

Song Cycle: vive la vélorution

An introduction by the composer, Alexander L'Estrange

As a keen cyclist and lover of the outdoors, I was delighted when the York-based Chapter House Choir, (as a joint venture with York Minster) commissioned me to compose a choral work to mark the *Grand Départ* of the Tour de France 2014.

It gave me the perfect excuse to spend a few days in Yorkshire – a stunning county in which I have enjoyed many happy holidays – and to cycle some of the route as a way of gaining inspiration. That experience reinforced my desire to create an uplifting, light-hearted and entertaining piece which would reflect both the enormous appeal of this most popular and energy-efficient mode of transport and also the beauty of our natural surroundings.

Having decided on the format of a song cycle I set about gathering texts, each reflecting a different aspect of cycling – from the often-amusing initial objections in the late nineteenth century (*Fine and dandy*) and the unexpected role it played in the emancipation of women (*A woman wearing bloomers on a wheel*) to the glorious sensation of cycling through the countryside (*My wheel and I/The men who ride for fun*) and the benefits to body and mind (*Freewheeling*).

For two numbers I've given my own take on pre-existing songs: *Daisy*, *Daisy* was a must because it fits the theme of the piece so perfectly; *A true love of mine*, which features new lyrics to the tune of *Scarborough Fair*, seemed an apt way to include some of Yorkshire's musical heritage. To enhance the comedy value of the piece I included my setting of an amusing Victorian rhyming poem entitled *Buying a cycle*. The work is framed by two versions of *Cycle-babble* in which the singers first describe the bicycle's inauspicious beginnings and later (*Cycle-babble 2.0*) its ascension to international popularity, thanks in part to the Tour de France.

In my settings of these poems, old and new, four of which are by my wife Joanna L'Estrange, I've allowed myself the luxury of composing a work that encompasses an unusual combination of different musical styles: pastiche Victorian music hall and Gilbert & Sullivan, folk, minimalism, barbershop, musical theatre and, of course, jazz.

As with my previous large-scale choral works, *Zimbe! Come sing the songs of Africa!* (2008) and *Ahoy! Sing for the Mary Rose* (2013), the choir is supported by a professional jazz quintet, giving the songs rhythm and groove as well as adding wonderful colours and textures to the overall sound. For *Song Cycle: vive la vélorution!*, the "rhythm section" of piano, double bass and drums is augmented by jazz trumpet and flute. The singers add bicycle bells and pumps into the mix, evoking the sound of cycling and adding to the joyful, entertaining nature of the piece.

Song Cycle: List of Songs

1. Cycle-babble
2. A true love of mine
3. Fine and dandy
4. A woman (wearing bloomers) on a wheel
5. The men who ride for fun
6. Buying a cycle
7. Freewheeling
8. My wheel and I
9. Daisy, Daisy
10. Cycle-babble 2.0