



Emma Disley interviewed Timothy Brown in Cambridge in July, shortly after he had returned from Aix-en-Provence, where he had been performing with English Voices, and as he moved on from over 30 years as Director of Music at Clare College, Cambridge.

She began by asking him what he would miss about working with Clare Choir:

'I will miss the unique combination of talent and enthusiasm and youth, which I think is undergraduate music-making at its best level. (And it is remarkably good at the best level.) This summer we did a concert at the Spitalfields Festival and another at the St Jude's Proms at St Jude's Church, Hampstead – two big London concerts – and then I went off to Aix-en-Provence with English Voices in a totally professional context. There is a difference between working with students and working with a professional choir. It's not that student singers get jaded after they leave university, but they do get into the routine of singing as a job of work; they become, for instance, very jealous of their time off. Whereas with students, you can pull and push and cajole and tease and train, and at the best level you reach a technical excellence which at times is more impressive than it is with professional singers.

You've seen a couple of generations of students go through Clare. Have you noticed a change in student attitudes?

Students nowadays often have quite different attitudes to their parents who were at university 20 or 30 years ago (and I've got to the stage now when I am literally seeing the children of former choral scholars of mine come up to Cambridge). There are changes, and sometimes it's rather irritating and you have to find new ways of dealing with them; one of the reasons why I decided to stop being Director of Music, was that I thought it was time for someone who's younger and therefore more attuned to the vibrations of modern undergraduates to take over.

It's a question of balance: you have to accept this changing attitude – and the fact that colleges are different places too, no longer the 'families' they once were, but places which operate more like offices (a sad change, but that's how it is). But when a student choir works at its best, you get a very exciting result. And there's a real sense of satisfaction because you do feel you're contributing to the education of these young people, and I shall miss that. At its best, when you have them eating out of your hand, which from time to time you do, they will absorb a lot. It's very satisfying when, for example, in English Voices, which contains a high proportion of singers who, at some

point or other, have worked with me when they were undergraduates either at Clare or elsewhere, you see some of those good habits which they learnt at university, such as sight-reading skills, listening ability, fine-tuning and a sense of ensemble, spin off into what they're doing professionally.

I am sorry to be giving that side of things up and I shall try to find ways of replacing it with choirs and groups who do at least aspire to similarly high standards and I shall retain an interest in students because I'm going to be attached to Robinson College, Cambridge, as the Visiting Guest Conductor. Robinson has an organ scholar running the show; they don't want a Director of Music and I applaud them for it; too few colleges in Oxford and Cambridge still have an organ scholar in charge. On the other hand, organ scholars sometimes need support; so Jeremy Thurlow, the Director of Studies in Music there, decided that I would be useful in a supervisory role. The idea is that I should go in for the first fortnight of term and run rehearsals and then stand back and just go in from time to time during the term and maybe conduct evensong occasionally, and perhaps a concert, but my role will essentially be a backroom job, which I will enjoy because I like that educating role and it will keep me in touch with students, though my contact with undergraduates at that intense level demanded by my role at Clare

will cease. My involvement in Robinson will be much lighter.

I also hope that I'll possibly go back to doing something like the University Chamber Choir – a cross-college chamber choir. For all its oddity – and these colleges are odd, and we all have our crises from time to time – there is something inherently very good and exciting about their singers.

In what other respects have students changed over the years?

When I came here everyone had done Latin at least to 'O' level, so you never had a problem with Latin texts, because at least people could read it, even if they didn't know the meaning of every word they sang. Nowadays it's a completely dead language; students don't even know how to pronounce it, unless they've been choristers. You have to remind yourself that this is really foreign to them. The same is true of English: students, by and large, have a much poorer vocabulary than they had 20 or 30 years ago; a lot of the archaisms of the English language which are common in anthem literature are unfamiliar to them. I once asked the tenors to make a mellifluous sound, and it turned out that only one person in the choir knew what 'mellifluous' meant. That's a rather extreme example. And what I find even more sad is the lack of enquiry; in the old days if you didn't understand a word, you'd look it up in the dictionary, whereas now people are happy not to know a word and not to be interested in knowing what it means and just to glide over it. The love of language seems to be less obvious now, though obviously there are always exceptions.

