

Minutes of the 2017/18 Whitehall Choir Annual General Meeting held at St Peter's Eaton Square, Tuesday, 3 July 2018, 6.30pm

The Minutes of the previous season's AGM were unanimously accepted as a true record.

Secretary's report

Presented by Ruth Eastman.

The defining event of this season, the arrival of Jo Tomlinson as our new Music Director, has had a hugely positive effect: a healthy rise in membership (figures in full report), an obvious improvement in vocal sound and a palpable boost in choir morale. The Open Rehearsals each term have helped drive up recruitment. All our concerts were well attended and audiences were consistently enthusiastic. A subsequent survey to identify hidden talents among members and open up volunteer opportunities within the choir has reaped benefits too, as an encouraging proportion of the many members who responded have since become involved in different ways. Thanks went to Martin Humphreys for his work in publicity, particularly his concert promotion videos with Jo, to Sam Foley for acting as Returning Officer, to the team of volunteers who helped at the party following the summer concert and to our Treasurer, Patrick Haighton, for the very large amount he does for the choir. This was Jonathan Williams's last AGM as Chairman. He was thanked for his 15 years of sterling service on the Committee, first as Secretary and for the past seven years as Chairman.

The Secretary's full report is attached as a PDF. No comments arose.

Treasurer's report

Presented by Patrick Haighton.

A surplus for the season is expected. The main income has been in subscriptions (£14k) and Gift Aid (£4k), with ticket sales this season: of £16k, 50 per cent of which is through the choir. Fund-raising comes through tea in rehearsal breaks, Give As You Earn scheme, and the Amazon button on our website, which works out better, because of advertising, than Smile Amazon. Rehearsals cost £11k (£130 an hour). It

was felt that both online and door sales could be improved. Ticket pricing was to be considered under AOB (see below).

In addressing the costs, Patrick explained that we expect to break even on non-orchestral concerts, although we don't always; orchestral fees of £5-£6k are hard to meet. With every concert we have the cost of professional musicians, equipment, such as occasional piano hire or extra staging, and venue hire. Subs are a donation to charity – this allows us to get Gift Aid, which is why we have to buy everything else, such as music (we are often able to get a better price for this via Alison's bulk deals). Publicity costs are changing because of the shift from print to digital (e-flyers, videos and social media). We need a lot of involvement and co-ordination with social media (post-meeting note: Martin has said he will work something up and share with choir members like Gemma Steel who voluntarily post on Facebook and Instagram). In terms of cash flow, there is typically a lot of money at the start of the season. Consideration was being given to the choir putting this cash in an interest-earning position until it is required. One option might be to use the Jubilee Fund on a temporary basis to generate interest, although this would need to be explored further with the Signatories.

[Note, taken from a report by Ian Williamson at last year's AGM minutes: The Jubilee Fund was founded at a time when finances were tough, during our Golden Jubilee in 1993, hence the name. To help replenish the coffers members of the choir got together and organised auctioned promises and sponsored walks, and £20,000 was raised! This money was just the financial cushion needed and would mean we would not 'go to the wall' in the event of a bad audience; increased financial security would enable us to take more risks. The Jubilee Fund also would, and does, provide funds for development. The Signatories have to ensure that any significant use of the Fund is supported by the members.]

Last week's Summer concert showed a c. £1k surplus – we sold more than projected: 164 seats (46 on the door, 38 online and 80 through the choir). The advantage of concerts at St Peter's is that it is less expensive than alternative venues while also offering a great acoustic. Five pounds was charged for drinks and nibbles after the concert; actually it worked out to £3.50 a head. There was a feeling that only 80 per cent of people would pay but more did.

The age range of current members spans from 21 to 78. Subscriptions are £240 (full rate) or £20 per month; Patrick proposed that the rate for

next season should remain unchanged, with same discount rate for young members. Carried unanimously.

The Treasurer's full Report is attached as a PDF. No comments arose.

Music Director's report

Presented by Jo Tomlinson.

Jo has enjoyed her first year and is pleased with the renewed energy and drive. Several months before the start of the Autumn term, she was busy with planning and development ideas. Membership numbers were a key issue, as numbers were already low and more were due to leave on Paul's retirement. She suggested a new website and an Open Rehearsal near the beginning of the Autumn term. The Committee were supportive and membership across the choir rose, although we will always need to keep recruiting. We need to focus on tenor recruitment urgently. The higher numbers help financially (through subscriptions and ticket sales) and also make a huge impact on the sound of the choir.

