

Whitehall Choir  
Conductor's Report 2015

This has been a varied season with a wide range of repertoire covered and much food for thought engendered.

Our first concert was to have been a rare performance of C P E Bach's Magnificat, coupled with his father J S's setting of the same words together with the brilliant short Cantata movement no. 50. However, our plans were thwarted by a discovery of asbestos in SJSS and we were not able to rehearse there. A short rehearsal of the Bach Magnificat and Cantata 50 in St Stephen's Rochester Row enabled us to pull these two works together, and we performed them with no rehearsal in the venue. Stephen Farr played the Fantasia in G by Bach on the organ and the orchestra played Bach's Violin Concerto in A minor which they had briefly rehearsed in St Stephen's. It was all a mess but the concert went well and everyone rose to the occasion. It was a real shame that we were not able to perform the CPEB as that was the rarity which a number of audience had come to hear. It was wonderful, as ever, to work with the outstanding London Baroque Sinfonia with their leader Catherine Martin who played the violin concerto.

Our carol concert at St. Stephen's followed on 16 December and went very well despite the habitual paucity of rehearsal time. These are nice occasions although this particular one was not dealt with sympathetically by the new vicar who accused me of being an old Etonian (the thought of it!) and was not helpful either in his spoken comments or with practical things like the sound system for readings. It will be good to move on this year.

The choral workshop was held on Saturday 24th January at St Stephen's and you covered the Mozart and Schubert works we were to perform next with Ben Goodson as I wasn't able to be there. Jo Tomlinson reports that 'there was a good turn out of choir members and quite a few guests. It was a wonderful day musically, Ben giving us a really thrilling time but it proved to be the nail in the coffin for our time at St Stephen's as they failed to put on the heating despite reminders and it was agonisingly, but agonisingly cold'. The temperature at St S's is something which few will miss – except perhaps in the heat of a really midsummer day when the cool would be welcome. But that happens so rarely it is barely worth mentioning!

We performed Mozart's great Mass in C minor and Schubert's Stabat Mater in SJSS with the Brandenburg Sinfonia on Maundy Thursday. We hadn't worked with the BS for as while and it was good to reconnect with them. It was another rarity with which we began the programme. No-one in the orchestra knew the Schubert Stabat Mater and so it was a steep learning curve for them, especially the first oboe who had some wonderful solos and who played them outstandingly. The Mozart is a big, complex piece which you rose to with your usual aplomb on the night. In rehearsal, though, you had been very last minute about getting this together and we were still getting it right on the final Tuesday evening. This, together with similar

experiences in previous seasons is partly what led to all the naval gazing which has been instigated since. But it did go well and the audience seemed genuinely pleased by it. For once, we also had a 'proper' review which was published in the quarterly Musical Opinion magazine. Edward Clark wrote that 'It was a real pleasure to attend, at SJSS, London, a choral concert that featured music other than the seasonal Bach and Handel. Instead a breath of fresh air was afforded by a rare performance of Schubert's early Stabat mater and the always delightful Mass in C minor by Mozart. The Whitehall Choir, under its musical director, the excellent and experienced Paul Spicer, was joined by four young soloists to rejoice in a pre-Easter choral experience. The voices in the choir are a mix of reclusive tenors and abundant sopranos, the latter numbering double the former. This gives the sound a particularly bright shine which is no bad thing in many sections of the Mozart Mass. What helped enormously are Spicer's abilities to bring out the general tone of the music through careful balancing and by paying attention to the score dynamics. Sudden appearances of really quiet singing added interest and lustre to both works.'

We ended the season just last week with a concert devoted to the magisterial Vaughan Williams in a summer programme which had light and shade in it and which created a perfectly balanced listening experience. We gave this concert in St Peter's Eaton Square which is to be our new rehearsal home from next term. This will be, I feel sure, a good move for us judging by the warmth of the welcome we had from the vicar and the practical help from the verger. The church is lovely to sing in, warmly reverberant and with a fine and colourful organ which Ian Tindale used to the full. We had rehearsed this programme very thoroughly although, as usual, the process of rehearsal was not very straightforward or uniformly progressive. However, a couple of final hard-hitting Tuesday evenings got us to a pitch where you could really shine. And shine you most certainly did. I would go as far as to say that this was one of the most enjoyable concerts, performance-wise, in recent years. Very attentive singing, musical, and allowing me to take the odd risk when I felt a musical moment was in order. We were very much inspired by young Henry Neill, whose glowing baritone in the Mystical Songs really showed a maturity both of voice and interpretation which belied his youth. Soo Bishop came to play the trumpet and did so beautifully, adding a real new colour to the end of the concert, and Ian, our precious and brilliant accompanist played both organ and piano with outstanding musicianship. How lucky we are.

So, a season of variety and of ups and downs. We had auditions this year as well as all this and it gave me an opportunity to hear and to classify each one of you. It was a very useful stock-taking exercise. Each one of you had a personalized response from me and some of you do have issues and need to work on elements of both vocal technique and reading ability.

This term I have been concerned by a worsening punctuality at rehearsals. More often than not we begin with no more than about 20 people (if that). I

always have to temper my dissatisfaction over this because I know that a number of you have big responsible jobs and can't get away earlier than you do. However, I sometimes wonder if others hide behind this and are lazy about turning up on time. We need our rehearsal hours. If people miss rehearsals then you have to catch up. Too often we are starting again with something already rehearsed.

More than this, we have been losing singers, especially tenors in recent months. This is sad, and recruitment is one of the biggest issues we face as a choir. We need more tenors and basses. We should all be trying to find these elusive voices. The better the balance (as hinted at in that review), the better the performance, the easier everything is, providing that we recruit good new people. We also need to recruit good news S/A as well as the choir has to constantly renew and revitalize itself. All of us need to take this on board.

We had a difficult and challenging season last season with the recording testing us to our limits. Hence the dropping of MacMillan's great Seven Last Words from the Cross from this season's programme. We are now even less likely to be able to programme this masterpiece until we have sufficient numbers and better internal balance to perform it convincingly.

Being in a choir like ours should be enjoyable hard work. We are an auditioned choir where certain standards are expected, especially by the orchestras we work with and being known for excellent performances bring more people to hear is. It is all a virtuous circle. But we all need to take responsibility for our own part in it. Just turning up for a good sing on a Tuesday isn't really enough.

So, we have much to do. But the essential thing is that you are capable of really good things as last Tuesday showed. That should give us all the confidence to move forward as we must do.

Thanks to Jonathan for his tireless work as Chairman. It is a very big task involving huge amounts of work on all our behalves. Thanks, too, to Patrick and to Jo as the principal officers for the work they both do to make sure everything runs smoothly and efficiently. We all owe them (and many others) a huge debt of gratitude.

Paul Spicer  
July 2015