

## Girton150 Asia Pacific Anniversary Celebrations: A personal view



After consulting widely, Girton chose Singapore as the hub for its Asia-Pacific 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration on 12-14 April 2019. It was a good decision: the college has about 600 alumni in the Asia-Pacific region, broadly writ; over 140 attended the events in Singapore, some travelling from Australia and New Zealand, from Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia, from Malaysia, mainland China, Hong Kong and of course from within Singapore itself. As well as engaging a core of established friends, the event attracted alumni who have not connected with the College for many years. There was no shortage of conversation, a great sense of fun, and a heart-warming level of interest in Girton's unique history and ambitious trajectory.

### **An evening in the Gardens by the Bay**

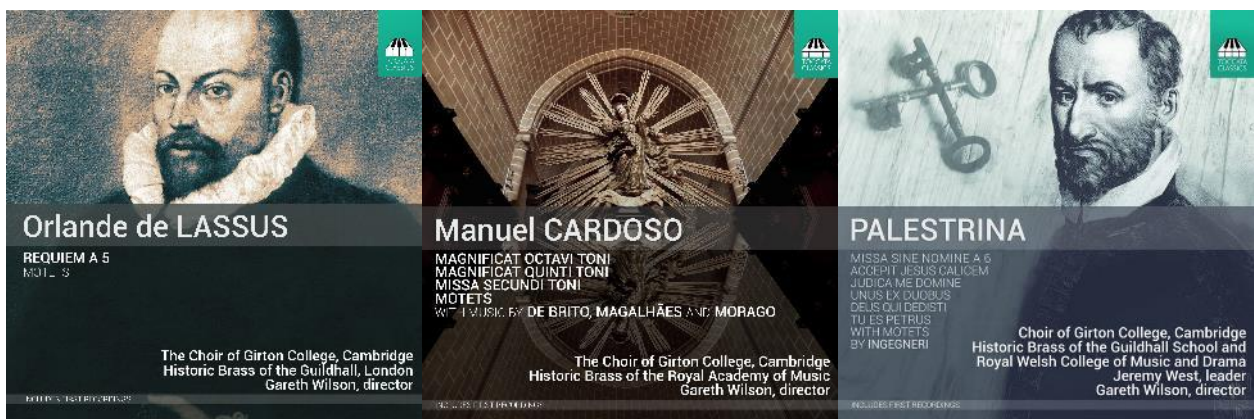
We began with a reception at Pollen in the Flower Dome at Singapore's spectacular Gardens by the Bay, whose story has been narrated in print by Girton alumnus, Koh Buck Song (1982 English), in *Perpetual Spring: Singapore's Gardens by the Bay* (2012, Marshall Cavendish International Asia Pte Ltd).



It was a tremendous evening, opened in style with an electrifying performance of 17<sup>th</sup> music by the Cornetts and Sackbuts of the combined UK conservatoires directed by Musician-in-Residence, Jeremy West. In a fifty-minute programme, the group played pavans, galliards, courants, allemandes, intradas, sinfonias and sonatas from late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century Germany and Italy, by Johann Schein, Samuel Scheidt, Paul Lütkeemann, Cristoforo Malvezzi, Giovanni Priuli and Orazio Vecchi, together with an assortment of pieces from the Durham Cathedral manuscripts (also early 17<sup>th</sup> century).



The ensemble, some instruments, the repertoire and the benefits of Girton's unique partnership with UK conservatoires - especially the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, who we thank for their enthusiasm and support - were introduced by Jeremy West. The choral tradition in Cambridge, he observed, is second-to-none, but the instrumental tradition - especially in the world of brass - is less well-developed. The conservatoires are all about instrumental music, but their vocal training is not in choral vein. Put the two together, and the chemistry is explosive leading, in Girton's case, to a series of highly acclaimed CDs, which are now available for purchase.





During the evening we (and everyone else in the flower dome) also enjoyed a performance by the student-led Close Harmony Group, followed by one number (a teaser for the following days) from the full complement of the Girton College Chapel Choir, Conducted by the Director of Chapel Music, Gareth Wilson. They gave a roof-raising, spellbinding performance of Orlando Gibbons' (1615-1676) work 'Hosanna to the son of David'.



