

Choir Notes – December 2020

The Choir is meeting once again on Thursday evenings. It is wonderful to be singing together, although not every member has been able to return yet, so the numbers are down, and not everyone who rehearses can sing at services, where the choir is limited to six (two sopranos, two altos and one each of tenors and basses).

No-one can complain about restrictions due to the virus, as it is a natural disaster, and precautions are inevitable. The common cold is another corona virus, and Covid-19 seems similarly contagious, so we sing socially-distanced, with visors on, and wipe our chairs with antiseptic wipes after rehearsal.

My visor mists as I sing, and my glasses slide down my nose, until I can read neither the words nor the music, except by squinting down my nose to peek under the edge of the visor with my head tilted upwards, which may be bad for my neck or cause a squint, but it is that or being totally silent.

Jeff is as cheery as ever and corrects us as best he can with limited hearing behind his pop-up plastic screen. His choice of anthems appears on the easy side of the repertoire, which is good, as I have forgotten how to sing, and my voice is rusty, needing to be eased back into business. I realise that I have forgotten my pencil, an indispensable singers' tool.

Cynthia is back at the organ, great as ever: she must have limbered her fingers daily in lockdown. We are all spread around the church, with Cynthia the only fixed point as she can't carry the organ about the church easily; so with Jeff behind his screen and face visor, maybe thirty feet from her, conversations between them are difficult, and much repeated in crescendo. Sopranos are hitting the high notes with confidence. I can't hear Greg, my only fellow bass, who is about five yards from me, at all, so it's like singing on my own. While the pieces are easy, and we have sung them before, it requires great concentration to read the music, try to see and hear Jeff in the distance through his and your own visors, while trying to sound nice.

Jeff records hymns for up-coming virtual services on a hand-size recording machine, so there are breaks while he listens to what he has recorded, after which he mostly says 'great', but occasionally 'let's do that again'.

We sing 'Lead me Lord' by Samuel Wesley, and 'Ave Verum Corpus' by Elgar, and the Kyrie from Casciolini's Mass in A Minor. Jeff says that it is his favourite Kyrie and tells us, to encourage greater efforts, of a rehearsal for a joint service by the choirs of Westminster Abbey and the Sistine Chapel. The Westminster choir sang the Casciolini Mass alone first: the Italian choirmaster murmured "Si, é bello, ma non é canto" [It's beautiful, but it's not singing]. The point is that we need to let rip like Italians, who let rip liberally, unlike a restrained C of E choir. Imagine a choir where the sopranos are clones of Montserrat Caballé; the altos of Janet Baker; the tenors of Pavarotti, and the basses of Bryn Terfel. But we'd need to build a new, bigger church of reinforced concrete to contain the sound safely!

I wrote all of the above just before the latest strict lock-down was announced, when I was expecting a further rehearsal followed by the Remembrance Day service. It is sad that when I had just learnt to sing again, I am going into reverse, and will have to re-train myself when the lock-down eases again, probably too late for the Advent Carol Service (unless it is postponed), but I hope in time for a carol service.

We are still able to meet for a rehearsal on Guy Fawkes' night, but with uncertainty when we will meet again, so we put in a mammoth session, recording not just Remembrance Sunday virtual service material, but the virtual Advent Carol Service too. We are there for two hours, and crack on through it all, as it is fun, and easier than singing alone to a computer, and better for Jeff who can record something in ten minutes which would otherwise take him or Stephen an hour or more adjusting electronically. The effort that they have put in over lockdowns has been colossal.

So, with an uncertain immediate future, we just have to hope for the best for Christmas, and keep smiling through!

Rob Hill

The virtual services can be seen and heard via the parish website and at www.bledlownvirtualservices.uk