

Lost in the mists of time ...

How did NEEMF actually start? The older I get the less I can remember, but I do have quite a vivid memory of a meeting that I organised one Saturday afternoon in March 1982 in the appropriate surroundings of the timber-framed medieval Maclagan Hall of St William's College, in the shadow of York Minster. The idea was to see whether there was sufficient interest in the North East for a society that would support the work of York Early Music Festival, bring audiences to the regular season of concerts promoted in York as part of the Arts Council-funded (oh, happy days ...!) Early Music Network, and come to workshops to learn more about the repertory and performance style.

I had invited some charismatic figures within the 'early music movement' – yes, we were that fervent – to speak: Jennifer Eastwood, who ran the Network, Joan Wess, who chaired the recently formed North West early Music Forum, and Anthony Rooley, lutenist-director of the Consort of Musicke, one of the founding artistic advisers of York Early Music Festival. 1982 was some four years after the first York Early Music Festival, and as the York Evening Press said at the time, 'the only surprising thing about the formation of NEEMF ... is that it should have taken so long.' More recent members of NEEMF may not know that in the early days, the Festival saw itself very much as having an educational thrust. In the first years we ran residential courses alongside the concerts, with artists such as Emma Kirkby, Andrew Parrott and Jordi Savall teaching as well as performing. In the very first YEMF the course was held at St. John's College, York, so in many ways the recent HISS was a completion of that particular circle. To some extent NEEMF was seen as taking on this educational thrust, allowing the Festival to concentrate on concert promotion. And of course NEEMF would run throughout the year rather than enjoying a burst of activity just in July.

At the end of that initial meeting in 1982 a group of enthusiasts volunteered to set up NEEMF, basing its constitution on that already formulated by NWEMF and trying to find representatives from across the region, from Sheffield to Newcastle and Huddersfield to Hull. I'm afraid I don't remember who was in that initial group, though when I chaired it in the early days the more active members included Jerome Roche from Durham University, David Hansell and Roz James, and the membership secretary was John Smurthwaite. The first AGM was held in October 1982 at the Clothworkers' Hall in Leeds, when various groups from around the region gave impromptu performances of medieval and renaissance music.

Later in that first year NEEMF activities included a workshop on the music of Dufay and Josquin led by Peter Syrus and myself (both members of the Landini Consort), a session on baroque string playing hosted by Hull University, and a residential weekend course on English song from Dowland to Purcell taught by Emma Kirkby and Tony Rooley. As well as workshops, NEEMF aimed from the start to act as a conduit for information about early music events in the region, and the newsletter became an important means of disseminating information about what was going on in the days before the internet and websites, let alone tweeting. The membership list also provided a vital 'who's who' that enabled like-minded early musicians to set up their own informal playing sessions.

So NEEMF is 30 years old this year, and continues to fulfil many of its original intentions. I have followed the recent discussion about 'standards of performance' at NEEMF workshops with interest, and do wonder whether to some extent the original desire to explore unfamiliar repertory and experiment with styles of performance practice has been overtaken by an important but perhaps secondary 'social' function. It could be argued that 'early music' is now mainstream and that the evangelical zeal of the 1980s is no longer appropriate, but we should not allow NEEMF to become complacent. And if we want to attract the next generation of performers to our activities, we owe it to them to be on the lookout for recent trends in historically-researched performance and newly-edited repertory, rather than relying on the tried, tested, and perhaps tired things we know we already know.

Here's to the next 30 years!

John Bryan