As well as meeting old friends and making new ones, there was an opportunity to catch up on news from the College in a short welcome from me, and an inspirational 'call to action' from alumna, Karen Fawcett (1982 Economics) - a pioneer among women in finance, who has shattered more than one glass ceiling of the banking world.

As a member of the Board of Girton's endowment fundraising effort - A Great Campaign – Karen was well-placed to comment on the needs and aspirations of the College. Her speech perfectly cast the Asia-Pacific gathering as a celebration of friendship, a networking opportunity and a means of giving back to support the next generation. She drew particular attention the life-changing opportunities for young people from the region that Girton alumni are creating through their support for a suite of graduate and undergraduate scholarships. Hong Kong, she reminded us, have nearly completed their collective gift!

Whoever is first past the post, we are very grateful to everyone who is participating, whether collectively or individually, in this visionary initiative; I was indeed able to announce the likely completion of five new Asia Pacific studentships the following evening at our Gala Dinner.

## Pathways to Excellence at the Arts House, Old Parliament



*Adrenalin*

On Saturday we held another engaging Girton150 symposium on ‘Pathways to Excellence’. During the course of the anniversary we have been reflecting in different ways on the achievements and ambitions of our College, which was uniquely founded for women and is now, 150 years later, an integral and permanent coeducational institution within a world-class University.

At an eve-of-anniversary event in New York, in December 2018, we focussed specifically on the fact that we were a college *founded for women*, sharing ideas with the heads of four of the ‘Seven Sisters’ Colleges of the eastern seaboard. We recognised the role our Founders and early students had played, not only in advancing women’s role and position in higher education, but also in campaigning for political inclusion and entry to the professions. We also reflected on the core values and future goals of colleges like Girton whose vision for widening participation has led them to go mixed. In fact Girton is currently celebrating 40 years of admitting men, and of becoming fully co-educational (which is another important conversation).

During the Asia-Pacific symposium in Singapore, we turned to the fact that Girton was and remains a *college* with its own distinctive ethos, traditions and ambitions. That is, it is a residential community with autonomy as an independent educational charity and a self-governing community of scholars, even as it is integral to the role and international standing of the University of Cambridge. Colleges have been a feature of the Oxbridge Universities since their foundation over 800 years ago,

but as we saw this weekend, colleges have more recently been integrated into the life of some well-established Asian Universities - Utown at the National University of Singapore (NUS), for example, opened in 2011 with four residential colleges, while the flagship liberal arts College, Yale-NUS, began operating in 2013. The collegiate model may characterise a minority of world-class universities, but it is found in diverse forms in both old and new settings. As one commentator said, on hearing the NUS story, it is inspiring to learn, on an island where most students can easily live at home, that one of the region's foremost higher educational institutions has successfully challenged the idea that university colleges are expensive anachronisms with no place in the modern world. As the *College* for women celebrates 150 years of operation it therefore seemed like a good moment to reflect on what being a college has meant - for the students who have enjoyed it, the scholars who have driven it, and the world its graduates have entered. That is what the Asia symposium was about.

### ***Changing lives: the collegiate university***

The opening panel, which I chaired, set the scene by reflecting on the role and potential of university colleges, asking some important questions about the achievements of the university colleges in the past, and about their potential going forward. We also considered the scope for an exchange of ideas between collegiate universities, and those (the majority of) HEIs who choose to promote excellence in higher education in other ways.



*Adrenalin*

The panel members were: Girton historian Dr Simone Maghenzani who observed that historically colleges had preceded universities, and had retained the flexibility to innovate; the Master of Tembusu College at NUS, Professor Gregory Clancey who explained why Tembusu had adopted the strapline 'a home of possibilities'; and the President of the Singapore Management University, Professor Lily Kong, who had previously played a major role in the institution of the colleges at NUS



and was now considering whether and how some of the unique qualities could be rolled out in a space-constrained city centre campus.

The panellists' full commentaries are posted separately, but the discussion ranged widely, from the distinctive qualities of colleges that flow from their uniquely residential character, to the 'pros' and 'cons' of delivering part (or all) of the core curriculum through college structures, to the ideals (e.g. around inclusive excellence) that colleges should advance, and the role they play in student welfare and all-round personal development through music, sports, the arts and service to the community.

