



June 2005

## an extract from "In Tune"

### The Quarterly Newsletter from the Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir

#### *The Gymanfa Ganu*

The Gymanfa Ganu an assembly or festival for sacred song has its origins as far back as the historical writings of Giraldus in 1188. Although its present, more liberal, form is perhaps, little more than a hundred years old. Giraldus writes of the special skills and customs of the Cymru, or the Welsh as the English called them. They, the Cymru, that is, excelled in vocal music which they sang in parts, rather than, as was done elsewhere in unison. This skill and custom developed through the ages to be reflected in Gamanfa Ganu.

Perhaps not appreciated today in its modern form, as it was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as quite such an outlet for the expression of deep fervently religious feeling. The Welsh democratic institution was and is, for persons of all rank and position to take part, an outlet for their feelings through the medium they love best, the music of human voices blended in harmony.

The beginnings of Gymanfa Ganu in the early 1800s, in the little chapels and churches dotting the valleys of the Principality were most humble. Once regular services were over, many of the congregation would remain for another hour of song. Unaccompanied by any instrument and directed by a leader, almost certainly without musical training or degrees, who would sound the pitch without even a tuning fork. The congregation without sheet music or written word would then be drilled to a considerable level of expertise, perhaps over several months, until a time or occasion arrived when several congregations would be united under a conductor specially selected and considered qualified, for an outpouring of balanced voices which produced a most memorable occasion. Over time these gatherings came to be held not only in chapels but also at farms for festive and social occasions in rural predominantly agricultural locations. They thus served some of the cultural needs of the nation in a time before industrialization and the coming of film or television. There were of course the big festivals and in more recent times there was the Great Gamanfa Ganu for the Investiture of the present Prince of Wales.

The demands of part-singing could not be met by hymns of simple character intended to be sung in unison. Hymns had, therefore, to be composed or adapted to this more harmonious phase of vocal music. This resulted in some pieces and tunes, which rank among the masterpieces of the world of church music.

This review of The Gymanfa Ganu could no doubt be more erudite but it brings to mind choir similarities, historical references to our origins made in the last 'In Tune' by Neil McCall and efforts that have gone before. However, our chosen Director of Music has problems enough in containing our efforts between pianissimo and forte, despite our good intentions and desires to respond to the nuances of his baton, or at least his hand gestures, causing him to almost touch his toes with outspread fingers to ensure that at times we keep the volume down. Then, had he, the flowing locks of the stereotype musician these would surely wave with abandon as he enjoins us to more expressive renderings.

You might see too, some connection with our Concert 'Afterglows' which provide great pleasure for participants, enliven occasional hostelrys with music not too often heard there, mostly tuneful, if not always sacred. Usually less mundane than rugby club renderings, which as Max Boyce has it of Cwm Rhondda and Delilah 'Damn they sounded both the same'

Anon.