



The year is 1957....

A group of Yorkshiremen leave Huddersfield. It's a Saturday morning. It's April 20th. The year is 1957. The men are the men of the Colne Valley Male Voice Choir; amongst them a young chap by the name of **Keith Swallow**.



They are heading for **Ringway Airport** to catch a flight out.

Flying is still uncommon. For most of the Choir it's their first time on a plane. The airport, just outside Manchester, has only just been finally released by the RAF for exclusive civilian use.



Two planes are needed for the flight to Düsseldorf. One of them is a **Vickers Viscount**. (The one pictured is the actual one that crashed into a house in Wythenshawe, only the previous month.) The other is a '**Pionair**' - a Dakota DC3 variant. Each arrives safely and without incident.



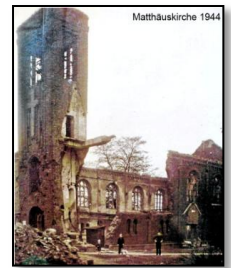
Once on the ground, they are met at the airport by recording engineers of the **British Forces Network**. They want to document this famous choir's visit for later broadcast.

It will be a radio feature item for the thousands of British soldiers stationed in West Germany. It's newsworthy when there's a, still uncommon, cultural exchange between two countries, who only a few years before had been in bitter conflict.

Many of the Choir members, of course, had been part of the war effort. The military focus, now though, is no longer on the battles of World War II but on the 'Cold War' threat from communist East Germany and the Soviet-Russian dominated states of Eastern Europe.

The choir is en-route to **Essen**. All through the Ruhr the signs of war damage remain visible - come to that, there's still plenty of war damage in Britain - but the mood in both countries is of economic growth and regeneration.

Indeed, so upbeat is the national mood that later that year Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, can claim - to much sceptical laughter: 'You've never had it so good!'



Reconciliation and cultural contact is in the air. Music is the common factor in this case - one that led to contacts with (and the invitation from) Essen's **Schubertbund Mannerchor**.

The Choir's trip, even though the members are being put up by the hosts, is expensive for what is just a long Easter weekend. The Choir has been busy fundraising and has had to find about £1,200 - enough to buy a very pleasant terraced house at 1957 prices. A working man's weekly wage packet is about Twelve Pounds, One and Sixpence and a woman's just Six Pounds Six Shillings (£12.08 and £6.30 respectively.)



The young **Keith Swallow** has joined the Choir just for this trip, taken on as the tour accompanist and solo pianist.

The following day, Easter Sunday April 21st, the Choir give their first performance - it's also the first recorded CVMVC concert performance by Keith at the keyboard - in the **Matthäuskirche** in the Essen suburb of Borbeck.

It's a new church, only recently opened. The previous building had been destroyed by fire in the war.



The following morning, Easter Monday, the Choir performs again in the temporary 'Saalbau' a civic centre undergoing reconstruction. It's a huge success.



Keith plays a solo spot to great acclaim, including two pieces by **Granados**. These were the first documented pieces he performed. (Hear him play Granados on youtube - click on the TV.) <https://youtu.be/tmCZbBgZTNI>

Both Keith and conductor, **George Stead**, are presented with bouquets. It seems that - as men - they both show some embarrassment at being given flowers but handle it with aplomb.



These were Keith's first engagements with the Choir (discounting a 'Rehearsal Concert' at the , now defunct, Zion Chapel, on Olney Street, Slaithwaite on March 13th). He was offered the position of accompanist during the Essen trip and asked for a week to think it over. Fortunately he accepted. That was 60 years ago. He's still here. He's still brilliant and, without any word of exaggeration, that's a fantastic achievement.



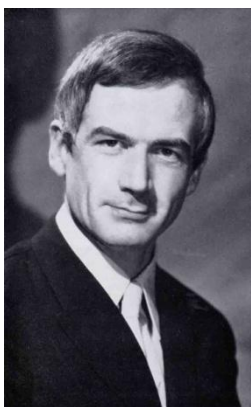
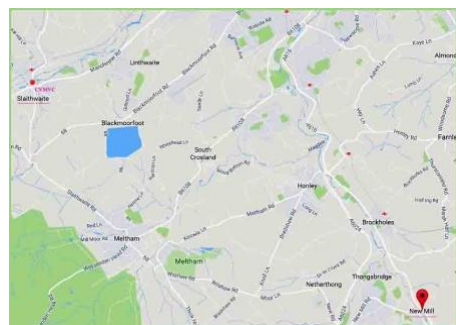
Voice of the Valley meets Keith Swallow

"It's no achievement really. Time just passes. I don't want any fuss made about being with the Colne Valley Male Voice Choir for 60 years. It's such a long time. I've forgotten most of what happened all those years ago and to be honest - I'm 86 now - so many of the people I worked with are long gone." It was with such typical self-effacement that Keith Swallow began his interview with Voice of the Valley. The Editor thinks readers will see it another way - as a tremendous and rare accomplishment.

