

**BISHOPWEARMOUTH CHORAL SOCIETY
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**Wednesday 6th September 2023, 7.30 p.m.
at Sunderland Minster.**

Minutes of the last AGM (2022) have been published on the Society website – under Members’ News. Anyone without access to these can request a paper copy from the Secretary (Tel: 522 7721) as long as this is made before the meeting. Nomination Forms for the elections are also available from the same source.

AGENDA

1. Apologies for absence
2. Minutes of last AGM
3. Matters arising
4. Chairman’s Report
5. Treasurer’s Report
6. Conductor’s Report
7. Election of Officers
8. Election of Representatives
9. Any Other Business

BISHOPWEARMOUTH CHORAL SOCIETY
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – 2022/2023 SEASON

This was held at Sunderland Minster, on Wednesday the 7th September 2022. The meeting began at 7.30 p.m. with Christine Alder in the chair and 44 members of the Society present.

Apologies for Absence : MF, GW, ES, GS, EA, and PB.

Minutes of the last A.G.M. : These had been previously circulated and were unanimously accepted as a true record.

Matters Arising : None

The following reports were presented at the meeting and are reproduced below.

The Chairman's Report : This report was presented by C.A :-

Welcome to you all. This evening gives us the opportunity to reflect upon last season, and look forward to this one, our seventy fourth.

The AGM is an important occasion, and helps us all to value what we get out of our membership, as well as helping us to re-assess the contribution that we can make to ensure the success of the society.

Firstly, I must pay tribute to the Committee for all their hard work over the past year, and to David and Eileen for their untiring skill and encouragement in producing the high musical standard which we offer to our audience. Thank you all!

Coming out of lockdown was an experience. Returning choir numbers were pretty good, and the Committee spent many a happy hour trying to digest the latest advice, and acting upon it. The staff at the Minster were always happy to work with us, which made things so much easier than they might have been, and having Liz White and David Cox "on site" as it were, was a great blessing.

And so we managed a December concert of Messiah. Momentous in that we did it, but not all of it, and socially distanced, without a live audience, and facing the "wrong way". But it was a start.

The decision was taken, rightly I think, to have just two concerts, and so Rossini's "Petit Messe Solenelle" was performed on June 18th. This really gave us the chance to find our voice, which personally I found had taken a long time to rehabilitate after months of disuse, David seemed pleased with the result, and I am sure will be reporting to you shortly. I was very proud of what we managed to achieve.

As an indirect result of the pandemic we have lost singers (as have most choirs), and we have lost audience too. Fortunately the balance sheet remains healthy, and Jeremy will be presenting his first report to you in a few minutes. Last year we were unable to organise our usual fundraising events, but this will be rectified this season. However, we rounded off the year with a splendid "Midsummer walk with fish and chips", magnificently organised by David Cooke. A great social occasion on a lovely summer's evening.

The Committee are well aware of the importance of attracting new members and bigger audiences, and this has been the focus of discussion for the coming season. We are keen to add to our patron numbers also, as well as trying to involve them more in the life of the Society. In this connection it was very gratifying to have the new volunteers for front of house in June, in the enforced absence of our usual team.

Attracting new singers and audience is a job which requires continuous thought and effort. We have to make ourselves attractive to both, without watering down what we do, or trying to be what we are not. We can and

must continue to put ourselves "out there", and Joanne Appleby is working hard on social media. We must all be aware however, of our own responsibility here, so don't be shy about Bishopwearmouth Choral Society. If you enjoy singing, at rehearsals and concerts, then please talk about it to others. Word of mouth and encouragement from each individual can only do good, as well as reaching out to the communities in which we live. It can seem to be a thankless task, but persistence is the key. I am sure that you will be hearing more of this in the future, and in his report David will be giving you some exciting news, which I shall not pre-empt.

Now, as you are aware, this is my last report as Chairman. In music, as we all know, timing is crucial, and can make or mar a performance. There comes a time when it is right to step down and let the reins be taken up by another, filled with enthusiasm and vision, so that growth may continue. The time is right for a new Chairman and Committee to plan for the future, which next year includes our seventy fifth season, a very important milestone in the society's history.

I have so many memories of being part of this choir, celebrating our fiftieth, sixtieth and seventieth anniversaries, and steering it through both calm seas and troubled waters. I hope to make more good memories as a lowly member of the alto line, a position which I have not occupied since nineteen seventy two, I think. We must never forget the contribution we make to the life of Sunderland, and the excellent reputation carried far and wide by those professional musicians who work with us. We have a lot to be proud of, and we must always be grateful to Clifford Hartley our founder for his vision and hard work. Our choral music has enriched the lives of so many over the past seventy three years, and I truly hope it will do so for many years to come.

