

Conductor's Report for Whitehall Choir AGM 2007

Paul Spicer

Recording
Bach Jesu meine Freude etc
Christmas concert
Mark Passion
Tour
Mozart C minor Mass

This has been an action-packed season with some real highlights. For me, it has also been a season which has confirmed our strengths and weaknesses as a choir – of which a bit more later. But there is most definitely and observably a trajectory upwards in standards and confidence, too, I think, and that is exciting and rewarding.

The season began with the recording of the Bruckner Mass and my Deciduous Cross. Sam Foley had come to visit me in Lichfield the previous summer and we hatched this plan over a nice outdoor lunch at Ask. She felt, and I wholeheartedly agreed, that the choir needed a big and exciting project to get its collective teeth into. We felt that the Bruckner/Dvorak/Spicer concert had gone so well and had been so well received that it was the ideal programme to record. A short run of rehearsals at the start of term put us in fighting form for this big new experience for the choir. The Bruckner, in particular, is a very tough nut to perform, and I feel that the choir has come out of this very creditably. I have little idea what the critics will say when it is reviewed, but as a stage along the road we are travelling together, I reckon this is no mean feat and I get plenty of pleasure in listening to it. You all took my piece to heart, for which I am really grateful, and produced an outstanding performance and one which I am proud to get people to listen to. I have no qualms about this. So congratulations to one and all, and of course warmest thanks to all those, particularly Monica, for her stirring work in sweet-talking the workmen on the local building sites and, as always, Sam, for putting aside her day job for the duration! It was a huge logistical exercise, and everyone pulled their weight. Mention must be made of Ruth, too, who did all the booklet work which turned out so well.

As a result of this project we started on our main season rehearsals slightly later than normal. It was another tough nut of a programme with Bach's complex motet Jesu, meine Freude at its heart. I was perhaps a little over ambitious in the programming here as we also did big double choir motets by Brahms and Mendelssohn. These big pieces are difficult for us with our current strength of tenors, in particular, but I am unrepentant about this as these challenging pieces help to keep our reading and self-reliance levels up. The big Elgar and Parry pieces went well and it was, as usual, good to be able to field two excellent soloists from the choir in the Parry, Michel doing the great 'Clouds and Darkness' solo with aplomb, and the late and very much missed Kate Ashbridge, singing the other. We feel her loss very deeply.

The Christmas concert went well this season and was well attended. It is always fairly remarkable that this concert goes as well as it does on so little rehearsal! Next season we have an extra rehearsal! These are always happy occasions, though, and seem to be much enjoyed and appreciated by the church and the audience.

We moved, next, onto Bach's St. Mark Passion in the reconstruction by Andor Gomme who attended the performance. This was a little bit of a musical gamble for me as I wasn't 100% sure how it would turn out as there is a lot of music in the work which is not Bach's. In the event, however, by making sure that the pace was kept up and the turbae choruses were as dramatic as possible, it really worked. We had a large and interested audience who seemed very enthusiastic. I felt that you performed with real energy and commitment which helped the performance to connect vividly with the audience.

Never letting the grass grow under our feet, we moved on straight away to our tour material. Using some of the repertoire from the first concert of the season and adding the Faure Requiem and Parry's I was Glad we headed a long way south to Toulouse for a couple of concerts in and out of town. With a smallish choir and a phalanx of lady tenors we landed in the middle of the Presidential elections and the French bank holiday. Both these things reflected in our first concert where we ran the gauntlet of outside protesters/revellers – I'm not sure quite which, but in the middle of a serious programme of emotionally-charged music this was a little ruffling. Anyway, we sang to a small but seemingly enthusiastic audience and Paul Plummer managed manfully (and brilliantly) on the recalcitrant organ miles away. We then went out to Lisle sur Tarn on a day when, finally, the sun shone and we sang our hearts out to a large and very warm and enthusiastic audience. Once again, Paul Plummer did wonders with an organ which barely worked at all! It was lovely for me to have my nephew, Mark Opstad who lives and works in Toulouse, with us for some of the time and he was extremely helpful on several occasions, not least in helping Paul out with organ management.

Tours such as these are extremely good for the choir on all sorts of levels, socially, musically, and, of course, for our reputation when we do things well.