Some important questions were raised in discussion, especially around the changing significance of 'presentism' for the delivery and experience of higher education, now that students can form learning communities in other ways using social media and related technologies. There was lively debate around Professor Clancey's observation that the college model is *increasingly* attractive to students, and around Professor Kong's hope that one way to preserve the face-to-face encounters so important to college life (especially in non-collegiate settings) might be to create residential pods and working hubs enabling students to come together for a few (3, 4 or 5 weeks) of project work. In conclusion, it was agreed that whatever structures are adopted for the future, the pastoral care that colleges offer is second to none, and the ideal of an interdisciplinary residential educational experience across the whole span of a degree is as relevant for the future as it was for the past.

### ***Making a difference in the world***

The remainder of the symposium was structured around the work of scholars and practitioners - mainly but not exclusively Girton's own alumni and students - who have made a difference in their fields, encouraged, in part at least, by the knowledge and experience they gained in the course of their College life.



*Adrenalin*

The first debate was sparked by a panel on the future of global health, chaired by Girton Fellow, Professor Josh Slater, and including Professor David Price, one of the first male students admitted to Girton. Alumna, Professor Vikki Entwistle (1983 Theology), together with Associate Professor, Dr Toh Han Chong, completed the line-up. The session drew attention to the role of medicine and health care in horizon-scanning to identify new problems and address key challenges. The Chair's introduction also linked the open-minded, collaborative, trans-disciplinary way in which modern science works, to the residential educational experience that colleges underpin.

For me, there was also an important message around the agency and interests of patients in an era of technological change: can the advent and analysis of 'big data' be used to transform public health; how much control can and should patients have over their medical records; how should we balance the risks and rewards of using robotics, AI and transhuman technologies in global health care; what about the social inequalities that arise at the intersection of an inclusive ethics of care and the pursuit of profit?

There was a lively debate from the floor, but one point on which all could agree was - as Professor Vikki Entwistle put it - if we are serious about improving global health we should invest in interdisciplinarity to bring perspectives from social science and the humanities to the core of biomedical debate. That, by the way, is precisely the kind of thinking that residential colleges like Girton, admitting students to nearly all subjects offered in the University, can and do encourage.

From the challenge of human health, we turned to the vexed question of human rights. Our speaker, alumna Gladys Li (1966 Law), one of Hong Kong's first female QCs, former Chair of the Hong Kong Bar Association, and founding member of the Article 23 Concern Group, could not be better placed to unpack this difficult topic. Her speech speaks for itself, but what shines through for me is her defence of the universal declaration of human rights, her rejection of the argument that it is an inherently 'western' construct, and her conviction that human dignity is the foundation for freedom, justice and peace. Interestingly, she picked up the theme of colleges as a home of opportunity, and it is hard in light of her lecture - which underlined the resurgent risks of racism, fascism and Nazism, and the divisions they inspire - to think of this opportunity as anything other than an urge to embrace the qualities that people share; the facts of being human. This prompted a thought-provoking discussion of human rights, and of the responsibility each one of us has for protecting and championing these, even - perhaps especially - in our own everyday lives. It was a fitting centrepiece for the symposium and indeed for the weekend as a whole, leaving no-one in doubt of the urgency and importance of educating young people to be clear minded, independent thinkers who are well-informed, engage in ethical debates, and are not afraid to go against the grain in the interests of truth and justice.

We returned to the theme of 'human being', or 'being human', after lunch with a reflection on music and the arts - life-affirming in themselves and equally 'ways of knowing' that colleges are well-placed to explore. Proceedings opened with a short performance by the Girton College Chapel Choir of

works written by Alexander Gretchaninov (1864-1956) (*Blagoslovi dushe moya ghospoda*), arranged by the Director of Chapel Music Gareth Wilson (*Ave Maris Stella*), and set by Felix Mendelssohn (*Psalm 100*). This prefaced a remarkable ten minute talk by the Director of College Music, Dr Martin Ennis, on '150 years of music at Girton'. It was a heroic effort, which confirmed that: 'The College for Women' had a choral society from the start; the first women's MusB was awarded to a Girtonian in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century; and the acquisition of a Steinway piano and the commissioning of one of the best all round organs in Cambridge were themselves tales of mystery and imagination.



