

# Rebecca Martin

## REFLECTIONS OF A CHOIR BABY

Rebecca Martin was born in Kennington in 1968. Her father Philip Martin is featured at the beginning of this book because he was one of the founding members of the choir and so it seemed a good idea to round off the story of the choir with Rebecca representing the next generation.

Philip recruited his daughters Rebecca and Sarah into the chorus of Kennington Amateur Dramatic Society pantomimes when he was playing the dame. It was just as well that Rebecca loved singing because membership of Kennington and District United Church Choirs was almost inevitable. Rebecca says "I suppose I was a choir baby. Music was a part of my life as long as I can remember. It was not long before I joined my father in the church choir. When I was 12 the concert pianist Patricia Loveland encouraged me to perform with adults in my first proper concert. After that there was no stopping me. I couldn't imagine life without singing."

In 2012, movie goers may have seen Patricia Loveland aged 76 in her first Hollywood movie 'Quartet'. Rebecca's mother Valerie is a reluctant singer but in her family there is a tale of survival against the odds and a sense of drama which Rebecca is brilliant at capturing.

"My Chinese great grandfather left Shanghai in 1939 but the boat he was on was torpedoed. After some time in the sea, he was lucky to be hauled into a life boat and eventually arrived in England. Immigration didn't understand Chinese names. They registered him as Tom Song. That's the only name we knew him by. Tom settled in Soho and became chef at the Café de Paris. He married a local girl and his son Albert told me how, as a child, he used to hang around at the café. Theatricality may be in the family. When Josephine Baker performed there she used two lion cubs in her act and she let him hold them." said Rebecca.

From the age of 3, Trevor and Brenda were Rebecca's teachers, first as a member of their Nursery School, and then, from the age of 6, as a piano pupil of Trevor's. She continued to study piano with Trevor and Music Theory with Brenda until she went to Guildhall at 18. After primary school in Kennington Rebecca went to St Helen's school in Abingdon.

"Once I was at St Helen's there were lots of opportunities to participate in music festivals and productions. I never wanted to do anything except sing. Trevor helped a great deal in the preparation of audition pieces when I applied for a place at the Guildhall School of Music. I was so happy when I received a scholarship to study there," said Rebecca.

"During my time at the Guildhall I became a member of the ad hoc BBC



Singers and of the Covent Garden extra chorus and briefly considered making a career in opera. But I was put off by the nomadic lifestyle and felt that my voice was more suitable for lieder and other, intimate forms of music. It was around this time that I began to sing solo parts for the Kennington Choir. My debut was in *Messiah* in 1986.

“I decided to teach for a while and became a peripatetic teacher of music mostly at St Helen’s and St Edward’s (Oxford).”

Rebecca had met her future husband, James Allison, at school, but he didn’t share her interest in music. She said

“James is totally unmusical – his oratorio is the sound of Formula One cars racing. I remember once when we were dating, I was performing an oratorio in Oxford Town Hall and I looked into the audience and there he was not looking at the stage but at a massive book on Formula One. We married in 1992 and had Emily in 1993, Matt in 1996 and Jonathan in 1999. Once the children were born James had the excuse of babysitting to get out of coming to listen to me.

“In 2000, when James started to work for Ferrari as an aerodynamic engineer, I gave up teaching and we moved to the village of Castelvetro, near Bologna in Italy. During those four years in Italy I was a full time mother and so had to start again when James took up a post with Renault at Enstone and we bought a house in Marcham near Abingdon.”

In 2013, James returned to Ferrari as its technical director and now commutes home at weekends but that’s another story...

In 2004, Rebecca was back in Oxfordshire eager to resume her career in music and was singing with the choir again in the autumn of that year.

She said,

“I was lucky on my return to meet Stephen (baritone) and Claire Barratt (soprano) and eighteen months later, they founded Charity Opera. Charity Opera performs concerts of opera, operetta, and songs from the shows using only professionally trained singers including Steven’s brother Ian (tenor).”

2004 was also the year when Rebecca met the pianist and composer Nia Williams. Just as Rebecca was rebuilding her career, Nia had been doing the same. It started with Rebecca using Nia as an accompanist. Rebecca said,

“We have often worked together and called ourselves Mezzopiano.”

Nia described how they and some friends performed in a variety of venues, including at the royal opening of the new Pegasus Theatre in 2011. Then a health problem threatened to bring Rebecca’s career to a sudden end.

“In April 2012, we were preparing for the *Titanic* Event which would commemorate the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the *Titanic*, with which we would open the KOA year. I had an infection which made my ears feel full

of wax. They were syringed but I couldn't hear a thing in my left ear. I eventually saw a specialist and he diagnosed it as sudden sensory hearing loss caused by a virus similar to labyrinthitis. It attacks the nerve endings. I can still hear low sounds but my upper registers have gone. It also caused tinnitus, vertigo and vomiting. It was difficult to judge the sound I was making, so when we performed at Kennington, I kept asking Nia if I was in tune.

"If you can't hear yourself, it is hard to sing. I lost confidence and it threatened to bring an end to my teaching career too. Someone suggested that I go to see a musician, Gill Purse, who has devised a technique called overtone chanting, which has its basis in Tibetan chanting and has



been proven to help tinnitus sufferers. It worked remarkably well and now I find my tinnitus much easier to control. I also have help from a specialist at the John Radcliffe who makes tinnitus aids for musicians, blocking out certain frequencies of sound.

With Nia's help Rebecca carried on singing and her determination led to a tour de force in March last year at the Old Fire Station. It all began with a *Mezzopiano* concert in Fleet Street, when the duo decided to include C20th song including work by Kurt Weill in the repertoire. Rebecca said it was the start of an interest in German cabaret and led to Nia writing and arranging *Smoke and Mirrors* based around songs by Weill, for Oxford International Women's Festival.

"It's a story about twins," says Nia. "So there's that sense of being very far apart, but always having this connection. It was a huge challenge for Rebecca who sang the parts of both sisters, two very different characters, as well as singing in three languages — German, French and English — and being on stage throughout the entire piece, with no interval."

If you have read this far in *I Love you All* you will have discovered how friendships are made through music and how the lives of the real characters in this book connect with the choir and beyond it. So having been connected with the choir from its foundation when she was in Trevor and Brenda's



**Rebecca (right) in Nia Williams' production of *Daddy's Girls***

nursery school, what are Rebecca's highlights of singing with the Kennington choir?

"I always love the *Mozart Requiem*, and I really enjoyed the Opera Choruses concerts in the Holywell, as they gave me a chance to sing something totally outside my normal repertoire."

I asked how the choir has changed?

"I don't think it has changed massively over the years, apart from the membership getting a little bit older along with Trevor! It always felt a very comfortable and friendly environment, as I knew Trevor so well, and my dad had always sung there. For me, the choir reflects the sense of community present in Kennington – it is a very supportive environment to sing in as a choir member, and certainly as a soloist. They meet for meals at the end of each season and for special occasions (Trevor's 80th, for example), and always seem to have a lot of fun, especially with the dressing up (and general hamming it up!) in the Gilbert and Sullivan concerts.

"When I was at Guildhall I sometimes struggled with the very competitive and demanding environment, and when I came home and sang in one of the choir's concerts, it always reminded me why I loved singing. Everybody was there because they loved music, they enjoyed working with Trevor, and if we made a mistake we got a glare from under those eyebrows, but it was quickly forgotten! We all knew that 'he loved us all'!

