

GLOUCESTER THREE CHOIRS FESTIVAL 2016

PRESS RELEASE

Teenage tenor steps up to solo spot in Three Choirs Festival Opening Night

A teenage choral scholar of Gloucester Cathedral was given the chance of a lifetime when he stepped in at a few hours' notice to sing the tenor solos in Edward Elgar's *The Kingdom* at the opening night of the prestigious Three Choirs Festival.

Magnus Walker, 18, was given the opportunity when James Oxley, the well-known professional soloist booked to sing the demanding role in one of Elgar's most famous works on Saturday 23 July, lost his voice on the morning of the concert and was unable to sing. So Adrian Partington, artistic director of the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival, turned to his own cathedral choir and chose one of his youngest singers to step up to the solo spot.

'When a singer falls ill on the day of a major concert you have a choice between trying to get a big name replacement, or at least someone who has sung it before,' he said. 'Our administrators did put out a call to artists' agents, but even if an established tenor had been free they could not have got to Gloucester in time for our rehearsal.'

The Kingdom, the second in an uncompleted trilogy of oratorios by Edward Elgar dramatizing the life of Christ, is not frequently performed and many established soloists have never sung it. The music is also much more complex than in works such as Handel's *Messiah* on which young singers normally cut their soloistic teeth.

'I have five absolutely splendid tenors in Gloucester Cathedral choir, but after consideration I decided to ask Magnus to sing the role for various reasons, but primarily because his ambition is to be an operatic soloist, with a voice that as it develops will be big and dramatic; he is a natural performer who has no shyness and no fear. The role is awkward but not vocally demanding for a young singer; I had confidence that Magnus would rise to the challenge – as indeed he did – and I felt that this would give him an experience that he would never forget at the start of his career.

'I rang him at 12.45 and he came straight over for a run-through with the piano; he is a very quick learner and by 2pm he was ready for the rehearsal on stage in Gloucester Cathedral with the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Three Choirs Festival Chorus – with whom he had expected to be singing the concert – and fellow soloists Claire Rutter (soprano), Sarah Connolly (mezzo-soprano) and Ashley Riches (bass).'

Six hours later – wearing white tie and tails borrowed from another member of the cathedral choir – Magnus Walker was making his Three Choirs Festival solo

debut. His extraordinarily accomplished performance was greeted with acclaim by the audience and admiration by his colleagues.

Joseph Denby, a tenor lay clerk of Gloucester Cathedral who has been Walker's mentor during his year as a choral scholar with the cathedral choir, said: 'I'm so completely and utterly proud of my choral scholar Magnus. What an amazing opportunity for a first gig: singing with the Philharmonia Orchestra and alongside Sarah Connolly. I shed tears of happiness listening to him.'

Reviewing the performance for the 'Seen and Heard International' website, the critic John Quinn wrote: 'Introducing the concert and announcing the change of soloist, the Dean of Gloucester assured us we wouldn't be disappointed; he was right ... Inevitably, given his age and at this stage in his vocal development his voice is not as large as those of his three senior and vastly experienced colleagues. However, everything that he sang was clear – in terms of both words and music – and completely accurate. Adrian Partington must have been mightily relieved to have so reliable a substitute and one who needed no "nursing" through the performance.

'But more than that, Walker didn't just sing the music; he sang the *role*. His important solo in Part IV ("Unto you that fear His name") is a rhapsodic piece of writing with a demanding tessitura. Walker sang it with fine assurance. He had every reason to be proud of his contribution to this performance and at the end Adrian Partington rightly singled him out for a well-deserved bow before anyone else.'

James Oxley was very disappointed that he was unable to sing as planned. 'Most singers hate to cancel, and the chance to sing Elgar at Gloucester, where the composer himself sat so often to listen to his works, is such a precious one; but a voiceless singer is like a rose with no flowers,' he said. However he was well enough to attend the concert, and afterwards paid tribute to his young replacement:

'In *The Kingdom*, "John", though a supporting role, has significant, and in places, taxing passages to sing, from the full-out *cantabile* of "Unto you that fear His Name" to the quickfire narrative of the disciples' arrest. Elgar doesn't make it easy, either, with constant fluctuations in tempo, and one needs always to have half an eye on the conductor most of the time.

'That Magnus picked up the score so quickly and was able to hold the part securely was, for one of his age and experience, quite remarkable. I only hope that when he sings the work for the second time, he will have a lot more time to prepare!'

The Three Choirs Festival 2016 continues in Gloucester until 30 July.
www.3choirs.org

MAGNUS WALKER biography

Magnus Walker is currently a tenor choral scholar under the direction of Adrian Partington at Gloucester cathedral where he is required to sing the daily services in the cathedral and take part in events such as the cathedral choir's tour to Canada, BBC Radio 3 Broadcasts, and the 2016 Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester. Magnus began singing in the Junior Chorus of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra under Christopher Bell in 2005, moving to the Changed Voices section in 2009, under the guidance of his father, Frikki Walker. In 2007 he became a chorister in the choir of St Mary's Cathedral, in Glasgow, where he has sung as a treble, alto, tenor, and baritone.

With the choir of St Mary's he has not only sung services and concerts, frequently featuring as a soloist in such works as Vaughan Williams' *Five Mystical Songs*, and in Stainer's *Crucifixion*, but has also toured to various English cathedrals, recorded CDs, and appeared on BBC Radio and TV, including solos on BBC Radio 4's 'Morning Worship' and 'Daily Service', and a feature on Jamie MacDougall's 'Classics Unwrapped' on Radio Scotland.

In 2014, he was runner-up in the National Rotary Club of Great Britain and Ireland Young Musician of the Year competition. Also in 2014, Magnus attended his first Eton Choral Course and was immediately selected by Ralph Allwood for the famous Rodolfus Choir, singing with them in the Three Choirs' Festival in Worcester, and on Choral Evensong on BBC Radio 3.

In the 2015 Glasgow Music Festival, Magnus won the Agnes Duncan Trophy for the most outstanding singer in the Festival under the age of eighteen, having won the Art Song, Lieder, Gilbert and Sullivan and Opera classes.

Magnus is looking forward to taking up a scholarship this September at the Royal Academy of Music, London, where he will study with Ben Johnson.

More information and additional hi-res photos available from:

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NOTES TO EDITORS

1. **The Three Choirs Festival** has its origins at the end of the 17th century in visits by the lay clerks of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester to one another's cathedrals for joint services and informal singing. More formal annual 'music meetings' can be traced back to around 1715 and have continued ever since, interrupted only by the two world wars, making this the oldest continuously running classical music festival in the world. The event rotates between the three

cathedral cities on a three-year cycle. The next festival takes place in Gloucester 23 – 30 July 2016 and is the 289th Three Choirs Festival.

2. The **artistic director** of each festival is the director of music of the city's cathedral, currently Geraint Bowen (Hereford); Adrian Partington (Gloucester) and Peter Nardone (Worcester). They work with the chief executive of the Three Choirs Festival Association, an operations director in each city and local voluntary committees to plan and deliver the festival programmes.
3. **The Three Choirs Festival Chorus** is largely drawn from auditioned members of the choral societies of Worcester, Gloucester and Hereford, with the largest contingent each year coming from the host city. Amateur choral singers have been taking part in the festival since the middle of the 19th century to augment the cathedral choirs of boy trebles and adult altos, tenors and basses.
4. The **Philharmonia Orchestra** has been resident at the Three Choirs Festival for the past six years. More information about the residency: http://www.philharmonia.co.uk/concerts/residencies/three_choirs_festival