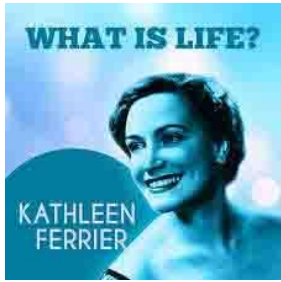
Keith certainly remembers the **Essen Tour** – his first tour with the Choir and the start of his long association. **George Stead** was the conductor. Keith recalls that George felt the German pianos weren't right and asked Keith to try transposing but that didn't work either. It turned out that continental tuning is just a bit different to English and it grated with George Stead, who had perfect pitch. 'It's in the cracks' - between the notes - said George but he soon adjusted and led the Choir perfectly. Keith, who claims not to have perfect pitch, hardly noticed and played his solo spots quite happily "I was offered the accompanist's job on that trip and I've been here ever since.

I'd known about CVMVC for years before I joined. They had a terrific reputation and did concerts with guest artists of international repute, so I went to many of their performances.

I'm as local as they come. I've lived in the house my grandfather built in New Mill for donkeys' years and that was only 100 yards or so away from my parents' home where I was born in 1931. My dad worked in the offices at Hepworth Pipes and I went to school nearby, at what is now Honley High School. I did have a few lessons when I was seven or eight, which I hated. So I'm mostly self-taught. Playing the piano was hard work. I just desperately loved music.



Just like the Choir I got involved with the **Mrs Sunderland Music Festival** and have had links with it for decades. I seem to recall I won the '**Rose Bowl**' one year as a teenager. Then came the Royal Manchester School of Music and my degree at the Royal College. There was 'National Service' in those days, which I had deferred, so after college, I found myself in the Army for two years, based at Catterick. So, at 26, when I started with Colne Valley my professional career was just getting under way. It worked out very well. I never felt much need to move away. Other musicians said, I should have a 'pied a terre' in London but it seemed to work without. I'd had a car since I was 17 so travelling the country from my Yorkshire base suited me - and it kept me in touch with the Choir.



I think it was at a Colne Valley MVC concert that I saw **Kathleen Ferrier**. She was a biggest star then and she had such stage presence. I was awe-struck. I was about 15."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7h_LuVVoyg

(Editor's note:- many of the names here have links to sound and video files. Click on the names or the pictures to hear the recordings, linked to Keith's biography. They are well worth it!)

"Later I worked on many occasions with another wonderful contralto, **Constance Shacklock** OBE, who later sang in the original staging of 'The Sound of Music'.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWw91W3krAg&list=RDnWw91W3krAg&index=1>



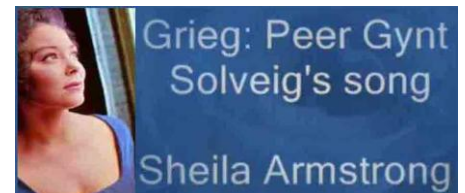
And it definitely was at a CVMVC concert that I came across **Owen Brannigan**, the bass recitalist. We struck up an association that lasted on and off for twenty years or so. He was very popular and we went on tour all over the country. He was a 'Geordie' and would always finish his concerts with Geordie folk-songs. But when we performed together, he didn't do, 'Cushy Butterfield'. He said it was 'vulgar - only suitable for football matches. I gained from having a Yorkshire base then. Many of his concerts were in the North-east. It was a lot easier getting to Newcastle from New Mill than it would have been from London.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTmvjioGgYw>



I can recall, though, one day getting a call from London. 'What are you up to, Keith? Put your 'tails' in the boot and drive down here. We want you to play at **The Albert Hall** tonight.'

This was for one of **Sir Malcolm Sargent's** Christmas season concerts, accompanying star soprano, **Sheila Armstrong**." (Here she is, singing 'Solveig's Song from Peer Gynt'.)



