

Choir Notes

2014, Meet my Choir, BBC Radio 3

In January 2014 I heard a new segment on BBC Radio 3's choral programme called '[Meet my Choir](#)'. Mike Beattie had heard it as well, and together we hatched a plan to see if Bledlow Church Choir might be featured. I contacted Radio 3 and they gave me a form to fill in, plus a guide on what they needed to create a piece for radio. I listened to a few of those segments during the next few weeks, and realised that the choirs sang all types of music. I think I am right in reporting that we were the first church choir to be included in the feature, and significantly, the BBC chose Easter Sunday that year to air the Bledlow Choir.

I started drafting a script for the submission at the end of February. I felt that we needed a 'hook', some personal comments about the impact of singing in a church choir, and reference to the huge range of church music that we sing while leading the service - it is not a concert. Mike agreed with me about using cathedral visits as a way of framing our entry, and that we needed at least three voices. I asked Kip Manning to record the scripted part, with Joy Mackman and Mike in support.

I also had to choose the accompanying choir music. By that time Gareth Maynard and Dave Dobson had taken some good recordings, either at cathedrals or at Holy Trinity, Bledlow. I whittled them down to *O Magnum Mysterium* by Laurisden, *Locus Iste* by Bruckner, Martin How's *Responses*, Stainer's *Magnificat* and the *Sanctus* from Schubert's Mass in G, and obtained Jeff's approval.

The whole segment broadcast by the BBC was 4 minutes and 14 seconds long, and can still be heard on BBC Sounds, but it is more easily found on the [parish website](#). The BBC used snippets of each voice and inter-laced them with carefully chosen parts of the How *Responses* and Stainer's *Magnificat*.

While I can see from my files and emails that it took a lot of effort and time to put it all together, I think that it stands the test of time. On listening again recently, I was very taken by the full recordings by Kip, Joy and Mike that I submitted, and they are published below for the first time.

While Joy is no longer in her 60s and we have sung at many more cathedrals since 2014, I hope that you enjoy the snapshot of the choir at that time, and the strong feelings that lay behind it then and which remain today. While the BBC did not refer to Jeff and Cynthia, I remember telling them both that they had been name-checked in our submission.

Meet My Choir – by Kip Manning, Joy Mackman and Mike Beattie – 2014

My name is Kip Manning. I have sung in choirs on and off since I was a schoolboy, but now my choir is the one that sings at Holy Trinity Church, Bledlow. We started about ten years ago and, since 2006, our choirmaster has been Jeff Stewart. We began with maybe ten parishioners and now we have over thirty regulars, mainly living in the village or very nearby, ranging from eight to eighty years old. There are no auditions and there is a real cross-section of our rural community. We sing once a month in our own church at a variety of services to support the worship of our congregation, and occasionally in nearby churches and we have now also sung at eleven cathedrals and minsters. We love the history, acoustics and the majesty of those wonderful buildings.

When we visit cathedrals, we are always well prepared, with our talented organist Cynthia Hall in support, but we are anxious to make the worship meaningful. There is a wonderful history and a huge library of church choral music from which we draw. While we sing anthems and psalms, the choral service staples are the *Responses*, *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis* for evensong and a mass for communion. Each time we try to make the congregation connect to the words that they have heard many times before, whether in Latin or in English. We work hard to know the four vocal parts well, so that the words can be sung expressively, knowledgeably and meaningfully, and in a way that may challenge the norm. We always find that there is a reaction. I have seen choristers crying during and after singing, and each one of us has had our choral epiphany in a cathedral.

We know that we sound different from the regular cathedral choirs because we are a mixed choir, but we sing the same prayers. Friends have often asked about our "concerts" in cathedrals, but I always explain that they are not performances; the choir is leading the service with the clergy. The service may have been sung thousands of times and each time that we sing, we want to make the prayers sound fresh.

A great pleasure that I have is to meet the congregation after the services. I talk to them, explain where we come from and tell them how much our small village choir enjoys singing in their special place. Sometimes they take their cathedral for granted. I remember when the precentor struck his tuning fork and started singing the age-old prayer and was bowled over by the commitment of our response. He was visibly moved, joined in whole-heartedly and waited for the last echo of the last amen to slowly fade round the building to a meaningful silence before rewarding us with a huge smile.