Musically, the biggest issues were over-singing, with tight throats and a lack of support and airflow, sometimes resulting in a harsh tone and limited range of dynamics and lack of text clarity; intonation issues particularly at one stage in the sopranos; and lack of facial communication with the audience, with the associated issue of watching the conductor.

The 're-auditions', or voice checks, in September allowed Jo to hear everyone and give hints to individuals on what could be worked on. She re-balanced the parts slightly closer to her taste of weight and colour. Reconfiguring the rehearsal room seating helped reduce over-singing.

The first concert was Handel's *Joshua*. There was a huge amount of work to do to sort out scores and track down orchestral parts for this very rarely performed oratorio, as well as working out cuts, but it was the perfect piece for us at the time. Not too many choruses enabled plenty of time for work on vocal development and story-telling. It was also helpful to have the advice and support of Peter McCarthy, who runs London Baroque Sinfonia and fixed us a superb orchestra for the concert. We had a very nice online review for the concert.

Our Christmas concert was enjoyable and it was lovely to sing in our home church. We managed to start rehearsing some of the carols earlier

in the term to avoid a massive rush in just a few weeks. With such a short rehearsal on the day Jo hopes we'll be adding a Monday rehearsal this Christmas.

Spring saw an intense programme of music by Brahms and Schubert. The choir found the German challenging, but hopefully the detailed work we did on pronunciation will mean that the rules will have been retained and works like next term's song by Fanny Mendelssohn (Hensel) will be easier! Thanks were extended to Sandy Jones for expert language coaching. The *German Requiem* was a great piece for working on spinning a legato line, and there was a rapid improvement in sound quality and stamina, particularly among the sopranos.

Last term, Bernstein and Lauridsen gave the opportunity to work on certain elements of vocal technique as well as giving a musical challenge in the case of the Bernstein. Performing Runestad's *Alleluia* from memory was a chance to work on watching the conductor and communicating with the audience. Jo was so proud of us for a wonderful performance.

She also said how lucky we are to have Ian Tindale as our accompanist – Ian is not only a superb accompanist and organist but also incredibly supportive of the choir and very much loved by everyone.

We were also extremely fortunate that Jonathan had stayed on as Chairman longer than he might have done to oversee the transition in Music Director, and Jo will miss working alongside him. There has been a huge amount to do for him and all the Committee, particularly Ruth and Patrick during this transitional year, and we are lucky to have people who are so dedicated to the choir doing so much for us. It's also wonderful to see how everyone does something to help and how passionate everyone is about the choir they sing with.

The Music Director's report is attached as a PDF.

A word from the retiring Chairman

Jonathan thanked the Committee, especially Patrick and Ruth for their work throughout the season. He said that whilst the three officers carry responsibility as trustees of the choir, all the Committee roles represent considerable areas of work, not least the Librarian, Alison, who organises sets of scores each term with great efficiency. He was very grateful to everyone in the choir who helps. Next season there is a fully-

fledged programme planned. Cantus Novus Wien are coming in November; JW will work with Daniel Lambauer over the summer on that. Jo has booked soloists for *The Creation* (post-meeting note: Miriam Allan (soprano), Greg Tassell (tenor) and James Oldfield (bass-baritone); all three sang with us in *Joshua*). Work has been done by the Committee on 'rebranding' the choir: a new president who has links with the DIT (nomenclature explained in May 2018 minutes) is being explored and we hope to have three to four names of patrons by the end of the summer. Fund-raising for *The Creation* has been high on the agenda too, as we need to find an additional £4k to stage it. With a new Music Director now settled in this is a good time to hand over. Jonathan thanked us for the card and gift presented to him by Jo after the concert, saying both were a surprise. Following up on his impromptu tour guide moments in Vienna (see Secretary's report), he recalled that it arose in response to our own 'guide' in the city not being very conversant with its culture so he revealed how he had quickly boned up to plug the gap. Tours, he said, are great for getting to know other members of the choir and he hoped it wouldn't be too long before the next took place. He also thanked all who were standing for the Committee and vouched for the benefits of being on it.

Election of the Committee for the 2017/18 Season and Re-election of the Jubilee Fund Signatories

The election of the Committee was taken as two blocks, officers and main Committee. Positions in both were passed unanimously. John Turner and Jack Joseph proposed and seconded, respectively, that the main Committee be taken as a block; officers – as per nominations below. After a year-long vacancy we have a Business Manager again, so thanks and congratulations to Laura Lowenthal. Jubilee Fund Signatories were re-elected as a block as proposed and seconded, respectively, by William Longland and Martin Humphreys.

