

# Richard Seal

1935 – 2022

**A**long with countless other musicians, I owe an enormous debt to Richard Seal. In 1967, as an eight-year-old, I joined Salisbury Cathedral Choir as a probationer under Christopher Dearnley, later to be a chorister for four years under Richard. He was that sort of ‘teacher’ who had complete command over his charges – in this case, 16 boys who had to be moulded to produce, on a daily basis, a ‘perfect’ Evensong. For Richard, the *Opus Dei* was far more important than recordings or tours – the Daily Office was paramount. That meant right notes, musical phrasing, secure intonation, and ensemble. When things did go wrong (which was very rare), he would be understandably upset, and we felt that. But while that could so easily have created anxiety in small people, it simply instilled in us the desire to do our best.

Richard was an inspirational choir trainer and conductor. As a youngster, I simply regarded him as a musical god whom we were eager to please. With eight services a week, we choristers worked hard. But it never seemed

– who have gone on to stellar careers, the foundations of which were laid by these two Richards. Their approaches were different in style, complementing one another. Shephard composed one glorious tune after another, always with similarly glorious Straussian (Richard, obviously) harmonies; Seal animated them, and brought them to public fruition.

As a (sort of) broken-voiced teenager, I kept in touch with Richard Seal, and he always offered an encouraging word, playing down any thanks that came his way – I remember wondering whether someone like this actually realises the huge impression they make on young minds. Was he aware of the huge gift he had, in instilling discipline, enthusiasm and confidence into small (and, of course, bigger) musicians?

When I rejoined the choir in 1985 as a lay vicar, Richard was at the peak of his musical powers. His conducting style was seemingly effortless. Always clear, never unnecessarily flamboyant, he simply showed you how

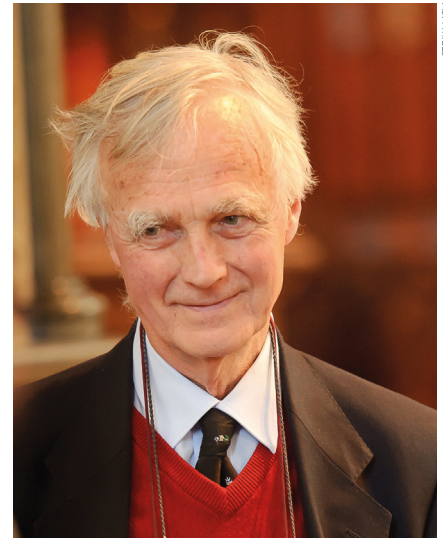
## When the Bowls Club attended Mattins, Richard didn’t conduct the responses; he *bowled* them

like hard work: there was serious graft to be done, but Richard was always entertaining. Rehearsals would be peppered with references to *The Goons*, and the time would pass quickly. Much longer rehearsals in the Chori Hols (those weeks leading up to Easter and Christmas, when school had broken up, and there were the festivals to prepare for) would be interspersed with walks round the cloisters, with Richard telling anecdotes. Small, yet-to-be-cynical boys, hanging on every word. And when a leader has young people eating out of his hand, good things can be achieved.

Combining this experience with that other wonder-musician Richard Shephard, director of music at the school, we were immensely privileged, and I can think of many ex-SCS musicians – male *and* female, for Seal set up the first cathedral Girls’ Choir in 1991

he wanted you to sing the music: a flick of the wrist, or of the elbow, expansive where necessary, or a raised eyebrow, and so often accompanied by an encouraging smile. And because singing in a three-man back row is often challenging on the breathing, you could get away with nothing – he would always have noticed your breaking a phrase in a daft place.

Of course, there was a subversive side. To isolate but one example, from so many... At one stage in the late 80s, the practice of the clergy at Mattins and Evensong was to welcome the congregation at the very start of the service. One Sunday morning we processed in and noticed a large gathering of people of a certain age, very smartly dressed, in uniform, the gents wearing navy blue blazers with an impressive looking badge on the breast pocket. They were duly welcomed.



ASHMUS

‘We extend a warm welcome this morning to all visitors, including today members of the Brighton & Hove Bowls Club.’ Cue the first response, ‘O Lord, open thou our lips’: Richard didn’t conduct the choir response – he *bowled* it. Straight-faced. And the second one. Vintage Seal.

Richard was genial, self-effacing, and a man of truly great musical judgement. In the big pieces, choral or orchestral, for sure, but also in the equally important small-scale creations. And in the daily psalms, perfect. Only a few months before his death, I was conducting at a Chalke Valley funeral for which he was playing. I sent him an arrangement of *Amazing Grace*, outlying which verses were to be solos, accompanied, a cappella, and so on. He phoned me, suggesting, ‘Might it not be better if...? Perhaps could we...?’ In his usual, quiet way, he simply made it immediately better, with the sort of ideas that left this arranger thinking, ‘Yes, of course, why didn’t I think of that?’

I/we will miss Richard. Most recently, it will be from his quiet presence at the back of a St John Singers concert audience. And an encouraging word afterwards. And then an email.

A legend. RIP, Richard, and thank you. ■

Steve Abbott