

Introduction

This book has developed from an oral history project about the life and work of Sir David Willcocks. It has been a privilege to work with David on this project, and throughout he has been patient, helpful, and inspiring in telling the story of his fascinating life. Over fifty people have generously taken the time to reflect on their experiences with David, and between them have covered the most pertinent aspects of his life and musical contributions. Remarkably, not a single person has refused to be interviewed. Many were emotional: all of them have laughed; some have wept. If there was one connecting thread throughout all the interviews, it has been David's infectious enthusiasm.

The premise of oral history is simple: there are living individuals who either made history or witnessed it, and it is important to have their recollections recorded. Even today, the field is still in its infancy. Of course one encounters discrepancies: any two people who witness an event will remember it differently; from this, perhaps, the truth emerges. I first experienced oral history as a graduate student at Yale University in the late 1970s, when I had the good fortune to work with Vivian Perlis, the Founder and Director of Yale's *Oral History American Music*, on projects devoted to Charles Ives and Aaron Copland. My interest in the field was keen, but I pursued a career in church music. Over twenty-five years later, on a sabbatical from my post as organist and choirmaster, I have been able to attempt my own project. David agreed to an initial round of interviews, and we have been working at it ever since.

A copy of the final tapes and transcripts will reside in the Yale oral history archive and another set with David's papers in the United Kingdom. The material will be open, by permission, to scholars and students on both sides of the Atlantic, and should prove an important resource for research on twentieth-century choral music. I encourage people to *listen* to the actual interviews. Transcriptions can only give the verbal content, and the interviews reveal the emotion, voice inflections, and the many times

people—including David—have burst into song or rushed to a piano to demonstrate musically what they are describing. These are the exciting aspects of oral history that bring it to life.

This book has been structured around a central narrative recounting David's story in nine chapters. To accommodate the many other contributions from family and friends, each main chapter is followed by an interlude chapter, containing a selection of reflections and anecdotes from the same period. These are amusing, sad, and generous in spirit, and round out a portrait of a modest yet highly gifted musician. The book is completed, firstly with a selection of wonderful photographs from David's life, and secondly with a CD containing extracts from some of the many seminal and important recordings from David's career.

It is dangerous to begin thanking individuals, but all those who consented to be subjected to my tape recorder and questions are due sincere thanks. Maggie Heywood, our Assistant Director in England, spent countless hours transcribing interviews and helping me with corrections and additions, as well as tracking down people, material, and photographs. Sandra Anderson carefully transcribed David's interviews and several others. Vivian Perlis and Libby Van Cleve from Yale's *Oral History American Music* offered encouragement and advice and agreed to house the project at Yale. I am grateful to the former Rector, the Rev. Dr John Martinier, and current Rector, the Rev. Ruth Lawson Kirk, of Christ Church Christiana Hundred, Wilmington, Delaware USA, for their encouragement and support, and for allowing me to devote time and energy to this project. Sherry Lawton-Fasic and Millie Miller from the church staff helped me in many ways and were patient with my frequent computer issues. Leopold de Rothschild and Philippa Dutton helped with The Bach Choir and Royal College of Music chapters and contributions. Sir Philip Ledger and John Rutter have been constant advisors and read the entire book in manuscript, making countless invaluable suggestions. I am also most grateful to John Rutter for all his help in assembling the CD. David Blackwell and his colleagues in the Music Department at Oxford University Press have been supportive, and aided in all aspects of the book's production. Finally Rachel Willcocks, Sir David's wife, has been unfailingly patient and helpful, and has offered regular counsel; her cheerful, supportive spirit and generous hospitality helped make this project possible.

A last word of thanks is due to the family of Alletta Laird Downs. The enclosed CD of excerpts has been generously supported by funds donated in her memory by some of her relatives. Mrs Downs (1913–2005) was a

lifelong parishioner at Christ Church Christiana Hundred. She served as Chair of the Church's Music Committee from 1977 to 2003, and through her joyous and longstanding contributions, many outstanding musicians, including Sir David and John Rutter, have been able to compose and perform under the auspices of the Christ Church Musician-in-Residence Program.

The book, and the oral history from which it is drawn, is intended as a fair and honest testament of David's life. Of course, his real legacy lies in his music-making, the students he has influenced, and the many amateur musicians he has inspired. In the words of John Rutter, David 'set new standards in choral music in the United Kingdom and beyond. He shook up the dusty profession of cathedral organist, giving it a new professionalism, energy, and stature. In an iconic series of recordings with the King's College Choir, he opened the ears of millions of listeners world-wide to the beauty of choral singing. He revived little-known music of the English golden age and brought new music into the choral repertoire. He almost single-handedly transformed our musical celebration of Christmas. He trained and encouraged generations of musicians. And he led one of our great musical conservatories towards the twenty-first century.'

To me, David's career represents the climax of, and one of the last links to, the Golden Years of English choral music—from Elgar to Vaughan Williams, Britten, and Howells. It is fascinating to see his students and colleagues, many of them represented here, building on the foundations that he has laid so splendidly.

WILLIAM OWEN
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