

15 November 2011

## Behind the scenes at the Parliament Choir

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Parliament Choir in Westminster Hall Times  
 photographer, David Emma Pomfret  
 November 15 2011 12:03AM

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Parliament Choir in Westminster Hall Times  
 photographer, David Bebbler

Peers, MPs and Westminster staff can find harmony once a week — at the Parliament Choir, which is preparing for Christmas. Scroll to the bottom to listen to the choir perform on Classic FM

Certain members of the Parliament Choir are limbering up more than others for their annual carol concert. “Ten Lords a-leaping . . .” muses their music director Simon Over, “we’re deciding what our Lords will do.”

The Parliament Choir is a 120-strong mix of peers, MPs and staff from the Palace of Westminster; around a third of its members are politicians (the coalition slightly outnumbers Labour), while Parliament staff or pass-holders — the cooks, researchers, secretaries, doorkeepers and so on who keep the Houses running — make up the bulk. They’ve been singing on the quiet for ten years but with bigger concert venues booked for 2012, the Parliament Choir is out to be noticed.

On a Tuesday evening they are practising hard in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft, beneath Westminster Hall. Upstairs, in the corridors of power, committees debate the new Welfare Reform Bill, Theresa May is preparing for a border-controls grilling and news breaks that Silvio Berlusconi will resign. But while Europe burns, the choir is focused on carols for its Christmas concert.

“Choir is my sanity,” says Sarah Teather, the Minister for Children and Families. Ministerial responsibilities have elbowed regular choir practice out of Teather’s diary, but she will sing a solo (*In the Bleak Midwinter*) at the carol concert. “For a while, Parliament Choir was the only way to include music in my life and I needed to carve out a space which wasn’t politics,” explains Teather, who before her Westminster life sang with the London Symphony Chorus. She still takes singing lessons. “You have to have some hinterland or you’d go a bit nuts.”



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The Parliament Choir was founded to accommodate MPs and peers for whom parliamentary life made a “normal” choir impossible. Parliament sits until 10pm on some days and choristers often have to dive out of rehearsals to vote. For many, the weekly rehearsal is an attractive role reversal. “We’re used to being bossed around by the party whips,” says Lord German, the choir’s chairman, “but it’s a great change to put down our swords against each other and to be ‘whipped’ by the conductor.”

Over takes no-nonsense control of the rehearsal. “Words, words, words!” he snaps. “Ten-nine-eight . . . it doesn’t want to sound like a football team,” he chides, berating their oikish *Twelve Days of Christmas* countdown.

“What they love is they don’t have to take responsibility,” says Over. “For once, they can sit back and do as they’re asked rather than having to think on their feet, being in fear of attack.”

Political ballyhoo is left at the dispatch box; apart from some mild Lords-Commons joshing, nobody talks shop. “We’re much more likely to gossip about who’s going out with whom and what you did at the weekend,” says Teather. Before you rush to google “Parliament Choir” and “expenses”, members pay an annual subscription (from £60 to £120 depending on salary) and, thanks to some hefty sponsorship from BT (to the tune of £60,000 per year), it uses no taxpayers’ money. Nobody auditions and the standard ranges from trained ex-choristers to enthusiasts who “like a sing”. For those who can’t read music, the chorus master Nicholas O’Neill helps to fill the gap with one-to-one lessons; he’s coaching several choristers through their Grade 1 singing exams.

Continuity is another challenge. Choir members can go Awol for months while a demanding piece of legislation is passed. Rehearsals are also disrupted by the division bell: there can be as many as three votes in a single rehearsal. Come election time there is some turnover of members – and a lot of distraction. In 2010 Lord Filkin, the choir’s founder chairman, resumed his duties for a year. “Members of the House of Lords are not afraid of an election,” explains Alun Michael, MP, “and it doesn’t disrupt their lives at all.”

As politicians rise up the ministerial ranks they tend to disappear from the choir. “I sang all through Opposition,” says Caroline Spelman, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. “Now I miss it but I haven’t given up entirely.” As a choir regular Spelman sang with her secretary and researcher. “We were a singing office. It’s very good for team bonding.”

The choir also reveals another, perhaps more endearing, side to its members. Tim Lamming, head of catering in the Lords, often helps his colleagues through tricky passages of music. “Rather than the peers being the authority on everything, they’re asking you for guidance,” he notes.

