

Well, haven't we come a long way since this day a year ago when Paul said farewell and Jo said how honoured she was to be filling his shoes? In Joanna Tomlinson we have found a champion of good vocal technique and a Music Director who 'gets us' as a group.

She has not only transformed our sound but since she took the reins last September but has helped us grow significantly in number. We have 24 new members, which represents an increase of 45 per cent year on year and 58.5 per cent this season. (Before the departures last summer the choir stood at 53; in September there were only 41. We now have 65 active paying members. We are, however, about to lose three tenors so if you know of any good ones please send them our way!)

The Open Rehearsals at the start of each term, which were a new model for us but which Jo embraced with aplomb, had a large part to play in the steady rise in membership because her enthusiasm was infectious at all three.

After the first alone, there were 15 potential recruits to audition along with the voice check of the existing choir all in the space of a few weeks. Talk about hitting the ground running! Jo got it done quietly and with no fuss – many thanks to Kate Goulden for her help with new members. We're pleased to have you with us.

But it's not just the music. Jo is also deeply invested in the management of the choir, which has a knock-on effect too. Witness the large number of you who came forward in response to the survey last autumn.

The idea for that was sparked by a chance question from Jo at a pre-rehearsal meeting with Jonathan and Patrick about hidden skills sets within the choir. We remain grateful to those of you replied – you know who you are! – and who have since become closely involved with the day-to-day running of the choir. In committee meetings, too, Jo is full of good ideas. We are very lucky to have her on board.

We're also lucky to have Martin Humphreys on the publicity side? He makes so many promo videos for the choir, I fear for the day he says he's off to become a film-maker. He does slope off to California a fair amount...

In terms of concerts, every one this season has hit the mark. First *Joshua*, which had been Paul's choice and was not a work Jo had conducted before; she grasped the nettle and prepared the choir masterfully. Our audience, which rewarded us with rapturous applause, picked up on a new sound, and the soloists and orchestra were brilliant. 300 people enjoyed Jo's first Whitehall Choir concert – a very good figure for St John's Smith Square.

I won't go into detail about every concert but the upward trend continued ... a few weeks later in our Christmas programme at St Peter's, then at the Brahms/Schubert at St James's Piccadilly.

One audience member at the latter proclaimed, 'The Whitehall Choir has arrived.' In the committee meeting that followed, Jo said, 'You could tell it was a good concert by the smiles on everybody's faces as they came off stage.'

Smiles there were aplenty, too, last week when we had another healthy audience – despite England playing in the World Cup! It was exciting for the choir to join forces with Ian on the organ (after all those weeks of him wrestling with the temperamental piano in the Parish Hall which he miraculously placates), along with the harpist, percussionist and the staggeringly talented countertenor in the Bernstein. Music making at its best.

The porch party afterwards fair rocked! Thank you to Ian Williamson, Lesley, Gill and Jean (Robinson) and to Jane Lewis's daughter Eleanor for all the work they put in – and to Patrick, of course, for getting in the wine and ice. We needed both! Patrick does so much for the choir that is never seen.

At the end of the concert Jo spoke for all of us when she extended huge thanks to Jonathan for his many years of service, going back to 2003 when he was Secretary. The chairman for seven years, he saw us through a young composer competition and subsequent recording (*Ascendit*) (2012/13), a choir tour to Vienna (2016) and, most importantly at this point in the choir's history, the appointment and installation of a new Music Director.

Jonathan always went the extra mile – newsletters, flyers, photographs and much, much more. A stand-out moment for me was when he gave a running commentary, mic in hand, as we drove across Vienna by coach after a trip to the Staatsoper to our first rehearsal with Cantus Novus Wien... whom we are delighted are coming to London for a joint concert in November. Jonathan

helped pave the way for that. I'm sure there will be many more star turns from this Whitehall Choir stalwart, both vocally, as a much-valued tenor, and in many other areas. I will not be the only person to say so tonight but you have given so much to the choir... on behalf of whom I would like to thank you.

Jo, thank you for turning the choir around. You have literally given us new life and your first season with us has raised our spirits. Morale was a bit low when you joined. It is anything but right now.

Three cheers for Jonathan, three cheers for Jo and three cheers for all of us.

It's been a fabulous year. See you in September for another season of camaraderie and great music making. It will be our 75<sup>th</sup>.