I began by thanking the present committee, officers and David and Eileen, but I must also thank all those who have contributed to the running of the society in my time as Chairman. Too numerous to mention, and now sadly many no longer with us, I am truly grateful for their help and advice, for open discussion, and decisions reached for the most part amicably.

As I leave my position as Chairman, I thank you all, and fervently hope that Bishopwearmouth Choral Society will continue to flourish and be a great example of musical excellence.

The Treasurer's Report : The Treasurer, JC, presented by the following points :

- a. The accounts for 2021-2022 are presented with the equivalent figures for 2020-2021 and 2019-2020 for comparison, however all are exceptional years. There was one concert in 2019-2020, no activity in 2020-2021 and only one ticketed concert in 2021-2022.
- b. The Choral Society spent £1,348.70 more than it had income in 2021-2022. Income from membership subscriptions, patron subscriptions and donations were down due to there being fewer members and patrons. There was no fund-raising from coffee mornings or other events this year and income from raffles and coffee at rehearsals only resumed in late March 2022. The deficit was managed by withdrawing £2,000 from the COIF Deposit account in May 2022 when cashflow became critical just before the Rossini concert.
- c. Gift Aid income increased slightly due to a change in HMRC rules so that Gift Aid of 25% can now be claimed on the whole cost of a membership subscription. The Choral Society also benefited £1,403.80 from the Young Singers when they ceased to exist last year, and their account was closed.
- d. The cost of hire of the Minster for rehearsals and concerts is likely to increase due to the rise in fuel prices. Doubtless inflation will cause other costs to rise. At the same time we have falling numbers of members, patrons and audience. Fortunately the Choral Society has considerable savings of £33,194.87 – equivalent to nearly three years income. I believe we should view some of this as a cushion to help us through difficult times and to reach out to find new singers from a wider audience.

The Chairman thanked the Treasurer for the accounts and his report, noting that it is not easy to take over such a role.

She also thanked VV for all of her contribution in the role of ‘raffle person’ which had been very valuable to the Society and noted that this also meant that someone new is needed to take over that role.

There were no questions and the accounts were unanimously accepted.

The Conductor’s Report for 2021-2022 was given by D.M :-

This season was in many ways quite momentous if only because it was our first return to singing since we were forced to abandon our preparations for the St John Passion scheduled for Easter 2019. We will all have our own personal recollections and memories of the pandemic, but the one thing we share about it is the deprivation it brought about in terms of live music making and the complete cessation of choral singing. It was certainly a huge hole in my life, and although I was lucky enough to be able to carry on teaching and even performing through recordings and streaming, the process of face-to-face rehearsal and performance was more and more sorely missed as it became ever clearer how woefully inadequate the technological alternatives were.

So, it was with a sense of some foreboding that we all took the plunge – guided as ever by our incredibly well researched and well-informed committee – and entered into live rehearsal again in September 2021, not having sung together since the end of February 2019. It was a touch scary, I have to say, and even with all the measures in place – screens in front of myself and Eileen, the choir spread all over the Minster in an effort to distance as much as possible, and only singing for 30 minutes at any time – this was certainly a very different experience from what we’d been used to.

I have to thank everyone for their patience at this point. I was frustrated that we couldn’t do more, and I am sure that you would have shared that frustration, but everyone just got on with the task in hand and made the best of things. I did want to liven things up a bit so as you may remember I invited various guests along to sing or play for about 15 minutes in our ‘interval’. I even enticed Bradley Creswick along – he was his usual glittering self and enjoyed joining us for the second part of our Messiah rehearsal, playing the fiddle parts as we rehearsed. He had an amusing start to the evening...

Other guests included two lovely young singers, Anna Dias and Rosemary McMorro, and a lovely young violinist, Elizabeth Bennett, who by the way is now studying at Harvard. We also showcased some of Bill Crow’s Covid Preludes for two pianos. He has now transcribed the whole of the original 19 preludes so we will be playing that in a concert in the new year.

The rehearsal on the day of the concert was a challenge as we couldn’t rehearse for anymore than 30 minutes at once. The performance, such as it was, had no audience for obvious reasons, and it was delivered with a string quintet and organ and soloists behind screens, and the choir still separated and taking the entire space of the church. It was a lovely performance, but it was the strangest version of Messiah I have come across, with 2 x 30-minute slots – so I tried to get a bit of everything in – Overture, Pastoral Symphony, all the Christmas music and of course solos for the two girls but I made sure you had plenty to sing too, and it ended up with a whole lot of fantastic choruses on after the other. Big Les told me he was knackered. I said, ‘good I’m pleased about that’.

