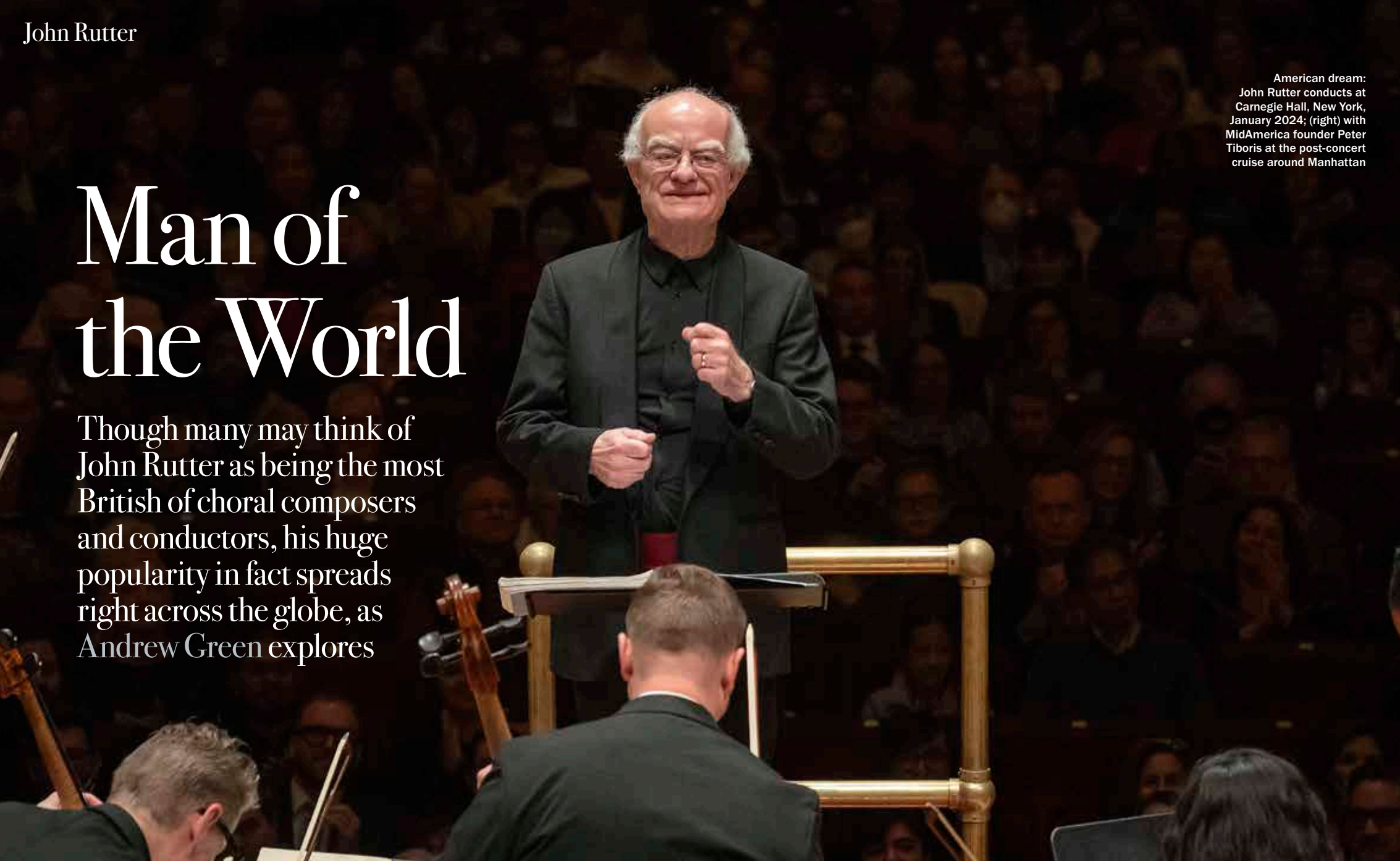


Man of the World

Though many may think of John Rutter as being the most British of choral composers and conductors, his huge popularity in fact spreads right across the globe, as Andrew Green explores



American dream: John Rutter conducts at Carnegie Hall, New York, January 2024; (right) with MidAmerica founder Peter Tiboris at the post-concert cruise around Manhattan



Italian attraction

‘John Rutter’s music is performed a great deal by Italian choirs (especially mixed-voice ones) because it usually has very singable and catchy melodies,’ says Silvia Manzoni (above), conductor of the Coro Laudamus Dominum, based near Milan. ‘The harmonies and rhythms are very modern and create a whole that’s appreciated by both the singer and the listener. In general, even when the music is complex, as for example in some passages of the Magnificat, it always remains accessible. Any tricky moments are addressed by the choir members with enthusiasm, never with a sense of frustration. This is a great merit of Maestro Rutter!’

