

M.N

- We had stunning soloists in James Bowman, the wonderful counter tenor, David Wilson Johnson and Philip Slane. They are all world class people and they, in their own way, each one gave to the work their personality. My role was to try to put all these different things together and to see whether to recommend changes or develop ideas or whatever... and of course, to make the work intelligent to a group of performers who have not actually seen it before, or who have not had the benefit of knowing fully what the work is about until we recorded it.
- B.W. Does this mean, Doctor, that you actually chose the soloists yourself?
- M.N. I really recommended the soloists to David Reeves and I think he felt pretty happy. It was his doing to ask Sir David Willcocks to play the organ, which was absolutely wonderful.
- B.W. Would you say that this is a work that would appeal to the elite or in fact, does it have a much broader market? I mean, is this a work with appeal only to the U.K. or does it communicate with the markets in North America and even here, in Australia?
- M.N. Well, I think it's got various things going for it. First of all, the subject is fascinating. The story of Becket is well known. Everybody knows that he was murdered. What isn't quite well known is the way there was obviously a sub-plot going on. Was he brought back from exile in France to be murdered? Was the king ever going to offer the Kiss of Peace? And there is this parallel, I suppose, in which David obviously feels is the way people can sit back to-day and let things go on, a sort of apathy, which is probably true nine hundred years on compared to what it was in the 11th century, but also I think and going back to its actual musical appeal, there is no doubt it will appeal to a broad section. It is not what you might call over here a very much "up market" Radio 3 type of thing. It's more approachable than that, and I think one of the things that the musicians enjoyed about it was - and that David did explore - was that the work abounds with memorable tunes - you know, they're hard to find these days.
- B.W. Well, perhaps that might be the answer to my next question which is what was the artistic reaction to the work by the choir and the orchestra?
- M.N. Well, they actually enjoyed it. First of all, it's very nice to have a composer who knows how to write. The composer was able to get the terror into the parts where it was needed. The dialogue between Becket and Henry was very effectively done - and what I think really registered was the way the drama in the score brought out the best in the singers - particularly David Wilson Johnson. He was able to really give his portrayal of a frustrated king. There was this feeling really of desperation, and I must say that as a work, it's got much more to it than possibly I might have thought earlier because of all these sub-plots and the musical cohesiveness and structure.
- B.W. It will be a feature of the Canterbury Festival in 2000 and I understand will be actually staged on the central steps of Canterbury Cathedral. Will you be conducting and will it be the same world renowned soloists?
- M.N. That's the plan. Yes, and I think there couldn't be a more suitable place, of course. It will be marvellous to do it in that historic spot.

- B.W. Well, Doctor, what is it like working with an Australian composer? Is that a fair question?
- M.N. Well, one thing I can say is that David's writing is just as hard to read as mine is. I think he'd vouch for that. But apart from that, he has a very good sense of humour. Actually, like a true professional, he really knows how to write. I mean, periodically I would ask: "Can we do that, David?" - put the basses up to top A or whatever. He would say that these people are brilliant. "Come off it, we've got to have them able to sing to-morrow morning as well," I would retort. And so we had a good little bit of dialogue and ding dong over one or two things like that, but the basic thing was there was a great deal of mutual respect, which means we got on like a house on fire.
- B.W. This sounds like a work for all choirs - amateur and professional. Do you think both would want to perform it? What are your feelings after conducting the inaugural recording?
- M.N. Well, I think it is very likely that people will want to pick up on one or two of the movements - particularly, there is a lovely one "Canterbury, Holy See" and then there's "Holy Day" and a lovely setting of the Lord's Prayer, and there are various memorable tunes which we all want. There are one or two movements like "Clarendon Sleeps" where the choir has a more difficult part to play, but choirs want to have something they can get their teeth into, and of course, once there is a recording out, it is very much easier because people can, as it were, use that as a basis for their work and learn the score. But I think that the great thing about David's score is the pattern of underlying sense of argument and cohesiveness to it, so that it is going to be manageable by amateur choirs, but they are going to need, shall we say, more of a grasp of the normal technique to cope with it.
- B.W. Well, you are saying that there is universal appeal than just for a select few.
- M.N. Yes. Yes. Years ago I was tied up with the Lloyd Webber "Requiem" and that work was picked up in a way which surprised many and that was more difficult than this.
- B.W. James Bowman is probably the best known counter tenor in the world. His performances are still wonderfully exciting. How long has he been doing this now?
- M.N. Well, he's been around almost as long as I have. I mean, he has been singing as an opera star for the best part of 35 years. He has worked with Benjamin Britten and has sung all over the world. His voice is absolutely extraordinary. He has got this unmistakable radiant quality, and I mean, you know it's James Bowman when you hear him sing. You can't buy that - it's special.

