

WILLIAM KERBER

St Mary's Cathedral Choir (20 November 1970 to the Present)

I was born in Lanark in 1949, the son of Hans and Mary, the one German, the other Irish and both farm-workers. My first school was the Sacred Heart at Penicuik and then St David's, Dalkeith. As a young fresh-faced lad of eighteen I started work with Midlothian Council as an assistant engineer. I joined the Cathedral Choir on 20 November 1970. I was introduced by Mr Jimmy Bruce who was a part-time barman in a local pub, and also a tenor in the Choir.

Jimmy convinced me to meet for a pint after work one Thursday and then set up an audition. The next stop was No 63, York Place.

I stopped at the top of the stairs outside the rehearsal room wondering what the big noise was — all men's voices! The noise stopped, they trooped out, I went in to be greeted by a very tall, thin, grey-bearded man. 'Willie,' he said in his English voice, 'you've come to sing for me.' He sat at the piano. Up the scales I went, then down, his eye piercing and staring as I sang.

'I've only got one question,' he said. 'Will you come every week?' 'Eh, eh — yes' I blurted out the answer.

Back in they filed, tenors at the front, basses at the back. This was my first meeting with the Choirmaster, Arthur Oldham.

At the time the Choir had about twenty boy sopranos, six boy altos, six tenors and six basses. Thursday nights, Sunday morning and evening were taken up with Palestrina, Anerio, Vittoria and many other composers. In my

almost non-musical education I'd never heard of any of them!

I later discovered that most of the men sang in the Edinburgh Festival Chorus that Arthur had founded in 1965. Because of his growing commitments to the Edinburgh Festival Chorus, the Scottish Opera Chorus and then the Orchestre de Paris and Amsterdam, Arthur then left his post at the Cathedral to pursue these activities more fully.

His position was taken by George Farmer, also director of Stirling Choral Union who, as well as singing in the Choir, was one of Arthur's understudies in the Glasgow section of the Edinburgh Festival Chorus. George, a music teacher at St Modan's High School in Stirling, stayed for twenty-three years but the effort of two rehearsals each week, added to the Sunday drive from Stirling eventually took its toll and he retired.

In his time he had been involved in the preparation and production of the music for the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1982. All of us in the Papal Choir will remember Bellahouston Park as well as the Pope's visit to St Mary's Cathedral.

George was replaced by Vincent Wallace who had sung as a boy in the Cathedral Choir and was well-known in Edinburgh music circles. He promoted the Choir by travelling to the Royal College of Music venues in Scotland and England, and also preparing recitals in various churches and cathedrals in Scotland. We all remembered singing in York Minster and then at the small local church the next day.

But in time, as boys eventually dropped out and couldn't be replaced, despite serious recruitment efforts (both by George and Vincent), the Choir numbers dwindled to around ten men.

As time elapsed, Choir conductors came and left. There was Stephen Doughty, a fine organist who now directs at St John's Episcopal Church at the West End. He was awarded a conducting scholarship with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

Roddy Bryce took over introducing the first ladies to the Choir. This was the next obvious step to uphold the great tradition of music and singing at St Mary's. Roddy left to further his studies and was then replaced by Emma Turnbull — again a *first* for the Cathedral. Emma has developed recruitment while teaching and training privately.

The long-awaited arrival of the new organ has further enhanced the music of the Cathedral and the appointment of Simon Nieminski, a top organist, is in keeping with the highest aspirations of the Cathedral.

To this day I can still remember the deep staring eyes of Arthur and also my blurted answer of 'Yes, I'll come every week'. I think I was afraid of letting him down.

As the years have slipped by the commitment has grown almost as much as SAGA in sending me offers for the over-50s.

I also think of Mgr David Gemmell saying that 'He who sings, prays twice over'.

Thirty-seven years on I am still here and I most certainly still need my prayers to be doubled-up!

Willie