in higher education (bursaries are available in each category, to help offset the fees we must inevitably charge) – and we value the vital and important part which young people play every year in our summer school. If you know a talented singer or instrumentalist, of school age, who might benefit from the NWEMF summer school experience – or an undergraduate or postgraduate student who either sings or plays Renaissance music – please put them in touch with us. And please – if you happen to be a soprano or alto singer who may be interested in joining us, please don't despair: you will be most welcome to apply. It simply happens that the greatest demand for summer school places in recent years has tended to come from adult soprano and alto singers, so there is a greater possibility here than in other areas of the summer school clientele that some applicants will have to be turned away.

Publicity for next year's summer school (21-27 July 2007) should appear at the beginning of February next year, including via the NWEMF web site. I hope to report back to you on the outcome of the summer school tutors' deliberations this autumn – a report which will appear in the February Newsletter, just about the time when the 2007 summer school publicity material is coming out. Please watch this space; bit, in the meantime, if you wish to respond to my earlier invitations to contact me – about NWEMF summer schools past, present or future – then I will look forward to hearing from you. Meanwhile, onwards and upwards.....

Roger Wilkes