

Whitehall Choir
Conductor's Report 2015/2016 AGM
Paul Spicer

First a review of the years we have just finished. A mixture of good and not quite so good. Handel's Athalia (yes, I had to be reminded that was in this season it seems so long ago). This was terrific. I always say this, but Handel does suit the choir very well and I love the tour of his lesser-known choral works which we are engaged in. This was a really good performance. You were on good form, the soloists were enthusiastic and entered into the spirit of it including little bits of acting as far as the stage would allow. The orchestra was wonderful as they always are. We are so lucky to be able to work with such fabulous players. The work is a really great one and It is also good to bring these lesser known Handel pieces to the audience. We should be starting to get a name for this.

Carols came next. A nice evening in St Peter's with that lovely acoustic and it was good to have Lois Butlin reading professionally. The concert went well and seemed to be very much enjoyed as these occasions usually are.

We then began the repertoire for the concert we called 'An English Choral Landscape' which was to supply the tour music as well. This was when we began to hit the choral issues which are dogging the choir at present. Repertoire which should be central to what we do as we have done a lot of 20th century English music in my time for obvious reasons seemed to be an uphill battle. Purcell, Parry, Howells, Bainton and my piece highlighted the weaknesses which we all know about and which we seem not really to be able to address. Some of it went well: the Howells, in particular, seemed to light a flame which continued on the tour. But I wasn't happy on the concert day and it caused a rare outburst from me concerning what seemed to be a lack of engagement in the final rehearsal. People were sitting down and standing up like yo-yos (I fully understand some individuals' needs on this front) and wandering off to go and use mobile phones. I was despairing at one point. In the end it came together and we didn't disgrace ourselves but it was far from our finest hour.

The tour followed and was great fun as a social weekend. These things are always terrific for being able to spend time with people and for the building of an esprit de corps. I pay huge tribute to Jonathan and Daniel especially for shouldering most of the responsibility for the organisation which was flawless as far as I could see. We also had a very good tour guide from the company. The singing, though, was a reduced version of what I have just described and was extremely difficult with a small choir and various people having to change part to help out. The first concert was not great, the second was much better, sung to a full house, but still not really what we would ideally want to represent what the Whitehall Choir is supposed to be. Not enough people signed up to go with the choir and there was no time to learn a new set of music which would have avoided split parts etc.

We had a useful workshop day with Alison Ling who reminded us of many technical issues and ways of dealing with them.

Our recent Bastille Day concert was also fraught with difficulties leading up to the day but the concert went well in a lovely venue. Really good acoustic and excellent space. The repertoire was varied and enjoyable as well as fairly challenging in parts. Tribute to Helen Ward who sang the second Debussy really beautifully. However, if we had not had Ed Harrisson as an extra tenor we would probably have had to abandon that movement following what happened on Tuesday where it was simply not possible to get through it with any degree of security.

So, where do we go from here? The key thing is that we now have to grasp the issues facing us if we are to move forward and if I am going to stay with the choir for a further period of time. As I see it recruitment has dropped off very seriously. We used to get a large number of hopefuls joining up in September and a further tranche after Christmas. That is now not happening. We have lost a lot of strong singers for various good reasons and we have to rebuild and be good enough to keep the good singers we recruit. Last week showed very clearly how the addition of one strong, leading voice in a part can transform the situation.

Rehearsal room: The room at St Peter's is part of the problem. Whilst being warm and having loos, it has the worst acoustic possible which exacerbates our vocal issues. We could all sense the relief in being in Piccadilly where the voice can be enhanced. We have also moved further away from Whitehall and I think that is a mistake. So we have urgently to find a new rehearsal venue.

I will re-audition the whole choir during the next season. This is earlier than normal but is going to be part of the rebuilding process.

We are going to discuss the funding of bursary places for key voice parts, perhaps two tenors, one soprano and a bass.

There are already plans for adjusting the fees for young people to join the choir and this might involve waiving the fee altogether for a few individuals who would be more closely auditioned as leaders alongside the bursary holders.

We should be prepared to take a hit number-wise initially while the choir settles down. I am not looking to make this a semi-pro choir, or to compete with the Holst Singers, but I am looking now to seriously deal with the problems which have been growing for two or three years and which are affecting everyone. We want to really enjoy our music making and to make the most of our position in the London choral scene. We are an unusual choir in our size and formation and we have and ought to be very attractive

because of it. Those people who like to sing in smaller choir and feel they are contributing should feel our choir is a natural choice. There are not many choirs of our size around in London. The fact that we don't seem to be as attractive as we once were should be of concern to every one of us.

The programmes that we have done this season should present such a choir as this with no problems. Inevitably, certain pieces will offer different challenges. The Phinot, for instance, which I felt was one of the really good performances last week some found hard because of the tessitura and the tuning suffered as a result. We are dogged by a few singers who tend to sing flat in all those places which I habitually point out. But there was a real passion projected in the performance of this work which was wholly convincing. In terms of tuning, conversely, the Vilette pieces which should have been really challenging, actually caused me very little grief last week. The Debussy showed that people need to take responsibility for learning their notes. Homework is important however busy we are. It is not right that one section lets the rest of the choir down however stretched they may be number-wise at present. The Whitehall Choir should not be at the point of abandoning something at the final Tuesday rehearsal. The outer movements worked well and all soloists acquitted themselves excellently.

Katherine Herzberg has asked the question as to whether we should not have embarked on such a programme when the choir is weak. Well, possibly. But I feel that unless we offer singers a challenge you will get bored quickly and we will not satisfy those people who are the strongest in the group who we are all very keen to keep. I also have a fundamental feeling that there might be people out there who look at the website and see what we are up to and think that they would like the chance of singing that music with us.

I do not want the choir to have only to sing variants on three blind mice in C major with limited range and no chromatic harmony because there is a perception that that is all we can do well at the moment. I would leave tomorrow and so would any good singers who we have recruited. For better or for worse, we have a couple of niche repertoire elements which people have grown to associate with us: British 20 and 21st century music because of my specialism and Handel as I have spoken of earlier.

I hope we can have a useful discussion following on from this. We have a real opportunity to turn this around and I hope you will all support this approach.