COMMITTEE OFFICERS

Chairman: *Philip Pratley*

Proposer: Ruth Eastman **Seconded:** Daniel Lambauer

Treasurer: *Patrick Haighton*

Proposer: Kate Hand **Seconded:** John Turner

Secretary: *Ruth Eastman*

Proposer: Patrick Haighton **Seconded:** Lucilla Poston

MAIN COMMITTEE

Publicity: Martin Humphreys

Proposer: William Longland **Second:** Laurence Grace

Business Manager: *Laura Lowenthal*

Proposer: Patrick Houghton **Second:** Ruth Eastman

Webmaster: Richard Grafen

Proposer: Laurence Grace **Second:** Izas Ozerin

Librarian: *Alison Williams*

Proposer: Helen Ward **Second:** Jane Mackay

Soprano Representative: *Kate Goulden*

Proposer: Gemma Steel **Second:** Fiona Graph

Alto Representative: *Sarah Rollinson*

Proposer: Jean Orr **Second:** Paula Nobes

Tenor Representative: *Simon Hunter*

Proposer: Graham Hand **Second:** Alastair Tolley

Bass Representative: *Ian Williamson*

Proposer: Will Carruthers **Second:** Daniel Lambauer

Jubilee Signatories: *Ian Williamson, Jacky Erwteman, Mark Graver*

Joint Proposer: William Longland **Joint Second:** Martin Humphreys

A word from the new Chairman

In thanking Sam Foley for her work as Returning Officer, Philip Pratley said he was honoured to be elected Chairman at such an exciting time in the choir's history. As an ambitious choir, he said, Jo has exposed us to new repertoire and a new style of singing. He was grateful to Jonathan's guidance during the transition of Music Director and to Jo's vision. As Chairman, he will welcome new ideas. He particularly noted the strength of so many members working for the choir through volunteering.

Any other business

1) Fiona Graph had raised the following question for consideration: *Why are no concessions offered on our tickets for pensioners or unemployed*

people? I have several friends who would come to more concerts but can't afford it. If the concern is that we would lose money from doing this, could we not consider offering a set number of concessions tickets for each concert and that they are only available through Choir members?

- Patrick Houghton is against the idea of discounting, which has been discussed before in committee. It's particularly hard to administer. To address the need, though, there are always 'cheaper' tickets on offer, e.g. £10 at last concert. Only one £10 ticket was sold through the choir and three were sold on the door. All of the expensive tickets were sold out before the last concert. The cost of venues has gone up dramatically and ticket prices are affected by this. The average price is £18, which is okay for St Peter's. However, for *The Creation* we're going to have to charge around £30-£40 for the upper ticket price, as SJSS hire charges are now £1,950 plus VAT. SJSS also take a commission on ticket prices. In terms of concessions they do give a 10% discount to Westminster residents (plus booking fee).
- Jeremy Lucas agreed with Patrick. A key input in deciding ticket price is the capacity of the venue. In a venue like St Peter's with limited capacity which you believe you can fill with full-price ticket sales, discounting doesn't make financial sense. In a large venue, selling tickets more cheaply to an easily defined group, like the under 30s, would enable you to fill seats you would not otherwise have sold. A cheaper price may be justified, too, if there really are inferior seats with restricted view.
- Jane Lewis asked whether it would be worth selling the less expensive tickets at the higher value.
- Kate Goulden reminded us that Fiona has friends who would come for the lower price.
- Jack Joseph says we overlook the younger market (under 30s). Some of his audience come just to support, not necessarily because of the music, so £20 seems like a lot.
- Philip Pratley says we should look at this in committee. Prices can depend on the venue and older age presents challenges because of the demographic of the choir.
- Deb Dowall said ticket sales could have fund-raising potential through sponsorship. For example as part of the sponsorship package, we could ask for or say that some of their donation will cover the cost of discounted tickets for the aged, infirm and young – if the discounted price is £10, say, and full price is £20, then £100 sponsorship would cover the cost of 10 discounted tickets.
- Ian Williamson did research on another choir and most of the audience were over 50. Our audience is similar.

- Ruth Eastman wondered if 10 tickets could be sold for the price of 9?
Philip thanked everyone for their helpful remarks.

2) Martin Humphreys reminded us to take and distribute (or email) the Come & Sing flyers.

In drawing the meeting to a close Philip Pratley thanked Jonathan, Jo and Ian Tindale *in absentia* (whom he will write to) – and everyone present.

The meeting closed at 7.55 pm.