So you have to work harder at words, and you certainly have to work harder at sight-reading. Members of the choir who haven't done GCSE or 'A' level music hardly know even the rudiments of music; probably only about 10 or 15% of the choir, men and women, have been choristers. Some of them have been in the NYC or in one or two good school choirs, like that at Eton, where they've had a serious training, but a lot of them come from schools without a good choral training background and they're not used to singing a lot of repertoire; they don't have a great sense of key, which one could take for granted in the past, and they find sight-reading quite hard. The repertoire, however, stays the same, and certainly doesn't get any easier; and the commitment remains the same in terms of the number of services and therefore the amount of music they have to sing in the same rehearsal time. So it's harder and

harder to reach the same standard because you need longer to do it, and it's a situation which is not going to get easier, because you can't extend the amount of rehearsal time, and I think it's really going to require a lot of skill in terms of choosing repertoire and teaching choirs how to sing in order to maintain the standard.

We still have to try to achieve the same high standards, but it comes at a cost. I've been criticised in the past for driving the choir too hard, because I've had a sense of the standard that I wanted the choir to reach and I've therefore used every device at my disposal in order to get them there. Some people say the cost is too high. It'll be interesting to see whether my successor will lower the bar or keep the bar or raise the bar or simply be cleverer at achieving the same bar or a higher bar, but without having to drive the choir so hard.

There have been times when I've wondered whether I'm expecting too much. But then when it works really well you feel this is the right thing. Former members of the choir have told me that they are very grateful for the standards which they've been taught here in Cambridge. And they take those inherent standards into the professional choirs they later work with, and it's frustrating for them, sometimes, to find themselves working alongside those who don't share the standards they've come to take for granted.

There is one other notable respect in which singers have changed since I was a young singer myself. When I was a chorister at Westminster Abbey under Sir William McKie, there was the assumption that we were very good. We all knew we were very good and there was the assumption that the Organist thought we were very good and so we did the services and then we went home, and nothing was said; and occasionally a message would come down from the organ loft that the Organist wanted to see us, in which case the Choir would wait behind in the Song School, and William McKie would come down and either say 'that was an appalling evensong' or that it was 'very, very good'. So in other words praise, verbalised praise – and it was exactly the same with David Willcocks – was

offered very sparingly, and therefore it meant something. Whereas now, if I don't say every single time to the Choir, 'thank you, that was great', they say 'weren't you pleased?' And sometimes I write a note to the choir saying 'that was a really good service' and

someone will say to me 'what did you think?' and I'll say 'I told you it was great' and they'll say 'oh, but did you mean it?' In other words, praise has become very routine and almost meaningless. People think you're ungrateful, but

no, you're just realistic. So that kind of thing I will not be sad to leave behind

Of course, in the professional world you certainly don't have to do that. You do a job and you go away again. People don't expect you to keep them behind ego-stroking, saying they're terrific. It's quite an important rule in life to learn your own strokes – to learn to acknowledge when you've done well, just as much as you have to acknowledge when it's not been so good, and if you just rely all the time on people saying 'that was great, that was great, that was great', it kind of blurs the edges. You don't get praise all the time if you're working in a law firm, for example, you just go and do your job. And if someone turns around and says 'I'm really pleased with you', that's good, but you don't expect it every day.

You have laid down Clare College Choir, but have a busy career beyond Cambridge, of course.

I've made the decision to do different things now. One of the problems with Cambridge and probably Oxford is that it is a bit parochial. I've liked to get out and do things beyond Cambridge, because it gives one a perspective on what Cambridge is about. Cambridge tends to think it's the cat's whiskers when it comes to all things musical, and it's quite important to be able to stand back from that. And what you gain outside you bring back to what you are doing in College.

It's not all downhill when you go out of this place in terms of choirs; it may be that professional choirs don't have that youthful



enthusiasm and sometimes that discipline, but actually they do have much more vocal technique and vocal sound and to work with that is very rewarding, and one brings that palette back to Cambridge and to one's work here.

I have English Voices and I shall have more time for my freelance career. I've been invited to go out to Chicago to conduct a choir there for a week, and I have invitations to work in Finland and in Switzerland. And I shall compose and pursue other projects which are important to me. Last year I started a song competition in the University – a duo competition. The prize was for a duo, not just a singer; we had 18 or 20 entrants and we had a very good competition in the final. The motivation for that was partly to get undergraduates to sing songs – to learn this repertoire as a counterbalance to the chapel music they are constantly singing – but also to try to encourage proper accompaniment. So often, when singers are invited to sing something, they just grab a pianist at the last minute, and are let down by inadequate accompaniment. I want to develop that with lessons with professional répétiteurs. We had Simon Lepper, a Kingsman, now Professor of Accompaniment at the Royal College of Music, come to coach the finalists. The prize is to do concerts in places like the Fitzwilliam Museum and St Martin-in-the-Fields.

