

WILLIAM BYRD SINGERS MD REPORT 2019-20

The weekend of the 14th & 15th March 2020 is deeply imprinted in my mind. The choir was about to embark on the next set of rehearsals for a concert scheduled for May. The feeling of euphoria following a recent concert was quickly changing to confusion and anxiety. I remember spending most of the Saturday sorting out all the necessary preparatory work required to set up these rehearsals, and this was juxtaposed with “shall we or shall we not” discussions with committee and with a number of very concerned choir members, at the onset of the realisation that COVID-19 was about to seriously affect our lives, and our choral activity. We did decide to rehearse, and even when more than half of the membership arrived at 2.15 on the Sunday, I was still prepared to share a discussion with those present as to whether or not we should sing together. The overwhelming feeling of those assembled, rightly or wrongly, was to sing, at least one more time before an impending national lockdown. We sight-read through our whole May repertoire as if there was no tomorrow, and left Sale URC that day on a collective ‘high’.

Our fears about the future were soon cemented, and before long we realised that the only solution was to cancel all plans for the rest of the season, unprecedented in the choir’s history. Zoom chat became the new social tool for us all, and little did we know, even by the *end* of 2020, that we would still be struggling to operate normally. ‘Hats off’ to Rosemary and the fantastic committee who moved heaven and high water to make it possible for us to rehearse for a few weeks, albeit in a limited way, during part of the autumn term of our current 50th anniversary season.

We, like thousands of choirs around the world, have almost forgotten what it feels like to experience the thrill of performing in a concert. But if you cast your minds back to the ‘good old days’ we were very much performing at our best, we were enjoying a stable membership and working together with a strong unity of purpose.

Only a week of the season had elapsed, and we were already performing at the Bridgewater Hall. The choir had been invited to perform a new commissioned work by Ed Puddick, entitled ‘One Universal Shout’, a piece written as part of Manchester’s commemoration of the 200th Anniversary of the ‘Peterloo’ massacre. We sang with five other community choirs and were accompanied by the very skilled Wigan Youth Jazz Orchestra. It was indeed a unique opportunity, unusually marrying a jazz style with choral music. The William Byrd Singers were apportioned a major role in the work, and I had the honour of conducting the whole piece. The choir had an opportunity to shine further by singing two pieces by Finzi and Pearsall to a very high standard.

The organist Robert Woods joined us for the first concert of our main season at Christ Church. The programme had a Marian theme, finishing with Finzi’s moving ‘Magnificat’, with its high drama and calm but mesmeric ‘Amen’ conclusion. The choir also stretched its exploration into music by Fayrfax and Sheppard, early sixteenth century repertoire, including Sheppard’s colossal ‘Gaude, Gaude, Gaude Maria’ which the sopranos will remember (with

affection?) for its persistently high tessitura. Robert played some exquisite Langlais and Finzi solos, and the choir wallowed in the lush French harmonies of three motets penned by the twentieth century composer, Pierre Villette. But it was Arnold Bax's challenging and overwhelmingly beautiful 'Mater Ora Filium' which will be best remembered with affection by the choir on this occasion.

What turned out to be our only concert of 2020 was one of the best we have sung in during my time with choir. It was entitled 'Dona nobis pacem', a prophetic cry from the heart for inner peace, if it could ever be better timed! We took advantage of the two organs which reside in Christ Church, with Richard Lea on the 'grand orgue' and Robert Woods supporting on the 'orgue du choeur'. I will never forget the startled faces of every chorister on first hearing the loud majestic opening of Louis Vierne's 'Messe Solonnelle', an overwhelming sound which inspired some stunning singing from the choir. By contrast we sang René Clausen's moving unaccompanied work 'In Pace', which left not a dry eye in the house, and we skilfully delivered (from memory) Fauré's popular 'Cantique de Jean Racine'. What impressed me most, however, as your leader, was how we collectively rose to, and conquered, the colossal musical challenges presented in John Joubert's uncompromising 'Pro Pace' Motets. The choral stamina required, especially in the longest, third motet, which finally climaxes with a sense of hard-won optimism, is a feat to be particularly noted; indeed it could be used as a metaphor for our enduring determination to ultimately triumph over current adversities.

We will triumph, and eventually the story of the choir's next fifty years will germinate in 2021. Stay with the team, and we will, I'm sure, begin to bear fruit once more.

Keith Orrell (MD William Byrd Singers) December 2020