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvt49yzaDGO>



"Then another time I was asked could I play for a young singer who had recently arrived in the UK. 'You'll like her, they said,' She's a Maori princess.'

Well I did like her. She was fabulous. She's still well-known today - as **Dame Kiri Te Kanawa**.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOA4PGzP1xA>



And wherever I went on tour in England and abroad, in recording studios and broadcasting it seemed to work out that I could mostly get back on Monday evenings for rehearsal with the Choir. I had a good career as a classical pianist and I worked in partnership with many fine musicians, Ian Wallace, **oboist Léon Goosens**, clarinettist, Jane Hilton and many more.... but I could nearly always pencil in Colne Valley concerts in my work schedule. I've been very lucky."

(Here's a clip of Keith accompanying opera singers, **Paul & John Hudson**, in the duet from, 'The Pearl Fishers')

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJunQIRjsgc>

"Especially now, when I'm semi-retired, the Colne Valley links are important. People have been very kind. And since I broke my fingers the other week, even more so! I'm pleased to say I'm on the mend now and the cast is off. I can drive again. I've been driving for about 70 years - so it was a great blow not being mobile - there are no buses round here now, and had it not been for CVMVC people, I would have been even more inconvenienced by the accident. I'm looking forward to getting back to playing for the Choir and so pleased to be a 'free-agent' again.



Of my more recent memories of the Choir, I was very pleased by our victories in Cornwall, being judged, '**Best Choir in the UK**'.

In the old days we used music. Now we work without copies. Most of the time that works very well but it means we can't tackle longer works and sometimes that feels to me like a downside. But mostly, it's the direct guidance from our conductor that makes the performance. We are very lucky to have **Thom** at the helm. I was here, of course, when he arrived and it's still a great pleasure to work with him."

A piece for Keith



Voice of the Valley Editor, John Clark, mentioned to Keith that he had dug out a clip suitable for a 60th anniversary. It was **Victor Borge** playing a piece, which turns comically into 'Happy Birthday to You' - which isn't quite right but close enough to mark an anniversary. "I saw Victor Borge once," said Keith. "He was very funny. But I noticed that every gesture, every word and note, was precisely calculated and rehearsed.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qf2NngwzBYw>

I liked **Les Dawson** playing the piano more. He always gave you the impression that awful piano playing came naturally to him. I practice like Les Dawson all the time."

So VotV is happy to add a Les Dawson clip too. Enjoy!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMOsWxh5mg>



Peter Denby writes.....

Peter Denby, seen here helping Keith mark a mere 50 years as our piano player, back in 2007, sends the following comments.



“On behalf of all members past and present of our illustrious choir I am happy to convey, most sincerely, our congratulations to Keith on reaching this remarkable milestone – 60 not out!

I find it difficult to believe that 10 years have passed since this photograph was taken. The occasion was Keith’s 50th anniversary as Choir accompanist. The venue was Berties Banqueting Rooms, Elland, and a more memorable occasion could not be imagined. As was to be expected, Keith was persuaded to entertain his guests - or was it a case of ‘paying for his supper.’

Much has been said of Keith’s outstanding performances over the years, but no one who attended the 2015 Cornish International Music Festival will forget his incredible accompaniment of Antiphon from the Vaughan Williams 5 Mystical Songs which received special praise from the Adjudicators.

Keith’s repertoire knows no bounds and maybe nothing better shows the range than his

accompaniment of our very own **Raymond Ellis** singing T.C. Sterndale-Bennet’s Song Cycle, ‘**Mary Had a Little Lamb.**’ Hilarious it may be but Keith insists it really is most ‘tricky’.

Thanks, Keith, for 60 glorious years accompanying the Colne Valley Male Voice Choir. Many of our lives have been enriched by listening to your music and knowing you were always there to rescue us when needed.

Peter Denby
Vice President and Chairman



Keith Swallow - dances

*VotV has been unable to track how many dozens of LP's (long-playing records) and CD's Keith has produced over the years. His latest '**Dances for Piano**' comes with Keith's own sleeve notes, which are both charming and perceptive - and give a little further insight into Keith's personality.*

Keith writes: “Two groups of exciting Spanish music and two enticingly scary piano transcriptions have persuaded me to put together another package of pretty piano pieces, recorded last summer.

