

## Women and the making of music

What role did women play in the early years of the choir?

Certainly, there was no distinction made in the requirements of membership. The adopted rules of the Society stated that each applicant for membership was to be approved by the Committee so that the Society was to consist “solely of persons capable of taking part in the performance”. While in the first few months this did not include women, the need for female voices quickly became apparent. First, there was the question of soloists, and soprano and alto parts were invariably taken by women. Second, although boy trebles were recruited in large numbers, they were led by a core of female singers.

At the Society’s first public concert in April 1847, where Handel’s *Messiah* was performed, a group of fifteen female sopranos, led by Miss D’Ernst “of the Royal Academy and Nobility’s Concerts”, provided the treble line. They were supported by thirty-eight boy trebles “with pipes as clear as a vesper bell”. Only Miss D’Ernst was from outside the city, and she had been engaged to lead the line with a voice that was praised as “equable, powerful and expressive”. Inevitably, Thomas Latimer, the correspondent of *The Western Times*, strayed from reporting on the musical performance and remarked that “the ladies added a charm to the eye as well as ear”, with “beauty and harmony a brilliant combination”. Warming to his task, he declared: “Nature hath dealt kindly with the fair maidens of Devon in every degree; and thou would’st have said that never did they look better than when adding their silver sweet voices to the glorious burst of harmony, which made the old banners, pendant from the ceiling, oscillate with joy.”

Within a year, women were being admitted to membership, not for decorative purposes but because their skills were needed. At first, this was most obviously as soloists and to bolster the upper voices. At this point, the orchestral players were overwhelmingly male. However, by the end of the century, women constituted around one-third of the fifty or more musicians in “the band”.