Our usual team of string players were back with us – Martin Pauline Laura Andy and Alan, and they loved being back. And we had two fabulous young soloists, Anna Dias – who is joining us again this Christmas – and Sophie Horrocks.

The streaming was pretty terrible I have to say and if any of you watched it, I have to tell you right now you don’t sound like that at all. I eventually had it taken down as I couldn’t stand it any longer. Apart from that it was a great success and it an important pivotal moment which showed us we could all still do it and despite the interruption we hadn’t lost our vocal resources. It gave us the confidence to plan for another concert, this time a full-length programme with audience, back to normal.

The arrival of 2022 saw us preparing for Rossini's Petite Messe Solenne. It also brought with it a tragic loss of one of the most adored members of our choir and little community here, Wendy Coombes. She was such a fantastic person to have around the choir all those years, full of fun and mischief, and she adored being in the choir and loved the concerts – to say nothing of the apres concert parties. We were able to help give her a very special send off at her funeral in St Peter's, singing some of her favourite John Rutter and Howard Goodall. She'd have loved it. The family were hugely grateful for what we did and it was, all in all, a lovely occasion despite the terrible sense of loss and sadness which surrounded it.

Back to the Rossini. This bizarre piece with its strange scoring for piano and harmonium accompaniment and its very irreverent take on a solemn mass – remains a favourite of mine. Its quirkiness and unashamed operatic bravado actually do not disguise some really fantastic music. I still think the Agnus Dei is one of the best choral settings of that section of the mass in the entire repertoire.

It is also very far from being a pushover. The two fugal choruses are extremely difficult, and thank goodness we eventually had access to our tried and tested split rehearsal facilities which helped enormously. As the process went on, I felt more and more like we were returning to normal and the choir week by week regained its strength and confidence. By the time we came to the concert in June we were thoroughly on top of it and sounding terrific.

We were joined by four fabulous soloists- Laurie Ashworth Clare McCaldin Richard Pinkstone and Patrick Owston. As they have a lion's share of the piece, this was crucial, and they did not disappoint. We had the luxury of a Steinway Model D piano which sounded fantastic, and we had my newly acquired keyboard with a very creditable harmonium sound.

It was a great performance. There was a temporary hitch with the volume of the harmonium. You may remember this. I certainly do. But no one was more aware of it – or indeed traumatized by it- than my wife who was sitting next to it turning Eileen's pages. She has often recalled the occasion during the summer months, wondering whether indeed at that moment World War three had just started and its epicentre was in Sunderland Minster.

Anyway, when we eventually got him shut up – the performance went fantastically well. I think we were all ready to give a really resounding account of this music which we had grown to love since starting work on it in February. Everything was top notch. The choral singing was really inspired and so very very exciting to listen to in the fugues, but equally moving and beautiful in the Sanctus and Agnus Dei. The soloists were wonderful, and the piano playing was fabulous. A great evening and one which showed beyond any doubt that we were back on form.

It gave me the confidence to suggest to the committee that we were now in a position to return to a normal season with three programmes. So, looking ahead to our current season we have the usual Bishopwearmouth wide mix of styles.

Here in the Minster, we are doing a lovely programme which is intended to be very Christmassy, and it contains certainly all my Christmas favourites and I hope a few of yours too. It will be a lot of fun. We will have Anna Dias joining us as soprano soloist and our usual team of string players as well as Eileen on the piano. I am also planning to do it a week earlier in my St Mary's concert series on the 3rd. You may remember we did a lovely concert there a few summers back in which we sang my arrangements of Gershwin, Jerome Kern etc. It was a lovely occasion. It's a very nice acoustic to sing in. So between now and the next rehearsal I would like everyone here to consult with their diaries to make sure they can be free on the 3rd. I do hope so because it's in the St Mary's publicity

In March we'll be doing a Haydn programme featuring two of his masses. At this moment in time, I am still deliberating which ones, but I am favouring the Nelson – which I am doing at Hexham in a couple of weeks' time – and which is a truly great piece of music – and maybe the St Nicolas Mass which is very lovely to

sing. It wasn't so long ago that we did Haydn's Creation – which was one of the most enjoyable experiences I can recall having in recent years.

Now in the summer we are going to use the newly opened Fire Station venue just across the road for a performance of another one of my favourites - Side by Side by Sondheim. Members of the committee went to check out the venue in the summer and we were very impressed with it on all levels. So, it seems only right that we try it out and see if it works for us. We are still fond of performing here in the Minster, but I think for a programme of Sondheim, something with more of a theatre feel to it - as well as excellent crystal-clear acoustics – may be more appropriate. So at last night's committee meeting we agree to do this on one of their available dates which is the 25th June. I'm looking forward to it all hugely.

