

# The Guardian

NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

## Sacred notes from Massachusetts

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36 ARTS

Meirion Bowen

ONE OF the specialities of the *Gloriae dei Cantores* — a much-acclaimed choir from Cape Cod, Massachusetts — is the little-known heritage of sacred choral music from all the Americas. Here, near the start of a European tour, at St John's Smith Square,

they offered a tantalising glimpse of the entire repertory: and one could imagine whole programmes from them subsequently, tracing particular scenes in depth.

Latin American music was represented by a Magnificat by Fernando Franco (who worked at the cathedrals of Guatemala and Mexico City in the 16th century), *The Lamentations Of Jeremiah* (1946) by the Argentinian Al-

berto Ginastera and a Brazilian Psalm (1941) by the German-born Jean Berger, who taught in Rio de Janeiro and now lives in the United States. Whereas Franco's composition alternated verses of Gregorian chant with traditional polyphony, the two other works involved setting words in a more independent, sometimes dramatic manner.

Under their conductor, Elizabeth C. Paterson, the GDC made each of the pieces sound convincing in its own right, balancing the needs of good diction and expressiveness in the Franco, bringing up colour contrasts in Ginastera's almost orchestral textures, relishing both the rich triadic chording of Berger's piece and its sudden change, late on, to rhythmically snappy hallelujahs.

The GDC seemed just as happy to indulge the unashamedly romantic warmth of choral compositions by three North American figures, all apparently immune to any *avante garde* influences — Leo Sowerby, Randall Thompson and Dominick Argento; equally, they revelled in Virgil Thomson's picturesque evocation of hymn singing from the old South. A hint of real daring came early on in the three *Fuguing Tunes* by William Billings — the church composer with the widest reputation in 18th-century America: a singular figure, described by one contempo-

rary as "of moderate size, short of one leg, with one eye, without any address and with an uncommon negligence of person" and by another as "the rival of Handel"; and indeed, his freely imitative "fuguing" lines sounded at times quite Handelian.

The innovations in polytonality that make Charles Ives's Psalm 67 so remarkable evidently held no terrors for the GDC: and they quickly cottoned on to the mock medievalism — complete with male alto soloist and handbells — in Bernstein's *Benedictus* (from incidental music he wrote for Lillian Hellman's *The Lark*). But their biggest test was Aaron Copland's *In The Beginning* (1947) which (using words from Genesis) told the story of the Creation, in antiphonal dialogue between a mezzo soprano narrator and chorus. Each day of God's creative enterprise — i.e. each section of the piece — was enclosed within the same two chanted phrases, "and God said". The choir here were accurate and fluent in the declamatory counterpoint that issued from Copland's close adherence to speech rhythms: and in the music for the fourth and fifth days, their singing swept to a sonorous climax.

● *Gloriae dei Cantores* sing at St John's College, Cambridge, on September 26. Details 0223-64903.

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ASHBOURNE NEWS TELEGRAPH

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## Crossing the east- west music divide

Usually, anyone ordering a CD of Russian choral music expects the choir featured on the disc to be Soviet. Not so in the case of *Holy Radiant Light* (Gloria Del GDCD007), a joyous collection of sacred songs by Gloria Del Cantores — an American choir.

The 44-voice choir, conducted by Elizabeth Patterson, performs 19 widely differing pieces from the USSR's rich sacred history — from the anthemic *Christ is Risen* to monophonic chants like *Lord, I Call*, the latter featuring the bass voice of Andre Papkov.

Beautiful choral melodies ooze out from the speakers with such haunting works as *Sacred Love* and the intensely moving *Hymn of Repentance*, both by Georgy Sviridov.

Tchaikovsky has three works included on this disc — *A Mercy of Peace*, *The Angel Cried* and *Hymn in honour of SS Cyril and Methodius* — and two liturgical pieces by Rachmaninov are featured — *Rejoice, O Virgin* and *The Mother of God, ever-vigilant in prayer*.

