

## Choir Notes

# The Virtual Services



I know that for many people, lock-down has been a lonely time: empty days, waiting for normality's return. For me, it has been anything but. Home-schooling and child entertainment have been a full-time job for both of us but have been some of the most delightful times that we've had as well.

I've also had to learn a whole new way of working. Cross-examining through the filter of a crackly video-link or making speeches into the void of a telephone speaker, is a far cry from the visceral sense of progress that you get from standing in a courtroom. Furthermore, it's prison for me if a toddler bumbles into the back of shot, so we have had to build a garden office ("the Shed") and a patio area to give us somewhere to commute to. By night, the Shed now doubles as a recording studio!

You can see that what I needed more than anything was... a project. When I suggested the idea of virtual services to Norbert, I expected an e-mail nod-and-smile. These were early days: Gareth Malone had thought up his take on virtual choirs, it was still sitting in a producer's in-tray; the Archbishop was still tidying his crypt! Little, then, did I expect the tsunami of enthusiasm that greeted my idea. Norbert did not falter. From the second week of services, he began to record thoughtful and inspiring homilies and his excitement at being able to continue his ministry in a world of social-distancing and locked church doors was infectious. He even braved entering the church, with viruses lurking behind every column, to video his contributions, until after Easter, when such adventures into hostile territory were banned from on high. Trisa and Stephen turned over-night into gaffers and cameramen. He was later joined by a familiar face, Revd David Wallace, and, a new and welcome addition to our congregation, Revd Alan Garratt, who has shrugged off retirement to add his experience and learning to the riches of our little parish.

As important as the continuity of worship is, my primary aim was to create a shared project for the church community - a community which I thought would help us all feel less isolated in what promised to be a long exile Behind the Pleated Curtain. As I put it in one of my poems for the services, "*If love can merge all our deserts together, how much greater a thing we've acquired.*" Each service would be a mixture of a sermon or reflection, prayers, some original music (to keep me on my toes!), an anthem, some relevant hymns and an organ voluntary.

It's all very well having a hare-brained idea. It's quite another thing carrying it out! My first e-mails were to Cynthia (who knows how to work an organ) and Jeff (who knows how to work a choir). Cynthia replied immediately to say she was "wildly out of her technical" depth recording on her home organ. Yet within a few hours, I had a CD-quality recording of an organ voluntary *and* prelude. Before the weekend had finished, I had voluntaries for the next three weeks, and the tap has never since been turned off.

I did not think that I could admire Cynthia as a musician more than I have done all the years that she has been playing for the choir and being a fount of knowledge for my early attempts at composition. Yet I had no idea how much of a jukebox she is: I could ask for any piece and it would be delivered, wrapped up in an ".mp3" file by her husband and posted on to the church website which she stewards, within the hour - perhaps two, if I asked for a tricky piece by Messiaen.

Having so much organ music to book-end the service brought with it another challenge: I could hardly have Cynthia play to the darkness. *Something* was needed to give visual interest while she was playing. My initial idea, which worked well for a number of weeks, was to appeal to the choir and congregation to produce photographs and paintings that I could use. Within days I had a vast gallery to choose from, including some beautiful artwork by Jo Stewart, Pippa Leslie, and even posthumously from former resident Vic Marr. Louise Bushell, as well as Luis and Greg Moore, even experimented with some time-lapse painting, and I had a collection of old postcards of Bledlow from Sarah Daly and Joy Mackman (despite the latter being stranded in a swimming pool in South Africa at the time!). Cynthia

found some drone footage of the village and, particularly, the church. And I had too many wonderful photographs of the church and its surrounding footpaths to mention individually.

Over time, however, variety was needed, and so I began to look for other sources of material. Fine art on the subject of the biblical readings was a rich seam to mine. Often, though, I just started from the music. When, at 3am, having prepared the rest of the virtual service, you close your eyes and listen to Cynthia's music, some image or other always comes to mind. The montages were fun, if intricate and very time-consuming to put together so that the activity on-screen fitted with the main developments of the music. Lambs playing football; a robin chick, bored of waiting for its mother to feed him, learns to fly; photos from the Hubble Telescope on its 30<sup>th</sup> birthday; a ballet *pas de trois* for Trinity; swans cajoling their cygnet who was scared of the water; a journey down the Thames, or round the world in 80 clips for our international service; cathedral interiors and exteriors and their clocks and organs. Some of my favourites united the theme of the service with the image that Cynthia's music conjured up, such as the speeded-up slugs and posturing peacocks in a service all about what right we have to judge who belongs in God's world and who does not.