Brendan Walsh was also able to speak with James Bowman.

- J.B. Most of my repertoire is Baroque and Elizabethan. I do from time to time perform contemporary pieces. People have written pieces for me - most notably Benjamin Britten wrote some pieces for me - so I do it. My main repertoire is what we call the "old music" - I certainly do dip my feet into the contemporary waters from time to time. It's not completely unknown to me.
- B.W. No. So that would lead me to asking you how does David Reeves' oratorio BECKET - THE KISS OF PEACE sit within your repertoire?

- J.B. Well, it fits very nicely, really, because David's written a piece which has a lot of echoes of the English - shall we say, the English Cathedral - the English Church tradition. I believe he was a Church organist himself long ago and this comes across quite strongly in his work. It certainly has lovely melodies about it. It's nice music to sing. It certainly fits well - shall we say - it's not avant-garde and way out. It fits very nicely with the sort of music I'm used to. It's really a nice continuation of the tradition that I was brought up on, in fact.
- B.W. So, you're very comfortable with it.
- J.B. Oh yes, yes indeed.
- B.W. James, three days ago on a radio station in Sydney, I played "Canterbury, Holy See" - both the solo and the duet. Now, I think they're really beautiful. Your own performance - especially in the duet with the chorister added, can I say, an extra emotion to the work - certainly for me. How did you feel as you performed it?
- J.B. I remember enjoying it very much. It was a sort of high point in the recording session. I remember we sent all the choir away so they weren't standing there breathing down my neck and we enjoyed recording it because it's a good tune to sing. Everyone likes a good tune to sing and I thought having the boy was very nice. I think he was one of Martin Neary's ex boys from Westminster Abbey Choir, which was a nice touch and everybody likes singing a good tune. I certainly enjoyed recording it very much. I haven't actually heard the finished product yet - you've heard it. You've stolen the march on me. I haven't heard it.
- B.W. Yes, I've heard it and played it! Even played it on air - so - well, it's a coup in Australia because we can say that we actually have an advance copy of a C.D. that's to be released in March or April.
- J.B. Well, that's wonderful. You're very lucky, that's great. But no, I particularly remember thinking that this is a good tune. He's written a good melody. It's like - you know - any composer who writes a fine tune, I'm sure he's very proud of it.
- B.W. I hope you won't mind me saying so, that Martin Neary said exactly the same thing - that David has this facility to write a good tune.
- J.B. That's right, he does. It's very good. I think it's a rare gift. People like Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Parry - they all had the gift of writing a good tune and David certainly has that knack.

Sir David Willcocks, in his recent critique issued in London, wrote: "In BECKET - THE KISS OF PEACE" the gifted Australian composer, David Reeves, has produced a score which, judging by the response of the singers and instrumentalists who recorded it in London, England, will give great pleasure to choral societies and instrumental groups and appeal to audiences.

The musical style is approachable yet fresh, and the darker issues of the story - the conduct of Henry and Becket - are powerfully captured. Henry's solo, 'CLARENDON SLEEPS' (brilliantly sung on the recording by David Wilson-Johnson) is an outstanding example of a contemporary composer speaking in a way which strongly intensifies the drama.

THE KISS OF PEACE is an oratorio which should be staged for full dramatic realisation