

László Heltay, musician who founded the Brighton Festival Chorus and the choir of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields – obituary

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László Heltay

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László Heltay, who has died aged 89, was a singular presence, colourful and stimulating, part of that vibrant émigré community who contributed so immensely to the broadening and enrichment of British cultural life throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

He created and directed several British choirs, including Schola Cantorum in Oxford, Brighton Festival Chorus and the choir of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, which made several outstanding recordings under Sir Neville Marriner and was heard on the Oscar-winning film *Amadeus* (1984).

The Brighton Festival Chorus first met in 1968 to work through Mozart's Kyrie in D minor with Heltay. Their festival debut, Walton's Belshazzar's Feast, conducted by the composer, proved a triumph, and for the next 27 years Heltay prepared them for the festival's choral concerts. He also took them to other engagements, including in 1988 to Flanders for a performance of Britten's War Requiem marking the 70th anniversary of the end of the First World War.

Heltay's reputation spread, and in 1975 he was asked to create a choir for a tour of Germany by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. The idea quickly took root, Heltay insisting that the chorus should sing as the Academy played – clean, precise and well-integrated. He chose voices that would blend, even at the expense of experience. "I could build an excellent choir from the rejects – but not to suit the Academy," he said

Heltay

Although Heltay's work involved preparing the voices, often a star conductor would come in to claim the glory at the concert. To those who spoke disparagingly of him being only the chorus master, Heltay would reply: "I consider it just as important."

László Istvan Heltay was born in Budapest on January 5 1930, the son of László Heltay and his wife Gizella Somogy. He studied at the Franz Liszt Academy, where his teachers included the composer Zoltán Kodály.

He fled Hungary in 1956 and arrived in Britain speaking barely any English. After attending a language school in Leeds he settled in London, where he cleaned offices in Oxford Street. "We were so free, so happy you cannot imagine," he said.

Soon he was conducting amateur choirs and came to the attention of Jack Westrup, professor of Music at Oxford, who arranged for him to undertake postgraduate research into 16th century music at Merton College. He scraped the English language test by two points, "the lowest mark," he said.

He founded the Merton College Kodály Choir, commissioning the composer to create a cantata from Arthur O'Shaughnessy's poem "The Music Makers" for Merton's 700th anniversary. He also started Collegium Musicum Oxoniensis, today known as Schola Cantorum, one of the country's leading chamber choirs.

Heltay spent three years in New Zealand conducting the country's symphony orchestra, returning in 1967 to Britain, where he worked with several festivals and choirs.

He recalled preparing the Collegium Musicum for a recording of Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms conducted by the composer when some ambiguity arose about whether the trumpet should be playing a B flat or a C natural: "I questioned the old man, who buried himself in the score for minutes on end. Eventually he lifted his head. 'I don't know. Either is good'."

By the late 1990s Heltay was increasingly conducting in Spain, and gradually shed his British commitments, including the Royal Choral Society, with whom he worked for a decade. In retirement he returned to Budapest.

Heltay enjoyed playing chess: one visitor to his flat in 1978 described chessboards arrayed around the floors, as well as a magnetic set on the bathroom wall – conveniently within reach of the lavatory seat.

He married Hilary Nicholson in 1964.

László Heltay, born January 5 1930, died December 17 2019

