

Kent Chamber Choir visit to Wuppertal

25 – 28 August 2017

Our return visit to Kantorei Barmen-Gemarke had long been planned, but in the weeks leading up to it events seemed to accelerate with alarming rapidity. Nonetheless, 36 of us, singers and family members, with Dick Cross who had first brought the two choirs together, duly met the coach on the morning of Friday 25th August at one of three allotted pickup points. Another nine were to make their own way to Germany. Our coach was clean and comfortable, and we quickly found out that our driver, Mark, was highly competent and obliging. Timings went like clockwork, in spite of a 45 minute delay at the Channel Tunnel, and we were soon moving rapidly through France and Belgium. A traffic jam around Brussels delayed us by thirty minutes, and then a motorway stop was necessary. Consequently we arrived in Wuppertal/Elberfeld at around 10:30 pm, to be guided the last few metres to the hotel by John Harding – essential in view of road works locally. Those of us who were being hosted were met there, giving some of us a chance to renew acquaintances made the previous October.

The hotel was (I am reliably informed) comfortable and provided a decent breakfast. In the morning we were treated to a coach tour of Wuppertal by Arno Gerlach, the Chairman of KBG, who proved an excellent guide. Wuppertal is on the edge of the Bergisches Land; the name means 'Land of Berg' from the name of the Duke of Berg,



and has nothing to do with 'Berg' meaning 'mountain'. The present city was amalgamated from the towns of Elberfeld and Barmen with several villages along the river Wupper in 1929, and is unified by its unique suspended railway or 'Schwebebahn', which for much of its length snakes over the river on gantries.



Our hosts had kindly bought us group tickets for a journey along the entire 20-stop length of this, which was a fascinating and at times exhilarating experience, as the carriages do sway from side to side through the bends! Two of Wuppertal's most famous sons are the early Communist Friedrich Engels and Friedrich Bayer, the founder of Bayer Chemicals. Bayer

first commercialized the production and sale of Aspirin, whence the local witticism that the first Friedrich gave everyone a headache, and the second Friedrich cured it. It's probably funnier in German.

After lunch in one of the many local cafés and restaurants, we were driven to the Immanuelkirche for an afternoon rehearsal. Immanuelkirche is a deconsecrated church with a community building, the Obendiek-Haus, in the grounds, and is owned by an association. KBG are one of the main users. Although there is a stage at ground level in the church, the choir usually sings from the extended organ gallery from where the acoustics are better. We rehearsed intensively until nearly 6:30 pm, and then after a much-needed break for drinks assembled for the concert at 7:30 pm. In view of Alan Vincent's unavoidable absence we were under the expert direction of Liz Jenkins. The concert consisted of our unaccompanied pieces, followed by a selection of pieces for choir and organ by Mendelssohn, culminating in his glorious Organ Sonata in D minor op. 65 no. 6 based on Luther's chorale 'Vater unser im Himmelreich'. After the interval we all sang Bruckner's Mass in E minor. The audience, numbering about eighty, were most appreciative.

Afterwards we were treated to a substantial buffet supper in the Obendiek-Haus with wine, beer and soft drinks. Arno and I both spoke briefly to the assembly. Prof. Volker Hempfling, the new Director of KBG, also introduced himself, and paid tribute to Liz Jenkins' role in preparing us for the Bruckner and moulding our performance. Now 73 years old, he recently retired as Director of the Kölner Kantorei which he founded in 1968. His appointment at KBG is an interim measure while they seek out a permanent replacement for Wolfgang Kläsener who resigned some months ago. Nonetheless he is ambitious for the choir, and his rehearsals are quite strenuous affairs! As he explained the following day, he was for many years organist, then Music Director at Altenberg Abbey, and with a colleague was responsible for overseeing the

installation of the present magnificent organ. He also held a number of professional university posts and has published a book of choral arrangements of German folksong.



We had had a long and tiring day, and were glad of a relaxed Sunday morning. At 11 am the coach took us on the 45 minute journey to Altenberg Abbey, where we assembled in the Martin-Luther Haus opposite for a warm-up. After changing into concert gear, we then made our way into the Abbey for a brief but intensive rehearsal. As Prof. Hempfling had told us, Altenberg was originally a Cistercian abbey. Like many such, it was built in a valley near water so that the monks could create fishponds. Stylistically the abbey church is remarkably unified,

having all been built within one hundred years in the 13th and 14th centuries. It was badly damaged after the monastery was dissolved in 1803 due to the secularisation of Germany, but was rebuilt with support from Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia, who decreed in 1857 that it was to serve as a parish church simultaneously for a Catholic and a Protestant parish.

We faced its glorious west window, at 24 metres said to be the tallest in Western Europe and predominantly golden in hue, and sang the Mendelssohn organ sonata and the Bruckner mass to a packed congregation – an inspiring memory to be treasured.

Another pleasant surprise awaited us. Close by the Abbey stands the pretty little Wißkirchen Restaurant, with which Volker has family connections. KBG had booked out the restaurant to provide us at their expense with a 'Bergische Kaffee-Tafel', a sort of regional high tea with coffee, cakes, cold meat, cheese, and other goodies including waffles with cream and hot cherries. We had the opportunity of presenting them with a gift, a framed print of a Margate seascape by Turner, for which Arno thanked us in most generous terms, with the hope that we would all meet again before too long – a hope I'm sure we all reciprocate.



The afternoon sun was still beating down, as it had all weekend, when we left Altenberg at 7 pm. Some of us still had energy enough (just!) to sit out on a café terrace in Elberfeld with a refreshing drink before bed.

On Monday we took an affectionate leave of our hosts, including Ulrike Fuckert, who had been instrumental in arranging many details of our itinerary, and 34 of us set off again in the coach. A midday break in Aachen gave us the opportunity for a leisurely lunch and a visit to the stunning Byzantine/Gothic cathedral. Again, the return journey to Calais went smoothly, with the expected heavy traffic around Antwerp resulting in our arriving on time at 7:30 pm, only to face a further delay of over an hour, courtesy of Eurotunnel. And so, after various words of thanks, home to our own beds.

DFC 31/08/17