Joaquin Turina, who was a prolific composer of colourful music, has never been as well known as his contemporaries - Granados, Albeniz and Manuel de Falla. His 'Gipsy Dances' are very focused and every bar smells of Andalusia. 'Zambra' is a dance of Moorish influence and 'Generalife' has the glimpses of the water features in the gardens of that place in Granada.

Federico Mompou (1893 to 1987 born Barcelona) was a pianist who wrote many short exquisite pieces depicting Catalan life and scenery. All the songs and dances are based on the popular music of his part of the world and 'Dance No. 3' is a Sardana which I witnessed once on holiday in Collioure, a beautiful little French town close to Spain.

Brahms wrote the arrangement of the 'Gluck Gavotte' for his 'good friend' Clara Schumann. He made it seem that a third hand would be useful. He was right!

Alfred Cortot, the great Swiss pianist, transformed the 'Kitty Valse' from the duet suite 'Dolly' into a solo piece. I swear no notes are missing! I was lucky enough to attend a Chopin recital given by Cortot in Lugano when I was 17. Afterwards, I wondered seriously about my choice of career.

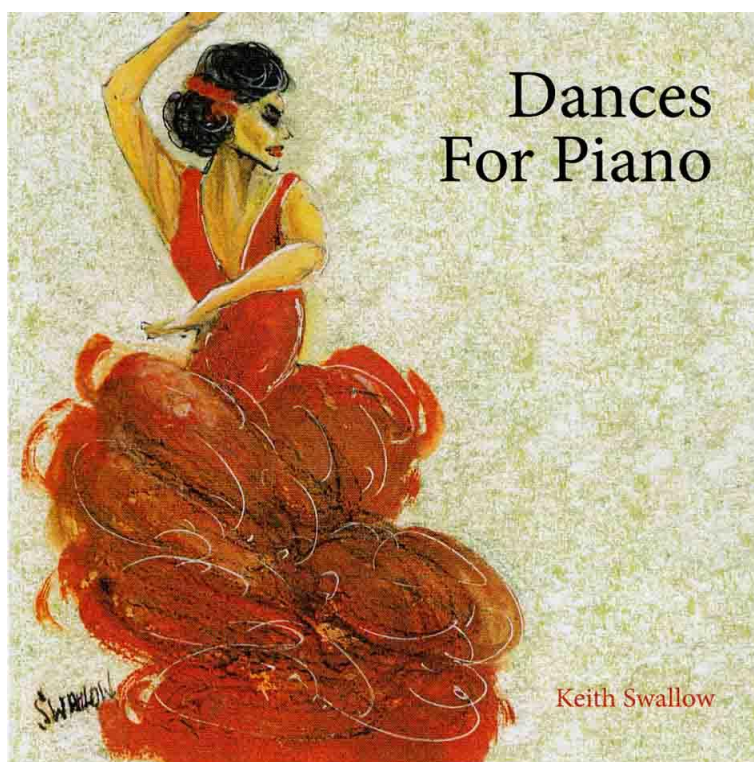
Six like minded young French composers in the early 1900's ('Les Six' - Others included Honegger and Auric), each writing a short piano piece, put together a small 'Album des Six'. Poulenc's wonderfully silly 'Valse' wins hands down.

I had to include a little arrangement of the 'Five o'clock Foxtrot' from Ravel's opera 'l'infant et les Sortileges' when the teacups have a little 'The Dansant'.

I fill up the package with music by my beloved Grieg and Schubert and begin with an abandoned 'Zapateado' which is the last of 6 pieces based on folk music.

The clever young **Jack Boyle**, who recorded this, is already on his way to having a brilliant career. And thanks, again, for the use of St. Paul's Hall in Huddersfield University." The paintings, by the way were done by my brother.

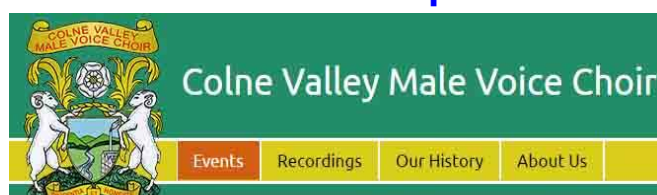
It's a terrific CD, says VotV. Listen to an excerpt here and then get a copy from Ken Parkinson.



Click here for a sample:

<https://youtu.be/tmCZbBgZTNl>

For the full picture of what the Choir is up to - see our website pages



<http://colnevalleymvc.org.uk/events/>