

Choir Notes – December 2024



Jeff is away, leading a choir in Lincoln Cathedral, for our first practice this month, so Cynthia takes the practice alone.

Now, choir practice leadership is ideally a two-person job. One cannot conduct while all fingers and thumbs are stuck to the keyboard, nor wave one's arms while playing the piano. So it is hard work for Cynthia, for which we are grateful, as we need all the practice that we can get.

We are learning two pieces, '*Drop Down, Ye Heavens*' by Anna Lapwood (*left* - born 1995, so not yet 30) and '*Preces and Responses*' by Gabriel Jackson (born 1962 in Hamilton, Bermuda, and still composing). These have to be ready for Evensong at St Paul's Cathedral on 16th December – do come if you can.

Anna Lapwood has a radio programme on Saturdays on Radio 3 called "From the Organ Loft". She said on that how much she admires James MacMillan, the Scottish composer. I can hear similarities between '*Drop Down*' and MacMillan's '*A New Song*', which we have sung before.

The next week, Jeff continues to train us with the new pieces. He makes the point that you have to see how each composer uses chords and progressions. By the end of the rehearsal, we are catching on to the two composers' methods.

On 26th October we have a Coffee-Time Concert featuring Penglei Liang, soprano, and Peng Lin, piano. Jeff is away at Snape Maltings, so he puts out a plea for volunteers. At first, he only gets ladies volunteering, as the men are slower to stick up their hands, so he then asks for men. What for? Men are only useful for lifting heavy weights or reaching on top of cupboards, neither of which skill is needed here. Is it as bouncers to control rowdy elements? Anyway, I volunteer, and how pleased I am that I did, as the concert is marvellous. Penglei sings songs in French, German, Italian and Chinese, including operatic songs, lieder and French art songs, all with amazing emotion and a rich voice with lovely, gravelly low notes as well as the wonderful high notes that one expects from a soprano. Peng Lin played an amazing piano solo. There were no rowdy types to evict.

These concerts were started to raise money to pay for the piano, originally bought on credit, without which we could not have had these concerts. We have now paid for the piano, and our ticket sales go partly towards the choir's modest running costs, partly to the church, and partly to the performers. It is just wonderful how many great performers Jeff knows and can persuade to come to Bledlow. The risk of buying the piano on credit has paid off well, getting both fun concerts and help for choir funds. How many times have I said that Jeff is amazing?

Our rehearsal on 31st October is a business-like note-bashing (choir-speak for learning the tune) rehearsal, when we work on the responses by Gabriel Jackson, and start on '*My Soul, There is a Country*' by Hubert Parry (1848-1918).

On 7th November, we practise for Remembrance Sunday, now just three days away. Jeff springs a new '*Kyrie Eleison*' on us by Orlando de Lassus (1532-1594) from '*Missa Octavi Toni*'. It is nicknamed '*Missa Jäger*' (Hunter's Mass, as scurrilous rumour says that Albrecht V, Duke of Bavaria, who employed Orlando de Lassus for a while, asked for a short mass so as not to reduce his hunting time). Jeff says that it is easy, and it is, but it exhibits confidence on his part in the choir to ask us to learn it to performance standard in just one week.

And we work further on '*My Soul*', which we have sung before: a tricky piece because of changes of speed and time signature, for which Jeff gives a quick upbeat and then we're in. We work on it and get it to a reasonable standard by the end of the rehearsal. Jeff has to give tips, like that the poem by Henry Vaughan refers to "he is thy Gracious Friend" (ie Jesus), and we should sound as if we are having a keenly awaited catch up with an old friend, rather than being furious on meeting an enemy (it comes out that way sometimes). Barring some disaster, we should give a cracking performance to our best standard.

And so, to Remembrance Sunday. We make a hash of both de Lassus and Parry on the two run-throughs, largely timing issues caused by not watching Jeff, but also by slowly going flat. Jeff begs us to look at him, as some of us, perhaps the majority, are not. He also asks us to always imagine that long notes are "climbing". It must be so worrying, when there is a chance of failure, as Jeff cares passionately about the music. And it works, as we sing both pieces well when crunch-time arrives. Every year, the Remembrance Sunday service is so moving, as we remember those who lost their lives in the service of their country, many of them dying right at the very beginning of their adult lives. One hopes that the music adds to the emotion of the occasion.

We look forward to seeing some familiar faces from the parish in the congregation for Evensong at St Paul's Cathedral at 5.00pm on Monday 16th December.