Choral singers and their music directors around the UK will be raising brimful glasses on 24 September in celebration of Sir John Rutter’s 80th birthday. His music is, after all, buried deep in the musical fabric of the country. Entirely appropriate that Sir John’s big birthday bash in the UK (a touch late, on 5 November) takes place at an iconic national venue – the vast spaces of St Paul’s Cathedral, with the composer himself conducting The Bach Choir and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in Rutter’s own extended works *The Gift of Life* and *I’ll make me a world* – the latter, a first concert performance. Talking of ‘making me a world’, I’ve long been aware that Sir John has a huge following in the

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US. (*The Gift of Life* is one of many works with an American inspiration – in this instance, written for a performance in Dallas). What I hadn’t anywhere near appreciated before talking with Rutter for this piece was the full global reach of his music. Even a cursory internet search confirms it, in terms merely of recent and future performances, of which more below. Rutter’s publisher, Oxford University Press (OUP), tells me that choral works by him have been translated into no fewer than 17 languages – the more unexpected, perhaps, being Korean, Japanese, Lithuanian, Romanian and Icelandic. Firstly, though, to the US, which Sir John describes as his ‘second home’. It’s the success story there, he says, that has been the principal

factor in driving his international recognition. ‘The ripples really have spread out from the States, not so much from Britain,’ he observes. Why this following in the US? ‘One major factor is the strong and continuing tradition of choral music in churches here,’ says James E Redcay III, CEO of New York-based MidAmerica Productions, which has been engaging Rutter to conduct his own (and other) music since the late-1980s. ‘The religious dimension to much of John’s music plays into that – there are probably a hundred performances of his music every Sunday morning.’ And singing in church easily spills over into a passion for concert singing. Rutter’s carols and anthems were beginning to circulate in the US by the mid-1970s. ‘Why not

something on a larger scale?’ thought Omaha-based choral director Mel Olson. He duly approached Rutter, who recalls: ‘Mel asked for a 20-minute piece that would stretch his choir, The Voices of Mel Olson, but also have a direct appeal. He wanted something joyful and we settled on the familiar words of the Gloria, not least because the Latin words have a universal appeal. The money wasn’t available for a full symphony orchestra, so we decided on a brass ensemble, tapping into the tradition of such groups in the USA.’ Rutter himself conducted the first performance in Omaha, in May 1974. Rutter’s versions of the work for organ and orchestra soon appeared, but there was no dramatic take-up of the Gloria until a reportedly stunning rendition at a national convention of the American Choral Directors Association spurred many another performance. Explorations of Rutter’s music by US choirs now gathered pace. Something of a bidding war broke out to decide who would publish his music on licence from OUP, a contest won by North Carolina-based Hinshaw Music. Hinshaw’s promotional work saw Sir John becoming widely in demand in the US to direct his own music and run choral workshops, as well as to press the flesh at conventions. ‘Being present in person was so important,’ he recalls. ‘It helped develop a kind of US bandwagon.’ I’ll say. By the mid-1980s, there was a voracious appetite for new Rutter music. Following the first performance of his Requiem (at a Methodist Church in Dallas, in October 1985) it was published simultaneously by OUP and Hinshaw. ‘There were around 500



Melodious mind: Rutter at work

The other Rutter
Three non-choral works

Suite Antique
Composed in 1979 for flute, harpsichord and strings, Rutter’s immediately likeable *Suite Antique* was inspired by Bach’s Fifth *Brandenburg Concerto*, which is scored for the same forces. Typically melodious throughout its six movements, it opens with a wistful *Prelude* before we are launched into a brief, perky *Ostinato* that has the composer’s distinctive voice running right through it.

The Beatles Concerto
Admittedly, the tunes in this 1977 work are not Rutter’s own – Messrs Lennon and McCartney get to take the credit for those. However, from the opening ‘She loves you’ to ‘The long and winding road’ at the end, the way Rutter melds them together into a three-movement, Rachmaninov-like concerto for two pianos and orchestra is really rather ingenious.

The Reluctant Dragon
There are singers here, but it’s not for a full-size choir. Along with *The Wind in the Willows*, this charming work for narrator, vocal ensemble and small orchestra was one of two Kenneth Grahame-based ‘musical fables’ composed for children’s Christmas concerts given by the King’s Singers in the mid-1980s. Highlights include the ‘guzzle, guzzle, munch, munch’ Banquet Fugue and the closing ‘Let’s begin again’ chorus.

GETTY



requests for the performing materials in the US in just six months,’ Sir John recalls. Also in the 1980s, the promotional pot was stirred yet more vigorously thanks to Rutter’s creation of the recording label, Collegium, largely as a vehicle for his music (featuring his own Cambridge Singers) internationally.

Ever since those days, there’s been an unrelenting demand for those personal appearances in the US. However, since the early 1990s, the principal commitment has been to Rutter’s extraordinary series of Carnegie Hall conducting appearances (around 140) for MidAmerica Productions, with his own music the principal feature. The original, far-sighted invitation came from MidAmerica founder, the legendary Peter Tiboris, who died last year. Says Rutter: ‘These concerts have meant that rather than my being constantly on the road to visit choirs, singers have been coming to me in New York.’ And arriving from as far away as Australia. One group from Brazil without any formal singing background apparently learnt the Gloria by rote in order to perform under Rutter’s baton.

