

Whitehall Choir AGM – Music Director’s Report

A year ago at the 2020 AGM, having had a whole term rehearsing online, we could never have imagined that there would still be online rehearsals taking place in the summer term of 2021. I’m always upbeat in these reports, but it has certainly been the most challenging of years for us as a choir. The biggest challenge and frustration has been the way things have kept changing, often with very little notice or clarity, which has been very stressful for all of us and not least our amazing committee, and in particular Rachel and Philip who bore the brunt of the Covid in-person rehearsal planning.

The Autumn term did bring hope and after a few weeks of planning and risk assessing, we were able to reunite, with a live-stream to those members who were unable to attend in person. Repertoire for the Autumn term was a selection of music that members had requested: an opportunity to rekindle the love of singing. Plus two less known works (The Lee Shore by Samuel Coleridge Taylor and Silentio Nocivo by Barbara Strozzi) which I intended for us to polish up for a video recording as a project to work towards.

Sadly another lockdown happened just as we were about to make the recordings but I do hope we will still find time in the schedule to do this at a later stage.

We then began working towards some Christmas repertoire online in the hope that we might be able to perform them, and indeed we were extremely lucky to get in our “performance” of Christmas music a day before another lockdown. This performance had no live audience but an audience of friends and family online. We tried to involve those on Zoom by having some of the readings coming from members online.

I was on maternity leave for the spring term and had been delighted to line up Sarah Tenant Flowers, one of the UK’s top choral directors and an expert on Rachmaninov Vespers, to cover the term in the hope that the choir would be giving their postponed performance of this work in March.

Sadly lockdown lasted longer than we could have imagined and Sarah had to do the whole term online. The term ended with a sing through the work, with some history and insight from Sarah as it went along. We’re really grateful to her for keeping the choir going through that time. Although it has been far less rewarding having “Zoom rehearsals” we have at least kept the contact between us as members and the feeling of unity as a group. I’m so grateful that members have supported the choir across this difficult year in such unrewarding circumstances.

In the summer term we began online and had hoped to resume singing in May but this had to be put off for several more weeks due to a last minute change to government guidance. Finally we have been able to sing together again for the last few weeks which has been so wonderful, working on pieces that we will be performing in the next season or two. I particularly enjoyed an afternoon singing together at the Royal Overseas League where we really seemed to revive as a choir. Whilst we will need to do some work on recruitment and rebuilding stamina, I have been relieved that the singing is sounding good and we have potential to rebuild very quickly. Do revisit the vocal exercises I videoed for you that are on our members' page, over the summer so that we keep up the momentum.

I'm really pleased with the programme for next year – some really unusual and less-known works alongside some real favourites like the Faure Requiem and Monteverdi Vespers. I think we're the kind of choir that's well placed to do the chamber choir type works alongside the larger scale chorus works and although some of the more unusual programmes cost more in terms of buying scores, it's well worth it to have the variety within the year.

Please do make every effort to spread the word about the choir, share the recruitment video and directly contact anyone you feel would suit our choir so that we can be back up to pre-lockdown numbers quickly: the better the balance in the choir, the more rewarding for everyone.

Thanks as every to my wonderful colleague Ian, to the committee and to you all for your support and the joy you give me now I can hear you sing again!