Gentle and powerful, rich in its many textures and forms, this collection comprising some of the best sacred music from Russia's Orthodox history dating back to the seventh century has been captured in a supremely professional performance. Recording clarity is magnificent. — ADH

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# MUSIC

ANDREW STEWART

## voice box

◆ Time was when the idea that a church or cathedral choir should be comprised of the faithful was more the rule than the exception. As a confirmed cynic, I have never found it difficult to divorce sacred music from its liturgical context, even though a religious work only gains in performance if the sentiments of the text are fully understood, if not believed. The American chamber choir, **Gloriae Dei Cantores**, whilst by no means unique in being the extension of an ecumenical community, does display a devotion and commitment to singing shown by very few 'secular' choirs and a level of excellence notably absent in

similar groups. The Cantores' director, **Elisabeth Patterson**, known affectionately as Betty, encourages sounds from the group that some have described as heavenly and which certainly would open the ears of any choir trainer becalmed in the waters of the so-called British choral tradition. Patterson expects and receives hard work from her singers. Last year the Cantores became the first group, from East or West, to sing Russian liturgical music on the concert platform, offering works in old Slavonic and performed, if the choir's CD of the same repertoire is anything to go by, with genuine 'Georgian' bass sound.

Patterson explains that the choir's *raison d'être* is governed not just by the music it performs but also on the tenet that it should promote peace and understanding, an evangelical mission that might have some switching off before hearing one note of the Cantores but which manifests itself in the intensely expressive way the group sings. 'I think it is the fact that all the members have a call,' says Patterson, 'and have answered a call to a religious way of life themselves, coming from an

ecumenical community, giving their lives over to try and live out God's will every day. This means that they have something beyond themselves, something that is a bigger goal – a goal beyond just singing good music; a goal to be used of God in every way, every moment of their lives. They have learned how music has the capacity to slip under this fence that we put up with each other – opinions, walls, traditions – things that we build up over the years. Music somehow slips under the fence and touches the heart.'

Part of *Gloriae Dei Cantores'* work, in addition to singing regular services at its home base in Orleans, Massachusetts, revolves around its annual tours, both at home and abroad. This month the choir makes its fifth tour of Britain, where in the past it has attracted the support of **George Guest**, for whom it gives a thanksgiving concert in St John's College, Cambridge on 26 September. The traits of rich, legato phrasing for which Guest's choir became justly famous have been passed on to the Cantores. Much of the repertoire performed by the Cantores, in Cambridge and earlier at St John's, Smith Square, stems di-

rectly from the Anglican tradition, albeit in the shape of works by American composers. The 'coals-to-Newcastle' approach of an American choir singing such as Howells' *Gloucester Service* or Vaughan Williams' *O clap your hands* may have some throwing their arms up in horror, but the immaculate intonation and pure tone of *Gloriae Dei Cantores* is bound to win admirers.

Art East  
Sept '91

# BRIEFING

## ANGLES LAUNCHES FUND AFTER FIRE

ANGLES Theatre, Wisbech, made its own drama in the early hours of July 27 when fire destroyed part of the stage and smoke damaged the auditorium, stage and dressing rooms.

The Angles is one of the three oldest working theatres in the country and a special fund, Angles Theatre Council Phoenix Fund, was started within a few hours of the fire. Although insurance is adequate the fund is to make sure that the restoration work can start as soon as possible.

Anyone wishing to make a donation to the fund should contact the Angles Centre, Alexandra Road, Wisbech, Cambs, PE13 1HQ, tel: (0945) 585587.

**THE American choir Gloriae Del Cantores (Singers to the Glory of God) is back in the UK for an International Gateway Concert Series during September. They are at St John's College, Cambridge on September 26 at 20.00.**

At St John's the choir is performing a concert in honour of Dr George Guest upon his retirement as organist and choirmaster of the college choir. Dr Guest is a long time friend of Gloriae Del Cantores. The programme includes Poulenc, Mozart and Bach.

• Pictured right is director Elizabeth Patterson.







