

Choir Notes

One of the odd things about doing Choir Notes is the need to write in the past tense about future events. Hence I've been tasked with writing about our Christmas singing in November for publication in January when it will all be over. Well, here goes!

As the song says, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. And for those who sing in choirs, it is the busiest of times too.

By the time that you read this, we will have sung at Advent Carols, the service of Nine Lessons and Carols, and on Christmas Day itself. In and among this, we fit in carols in Cherry Tree Nursing Home, Jazz Carols in Holy Trinity and sometimes we sing on Princes Risborough Station to raise money for Macmillan Nurses, but not this year. Many of us belong to more than one choir and so have additional dates in our diary. Is it any wonder, with all this going on, that we don't always get our Christmas cards out on time? Somehow though, the music often has a sense of familiarity about it which makes the learning easier, but there are exceptions.

Familiarity is the essence of the Christmas season. The fact that we sang (or should I say, will have sung) in four different languages doesn't detract from the unchanging nature of Christmas. This year the music included an old Basque song, a work by Norwegian, Edward Grieg, and something by Rachmaninov, as well as works by two English composers, Ralph Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells.

One of my personal favourites of Christmas just gone is '*A Spotless Rose*' by Herbert Howells. It is said that he wrote this one October day in 1919 whilst watching trains shunting at Gloucester station. The words are from an anonymous fifteenth century poem. At the time, Howells would have been just twenty-one years old and employed as a sub-organist at Salisbury Cathedral.

Howells was a contemporary of and knew Ralph Vaughan Williams, the composer of my other favourite, '*This is the truth sent from above*'. The two men came from rather different backgrounds. RVW was the son of a clergyman who was educated at Charterhouse School and Trinity College, Cambridge, whereas HH was the son of a plumber who had gone bankrupt. Howells was greatly influenced by Vaughan Williams who was twenty years his senior. Music bound them together, as it does all of us down the centuries. I hope that we sang them well.

As this is the last Choir Notes of 2019, I would like to say thank you on behalf of all the choir to Jeff and Cynthia for their leadership and direction throughout another memorable year. We are always pushed to achieve more than we believe we can. And the highlight of 2019 surely has to be our singing evensong at St Paul's Cathedral. My mother would have been so proud.

Which brings me to my final point. As you know, the choir relies on financial support from the Bledlow 100 Club which has been run for the last year by Rob Hill who has had to stand down due to business pressure. I am grateful to Rob who took over from me when I, too, was under a great deal of pressure. So I am taking the job back and will be in touch soon.

Mike Beattie
100 Club