

These articles appeared in the AOTOS Newsletter on the occasion of its 40th Anniversary in 2015

The Association of English Singers and Speakers (AESS) was formed in 1913 by the eminent laryngologist, Dr W. A. Aikin, to further study in the principles of phonology as expounded in his book, 'The Voice'. The AESS at this time was an all-male society of well-known singers and teachers who met regularly to dine and discuss matters of vocal and professional interest. Two of the original members were Harry Plunket Greene, a singer famed for his English oratorio interpretations, and William Shakespeare, a leading singing teacher at the Royal Academy of Music.

During the 1920s, the Society initiated publication of 'Fifty Modern English Songs', the first ever collection of songs by contemporary British composers. Sir Percy Buck and Sir Henry Wood, among others, served as Presidents and after the war the AESS opened its doors to include the speech and drama professions. In 1969 women were at last admitted to its membership!

1989 saw the AESS Constitution revised, its purpose redefined as being 'to encourage communication of English words in speech and song with clarity, understanding and imagination'. The AESS has now achieved charitable status.

In 1982 the then chairman, Catherine Lambert, inaugurated the AESS English Song Prize which is still an annual event. It is the only vocal competition that combines a 'themed' recital of English Song, poetry and spoken introductions.

Niven Miller during his chairmanship until 2004, when he was forced to resign due to ill health, worked tirelessly to resurrect the somewhat shaky fortunes of the Association. It was he, together with his committee, who achieved Charitable Status for the AESS and he also used his experience and contacts to find sponsors for the 'English Song Prize'.

From 1999 – 2002 the competition was sponsored by the Concordia Foundation, founded by the international soprano, Gillian Humphreys, OBE. In 2003 the distinguished actor and singer, Patricia Routledge, CBE, one of our honorary presidents, graciously enquired as to whether she could be of any assistance. Miss Routledge has kindly sponsored the Song Prize to this day, which now bears her name.

In 2003, the AESS and the British and International Federation of Festivals began the National Junior English Song Competition funded from a master class given at the Wigmore Hall by Thomas Hampson, the American baritone. Mr. Hampson continued support for a restructured Junior Recital Competition run solely by the AESS, until 2006. In 2007, the name of the competition was changed to 'The Catherine Lambert Junior Recital Prize' as Catherine has offered sponsorship indefinitely. At the same time, Coral Gould, MBE, offered to fund a third prize for the competition. Marian Lines offered an anonymous donation for a speech award for the junior competition. After her death, this prize was named the 'Marian Lines' prize and has been generously continued by Marian's husband, Graham.

Mark Wildman briefly held the Chair after Niven's resignation and I was elected to the position in 2005. Niven was asked if he would become an Honorary President, to which he agreed. The first priority was to elect a complete committee of officers and trustees and begin a membership drive. The AESS Constitution needed to be finally formulated and ratified by the Charities Commission and this was done. I also asked a friend to set up an AESS website, which has recently been updated. An email group of AESS members was formed so that regular information could be sent to virtually all members immediately. This meant that members, although separated geographically, could all feel part of the Association.

I spent some time contacting all the past winners of the English Song Prize, some proving most elusive, and offering them all Honorary Membership. All were found eventually and many are happy to sit on adjudication panels and to support the AESS when their professional work allows.

Two of the Association's Honorary Presidents were impossible to contact and so I asked Sir Nicholas Hytner and later, Dame Harriet Walter, if they would become Presidents, to which they kindly agreed.

Graham Trew

The AESS Today

The Association of English Singers and Speakers is in very good health today thanks to the enormous hard and consistent work Graham Trew has put into it for the last ten years. We all wish him a well-deserved and happy retirement from the chairmanship, and as a member he will still be keeping a beady eye on all that goes on.

One of my first jobs as the new chair will be to finish the publication of the last three volumes of 'A Century of English Song' started by John Bishop over 20 years ago. The first seven volumes, published originally by Thames, are available through Music Sales but after having copies of the last three volumes for over two years, they have finally come back to us to say they will not publish them after all.

We are in the process of collecting back all the material given to them plus the copyrights they managed to obtain so that we can go forward. We will self-publish under the AESS, using as much of the original artwork as possible. It won't take us long to get them printed once we are ready! My ultimate hope is to get all ten published by the AESS as the first seven are in short supply.

Why is the AESS important today? The main reason is that we run four excellent competitions for young singers, ages ranging from 13 to 32. Committee members, Jean Hornbuckle and Jane Roberson with Jeanette Ager of the Toni V Fell Trust, started the fourth competition, the Musical Theatre prize in 2013. It is a shared venture with The Tony V Fell Musical Charitable Trust and took place in 2015 on Sunday June 7th at the Sylvia Young Theatre School. We felt that there were not many music theatre competitions compared with the classical singing world, and yet so many youngsters want to train for musical theatre.

Our prizes are unique because of the spoken element, which is now judged to have an equal importance to the singing. We all feel that both spoken communication and sung communication are so intertwined. As each year progresses, students are getting better at delivering their poems and prose and this enlivens their singing. Accompanists also compete for prize money within the senior competitions. I will make sure all four competitions keep going for many years to come.

Entrants must be pupils of AESS members or approved of by an AESS member. As many of the music colleges are members their students can automatically enter. Alternatively, I believe that a student who wants to enter can join the AESS at the student rate for that purpose. The competition finals are open to the public and are advertised on our website.

It is worth becoming a member of the AESS to enter your students for the competitions alone. The joining fee is very modest.

Other benefits include the possibility of advertising ones concerts of English Song through the AESS website, and of taking part in occasional concerts of English Song through our 'Unsung Heroes' series.

The AESS also organises other events to promote its educational aims, including workshops and master classes given by experts in the field of English poetry and song and through members' concerts.

Our 'Unsung Heroes' series, organized by Patricia Williams, has proved a big success. Last June we gave a concert at The Birley Centre, Eastbourne, featuring the songs of Michael Head and there is one planned for September this year in Bath, featuring women composers.

We also sponsor The London Song Festival, The English Song Festival and Songs in the City, as they all contain much English Song, and there is an ongoing AESS cup and prize.

We are always open to new ideas and welcome new members who, like us, want to promote good sung and spoken English. We need judges for our competitions and the occasional committee member.

The highlight of the year is our annual dinner, held at the Royal Overseas League in London following the AGM. This year Courtney Kenny gave enchanting entertainment and our speaker was honorary president Sir Thomas Allen, who delighted us with tales from his career.

Do consider joining us. For more information, visit our website at: www.aofess.org.uk

Sarah Leonard