

Polyphony **Stephen Layton, director**

Polyphony was formed by Stephen Layton in 1986 for a concert in King's College Chapel, Cambridge. Since then the choir has performed and recorded regularly worldwide to great critical acclaim. Recent reviews declare Polyphony as "one of the best small choirs now before the public" (*Telegraph*) and "possibly the best small professional chorus in the world" (*Encore Magazine, USA*). In a poll by Gramophone Magazine they were named as one of the world's leading choirs: "Stephen Layton's choir have become renowned for both their sound and versatility – whether in early music, or contemporary works such as those of Eric Whitacre, they embody the remarkable tradition of British choral excellence at its finest."

For over two decades, Polyphony has given annual sell-out performances of Bach's *St. John Passion* and Handel's *Messiah* at St John's Smith Square. These have become notable events in London's music calendar and have been broadcast regularly by BBC Radio 3 and the EBU. According to the Evening Standard "no one but no one performs Handel's *Messiah* better every year than the choir Polyphony," and the Times rate it "amongst the finest John Passions ... ever heard."

Recent and forthcoming diary highlights for the choir include appearances at the Oslo International Church Music Festival, performing a programme of Palestrina, Esenvalds and Browne; at the new Polish Sacred Music Festival in London "Joy and Devotion," giving no less than seven UK premieres; several appearances at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, as part of their ZaterdagMatinee series, including Faure's *Requiem* with Britten *Sinfonia*; performances of Bach's *St. John Passion*, with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, at

the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, and the Theater an der Wien, Vienna; a performance of Mozart's *Requiem*, with the City of London Sinfonia, at the BBC Proms; Belfast Festival as part of their 50 year celebrations; Snape Maltings, Aldeburgh, to mark the start of their Britten celebrations; and the Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester with the Philharmonia Orchestra. Further notable performances have included regular festival appearances, including dates at the Aldeburgh and Cheltenham Festivals, and at the RTE Living Music Festival in Dublin; and numerous première performances including works by John Tavener, Arvo Pärt, Karl Jenkins, Eric Whitacre and Pawel Łukaszewski. Performances abroad include concerts in Holland, Norway, Austria, France, Spain, Brazil, Denmark and Hungary.

Autumn 2018 saw a new departure for Polyphony when they performed a newly commissioned *Requiem*, as part of an innovative and immersive theatrical work – *Now the Hero* – at the Swansea Festival. Collaboratively written by the late film composer Jóhann Jóhannsson, and Owen Morgan Roberts, the piece was performed in tribute to Jóhannsson and was warmly received by the press and audiences alike.

Polyphony are broadcast widely and recent highlights include performances of works by Poulenc, Rautavaara, Tormis, Britten and Grainger for BBC Radio 3, works by Arvo Pärt for RTE, and an EBU broadcast of Bach's Christmas Oratorio.

Polyphony's extensive discography on the Hyperion label encompasses works by Britten, Bruckner, Cornelius, Grainger, Grieg, Jackson, Lauridsen, Łukaszewski, MacMillan, Pärt, Poulenc, Rutter, Tavener, Walton, and Whitacre. The disc of Britten, *Sacred and Profane*, won a Gramophone Award and a Diapason d'Or in 2001, and the choir's première recording of works by Arvo Pärt, *Triodion*, was Best of Category (Choral) at the 2004 Gramophone Awards. Polyphony also received Gramophone Award nominations in 2002 for their Walton

compilation, and in 2008 for Poulenc's *Gloria*, described by Gramophone Magazine as "a performance of real distinction ... simply incredible."

In the USA, Polyphony's recordings have twice been nominated for Grammy Awards: in 2006 for *Lux aeterna*, a disc of works by Morten Lauridsen, and in 2007 for a disc of works by Eric Whitacre, *Cloudburst*. This "staggering disc" (*BBC Radio 3*) spent more than fifty weeks in the Billboard Classical Album Chart and has been hailed by the Times as "extraordinarily beautiful," by CNN as "outstanding," and by Classic FM Magazine as "unmissable".

Polyphony's recording of Handel's *Messiah*, recorded live during the 2008 performances at St John's Smith Square, was named Editor's Choice as well as one of the 50 best recordings of the year by Gramophone Magazine. Classic FM Magazine concludes "there are few finer exponents of this great oratorio than Polyphony and Stephen Layton ... if you only listen to one Messiah this Christmas, Stephen Layton and Polyphony's live recording should be it."

Polyphony's recent releases, on the Hyperion label, include Eriks Esenvalds' *Passion and Resurrection*, which was recorded with Carolyn Sampson and the Britten Sinfonia, and was described by International Record Review as "utterly gorgeous" and "totally absorbing;" a disc of American repertoire, which BBC Music Magazine described as "Incandescent choral glory – Polyphony is revelatory in American repertoire ...;" and a new disc of works by Arvo Pärt, which was Editor's Choice in Gramophone Magazine. For Decca, a new collaboration with Sir Karl Jenkins has seen two highly acclaimed releases: a glorious collection of Motets, which reached Number 1 in the Classic FM chart, and Jenkins' new *Miserere*, recorded with Britten Sinfonia and Iestyn Davies.

Polyphony has also recently recorded the Bach *St. John Passion* with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and soloists including Carolyn Sampson, Ian Bostridge and Iestyn Davies. BBC Music Magazine comments “This new recording’s credentials border on the unassailable ...” whilst Katherine Cooper, of Presto classical, states “It’s remarkable simply because it’s practically perfect in every way.”

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