

## BISHOPWEARMOUTH CHORAL SOCIETY

### Conductor's report for the 2022-2023 Season

This last season was quite a turning point for us all, as it was the first season where we returned to a completely normal schedule, and were able to give three concerts in unrestricted circumstances, after the challenges of the pandemic and its aftermath. This came as a relief to me, certainly, and I am sure to everyone else.

However, it wasn't without its own challenges. In the Autumn we set about learning a lovely Christmas programme, full of shorter pieces with a wide variety of styles. This is always in a way more challenging than doing a larger work where there maybe upwards from half a dozen larger choruses all in the same style. It took a bit of learning, and we were further challenged by two other things: firstly we had quite late on decided to perform the whole concert a week earlier at St Mary's Monkseaton, where a slot had become available, and secondly we also decided to make a recording to be submitted for a Classic FM competition. This was really hard and on reflection we weren't quite recovered enough from the ravages of Covid to be in the best vocal health for it. Flat singing was cruelly revealed in the recording and it wasn't our best effort. However, it did act as a wake up call and over the next few months we were all acutely aware of the necessity of correct breathing and proper support especially in softer, slower passages.

The concerts at Christmas were very successful: there was a lot of interest at St Mary's – where they do hear a lot of choral singing. They were very impressed both by the choir and by the choice of repertoire which was both ambitious and eclectic. We had our usual team of strings and piano as the instrumental support and as usual they were top notch. And we had our young soprano Anna Dias with us singing solos and also the soprano part in Chilcott's lovely settings of carols in On Christmas Night. We had also from within the choir Cathy Price and Chris Moore singing solos very beautifully.

And from the body of the choir we had readers to read the passages in between the settings. I thought that everyone read superbly and the musical performance of the piece was very fine, as well as the overall effect being deeply moving. The whole evening ended with our old favourite-Chilcott's outrageous and very funny setting of the 12 Days of Christmas, bringing things to a boisterous and very animated conclusion.

Into the new year we were embarked on a lovely project. We had chosen to sing Haydn's Nelson Mass, and Haydn's setting of the Te Deum, and joining us for the Beethoven violin concerto was Bradley Creswick. It was going to be quite an evening.

The rehearsals for the mass went very well indeed. By now we were in better voice, and we had more stamina. The movements were learnt well and reasonably quickly. The flat singing all but disappeared. The Te Deum proved more difficult, partly due to the unfamiliar text, and partly due to it being less straightforward somehow than it looked. I did one of my famous cuts, giving a tricky passage to the long-suffering soloists, and we managed to master it by the time the concert came along.

With a really magnificent orchestra full of high quality musicians, we gave a really strong and very committed performance of both pieces. The mass in particular was full of really strong rhythmic singing with everything from the boldness of the Credo to the very expressive, softer and shaped singing in the Et Incarnatus est. With a magnificent team of soloists, this was a performance really worthy of a Bishopwearmouth Choral Society at standards we had achieved pre pandemic. The icing on the cake was Bradley's sublime performance of the Beethoven Violin concerto which rounded off the concert. This had everything – stunning virtuosity, but also deeply moving passages, especially in the slow movement, and then with unabashed humour in the finale. It really was a privilege to make music with such a hugely talented soloist of international standing and brought this concert to a triumphant conclusion.

The summer term saw us on a very different venture. One of the most enjoyable programmes to work at, Side by Side by Sondheim, was a bit of challenge right from the start. Firstly, getting enough copies from the publishers was a big ask and then getting them to appear when we needed them was an even bigger one, despite the large sums of money needed for the privilege of hiring them.

We were undeterred however, and were soon engaged in the business of learning this very very tricky material. But its astonishing quality, and terms not only of the music, but of the lyrics, kept us all going and at times very amused and tickled. We had quite a lot to do, and it took us all our time to learn everything in time, but it was fun. Anne Marie's appearance half way through to give us some well needed vocal coaching was both welcome and enjoyable as well as deeply instructive.

The weekend of the show was a very busy one for me- I had four soloists staying with me over the weekend to rehearse all that they were doing, and that was an immense amount of material. They were superbly prepared and everything was off copy – something I didn't ask for but which definitely added extra dimensions to the show. So the chorus was well prepared, the soloists were well prepared. What a good job that was. The Sunday afternoon at the Fire Station began with some of the most stressful circumstances I have come across in all my career. The level of incompetence and unreadiness at the Fire Station – for which we were paying a large amount in hire fees – was at a level I have not seen before. In fact it was off the scale. It meant that we could not start rehearsing at 2pm, and it was after 2.30 by the time we could do anything as there no chairs and no staging when we all arrived. There were no radio mikes until 3.30, and there was no foldback until 4.30. How on earth we managed to get through everything by just after 5 is still a mystery to me, but I have to say I could not have been more proud of you all in your calmness and coolness despite the situation we were having to endure, and your complete focus and commitment to getting the job done.

The performance was – as we all know – a huge success, with great feedback from the audience, and a feeling of great enjoyment from everyone involved on stage in singing those great numbers and feeling everything come to life. The addition of the new numbers was a great success, as was the re written libretto delivered by the four soloists. It was a lovely evening and a great end to the season. It was sadly with reduced numbers in the choir for a variety of reasons, but the quality of the singing was as fine as ever.

Now we turn to our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary season.

We start with another Christmassy programme. There are several reasons for this. You have gathered by now that our costs, especially since the spiralling costs of hiring the Minster, are rather eye-watering. We always have had to keep an eye on the cost of programmes and the returns we can make on them. In this climate we need even more care. So it is a low budget concert, and one which will hopefully attract good audiences because of its easy listening and popular content. We are again going to perform the concert twice, once in the Minster and once in St Mary's after last year's success. It is a programme I have done before, but not for a few years now. It features two of Vaughan Williams' best loved works, his Fantasia on Christmas Carols and the Serenade to Music.

The second half will be a selection of music from Carols for Choirs and other sources. The thing I am most excited about is being able to perform two carols by Lucy Walker. Lucy was my pupil for 11 years and was one of the most talented pupils I ever had. She has recently become a sought after composer, and at the amazing age of 23 has got herself commissioned by BBC singers amongst others, and also finds some of her compositions in the new edition of Carols for Choirs! At age 23! So I am really looking forward to doing those. Her music is simply beautiful. And also there is a possibility of doing this concert together with a local children's choir which we are investigating at this moment. We could do some pieces such as Oh Ebenezer from my Christmas Carol which we used to do with the young singers. And of course these children will have their own repertoire, and they will hopefully bring their own audience and swell the box office returns.

The big concert in March, and one which will cost a bit of money, is an Elgar programme I have been wanting to do for some time. It will feature Elgar's The Music Makers, which is the most fantastic piece, and which we haven't done for some time. It will also feature Elgar's Sea Pictures which are also on my top ten, and we will start things moving by singing I was Glad by Parry – always a spectacular start to any occasion as the recent coronation proved.

Finally we return in the summer to a selection of my arrangements of popular songs which we haven't done since 2017, so it will be a more light hearted summer term. It will also be another low budget concert to balance out the costs of the Elgar and I look forward to it as indeed I do to the whole season with great excitement.

My great thanks to our hard-working committee for their great commitment to making everything run as smoothly as it does, and in particular thanks to Mike who has had a great first season as chairman, with big shoes to fill, but has brought a lot of enthusiasm and energy to meetings and has some great ideas for the future.

David Murray

4/9/2023