In ten minutes Dr Ennis conveyed a great deal but barely scratched the surface, and modestly overlooked to say that next year will be the culmination of 30 years of music making under his own brilliant, energetic baton - something we expect to celebrate in due course. Fortunately, the choir and instrumentalists took to the stage again to show just what it is that 150 years of music making has inspired, in a varied performance of works through the ages, by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594), Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548-1611), George Frideric Handel (1685-1759), Franz Schubert (1797-1828), Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), and William Henry Harris (1883-1973).

In the final presentation, Girton Fellow and medic Professor Peter Abrahams explored the intersections of life and art in a tour de force charting his role in discovering the sculptor responsible for the so-called 'Rothschild Bronzes'. The answer to this anatomical whodunnit is Michelangelo. However that conclusion (astonishing as it was, since Michelangelo left no others) is only a little bit more amazing than the journey of discovery that led to it. Professor Abrahams is a gifted lecturer and you can hear him tell the story [here](#). What impresses me about it is the careful piecing together of the widest range of evidence in painstaking detail. It is a piece of brilliant scholarship as well as fascinating detective work, and an important commentary on the relationship between scientific understanding and artistic endeavour.

The programme invited me to offer a concluding comment at the end of a riveting afternoon. I decided to do no such thing. These important, energising debates have barely begun; it is far too soon to draw them to a close. Girton150 is opening up a whole range of new conversations, and I am looking forward to continuing them in myriad ways as the future unfolds. On the subject of which, as a coda to the afternoon's proceedings, Girton's admissions tutor Dr Stuart Davis and I were delighted to have the opportunity to meet a number of local educators and students to discuss the ins and outs of the university and colleges' admissions processes. Girton's Admissions Office is always ready to



answer questions and offer support to international students who wish to apply. A store of relevant information is available on the College and University websites, but for those with more specific queries, there is a friendly admissions officer available at [admissions@girton.cam.ac.uk](mailto:admissions@girton.cam.ac.uk).

### **‘At home’ with the High Commissioner**

The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in Singapore concluded with a fine dinner at Eden Hall, the Official Residence of the British High Commissioner to Singapore. Built in 1904 by the architect who designed Raffles Hotel (R. A. J. Bidwell), it was sold to the British Government in 1957. We received a warm welcome from His Excellency Scott Wightman, who has recently co-edited ‘200 years of Singapore and the United Kingdom’ to mark the anniversary of Raffles’ landing, which includes a chapter by alumnus Koh Buck Song. This was followed by an engaging performance by the choir of voices and instruments, wittily and informatively introduced by the Director of Chapel Music, Gareth Wilson. It was a mix of early and modern compositions, including recent works by Gareth himself (*Pater Noster*) and Elizabeth Coxhead (*Mine eyes for beauty pine*), an engaging setting of *Lauda Sion* by the little-known renaissance composer Marcantonio Ingenieri, who - as Gareth put it - made the ‘mistake’ of teaching his pupil Claudio Monteverdi so well that his own quite stunning work was overshadowed, and a mix of other pieces concluding with Clemens Papa’s moving *Ego Flos Campi*.



*Girton College Chapel Choir (taken next day at the conclusion of the Palm Sunday service at St Andrew’s Cathedral).*

There followed an evening of fine food and sparkling conversation, beautifully augmented by the light, entertaining touch of the Director of Music playing the High Commissioner’s piano. We were honoured that alumna Mrs Lim Hwee Hua - the first woman appointed as a full Cabinet member in the Singaporean government, now a champion of business development and networking in the Asia-Pacific region, and a Distinguished Visiting Fellow at NUS - agreed to fill the challenging slot of after-

dinner speaker in the closing stages of the anniversary weekend. Her speech ensured the event ended on energising thought-provoking note. She spoke of the twin challenges of globalisation and technological innovation, and underlined the importance of creating a continual circle of learning and networking - a process that is rooted in a common connection to a fine college but that should aim to sustain its students through a life time of upskilling and leadership. We completed the evening with a round of heartfelt thanks and a toast to the future.

*We are very grateful to Tan Yong Nang for sponsoring the reception at Pollen, to Nelson and Terence Loh for supporting the visit of the Chapel Choir together with the Cornetts and Sackbuts of the combined conservatoires, to the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama for enabling three of their students to join us for the occasion, and to all who extended hospitality and friendship during our visit.*

**Professor Susan J. Smith, The Mistress**

Photograph credits: Jeremy West and Adrenalin