

Whitehall Choir – AGM 2018 – Music Director’s Report

I have enjoyed my first year as Music Director of the choir so much and have been made so welcome by the choir. We’ve had an exciting first year together and I feel that the choir has a renewed energy and drive.

My time with the choir began several months before the start of the Autumn term, with planning and development ideas to put in place over the summer. Membership numbers were clearly a key issue, as numbers were already low and more were due to leave on Paul’s retirement. Alto numbers were particularly low. I suggested that a new website and a look at our marketing image would be crucial and suggested an “Open Rehearsal” near the beginning of the Autumn term. I was very lucky that the committee were supportive of these ideas and prepared to take the financial risk. Membership across the choir rose by around 30 members over the year, and although we will always need to keep recruiting as members inevitably move away, we are certainly in a much better position with membership, and now with altos at full capacity! We will certainly need to focus on tenor recruitment urgently. The higher numbers of course helps financially, not only with subscriptions but also ticket sales, but also makes a huge impact on the sound of the choir.

Musically I saw the biggest issues for the choir being 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 in the sopranos; and lack of facial communication with the audience/watching the conductor.

We held a day of “re-auditions” for current members in September which was very useful for me to hear everyone and give a few hints as to what individuals could work on. I re-balanced the parts slightly so that the voice types on each part were more my taste of weight and colour. We also changed around the configuration of the rehearsal room which seemed to help stop the choir over-singing.

The first concert of the year was Handel’s *Joshua* at St John’s Smith Square in November. When I inherited this programme I was a little anxious as 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, always a huge job. In the end, it was the perfect piece for us at the time. Not too heavy with choruses so we had plenty of time for the vocal development work that I wanted to do. And plenty of opportunity for story-telling, which gave the chance to work on our communication. It was also great to have the invaluable 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 lovely to have the chance to sing in our home church. We managed to make a start on rehearsing some of the carols earlier in the term to avoid a massive rush at the last minute to learn a programme in just a few weeks. I hadn’t realised until later in the term that there was only a very short rehearsal on the day and I’m hoping we’ll be adding a Monday rehearsal this Christmas so that we can be more relaxed in that hour’s rehearsal at the Tuesday concert.

In the Spring we moved on to an intense German programme, including music by Brahms and Schubert, all in German. I know the choir found the German challenging, but I hope the detailed work we did on pronunciation will mean that the rules are retained and works like next term’s Fanny Mendelssohn will be easier! Thanks to Sandy for your expert language coaching. The

German Requiem was a great piece for the choir to work on spinning a legato line, and I saw a rapid improvement in sound quality and stamina, particularly in the sopranos.

This term, the combination of the two main works, Chichester Psalms, and the more legato Lauridsen have continued to give the opportunity to work on certain elements of vocal technique as well as giving a real music-learning challenge in the case of the Bernstein. Performing Runestad's Alleluia from memory gave the opportunity to work on singers watching the conductor and in communicating with the audience. Whilst the choir have found this a big challenge, I think everyone could understand the reasoning behind it! I'm so proud of you for a wonderful performance last Thursday: I had so many comments from audience members about the quality of your singing but also what a joyful atmosphere there was and how well you communicated the music.

We are so lucky 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.

At the end of the year, our long-standing chairman Jonathan has stepped down from the role after ten years. We were extremely fortunate that Jonathan stayed in the role longer than he might have done in order to oversee the transition in Music Director, and I shall miss working alongside him very much. 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 all so lucky to have people who are so dedicated to the choir doing so much for us. It's also wonderful to see in this choir how everyone does something to help, and to see how passionate everyone is about the choir they sing with.