

Still the Night

As part of the 2020 Zoom Christmas Party for the Mackintosh Choir, I was nominated on behalf of the Bass/Baritones to pick a song and to 'present it', giving reasons for choosing it and to provide a *YouTube* link.

I chose *Still the Night*; more of this later.

This experience prompted me to write down these reminiscences which I hope might strike a chord with some of my readers, pun intended.

I think the first time I sang *Still the Night* was as a wee boy of about four, at *Greenview Gospel Hall* in Pollokshaws. At this period, we lived in a 'single end' in very poor circumstances.

(Try my parallel stories **Mario Lanza**, **American Cream Soda** and **The Go Between**, also available on this website).

On Sundays around 2.30 pm I would be collected by my older cousins and as part of a straggling family group we attended afternoon Sunday School where we sang many simple Christian songs including *Still the Night*, always a favourite on the run up to Christmas.

Neither of my parents were churchgoers. I realise now it was an opportunity for them to enjoy time together, enjoy what they called 'peace and quiet'. Perhaps they locked the door, pulled down the blind and hopped into bed? On my return around 4.30 pm there was always a lighter, cheerier atmosphere with the radio playing songs and dance tunes. My father would be crooning along in the style of Bing Crosby, Perry Como or Dean Martin. Dad had a pleasant light baritone voice, a good ear for a melody and the diligence to learn all the words.

Later, when we moved to Arden (try **Brook** on this website) I was encouraged by my parents to join The Life Boys at Carnwadric Church of Scotland which, at that time, was a thriving family church with about fifty ragamuffins like me ranging from 9 to 11 years, many of us later 'inducted' into The Boys' Brigade when we moved to secondary school.

(Did I ever say anywhere in my writings that I was born in Carnwadric, at number 27 Drumpark Street, in Granny Bonthron's bed? This was in June 1947 when the NHS was just starting up. I was one of the last of around a hundred babies Granny Bonthron delivered as an informal, untrained midwife.

Shortly after I was born, or so I have been told, Dr David Granit attended and approved my delivery. David Granit was a very a fine Jewish man who lived into his nineties. I saw him once at an RNSO concert a few years before he died and he looked more or less unchanged from the days when he was the Bremners' family doctor visiting his Gorbals surgery. He also had a posher surgery in Giffnock which I once attended when we lived in Arden. He recognised me at once, saying, "Well, Johnny Bonthron, my how you've grown up. How is your mother?'

I read his obituary in the *Glasgow Herald* and was not surprised to learn this quiet, polite and softly spoken man was loved and revered by all who knew him.)

Back to singing.

In parallel with my Carnwadric Church attendance, aged 9 to 13, I was also walking two miles each way from Arden to Thornliebank to attend the Sunday School cum Bible Study Class at Thorntree Gospel Hall, a sister church to Greenview Hall back in Pollokshaws. This also meant enthusiastic hymn singing, to a rather plinky-plonky piano, I recall. There was a pedal operated harmonium too, I think.

In my final year in Life Boys, I was the lead singer in a concert party type show where we boys were dressed up as old-fashioned couples and swanned about a small stage singing 'Lambeth Walk'. Fortunately for me, I was designated as a 'man' so did not get ribbed for wearing a dress! We also sang a version of 'Little White Bull' in a Cockney accent in the style of Tommy Steele.

Looping back to that earlier time when we still lived in Pollokshaws:

Aged five, I began my star-studded career as a boy soprano in the unlikely setting of Graham's Licensed Grocers. In my memory this was a dimly lit shop located at the corner of Govanhill Street and Cathcart Road, a building long gone under redevelopment. Visiting Granny Bremner with my Mum, I remember myself as an 'eager to please' wee boy sent out on serial errands, "doing messages" while the adults gossiped. The phrase 'wee dug's have big lugs' was used!

At Graham's, my mission was to exchange Granny's empty soda water syphon for a refill.

(For the record I must stress that Granny Bremner, my mother and her sisters were avidly teetotal, a laudable gene that skipped past me, I am afraid.)

I can still visualise my audience in Graham's: three balding men with dyed black hair, standing behind a polished counter, dressed in starched white shirts with elasticated sleeve holders and ornate cufflinks, black bow ties and high-waisted black and white striped aprons. There was sawdust on the floor and a sharp smell which I realise now must have been alcohol.

Before I sang my repertoire of Sunday School songs, I had to wait in the queue with a small gathering of ladies wearing long fur coats and fancy hats. These women were at Graham's to have their sherry bottles re-filled from wooden vats. These bottles, wiped dry, corked and wrapped in tissue paper were then wedged upright with old newspapers into shopping bags of shiny leather, posher versions of the battered older one I was carrying.

I realise now that I was being 'set up' but at the time I was pleased to be placed centre stage and always received my reward of a yellow thruppenny bit from the shop's till and occasionally a silver sixpence from a kind lady's purse. I cannot be certain sure but I think I would probably have sung a version of *Still the Night* on the run up to Christmas.

My more recent memory of singing *Still the Night* comes from around ten years ago when I attended a class at Strathclyde University's Centre for Lifelong Learning, my return to singing after a gap of more than fifty years.

This ten-week singing course was the first time "Health and Wellbeing through Song" was offered as a pilot, under the auspices of Cappella Nova. Our tutor was Edward Casswell, a red-haired Viking of a man, towering above us at six foot eight inches tall. Edward is an amazing man and full of droll, pithy stories. Hilarious!

He introduced us to 'echo singing', everything sung without music. Edward sang to us and we sang back to him in unison, a mixed choir of thirty-odd voices. Terrific fun!

Towards the end of the course, from about week seven, Edward moved us up a gear to sing in separate groups, mainly rounds.

The Men's section comprised four men and one deep lady. The Ladies' section comprised around thirty or so Sopranos and Altos, many already performing in proper choirs. These ladies could sing!

In week nine we rehearsed the songs we planned to sing to ourselves at week ten, a final 'concert' of sorts.

After our coffee break, Edward introduced us to a harmony version of *Still the Night*, rehearsing each section in turn, still echo singing, without music.

In exasperation, he moved the Men's section to the front of the choir. However, try as we might, we just could **not** sing our low harmony part against the melody of our Ladies', always 'migrating onto their notes.

As the time ebbed away, he tried repeatedly, singing our notes to us, glowering and, or so it seemed, looking directly at me.

Sadly, 'The Five Men' were simply not good enough.

A large, grimacing face leaned in close to mine and hissed:

"Although your starting note is **quite a nice note**, it just happens to be **the wrong note!**"

Under my breath I muttered to myself: "*But I did my best, honest Guv!*"

Time up and we made our escape.

On week ten there was no further mention of a harmony version of *Still the Night* and our class concert was sung entirely in unison, or so I am told. I was absent but had a valid excuse. I was in Bologna, on an Italian language immersion course. (Try **Travels of a Donkey**, also on this website.)

Now for the song I chose for the Mackintosh Choir party Night:

"*Stille Nacht*" sung for us in the original German by the Vienna Boys' Choir:

<https://youtu.be/vKvKMgR8H7k>

