

John Poole

Senior Lecturer in Music

By the time we read this biographical note in celebration of his retirement, Senior Lecturer John Poole will have closed his career at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music with two signature performances. First, the world premiere of *A Clear Midnight* by the distinguished American composer and Pulitzer prize winner John Harbison, in memory of the five students of our school who died tragically in a plane crash; and later, with the specialized Classical Orchestra, and in collaboration with its director, Stanley Ritchie, an interpretation with the Pro Arte Singers of music by Haydn, in honor of the two hundredth anniversary of the great composer's death. These events represent only two of John Poole's many facets as one of the most important European choral conductors of the last 50 years. They are also a distillation of his pedagogical influence at Indiana University. In a most graceful and seemingly effortless way, John Poole sustained the highest standards of choral singing and opened fruitful new collaborations between departments at the Jacobs School.

John Poole is known around the world as the conductor laureate of two world-class professional vocal ensembles, the BBC Singers and the Groupe Vocal de France; and as an eminent champion of British composers. Reviewers have described him as a conductor of "great finesse and power" (*The Telegraph*, London) and "a sorcerer" (*Le Monde*, Paris). He began his career conducting choirs and orchestras while still an undergraduate at Oxford. He gained further experience directing concerts at the London University Church and at University College. He founded the Bloomsbury Singers and Players and conducted choral-orchestral concerts at St. George's Church, Bloomsbury, where he first came to the attention of the BBC. In 1968 he became conductor of the BBC Symphony Chorus and conducted his first Proms concert in 1973.

In 1972 John became director of the elite BBC Singers, a post he held until 1989. Under his direction the Singers earned their reputation as one of today's premier professional choirs. His career with the BBC Symphony Chorus and the BBC Singers included hundreds of broadcasts of music of all periods, including many first performances and British premieres. He also conducted concerts with the Singers at the Proms, at London's South Bank, Barbican, and St. John's Smith Square, at major British and overseas festivals, and on tour throughout the world. For the BBC Singers John Poole commissioned and recorded many works, including his landmark recording of Giles Swayne's *Cry* (1980), still listed today by critics as one of the best performances ever by the ensemble. Coincidentally, the impact of this event resonated in Bloomington, as Chancellor's Professor of Conducting Jan Harrington conducted here the American premiere of one of the movements of *Cry*, and invited John Poole for the American premiere of the full work at the Jacobs School in 1989. That same year our alumnus Robert Gehrenbeck won the Julius Herford National Choral Dissertation Award for his research on Swayne's *Cry* and other works.

In 1990 John Poole became chief guest conductor of the BBC Singers, as he took a new post with the Groupe Vocal de France, which specializes in contemporary repertoire.

For five years he led the Groupe Vocal and gave concerts regularly in Paris, throughout France, and internationally, also organizing highly successful summer schools for conductors and singers in France, and continuing to perform as guest conductor with major choirs and orchestras in Europe, Scandinavia, and as far afield as New Zealand, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

In August 2001, John Poole joined the conducting faculty of the Jacobs School of Music, where soon after arriving he conducted the American premiere of faculty composer Sven-David Sandström's *High Mass* in November 2001. His impact on the students was immediate, not only because of his expertise, but because of his elegant approach to music making and the profession at large. His contacts in Europe continued through his master classes at Parthenay and return performances with the BBC Singers. In 2004 John conducted his seventieth birthday concert in St. Paul's Church, Knightsbridge, with the BBC Singers, in a program that included the London premiere of Giles Swayne's *Stabat Mater*. In May 2005, John's recording of Olivier Greif's *Requiem* with the BBC Singers was launched. In June and July 2006 he directed performances and workshops of Mozart's choral and orchestral music in Vienna.

At Indiana University John soon established important alliances with composer Sven-David Sandström, commissioning his *Magnificat* for chorus and Baroque orchestra, and with violinist Stanley Ritchie, with whom he produced historically informed concerts of Baroque and Classical repertoire. As one of the high points of this collaboration, in February 2006 John conducted the Jacobs School's Pro Arte Singers and Classical Orchestra in performances of Mozart's *Requiem* for the American Mozart Society in Bloomington and in Chicago for the American Choral Directors Association. He also premiered Sandström's *Magnificat* for chorus and Baroque orchestra at Chicago's Rockefeller Chapel in 2007.

In spite of his pedigreed academic training, John preferred to target and solve practical problems that would render exponentially beneficial results. He engineered with the Piano and Organ Technology Department an electronic keyboard to perform in any of the wildly diverse historical tunings; and collaborated with music informatics professor Chris Raphael in his project "Real-Time Planning of a Conductable Orchestra," which won a major grant from the National Science Foundation. He also advocated successfully with former faculty conductor Imre Palló for the formation of the Student Conductors Orchestra, which has improved the training of young conductors in both choral and instrumental conducting departments at the Jacobs School.

Students would often meet and comment on John Poole's subtle teaching about life and music. He would tend to end rehearsals a little early, with a sly comment about saving time for "tea and cucumber sandwiches." More importantly, he would advise the young conductors in search of the highest standard of performance never to forget "to smile often" and "to love the singer." Wise words indeed from an artist who conquered the strenuous life of the successful conductor.

~Carmen Helena Téllez