

Whitehall Choir 2014 AGM  
Conductor's Report

This has been one of the most interesting, most testing and challenging and, in some ways, useful seasons that we have had in recent years. I say useful because I think it has served to point up a number of areas of our operation where we need to have a rethink, or issues which we need to address. I think you have responded magnificently to huge musical challenge with which you were faced, but I feel that we were scuppered by some things which we didn't expect.

First, Sam Parsons' piece turned out to be far more difficult than any of us who were judging that competition anticipated. On paper it looked completely logical and singable. It turned out to be far more difficult and therefore to take an inordinate amount of our rehearsal and recording time. For that, as one of the judges, I apologise. In fact I was trying to take that very issue into account as a major point when looking at the competition submissions.

Second: We had a very late Easter which meant that this term was shorter by two weeks than it often is. When you then take out a recording week and associated rehearsal we were seriously short-changed for time with our most recent concert. Also, with recording rep still hanging over us, it meant that we couldn't focus 100% on the new repertoire.

As to the concert we have just done, that music was supposed to be a relaxation after the rigours of the recording music with only the Kodaly being a challenge. It turned out that all the music was more of a challenge than it was supposed to be. Being double choir also seriously stretched our current resources.

We began the season (goodness, it seems a long time ago!) with Handel's Jephtha. A classic Whitehall Choir work which you sang with great panache and distinction. These great Handel works suit us brilliantly and go so well at Smith Square.

It was wonderful to go to sing at Le Manoir with our Christmas music and I thought you acquitted yourselves expertly. Everyone seemed to enjoy it - audience and singers alike - and they got more of the French connection than they actually asked for. So we earned brownie points there. They fed us beautifully afterwards. It was a rather unexpectedly enjoyable evening on all levels. Because of this level of preparation our Christmas concert was even better than normal and was also enjoyable despite the new organ failing and the whole thing having to be accompanied on the piano.

We then began the long haul to the concert and recording at St. Alban's. I want to say one or two things about the choice of music which might feed into our discussion. Interesting repertoire is what we do here at the Whitehall Choir. I remember Bob Porter once, after an orchestral concert with some particularly rare repertoire, saying that this was a hallmark of our work which was different from other choirs. We need to be distinctive in the huge market place of London. The other point about this is that I programme what I honestly believe you can sing. Where I sometimes fall down is in the number of people who, for a variety of reasons, decide they can't sing or who miss too many rehearsals in a term and then our numbers start to dwindle and when we have multi-part music this is when the cracks begin to show.

I really do not like programming music which is two-a-penny with many other choirs and I hope that there are quite a lot of people in the choir for whom this is a real plus point. Where I suppose I need to make adjustments is in the overall balance of repertoire within a season so we get challenging music balanced by easier, rare with popular.

I am particularly aware that we should have a gentle season for our next which is why there has been such a vigorous discussion over whether or not to programme MacMillan's Seven Last Words from the Cross on Maundy Thursday.

I thought that you rose to the challenge of the recording wonderfully well and I hope that you all enjoy hearing the outcome. It is a fascinating programme which demonstrates my philosophy for choice of repertoire very clearly, balancing the familiar with the unfamiliar, straightforward with difficult. It is a disc which a lover of choral music might look at and think 'what an interesting sequence of music' rather than just being another vanity disc for an amateur choir.

The most recent concert sounded great in that beautiful acoustic at Holy Trinity. As we know, it suffered from lack of preparation time though you rose to the challenge and acquitted yourselves well. It all held together and there were some marvellous moments for everyone to enjoy. The Kodaly was particularly successful. Had we had the two extra weeks we needed we would have been totally on top of it all. One of those things this year!

In all my long career I never get over the issue of the one rehearsal a week choir. My life is dominated by these weekly moments leading to a public outcome. Birmingham Bach Choir, Birmingham Conservatoire Chamber Choir and you. I turn up to each of these rehearsals and the first thing I see is all those who are missing and think of all the catching up which has to go on. For me it is like building a house where every few stages there is a row of bricks missing which undermines the structure. One hopes that people are catching up with what is missed.

The feedback you have all provided in response to the recent questions about repertoire and approach has been very interesting to read and I am very glad that most people like the challenging music as well as the more easily accessible. For me and the committee it is getting the balance right, and we will work hard to try to do that for these coming seasons.

I want to thank Ian Tindale who is one of the best accompanists we have had in my time with the choir. Fully engaged and supportive, capable of taking excellent rehearsals and being a marvellous keyboard player. We are very lucky to have him.

Thanks, too, to Jonathan for being such an excellent Chairman. That is a big job which he handles with skill and devotion. Thanks, too, to Patrick for his wonderfully supportive work as Treasurer and to Jo as our tireless Secretary. Many other members of the committee contribute hugely to the smooth running and success of this choir. Thanks to them all.

And what of the future? Well, from my perspective, it is really about recruitment so that we can develop and not stagnate. Whilst the guy standing at the front and waving is undoubtedly important and I try to do a great deal to train you all vocally so we sound good and teach you the notes and develop an interpretation of the music being sung, I can only work with what I have in front of me. We need more tenors and basses in particular and I hope that everyone will keep a serious look out for potential recruits so we can build the group up to proper strength in all its sections. That makes it more enjoyable for everyone.

Thank you all for your hard work throughout this challenging season. I hope the summer will be a good rest and that we will all return in good heart and voice to take on the new season's music.

Paul Spicer