



# Evening Standard

LATE PRICES EXTRA

LONDON, MONDAY, 21 MAY 2001

www.thisislondon.co.uk

Incorporating THE EVENING NEWS 15p

## Teaching the world to sing

There aren't many choirs that can take over Covent Garden for its birthday party, can boast an audience of a bit lion for a single live performance (the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales) or commission a new piece from Sir John Tavener for its next Prom. But, then, the Bach Choir is probably the finest independent choir in the world.

"It is completely amateur, which requires a level of dedication that's hard to find anywhere else, and it's not connected to an orchestra so it controls its own agenda," says musical director David Hill. "That makes them better than professionals in my book."

The choir is gathered in its home of the last century or so, Westminster Cathedral Hall, where at the top of everybody's mind is the 3 June event at the Royal Opera House, the celebration of its 125th birthday.

There's an assistant prison governor, a former station master, a research chemist, a theological lecturer, lawyers, architects. At the front a woman in a pink cardie, buff slacks and trainers is taking a sip from an Aroma beaker. She is Katherine to everyone and was a bit

### The Bach Choir is celebrating its 125th birthday in style, reports Simon Tait

late this evening – trouble parking her car. But to you and me she is Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Kent.

The 3 June programme the choir is launching into tonight includes Walton's tricky Belshazzar's Feast, the first movement of Bach's Christmas Oratorio, some Brahms, and a very awkward Vaughan Williams. These people are serious about what they do.

They come from as far away as Chester for their Monday evening sessions. Someone's mobile goes and the ring is not the EastEnders theme or the Ride of the Valkyries but a Bach partita.

Until recently, Diana Rayner educated her four children at home in Evesham as well as organising the choir's programme publications and archives, commuting to Victoria twice a week, and singing. "I've done it for 15 years and I



Just call me Katherine: the Duchess of Kent is one of the singers in the Bach Choir

can't imagine not doing it. It's just the most terrific fun."

Until she ceremoniously chucked her stethoscope into the Thames on Millennium night, Jane Mackay was a GP in Walworth Road. Now, at 53, she is a music painter – she has synesthesias, which means she sees music as colours. But she joined the Bach as a student 33

years ago and remains as dedicated as ever. Jon Cooke, meanwhile, is 27, a member for just two years, and one of the few actually working in music. He's Julian Lloyd Webber's PA and also preparing for his boss's Albert Hall concert on 1 June. "The choir may seem rather old and traditional, but it isn't," he says. "There's new

music coming into the repertoire and many of us are in our twenties." This ensemble was created by an amateur tenor called Arthur Duke Coleridge, a Bach buff whose mission was to have the Mass in B Minor performed in this country (nobody had dared take it on).

Formally constituted as the Bach Choir in May 1876, the first

performance was the Mass, under the baton of the husband of Jenny Lind, the Victorians' equivalent of, probably, Madonna.

So, the choir started on a pedestal which it has been kept on by a series of eminent musical directors, including Ralph Vaughan Williams, Adrian Boult and, for 38 years, Sir David Willcocks, who handed over to Hill three years ago.

The choir gives at least 20 concerts a year and there's usually a tour abroad. Every three years, each of the 240 singers undergoes an audition to check their sight-reading, pitch and tone, and each year four or five are gently told they can't cut it any more.

"Nobody sight-reads like English singers," says Hill, music director at Winchester Cathedral, who leaves shortly after 14 years to concentrate on his burgeoning career as a choral conductor. "I had a German soprano audition this week and she had the most beautiful voice but she couldn't read quickly enough, so she was out."

"With the gala we'll be looking to the future rather than the past. We've commissioned a new piece from Tavener for our Prom, and there'll be more commissions if we can generate some cash – Macmillan, possibly, Weir, Turnage. This is a choir which is entitled to be very ambitious."

David Bartley