

All Whitehall AGMs are important but, with Paul leaving and Jo taking up the reins, this one is particularly special. I'll be brief but can I begin by saying what an honour it is to serve on the committee again at this exciting juncture in the choir's history. I would also I

like to say publicly what a great job Jonathan and Patrick have done this season running the show and keeping us financially afloat while at the same time recruiting and then ensuring the smooth transition of our new Music Director as well as leading a recruitment campaign and spearheading a new website design ably managed by Martin. Talk about spinning plates. Oh, yes, and Jonathan and Patrick organised Thursday's party, with Jacky Houghton virtually singlehandedly catering it and with such panache. Thank you to her too and to Patrick and Jacky's grand-daughter, Olivia – and to all of you who helped serve her delicious treats at the party.

Next, a few words about Paul, not the only ones tonight, I'm sure. I can remember my first rehearsal with the choir. We were preparing the Christmas Oratorio and I was so impressed by

Paul's attention to detail and every nuance of Bach's music. That devotion to his art never flagged, whether the repertoire was Bach or Poulenc, César Franck or Frank Martin. What a privilege it was to sing with him – and LEARN with him. I know I'm not alone in valuing that and I doubt I'll be the only person signing up for his English Choral Experiences in order to sing with him again.

It was very sad saying good-bye on Thursday. Singing the encore of his own piece with Paul sitting and listening brought a tear to my eye. Again, I'm sure I speak for everyone.

As one of my audience members wrote, 'I feel sure he must have thought he was leaving the Whitehall Choir in very good shape, as we both thought we had rarely heard you sing better. He was clearly deeply moved by your singing at the very end. What a great sport Ian Tindale was and what an accomplished organist. Hopefully the new conductor will enjoy her time with you all as much as Paul clearly did.'

There were some hair-raising moments for Paul, too, as Monica Darnbrough recalled to me on Thursday. (Monica, Jo, was an alto of long standing and lively personality who is leaving the choir because she's moved to Brighton.) 'I shall never forget the look on Paul's face,' she said, 'during the performance of Israel in Egypt. The altos had a gloriously low leading entry – on a bottom G, I think – and we had always revelled in its words "A thick darkness". Well, the entire alto section was obviously in a thick darkness as no-one came in! Even more sweat poured off Paul in St John's Smith Square for a few moments after that.'

Monica also reminded me of the time we sang only half the programme at St John's because of an asbestos scare, which Paul referred to on Thursday. Sorry for the repetition, everyone, but Monica's point was Paul did have to put up with a lot! And he always did so with a smile. Well, almost always!

Jo, I hope your first concert with us, also Handel and also in St John's Smith Square, will have no

sweat, no blood, no tears – no asbestos! We welcome you with open arms and look forward to a new chapter of music-making.

On that note, I'd like to propose a vote of thanks from the whole choir to not just Jonathan and Patrick but to our Music Directors past and now present Paul Spicer and Jo Tomlinson.