Among the MidAmerica/Carnegie Hall premieres have been those of the now widely performed Magnificat (1990) and *Mass of the Children* (2003). Rutter’s verbal skills as a communicator during rehearsals, says James Redcay, mean that, ‘He always gets to the core of what he wants musically. His style of conducting and physical movement on the podium fits his music so well. One of the longstanding



A popular figure: Rutter conducts the New England Symphonic Ensemble at Carnegie Hall; (below) conductor Candace Wicke, a devoted Rutter champion; (opposite) Sir John receives his well-deserved knighthood, 2025

with Icelandic organists and choral conductors, plus performances of his music which promised to ‘unite several hundreds of choral singers in song and joy’.

However, schedulings of Rutter’s music have hardly been dependent on his presence. British choral conductor Simon Halsey, for one, has been championing this repertoire in Germany. In the recent past there have been performances in, for example, Spain (a couple of Magnificats, perhaps reflecting the score’s Hispanic flavour – it also goes down well in Mexico); in Romania (a Gloria and a Requiem); Hungary (carols); Estonia (Requiem); South Africa (*Feel the Spirit*); and Australia, where in May Joseph Nolan, director of music at the Anglican cathedral in Perth, conducted the St George’s Cathedral Consort and the West Australian Symphony Orchestra in the Gloria. ‘It’s a compact and direct masterpiece that appeals to performers and audiences alike,’ says Nolan, ‘and it was duly received with great enthusiasm, cheers and so on.’

‘We perform quite a lot of Sir John’s music at St George’s,’ Nolan continues. ‘Christmas without Rutter is unthinkable. The “hits” such as *The Lord bless you and keep you*, the *Gaelic Blessing* and *For the beauty of the earth* are exceptionally well-crafted. What’s wrong with the fact that they’re melodic? I suspect Sir John’s detractors on that count would readily swap places with him if they could when it comes to the respect and popularity he enjoys.’

Then there’s Japan, one of the prime countries for OUP sales of Rutter’s music. Of all things, there has been (maybe still is) a ‘JR Choir’ specialising in performing and recording ‘JR’s’ music. Sir John recounts how the short work *A flower remembered* was written for Harmony for Japan, an association promoting choral music. ‘They approached me after the earthquake/tsunami disaster in 2011 which led to the accident at the Fukushima nuclear reactor. Would I write something for performance each year, to memorialise those who died and comfort the bereaved? The text is my own haiku.’

Rutter’s travel schedule at age 80 remains daunting. ‘However, in the future,’ he says, ‘I’ll be cutting things down. You can’t but be aware that the time available is growing shorter... and there’s so much music I still want to write.’ You can be certain that the choral offerings will continue to be masterfully crafted. And will certainly be approachable, as ever, by the composer’s deliberate choice. ‘I’ve always wanted my music to be accessible – music which doesn’t shut people out.’ ☺

members of our orchestra told me that conductor Candace Wicke has prepared choirs for Rutter-led performances at Carnegie Hall for many years. The wealth of knowledge, musicianship and inspiration John imparts is priceless. Compositionally he keeps vocal ranges, keys and technical demands in mind to ensure the best possible performance. I’ve seen singers perform his *Mass of the Children* with tears streaming down their faces. And all you need to know about the audiences is their standing ovations.’

The US commissions continue. April saw the first performance (in St Charles, Illinois) of *Dancing Tree* – eight settings for choir and harp of Charles Causley poetry, written for the St Charles Singers and its founder/conductor Jeff Hunt. His take on the enduring Rutter appeal? ‘I’ve always admired John’s generosity as a person, and I believe this spirit of generosity runs through his music. I also believe there’s a broad sense of optimism in it that people are drawn to. His music touches people of all ages, which I think is remarkable.’

MidAmerica Productions has occasionally aided the development of Rutter’s profile across the Atlantic by staging concerts in Europe, to

which amateur singers flock in numbers. In July, Sir John was sent to direct his Requiem at Uppsala Cathedral in Sweden for MidAmerica. No longer can such exposure beyond the US and UK be regarded as remotely unusual. (In fact, though, one of the famous stories – apparently founded on fact – goes back to the Soviet Union’s overlordship of the Baltic States, where Rutter’s ubiquitous 1966 *Shepherd’s Pipe Carol* functioned as something of a secret call-sign among music-lovers, signalling resistance to the Russian authorities).

Spreadable Rutter

Rutter’s ever-advancing stature around the globe owes much to the inspiration-inducing role played by the internet, from the online availability of videoed performances of his music (not least emanating from the US) to the information flow between choral enthusiasts made possible by social media. As a result, his services as conductor and/or workshop-leader have been sought in such territories as Denmark, France, Italy and Germany. In August 2022, he travelled to Reykjavik for a ‘Come and Sing’ event embracing a seminar



‘I’ve seen singers perform his *Mass of the Children* with tears streaming down their faces’