

JT AGM report WHC 2020

The year started with a bang with another fantastic Come and Sing day on Handel's *Messiah*. The quality of singing for a C&S was very high, and it was very well attended. The whole day was most enjoyable and well organised and again Whitehall Choir members showed what a welcoming bunch they are.

In the early Autumn we also finished our ambitious re-audition programme, and Ian and I also heard a number of potential new recruits. As numbers were pretty much at capacity, the new member auditions were tough and we took on a handful of excellent new members. Although it has been very sad for us to say goodbye to a small number of singers who didn't pass re-auditions, I believe this will have been worth doing in order to continue our development as a choir.

Although there had been some negativity from members about performing such a well-known piece as Handel's *Messiah*, I had always felt that this was a work that we would do very well and was worth taking the time over. The choir has traditionally been good at Handel and Baroque music and in my opinion it is one of the greatest works ever written. I think many members were moved by the occasion at St John's Smith Square, with ravishing soloists and orchestra, as well as a top performance by the choir. I do feel it is worth performing well-known works from time to time, and getting really deeply into both the technique and artistry that approaches the way a professional choir would work, and I felt this was a very special concert.

As ever, a joyous Christmas concert concluded the Autumn term. Both concerts had super, supportive audiences and it was looking like an excellent year for the choir.

As we came to Rachmaninov Vespers in the spring, I felt this was a culmination of some of the vocal work we've done over 3 years together. It's an hour of challenging a cappella sustained singing in Church Slavonic and can't be done without voices being in great shape. Rehearsals were going well, and much of the piece was sounding fantastic. It was good to have the opportunity to invite Lada Vaslesova to coach our language. However with Coronavirus lockdown, we were unable to perform this concert, and I really hope that we will be able to revive it at a later stage. The last rehearsal we had was also the last time we all saw Laurie Grace, who had been a long-standing member of the bass section, with his lovely warm voice and truly kind and welcoming nature. The loss of someone with a personality like Laurie's will have a profound affect on the dynamic of the choir and he will be so very much missed.

Suddenly in March I had to work out how on earth we could continue to keep connected with each other and develop our skills whilst not able to meet. Lots had to happen quickly for all of us to work out how to use technology to do this. Different choirs are doing all sorts of different things, but I feel it's a case of finding the best alternative for us for our particular choir. We can never replace the joy of singing together in harmony and the camaraderie that we feel when

we're together as a team. I think this will have shown us how important singing as a choir is to us and how it just can't be replaced.

I felt it was important for us to keep a connection as a close-knit group, and we've been exploring different topics within the limitations of online Zoom meetings. Some things have been more successful than others: it's been a very fast learning curve for me to see what works and to essentially learn a whole new job, without the years of experience to inform me what will work well. However attendance has been good at the sessions and people have been pleased to see each other and stay in touch and I have felt so supported by you all. You've been really open to new ideas and adventurous to experiment.

Things we have done over the last term include sessions on vocal technique, performance practice and sightreading, a fabulous and fascinating visit from the composer Cecilia McDowall, exploration of Baltic choral music and an introduction to some of the music we'll be performing in that programme, and a vocal masterclass with four great guinea pigs!

We have had social events including a quiz and an "online concert" plus sections have met up on Zoom independently for socials. A huge thanks to the part reps who have been amazing in a pastoral role this term, organising Zoom drinks, checking in with their flock and even in the case of the altos there has been an alto composition project!

In addition I made some vocal technique videos for everyone to use to keep the voice in good shape and people have been sharing links to other online resources so there has been plenty going on to keep us going but of course I'm absolutely desperate for us to get together again as soon as we can.

The big question is when and how will we start singing together again, and of course I can't yet give a direct answer to that but I can tell you some of my ideas for different scenarios. As yet the government guidelines don't allow us to meet, so of course we first have to wait for that directive to change. You will probably have heard lots of doom and gloom about the transmission of Coronavirus in choirs and research about aerosols, but as yet there isn't actually any conclusive evidence that singing is any more dangerous than all of us speaking in a room, like in a pub. It is likely that those choirs being in close proximity, sharing refreshments and hugging on arrival would have shared the virus around whether or not they had been singing.

Research is now being carried out in the UK and I'm keeping abreast of papers as they are published.

If we are able to meet, we would use the main body of the church to rehearse and spread out well. We would shorten the rehearsal and not have a break. We could look at starting a little later to accommodate hand-washing or even allow people who are still working from home to travel in to rehearsals. I appreciate that everyone's situation will be different and that we'll probably need to record rehearsals for those who aren't able to attend every week, and we could have some sessions online still. It might be that we have to start online and then change to live rehearsing as soon as we're able.

Musically we could explore some smaller-scale chamber repertoire or repertoire appropriate to the forces attending. We may not get the chance to give a concert in the Autumn but we could be working towards some pre-recorded video performances - we definitely need some good quality video of the choir and this would be a perfect time to do that.

I'm not going to plan out the Spring term at this stage but we could easily put on the Rachmaninov at quite short notice, though I wouldn't want to spend another whole term on that so we would combine it with other things. Let's hope that next summer we can perform our Baltic programme as planned this term, with perhaps a Monteverdi Vespers in the following Autumn.

This situation will have already had a huge impact on the performing arts, on the concert halls and all their staff, on the professional players and soloists that we have worked with and on our choir and its members. But this terrible time has shown what an amazing group of people make up the Whitehall Choir and how supportive you are of each other, drawing us even closer as a family of singers. A huge thanks to you all, to our accompanist Ian and to the amazing committee who have kept us all going and to those committee members stepping down, thank you for all you have done for us, it is so very much appreciated.