

Whitehall Choir 2020 AGM – 30 June 2020: Chair’s Report (Philip Pratley)

This evening, we can reasonably assume, is a first. At no previous Annual General Meeting in Whitehall Choir’s distinguished history have the members attended from so many different places. Indeed, until recently it would simply not have been possible to meet as a video call connected over laptops, tablets and smartphones. So for our 2020 AGM, we set a first: no single location but instead a meeting as a Zoom call.

Those words – Zoom call - are now familiar. They’ve entered our vocabulary in the last 15 weeks. I’d like on behalf of all of us especially to thank Jo Tomlinson for her innovation, phenomenal musicianship and sheer commitment in providing such a remarkably varied programme each Tuesday on *Zoom*, that word again. And we are equally fortunate in the support we enjoy from Ian Tindale.

In a moment Jo will offer her thoughts on the 2019-2020 season, and more importantly perhaps, on the season ahead. For my part, I will simply say that our performance of Handel's Messiah in St John's Smith Square was among the most thrilling in which I have been involved, and I know that many of us felt the same. The evening, with 4 tremendous soloists and a remarkable orchestra, was the culmination of so much that Jo brings to developing our performance, and then producing it in the concert itself. Our Christmas concert and the post-concert party had the same sense of vitality about it. We did not know that these were to be our only 2 performances this season. With the successful Come & Sing which launched the season, those concerts set a headmark to which we are determined we shall return.

Without doubt the saddest moment of the season was the tragic, sudden death of our friend Laurie Grace. Laurie's sense of passion was evident in everything he gave to our Choir throughout his long

membership. More even than that, we valued his friendship and the laughter he brought to us. The tributes by email, and especially on the Zoom call in which we were joined by past choir members and by Laurie's family, spoke of how special he was. We will find an appropriate way of honouring his memory when we are able to meet and have concerts again. Thank you to those, particularly Ian and Martin, for such thoughtful contact with Laurie's family. We will miss him.

As at the conclusion of every season, there are singers who are leaving us and also changes in the committee. Paraphrasing our President, Antonia Romeo, our concerts have shown that as a choir we have professionalised our performance, and we must also professionalise our administration.

We outlined the approach we would take at the AGM last year, and the Committee's work in the first half of the season took us a considerable way along that path. In particular, we have rebalanced

the committee posts, and are also able to bring this evening a revised Constitution to ensure that we remain up to date with the developments in Charity Commission protocols. Simon will shortly provide a more detailed commentary on the revised Constitution, which the Committee and Jubilee Fund Custodians have studied and agreed in detail. I'm grateful to Simon and colleagues for their careful, patient diligence in this, and the assurance it provides for the future.

To those stepping down from the committee – thank you for all you have brought to the way we run the Choir, for your time and energy in giving us such a confident basis for the future. Thank you too for those who have accepted nominations to *be* on our Committee. We are exceptionally fortunate in having so many members involved in running the choir, those on the committee and those who support us in other tasks, be that publicity, programmes, fund raising, catering, front of house for our reciprocal arrangements with Constanza, and the many other ways in which you make a contribution.

Of course, given the way we have had to hold the final part of last term and the whole of this it was tricky to arrange an AGM. One of the most important initiatives was the on-line survey. Thank you for the response rate of over 80% and such encouraging responses in detail. Sarah will be summarising the results, with some of your individual thoughts. We look to continue that conversation over the summer and into next season, so please don't think the survey was a one-off exercise. We would be delighted if you let us know your thoughts.

And a special thanks to all of you, the members of our Choir, for the way you made our concerts in November and December so successful, for welcoming new members, for making the past 15 weeks work, for keeping Tuesday evening as a special part of the weekly diary, and for keeping in touch with each other.

The nation faces a crisis bigger than any since the Second World War. That was when our predecessors *founded* our choir. I hope they would think that by the way *we* are continuing with the Choir *today*, we are staying *true* to their spirit, especially in the sense of our Choir being a community.

And I hope *you* feel that we are staying true to the ambitious, fulfilling aims we confirmed a year ago. We are setting them again for ourselves now, and in so doing we are continuing to ensure we have resilient foundations for the future.

It's a pleasure to invite Jo to give her report as MD, followed by Sarah with the Treasurer's Report, then Simon with the Constitution and Jubilee Fund Amendments, after which we will be able take a few questions.