These trips away from our church create a wonderful atmosphere and team spirit and they also encourage new local singers to join us. Such outings enhance our friendship and they really do help when we are singing at Bledlow.

One of my best moments was when we started a tricky setting of a psalm a good forty yards away from the congregation. They could not see us, so they had to listen as we slowly processed into view, and then passing through them, entered into the stalls just as the last verse was sung. What a perfect way to start a service! I will never forget at the end of the third and last service of the day that the verger, who had kept us in place and in time, told us that he looked forward to seeing us again. I now realise that this was high praise indeed.

Bledlow Church lost its original pitched roof over 200 years ago and with it went the acoustics. The opportunity to visit and sing in cathedrals where we can still enjoy wonderful acoustics is a privilege which I really appreciate on every visit that we make.

My name is Joy Mackman and I am in my late 60s [see the note above]. I can honestly say that my choir has changed my life. I have always, from a child, loved singing hymns, as did my mother. When our local vicar suggested forming a church choir, I was one of the six ladies who turned up for the first practice, only one of whom could sight-read. However, we ploughed on with the organist as choirmaster for about a year, singing slightly louder than the rest of the congregation. Then we received a letter from a new young man - well he was young to us - who was taking over the choir. I panicked at first, but decided to give it a go, and since then I have never looked back.

We have now become a fortyish strong, mixed age and mixed ability choir. Music used to take weeks to learn, and now it only takes us one practice to master a piece and, of course, a few more practices to perfect it. I have now sung in many cathedrals, which is literally awesome.

My personal favourite is Wells Cathedral in Somerset. We usually sing all the services for the whole weekend and I love singing the evensongs because we get to sing the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc Dimittis*. We are told that singing is good for the body and the soul, and this is so true. I have also, as a result of being in my choir, made many friends in my village whom I might never have met. Although it was weird on one of our early cathedral weekends to have breakfast with my fellow choristers, I think that we have bonded so well as a group and we sing together so much better.

From at first not knowing which way up a score was, I have now sung many works in Latin, French, Polish, Russian and even Welsh. I have also, in 2005, joined a choral society where the first piece I was handed was Mozart's *Requiem*. My choir has taken me to places in which I never imagined I would sing and I hope to continue until I can no longer stagger to the church for our Thursday night practices.

My name is Mike Beattie. I have to say that when I joined the Bledlow Church Choir, I did it simply to get a chance to sing in a cathedral. I really wasn't much of a church-goer but I often listened to Sunday evensong on Radio 3 and thought how fitting it is as a way to close the day, especially during the winter-time. Now I can say that I have personally sung in some of the most glorious places you can imagine and have even had the privilege to sing a solo.

When I joined, I couldn't believe how friendly people were to me. It is a wonderful group. We have a lot of fun together in our music-making and afterwards sometimes in the pub as well, but believe me, we take it seriously and strive for the best that we can achieve every time we sing. The experience is always moving. Sometimes I can't believe how glorious the sound is. An agnostic friend of mine heard us sing in Southwark Cathedral and described the sound as magnificent, and I have even seen one of our choir members with tears running down his face when he was singing. It is quite difficult at times to control your emotions and to master your feelings with those sorts of sounds and those sorts of surroundings. My ambition for the choir would be that we stay together and continue to improve, that we play our part in keeping the choral tradition alive and that we encourage future generations to sing this wonderful music. Unless we do these things, there is a danger that choral music, which has enriched our lives for well over 1,000 years, will in the end be lost.

Thank you so much to Kip, Joy and Mike for their wise words and insights from seven years ago.

Regular readers of *The Messenger* will have been following the choir's fortunes since then. The choir has supported the virtual services since 22nd March 2020 (Mothering Sunday) and everyone will recognise why we have had to shift from physical gatherings to online singing for our worship, but we hope that we can all sing in our churches again soon, with the congregation joining in the hymns.

If you would like to support the choir in its annual fund-raising, then please go to the [100 Club page](#) on the church website. (While you are there, why not listen to the '[Meet my Choir](#)' recording?) Or you can ring Sam Turner about the 100 Club on 07808 238 989, or [email](#) her. Thank you.

Greg Moore (bass)

The virtual services can be seen and heard via the [parish website](#) and at www.bledlowvirtualseervices.uk