

Meet the British Von Trapps

The Bevan family's choir disbanded in 1984, but now it's back with a new generation, writes Richard Morrison

The Bevans are the singing dynasty that just keeps on giving. Other famous family music groups — the Corrs, the Jacksons, the Nolans, the Von Trapps — rarely exceed half a dozen members. But the present generation of the Bevan clan comprises 53 cousins, 15 of whom are featured as the Bevan Family Consort on a new album of sacred choral music.

Two of them — Sophie and Mary Bevan — are highly successful opera singers. Half a dozen more are also professional musicians. “But there are plenty more cousins who can sing,” says Benedict Carter, who (when he's not singing with the Bevans) is head of the Islamic and Indian department at Sotheby's. “The consort is like a Premier League football team — the bench is quite big when we need to bring on subs. In fact, we also had a couple of in-laws singing with us at one point, but they have been banished for diluting the brand.”

I am sitting in Benedict's flat, along with Mary, Sophie and a fourth member of the consort — Francis Bevan, who once played lead guitar in a prog rock band called Rocketeer but is now slightly more sedately occupied editing Renaissance choral pieces that have mostly not been sung for centuries. “There's one of those on our disc,” he says. “*Dignare me laudare te*, by Fernando de las Infantas.”

“Francis digs up rare choral music from abbeys and libraries all over the world,” Sophie says. “Nearly every week in the church choir down in Dorchester-on-Thames that I sing in with Ryan [Wigglesworth, her conductor-composer husband], we do something that Francis has found. And everything he edits is free online for anyone to use.”

“Well, that's because there isn't any money to be made from selling it,” Francis points out.

“But we should say,” Mary chips in, “that most of the music on our album is favourites that we have all loved singing since childhood. Sophie and I are two of eight siblings, and we all grew up singing in the choir that our father ran at Holy Redeemer Church in Chelsea for 35 years. I think everyone else on the album did a stint in that choir as well. That's why it's dedicated to the memory of him and his sister Rachel, and we sing one of



Top: the Bevan family choir today, including Benedict, second from left, Francis, third from right, Mary, seated second from left, and Sophie, seated, front row. Above: the original choir in 1978

Vidi Speciosam, the Bevan Family Consort's debut album, is on Signum Classics. The consort sings at Queen Elizabeth Hall, London SE1, on November 26

his compositions on it.”

As you might have surmised, conversation among the Bevans moves at the pace of a Formula One grand prix, and with just as many overtaking manoeuvres. And I'm talking to only four of them. “Yes, we are quite excited when we are all together,” Sophie says.

“That's why we had to bring in an outsider [Graham Ross, director of music at Clare College, Cambridge] to conduct the recording,” says Benedict. “If someone in the family tries to be in charge,

everyone shouts over everyone else. But when Graham was around everyone behaved themselves. Well, mostly. I don't think he expected to find himself in a small cupboard at four in the morning playing sardines.”

The Bevans have been singing together for more than half a century. Not this present batch, of course, who are mostly in their twenties and thirties, but their parents and grandparents, great uncles and great aunts. The original Bevan Family Choir was founded back in the 1970s by grandfather Roger — an extraordinary figure. The son and grandson of high-ranking Anglican clergymen, he spent his boyhood in a grandiose Victorian castle in Shropshire. “But then,” Sophie says,

“he married our grandmother, Molly, who lived in one of the farmer's cottages on the estate. The problem was that her family were very Catholic, his were very Anglican, and that difference was a big deal in those days. So grandfather was disinherited.”

“Well, he was also disinherited because he and Molly were first cousins,” Mary points out.

“I think the inbreeding was a secondary disapproval,” Benedict says. “It was him turning Catholic that was the real social stigma.”

Either way, Roger and Molly left the security of the Shropshire castle to live on a farm in Somerset, where they didn't improve their financial situation by proceeding to have 14 children. He taught music at Downside, the Catholic public school. She ran the local village market. “And they turned to subsistence farming to feed everyone,” Francis says. “They milked a goat, they planted potatoes and they filled a freezer with ...”

“Pig's legs!” Sophie cuts in, and everyone roars with laughter.

“Yes,” Francis says. “Our grandfather famously said: ‘No one can do more with a pig's trotter than my wife.’”

Astonishingly, the 14 children were all home-schooled. Singing around the piano was an integral part of that. “Grandfather wrote an autobiography that we've all read,” Sophie says. “In there he says how one day he heard his children singing and realised they were all in tune and could all hold a line when singing in harmony. So he

started getting them to sing at friends' houses and so forth, and the family choir grew from there.”

It did, spectacularly. The original Bevan Family Choir made an LP, appeared on TV and toured across Europe. When Roger retired, David (Sophie and Mary's father) took it over.

That choir disbanded in 1984 when its members were too busy raising their own children. Unofficially, though, the Bevan clan never stopped singing together. “It's very handy in our family that if you get married — or in fact die — you have a guaranteed choir for the service,” Benedict points out.

“If that's what you want,” says Sophie.

“Well, I had a 40-piece orchestra and a 16-strong choir for my wedding, mostly all Bevans, and it was wonderful,” says Francis.

The idea of resurrecting the family choir surfaced in 2013, when lots of Bevans got together to do a fundraising concert for a new roof at Downside Abbey. “That was multigenerational,” Mary says. “After that we realised we could make a choir out of just our own generation. Our parents' generation had already been there and done that. We were younger and had the energy so we started doing a couple of events a year. It would be a good excuse to see each other and hang out.”

And that's how it has turned out. “When we record our next album,” Mary continues, “we are hiring a big country house for us all to stay in and keeping it for an extra day so we can all have fun together.”

“My son, Albie, 12, is already saying, ‘Can I sing in your consort?’”

That's great, but here's a semi-serious scientific inquiry. If they are all part of the same family, and all trained in a specific Catholic choral tradition, do they sing in the same way?

“I think we do all have a very similar timbre to our voices,” Sophie says.

“I think we are also on the same psychological wavelength,” Francis adds. “Just as we all make the same joke at the same time, so we all tend to breathe instinctively at the same moment in choral music.”

What of the next generations of Bevans? Are they musical enough, and motivated enough, to keep the family singing tradition rolling merrily along for a few more decades? “Well, there will certainly be enough of them,” Benedict says. “We have more than 30 children between us already.”

“We will have to start scaling up,” Sophie says. “Next, the Bevan Family Symphony Chorus.”

“My son, Albie, is 12 and he's already saying, ‘Can I sing in your consort?’” Mary adds.

“I hope you replied, ‘Start your own damn choir,’” Benedict retorts.