

William Shepherd - a troubadour

The taxpayers of the *Greater London Council* sent me to *Christ's Hospital*, the Bluecoat school in Horsham Sussex founded in 1553 in the *City of London* by King Edward VI. The school had one of the best school bands in the country and a strong choral tradition. Learning band instruments was free, there were bursaries for piano and violin lessons and choral singing was encouraged with chapel, community and madrigal choirs, many public concerts each year and an annual singing competition between the school's houses. I sang in all the choirs and left school in 1964 with a core competence in piano and organ.

At university I signed up with the *Cambridge Gilbert & Sullivan Society* who performed at the *Cambridge Arts Theatre* for two weeks each spring. In 1966 we did *The Gondoliers* (one solo-line) and in 1967 it was *Ruddigore*.

After Cambridge I barely stretched my vocal chords until I joined *Ryesingers* some 35 years later in 2003 to help me get through the grief and loneliness from the sudden death of my partner of ten years in November 2002.

Ryesingers gives stage performances of a G&S opera each February: *Pirates of Penzance* (2004), *H.M.S. Pinafore* (2005), *Iolanthe* (2006) and later in the year a concert from the classical choral repertoire; *Handel's Messiah*, *Brahms' Requiem*. *Ryesingers* also tours (West Country 2005), accepts concert invitations, sings at weddings & funerals...and sings *The Teddy Bear's Picnic* in *Barber Shop* mode.

In 2005 *Simply Opera*, an ensemble of soloists (sopranos, contraltos, tenors and basses - four of each) invited me to join. They perform with narrator and scores instead of full stage performance.

In 2006 *Winchelsea Singers* were short of tenors...must be something in the waters so I helped out with *Fauré's Requiem* and their Christmas and spring concerts. At year end I took the role of Samuel, the Pirate King's sidekick, in the *Pirates of Penzance* at short notice and performed a solo of *Flanders & Swann* version of *Mozart's Horn Concerto* at their staged *Drop of Yet Another Hat* revue.

Ryesingers meanwhile drafted me in to play the role of Cyril - one of the principals in *G & S's Princess Ida* in February 2007. *Winchelsea Singers* had talent scouts in the audience because I was then pencilled in to play Gabriel Eisenstein in Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus* in November 2007.

At this juncture in my fledgling career as a *Journeyman Tenor*, a group of seriously good principal soloists with *Opera South-East* invited me to join their 16-strong *Icklesham Festival Chorus* to perform at the *Flower Festival* at *Icklesham Parish Church* - with *G&S' Trial by Jury* after the interval (without scores). The concert was so well received that the festival chorus will doubtless be institutionalised - so I'll be back there again next summer.

The strangest part of all this is that I have very little idea how I come over as an actor nor what I sound like as a singer. I have heard no recording, viewed no DVD or video and seen only grainy newspaper renderings of my stage presence. What I know is that I turn up for rehearsals on time, learn my part and don't forget my words or lose my voice on stage. This is local amateur dramatics and singing lessons at £30 per hour seem a little pretentious. But as my parts get bigger my vocal and dramatic abilities may be in need of professional training. I have only just found out that singers learn breathing as well as notes and lyrics.

Complicating it all is the move to Buckfastleigh at Easter when I signed up with *The Ashburton Singers* for a concert in *Buckfast Abbey* in December and put my name down to sing with *The Dartington Community Choir*.

As to what I actually do. Here are 90 *Days in the Life* of a *Journeyman Tenor*. I left Rye for Buckfastleigh on Tuesday (28/8) after an *Opera South-East Group Gilbert & Sullivan Gala Concert* at the *Icklesham Flower Festival* on Sunday (26/8) and will return next Saturday (8/9) for the first rehearsal with *Simply Opera* on Sunday (9/9). I have my own place in the West Country and live at *Rye Yacht Centre* on my 30-foot gaff cutter *Vemara* when on the east coast.

Regular weekly rehearsals with *Ashburton Singers* start on Thursday (6/9) for a concert in *Buckfast Abbey* on 8/12 (*Buxtehude, Pergolesi and Praetorius*). *Dartington Choir* start weekly rehearsals on Monday (17/9) with a performance of the *Bach B Minor Mass* on 20/10 and a concert in St John's Church on 15/12.

Between rehearsals I have to get aboard a *Brittany Ferries* boat from Plymouth to Roscoff for a 3-day conference in Morlaix (14/9 to 18/9) and on a train to *Churchill College* to talk with the *Churchill Archive Centre* on Friday (21/9) and sit at High Table the next day - dinner jacket job. There was a time when I travelled everywhere with my running kit. Now it is my DJ that goes with me.

Meanwhile in Rye on the Sussex channel coast my responsibilities involve: turning up for *Simply Opera* rehearsals for Henry Purcell's *Dido & Aeneas* to be performed at *St Leonard's Church, Hythe* on Sat (1/12); avoid missing too many Wednesday evenings rehearsals with *Ryesingers* who are performing *Fauré's Requiem* and Carl Jenkins' *Hymn of Praise* at *St Mary's Church Rye* on Saturday (13/10); and keeping one rehearsal ahead of the chorus and fellow principals in *Die Fledermaus* by booking private sessions with the choir's accompanist.

How I will manage next year with half my time at *Lund University* completing my *Filosofie Kandidat* is hard to envisage. But I will cope. One always copes.