Accompaniment is terribly important: I've always said that behind every good choir there's a good accompanist, and if there's a bad accompanist, there'll be a deleterious effect on the choir.

Of course, what you were saying about Sir William McKie reminds me that you have brought to your career your own training as a chorister at Westminster Abbey and later a choral scholar at King's and a Lay Clerk at New College, Oxford.

I feel so privileged to have not only come through the Abbey route, but to have been a Choral Scholar at King's and a Lay Clerk at New College. I've never forgotten my first appearance with King's. The first time I sang with the choir was for the organ scholarship trials; I was handed some music and we started to sing and I realised within ten minutes that this was a choir that sang accurately, in tune, and with a good sense of ensemble; all that was simply an unwritten expectation. Once a choir practice started, you were at a very high pitch of concentration. It was unheard of to make mistakes, and if it happened at all, David Willcocks went absolutely ballistic. Choirmasters in those days could do things

that you couldn't do now. I remember vividly a choral scholar getting something not terribly seriously wrong, but he was made to sing it on his own in front of the whole choir, including the boys, for about 15 minutes in an hour-long rehearsal.

Most of us thrived in that sort of environment, but occasionally it didn't suit someone; but in those days you stuck it out for three years, whereas now the attitude seems to be 'if it doesn't suit me, I won't do it.' And if someone made a commitment, he or she stuck to it, whereas that doesn't always happen nowadays, and if they don't turn up, you don't always even have a note of apology. (Actually, they don't write notes at all – the concept of RSVPs, even to party invitations, has largely disappeared, and they won't write to thank you afterwards, either.) I don't personalise this in any way, it's very much the society in which they live.

You have worked elsewhere, notably in 2005 as Acting Director of Choral Activities at Westminster Choir College, Princeton, New Jersey. What is your dream job?

The dream job would indeed be to work here in Cambridge. Going away for a year to Princeton was very interesting; I love America, and I love Americans, but there's no question that the American educational system does not marry up to the best we can offer. And, despite these minor gripes about how students are nowadays, I would say that the individual students are every bit as nice individually and as biddable and as pleasant as they always were; they are simply the product of the society in which they live – and the society in which they live behaves in a very offhand and rude and casual way. We simply grin and bear it when people in restaurants, shops and garages treat us in an offhand or rude manner, but here it matters, simply because this is a community; and I have never apologised and I do not apologise now for being pretty upfront with people; I've had showdowns with students which have had tremendously positive results, in that the students concerned have turned themselves around and become absolute stars.

College choirs have a high turnover in terms of membership; how hard is it to maintain standards in this environment?

In this place the academic year is pretty short and each year you lose a third of your choir, so every year you find yourself wondering how you will cope without someone who's been really good. But when

a space is vacated by someone, it is always filled by someone else; the others need the space in order to grow. It's become a standing joke when I say to the choir at the beginning of the year 'this is the best sound ever' and they remind me 'that's what you said last year and the year before!'

Having been at Westminster Abbey and having been at King's, those kind of standards are very much my goal. We shouldn't be attracting people to Clare and saying 'oh that's good for a first week' – I want people to say 'that's terrific'. And we got there this year. There was no feeling of 'gosh is this going to be alright?', actually it was alright from the start. Once you've achieved an acceptance of a level, provided you've got enough continuity of people, then it's going to be alright the following year, and I think we've got that now. I no longer worried about gearing them up at the beginning of the year

I do feel privileged to have been part of this whole system at Cambridge and especially to have brought on the girls. Clare was the first college to have women choral scholars; to have reached a stage now when women are accepted as the norm is fantastic; this year we were very proud to sing with the Choir of Caius College at the Honorary Degree Ceremony, and nowadays the response was not 'oh that was a novelty to have girls', it was just a nice alternative to King's and John's. It was as if we were being judged on the same level, not just in terms of 'pretty skirts'.

I have loved all of this, and it's this coalface of education which I shall really miss. Despite my trips to America and everywhere else, there's no place like Cambridge. There is no doubt that Cambridge and Oxford between them have supplied and continue to supply some of the very best British musicians, and it's a tremendous responsibility to be part of that teaching fraternity. It's been wonderful.

'You have invested so much in Clare College Choir. At the beginning of the Michaelmas Term, will you face a pang when you are heading elsewhere on an aeroplane?

'I'm not a looker-backer and I'm not a very nostalgic person. I can let go. I'm absolutely completely inside something when I'm there; but as soon as it's gone, I can move on. People say 'how will you cope with missing it?' and the answer is I will miss it very easily, because I'll be doing something else, and when I'm doing something else, I won't be thinking about it.