This egalitarianism is at the heart of the choir, which bypasses Parliament’s hierarchy. “Outside the choir, people feel obliged to call me M’lady,” explains Baroness Corston. “But the moment I walk into rehearsal they say, ‘Hi Jean’.”

Not so David Leakey, the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, a senior officer of the House of Lords, who sings the entire rehearsal in full regalia: white bow tie, black knickerbockers and patent-diamante slippers. “I’m known by everybody from top to bottom of the place as Black Rod,” he says forlornly.

Performing in Westminster Hall, the site of 900 years of parliamentary history, cannot fail to inspire. (A little too much at times; Spelman remembers a rehearsal of Parry’s anthem *I Was Glad* when the combined vibrations of choir and organ sent a beam tumbling.) Singers also talk about a sense of giving something back to Parliament. The choir and its partner orchestra, the Southbank Sinfonia, perform various in-house duties; they sang for the Pope’s visit last year and will perform for the Cultural Olympiad’s Arts in Parliament programme next year. “We are a user-friendly face of Parliament,” says Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall. “Constituents are interested.”

The one thing that the Parliament Choir lacks is competition. Last year it visited Prague to sing with the Czech Parliament Choir — founded after a Czech contact heard about the singing MPs and peers. Over hopes to spark interest from the French Parliament, Germany's Bundestag and the European Union. A Euro-Parliament song contest may yet happen.

What it sings is overwhelmingly high-end, meaty classics (last week it was getting stuck into Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise*). There have been diversions into lighter fare, some Gilbert and Sullivan (predictably the Peers' Chorus from *Iolanthe*) and a concert of show-tunes. As far as anyone can recall, Ken "Jazz" Clarke hasn't boo-boo-be-doo-ed with the basses, but Over has plans: "We have thought about doing some jazz and seeing if he would get involved."

Alas, some great characters are missing. You won't see Eric Pickles busting a lung. The Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls, a chorister at university, doesn't have time to sing but is a big choir supporter. Lord Prescott is unlikely to be giving it his pianissimo.

Not that Prezza hasn't been asked. In a choir spin-off, Spelman and Teather performed Delibes' *Flower Duet* from *Lakmé* for a Macmillan Cancer Support concert. At the time they were shadowing John Prescott and asked him to make up a trio. "The answer was no," remembers Teather. "He said, 'I think I get the p\*\*\* taken out of me enough'."

*A Westminster Christmas*, presented by John Suchet, is at Central Hall, Westminster, SW1, on Dec 7 (tickets from 0844 8717605; atgtickets.com) and on Classic FM on Dec 24 at 8pm

### **Singing for their supper**

#### **The Metropolitan Police Male Voice Choir**

The UK's bobbies are represented, in choral terms, by some 30 members. Their wide repertoire includes Wagner, spirituals and the Beatles, with presumably *Sgt Pepper* a particular highlight. They've yet to sing the Prisoners' Chorus from Beethoven's *Fidelio*.

#### **Young@Heart**

Young@Heart was founded by the residents of an elderly-persons' housing project in Massachusetts in 1982. It was the subject of a Channel 4 documentary in 2007 and, a year later, a feature length version was released. Members may all be over 70, but they are more likely to sing rock anthems than Handel's *Messiah*.

#### **Voices in Partnership**

Never knowingly undersold, this is the flagship choir of John Lewis's Music Society, founded by John Spedan Lewis himself in 1925. Up to 90 singers take a break from haberdashery or the wedding department to sing in London or Bracknell. Members farther afield are sent tapes to sing along to.

#### **UBS Choral Society**

Taking things rather more competitively this London-based ensemble recently slugged it out for Office Choir of the Year. This month they play LSO St Lukes alongside the UBS Orchestra, with British composers represented including Britten, Finzi, Tavener — and Gary Barlow.

#### **The Fisherman's Friends**

Port Isaac's finest (*below*), made up of ten fishermen, lifeboatmen and coastguards, spent 15 years entertaining each other with their traditional shanties. Then they were signed up by Universal in a £1 million record deal: another nationwide tour begins next week.

Neil Fisher

**[Click here](#) to listen to a one-hour performance by the Parliament Choir on Classic FM (performance begins at 03.06 minutes)**