Finally, we moved on to the Mozart C minor Mass in Robert Levin's fairly recent completion. This is a very tough piece indeed, rather in the manner of Bach's B minor Mass. However, we took it apart seriously and put it back together again and what came out in the wash last Saturday was a real tour de force of a performance. I was really pleased – thrilled on occasions. Certainly musically very uplifted by the end of the evening. The orchestra was, of course, superb and we were hugely privileged to have Cat Macintosh leading for us. She is one of the most respected musicians on the circuit. More than that, however, were the world-class group of soloists and especially the two wonderful sopranos. I had had this very team at the RCM when we did it with Mackerras earlier in the year and I booked them straight away! What sheer musical delight. But, I was seriously pleased by your singing, lest you think I was just thrilled by the purchased elements! There were one or two slightly weak moments – those double choir bits in the Qui Tollis which we had such problems with last Tuesday, were still not as good as they could – or should – have been. But this was a small blip in an otherwise outstanding performance. The audience reaction at the end of the concert demonstrated their feeling, and it reflected mine too, so congratulations.

This leads me to a few reflections in a kind of 'state of the nation' moment.

- I am very concerned about the level of 'dropping out' that goes on during a term. Of course there are personal situations which occur and over which we have little or no control. However, it becomes very difficult for me when I

think I have a choir with a particular strength of people and then find that we are actually seriously down on those numbers. This is especially galling when we have a waiting list of good people not able to sing with us because we have to restrict our numbers because of stage sizes.

- Tenors: we have recently had an almost embarrassment of riches in the tenor dept and equally quickly we found that they all left us! Another very galling situation. I am, of course, enormously aware of the pressure put on the remaining and loyal tenors. The tour demonstrated just how short of tenors we are being able to field only three men and having, as I said earlier, to draft in three altos to help out. It has helped to have a new young and strong tenor from the RCM (he's not a first study singer) who is actually going to stay with us for a while having enjoyed this last term. It helped even more with the addition of the other young tenor brought in for the concert last week. This leads me to wonder if the concept of a Choral Scholar scheme for the choir might be something worth considering? It would cost us money to run it, but I feel sure that the benefits would greatly outweigh the costs involved. The difference it makes to my perception of the general sound is huge. Current tenors MUST not take this as a slight in any way at all. It is balance and blend which concerns me most of all, as well as the knowledge that if someone is away it isn't a catastrophic situation.
- Recruitment: whilst the choir is technically 'full' we must try to keep a serious lookout for excellent new singers to join us. I feel that we still need leaders in various parts as it is rather too obvious what happens when one good singer is ill or away. This really isn't good enough.
- Repertoire: I feel that this choir, as currently formulated, is extremely well-suited to works like the Bach Passion and the Mozart Mass we recently performed. You really shine in these pieces and find a confidence which is sometimes lacking in more challenging a cappella repertoire. Whilst I am obviously very keen to develop to the group, I am also very keen that when we perform we do so at a very high level of attainment. I have said this before, but it does neither my reputation nor the choir's any good when you are patently feeling your way round the music in a concert. I feel that we need to develop through singing music in which we can be confident and produce a beautiful sound with enthusiasm and energy as we did last week. I am sure that both Saul and the Monteverdi Vespers next season will do this for us. But we need to be careful of the repertoire we choose so that we are not over-stretching ourselves for our numbers and our level of attainment. When you are making suggestions to the committee for repertoire which you would like the choir to sing you need to bear these things in mind. I want the choir to build a reputation for being amongst the best of its kind for its size and type in London. We will only do this by the consistency of standard of our performances and by word of mouth advertising from satisfied audience members.

I want to end by thanking everyone on the committee for their hard work and commitment to the choir. Everyone works hard and takes special responsibility roles and this really helps everything to run as smoothly as it does. But two people, as always, need special mention: Ken Holmes, who is a remarkably steady hand on the financial tiller. He is an exemplary choir Treasurer and we are very lucky to have him in this role. And of course, Sam, who is, I think, one of the very

best choir chairs (ghastly, but then so is person, and I'm not allowed to say 'man'...). She is brim full of ideas, has energy, enthusiasm and the ability to take everyone with her. She is an exemplary chair in meetings, keeping them to the point and trying hard to cut down the rambler(!). She is also on the case ALL the time. I don't know how she does it with her busy and responsible job, but she does and it's really what is helping this choir to become the animal which is gradually is. Long may her reign continue as far as I'm concerned!

Finally, thanks to all of you who make up this choir. It is perhaps worth saying that in my early days as your conductor I nearly resigned several times as I found the pace of development so slow and people's attitudes so against change. However, I now positively look forward to Tuesdays (well, usually!) and more often than not get a real kick out of the concerts – especially when they are as good as last Saturday's. Let's go on really growing together and trying to make this choir better and better on all levels.