

Perfect HARMONY

KAREN JENSEN-JONES meets Aidan Oliver, musical director at Westminster and choir master of Dulwich Coral Society

Walk along Half Moon Lane on a Monday evening and you will hear the stirring sounds of Dulwich Choral Society rehearsing for their Easter concert – the spectacular epic Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.

At the helm of the choir, founded in 1944, is Aidan Oliver, musical director of St Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey – the Parliamentary Church – and founder of Philharmonia Voices. Lucky for Dulwich then that one of the most sought-after choral directors of his generation moved here in 2004 and took up the post of choir master.

"We moved to Dulwich when my wife was expecting our first child because we thought it would be a lovely place to bring up children," says Aidan. "About 18 months later I saw an advertisement for someone to direct the Dulwich Choral Society. It was perfect timing and now it's wonderful for me to have a choir on my doorstep and to feel that I am part of it in the local community."

Aidan's church job at Westminster has regular commitments and occupies half of his working week with regular Sunday services, rehearsals with choristers and planning big parliamentary events including memorial services for politicians and weddings for MPs.

"Possibly the most interesting work we do is putting together memorial services for Peers because you meet the families and try to tailor a service that really reflects the life and work of that person," Aidan explains.

The rest of Aidan's time is taken up with various musical projects including the field of opera as a conductor and répétiteur,

working regularly with the music staff at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. He is also the founding chorus master of Philharmonia Voices, a professional chorus which collaborates regularly with the Philharmonia Orchestra.

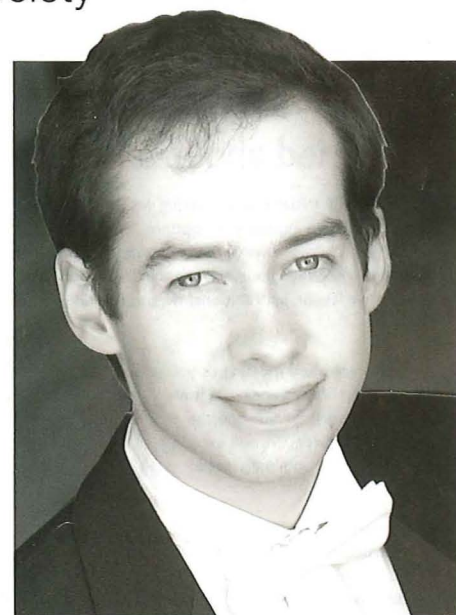
"I am delighted that the Philharmonia Voices are beginning to strike out on their own," reflects Aidan. "We will be doing more independent concerts and festivals in the future and last year the chorus made its Proms debut and sang at Buckingham Palace for Prince Charles 60th birthday – that was great fun!"

So how does Dulwich Choral Society compare with the exciting world of the professionals?

"It's not as different as you think," says Aidan. "I try and achieve an exacting standard with whichever group I work with and the techniques are the same. Professionals and amateurs should be similarly motivated, but obviously professionals bring additional skills. What amateur choirs do bring to music-making is that they are doing it for enjoyment and the love of it and that gets you a long way.

"Great works of music must be at the heart of what an amateur choir does because they are the best pieces, so once a year we tackle one of the top 10 pieces like Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Creation*. Dulwich Choral Society is amazingly good at managing those and I think it's to do with the area. Many professional musicians live around here and the schools are musically minded too.

"Dulwich attracts creative talent so we can take on the challenge of some difficult scores that a lot of other choirs would balk



at – which makes it very exciting for me."

And Aidan's latest challenge will be keeping him busy until spring. "Dulwich Choral Society are celebrating the bicentenary of Mendelssohn at Easter with a performance of *Elijah* at St Barnabus Church which is a perfect venue – light and airy with great acoustics as well as being visually amazing," muses Aidan. "Mendelssohn has always been a big passion of mine and I think *Elijah* is the most exciting piece of choral music there is, with one sensational chorus after another. I'm hoping it's going to show people what a great piece of music it is and what a wonderful choir we are."

Who needs Covent Garden when you live in Dulwich? ●

See Mendelssohn's *Elijah* on 28 March at St Barnabus Church, Calton Avenue SE21 7DG. Tickets available from The Art Stationers, 31 Dulwich Village SE21 7BN or call 020 7274 2349