# Evening Standard

Northcliffe House, 2 Derry Street, Kensington, London W8 5EE 071-938 6000

## Peace of the action

GLORIAE DEI CANTORES

St John's Smith Square

"THE promotion of peace, understanding and harmony between Americans and the people of other nations and cultures," looms large among the aspirations of Gloriam Dei Cantores (Singers to the Glory of God).

An American mixed choir of nearly 50-strong, about half each of women and men, it is based at Orleans, Massachusetts where it sings the Anglican services.

At the same time, it also concertises at home and abroad, its present tour comprising Holland, Italy and Poland as well as the UK. Next year, it returns to Russia and even plans to visit Albania.

Founded in 1972 by Elizabeth C Patterson, a musician of commanding personality, this is a highly-trained choir, unusually strong in tenors, rich-toned and versatile. The conductor stands stock still, her directions small scale and absolutely precise. Would that all choral conductors looked so unfussy.

Her programme in St John's, Smith Square,

consisted of unaccompanied sacred music from the Americas, starting with a Magnificat by Fernando Franco (1532-1585) of Guatemala and Mexico; its verses alternated polyphony with plain song — this last a speciality of the choir.

In his turn, the late 18th century composer William Billings was represented by three of his Fuguing Tunes, most notably in When Jesus Wept, a profoundly moving setting.

On to Ginastera's semi-ethnic, Argentinian Jeremiah Lamentations, the jazzy hallelujahs of Berger's Brazilian Psalm and the splendid counter-tenor lead in Bernstein's Benedictus from The Lark.

Add some top quality Charles Ives and Virgil Thomson, culminating in Aaron Copland's magnificent Creation music, In the Beginning.

One way and another, it proved an evening illuminating and inspirational, opening up vistas hardly guessed at here.

Christopher Grier

# CHURCH TIMES

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## Polyphony to the glory of God

THERE IS a kinship between English and American choral music which makes it all the more surprising that choral societies over here perform so little music by American composers. A concert in St John's, Smith Square, London, two Saturday evenings ago by the superb American choir, *Gloriae Dei Cantores*, showed just how beguiling that repertoire can be.

The St John's programme spanned five centuries, by taking in the 16th-century composer, Fernando Franco, who was choirmaster at the cathedrals of Guatemala and Mexico City. If his *Magnificat on the Seventh Tone* seemed the least successful item, that may have been because we are scarcely permitted these days to associate polyphony with large mixed choirs; and the tone, in this first item, did seem forced. But the singers soon settled in with *Three Figuring Times* by the 18th-century composer William Billings. "Be Glad Then,

### Glyn Paffin on choral music from America

America", the last, was a splendid dramatic piece, running the gamut of revolutionary emotions. He is almost a Yankee S. S. Wesley.

Leo Sowerby and Randall Thompson provided the Transatlantic equivalent of 20th-century romantic Englishry; and I was not surprised to learn that they are very popular with church choirs in the United States. Sowerby's *Eternal Light* was for people who like Harris's *Fare Is the Heaven* or Hadley's *My Beloved Spoke*. I was rather glad I couldn't pick out the words of Thompson's *The Best of Rooms*. Dominick Argento's *Easter Day* was a lovely neo-romantic setting of Crashaw, written only two years ago. Leonard Bernstein, Charles Ives, Virgil Thomson and Aaron Copland

filled the second half. All had vitality, but Ives's *Sixty-Seventh Psalm* and the first of Thomson's *Hymns from the Old South*, "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need", deserve, in particular, to be heard more often in this country (and why not in church?). Bernstein's *Benedictus* from his incidental music to *The Lark* has a gutsy counter-tenor opening and a part for handbells. It is re-pro-medieval, but couldn't be by anyone else. It has the Latin vibrancy which distinguishes it from the Anglo-American tradition and brings it closer to Graun's *The Lamentations of Jeremiah* and Jean Berger's *Brazilian Psalm*: pieces drawing directly on South American folk music, which this very white-American choir carried off, nevertheless, through sheer confidence of technique. Their tour continued in Cambridge before visits to churches in Italy and Poland throughout October.