I cannot let this moment pass without paying tribute to Christine, who is standing down as Chair this season. Her contribution to this choral society over the many years I have been its conductor has been immense. She has truly been a model example of someone at the helm of a choral society committee, guiding us all with a very sure hand but always giving me the flexibility to make the final decision on artistic matters, and I could not have felt more supported in all my time here. I understand of course that all good things must come to an end at some point but I am truly sad to see her go. She will, of course, continue to sing with us – altos can breathe a sigh of relief at this point. But I truly value having had the opportunity to work with Christine in the running of this choir for well over twenty years – it has been a real privilege.

Another report had been previously provided via the web-site (and not presented verbally) but is presented here.

The Concert Manager's was prepared by D.C :

1st Concert—Messiah excerpts - September rehearsals started by having to follow Covid Regulations /Advice. Fortunately, when Minster services restarted Provost Stuart Bain moved the Nave pews and stored them in the South Transept then replaced them with chairs from the Café area. This made the spacing easier and more flexible and in order to get 2m spacing the choir took up the whole of the Nave, with sneeze screens for the protection of the conductor and accompanist. Microphones were used so that the conductor and accompanist could be heard throughout the Nave. Choir numbers for first rehearsal:- Soprano 21, Alto 12, Tenor 9, Bass 8

When it came to the Messiah concert the small orchestra took up space in front of the dais protected by the sneeze screens with the conductor and soloists on the Dais. The concert was put on-line via the camera and microphones used by the church for on-line services; thanks to Amir from the Minster, who was familiar running the system. Unfortunately distortion on the microphone which was picking up the choir, meant that the recording of the choir was poor quality and the recording was removed from YouTube. Thanks to the 49 members who sang in the concert. There was little furniture moving as without an audience only the Dais items and a few chairs had to be put back in place for the Sunday morning worship.

2nd Concert—Petite Messe Solennelle– Rossini - Continuing problems with Covid and lockdowns meant that the March Concert had to be postponed until June. In the New Year it was decided that the chairs could be put on the Dais each week in the position where the choir would perform at a concert. This meant moving 50 chairs each Wednesday and returning them to the Nave at the end of rehearsal. Split rehearsals took place in the café area with a keyboard. Microphones were problematic because there were no speakers on the dais.

Four rows of the concert staging were erected on the Friday evening of the concert, before the rehearsal, with a limit of 10 chairs on each tier. Thanks to all who helped to put it up. A plan of the church was put together to gauge how many audience could be accommodated using chairs and short pews. Extra lighting was borrowed and helped to illuminate the choir on the night as lighting in the Dais area of the church is particularly poor. Two red floods illuminated the arch of the East window behind the choir. Choir numbers at Concert :-Soprano 20, Alto 8, Tenor 8, Bass 9 Choir seating for concert was very similar to rehearsal.

Getting on and off stage at the beginning was tidy but after the interval there were some members not in the correct order. The church was cleared and arranged for morning worship by 10.15pm. The piano was moved to the North Transept and taken away on Monday morning. Thanks to all who helped make this possible.

Thanks to David & Eileen for their hard work and patience especially over a challenging season. Also, a huge thanks to everyone who helped to prepare the venue for Wednesday rehearsals, especially the volunteers at the Minster, and those who clear away each week. Thanks to all who helped with preparing and clearing away on Concert days, especially those who helped put up and dismantle the staging. We need to consider purchasing our own extra lighting and also find/hire some suitable staging which is easier to erect on the Dais area. Also I am not sure how long the church is able to continue without putting the pews back in the Nave. I am looking forward to a more settled 2022-2023 season.

Election of Officers – These were conducted as follows :

For the post of		Proposed by	Seconded by	
Chairman	M.Foster	JC	LW	carried by meeting
Secretary	E.Watson	LW	EB	carried by meeting
Treasurer	J.Cripps	LW	EB	carried by meeting

The Chairman explained that there had been an error in which the Section Rep elections had been posted in the published agenda and so notice was being given for the Alto and Tenor sections to consider their representation before these being confirmed at an extraordinary general meeting in 3 weeks time.

Any Other Business :-

There being no other business, the meeting closed at 8.17 p.m.

Eileen Watson,
Hon.Secretary.

Extraordinary General Meeting held on Wednesday, 28th September 2022, during the rehearsal at Sunderland Minster.

The only business at this meeting was to elect Section Representatives:

For the post of		Proposed by	Seconded by	
Alto Representative	C.Lennox	DL	KP	carried by meeting
Tenor Representative	M.Richards	LH	SR	carried by meeting

Eileen Watson
Hon.Secretary