Anyway, with Jeff (to whom I shall come....) and Cynthia on board, I was emboldened to recruit the choir. It says everything that I sent out the initial e-mail to them on Friday 19<sup>th</sup> March, and – after more protestations of being defeated by technology – by Mothering Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> March (only a week after the last in-person service), I had cobbled together our first service, complete with a 14-voice choir. In some weeks, the choir recorded three hymns and an anthem, and were always game to try versions that they'd never sung before. In a particular high point for me, the choir commissioned a new *a capella* work, *Oculi Omnium*, from up-and-coming composer Tomos Owen Jones. The choir rose to the challenge, and the result was a delight.

What I was asking them to do overnight was far from easy, and they'd never done it before. They had to play a "click track" through headphones on one device whilst, simultaneously, recording themselves on their mobile phones. At the same time, they had to make sure that their consonants were firm, vowels were pure, pitching was tuneful and timing was spot on – otherwise, no amount of technical magic could cure their recording.

Then came the hardest bit: sending it off to me, knowing that they could be heard. Singing in a choir is a relatively forgiving way to sing: if you don't know a passage, it is easy to follow your neighbour and blend into the background. The collective voices smooth out all the rough edges, and the acoustic (if you're lucky) papers over the cracks. Recording your voice, unaccompanied in an acoustically dry room, is a wholly different proposition. You are exposed and can hear every flaw. That 14 people did that so quickly, and that many more did over the coming weeks, is a sign of how mature Bledlow's choir is: everyone can hold their own enough to produce a track. I will say that occasionally these were decorated with backgrounds of birds singing, fingers tapping along, pages turning, children crying (a real challenge to edit out)!

Of course, that is only the beginning of the process. Editing the various voice and organ tracks together is a monstrously fiddly process. You have to line up every voice and the organ to the millisecond – which is made harder by the fact that the note that singers are most likely to come in late for is the first one. You then chop each singer's track up into individual phrases and again line *those* up. Within each section, you then have to identify and move the consonants so that they all line up. You have to check the pitches and adjust any that sound noticeably off-key. You then have to balance all the singers so that the overall sound is right, as well as adjusting the balance in different parts of the piece to bring out movement in the inner parts. And finally, you have to add an acoustic that makes it sound like the piece is sung in church without making the individual words too indistinct. Only then can you add words and pictures so that it forms part of the service. And occasionally, I would set particular challenges for myself, such as re-creating the Coronation with Vaughan-Williams' trumpeting version of *All People That On Earth Do Dwell*, or conjuring up the Palm Sunday procession with *All Glory Laud And Honour*.

For the services up to just after Easter, I did all of the music editing bar a few of the anthems, and I was exhausted. I couldn't, therefore, have been more relieved when Cathy, Greg and Jeff (all three my rocks of support throughout) ganged up on me to persuade me to delegate some of the work. Greg

took over press-ganging readers. Cathy continued to make sure that the message got out each week, even when (as too often happened) technical problems caused by lack of hard disk space, memory, or know-how, meant it was not available at 10.30am on Sunday mornings.

Jeff, who had already been working hard on the anthems, was a saint. He took off my hands the job of creating learning tracks (which used to take me 3 or 4 days, and left the choir with limited time to record). He then shared (and in some weeks took over entirely) the job of mixing the hymns as well as the anthems. William Avery and Steve Daly, too, gave some succour (and welcome prior knowledge!) with these. But Jeff single-handedly gave me back the gift of sleep on Saturday nights, and I could not be more grateful. In addition, he has sung my amateurish attempts at music-writing with a straight face – no mean feat when you’ve sung Peter Grimes – and provided a voice to my poems without pausing to ask what I would do to him in the edit. I have always thought that a parish the size of ours is uniquely blessed to have a talent as colossal as Jeff: lock-down has brought home to me how, in among that world-class talent and passion for music, is a heart of gold and a genuine love of our villages. Like Cynthia’s fingers, his vocal cords have raised the quality of our output to something which has been noticed and praised on YouTube far beyond our parish boundaries.

Indeed, an average of around 40% of the audience for our services came from overseas, and I have received comments on them from all over the UK. We became the school assembly for a Christian school in India. Our international service had contributions from a flautist in Chile, a film producer in Barbados, a student in India, an academic in Malaysia, and an old friend of Bledlow, Aksana Pachkouskaya, in Belarus. Closer to home, I was also delighted to welcome back Matthew Locke: I know that he and Jennifer have been watching the services, which, as the people who first welcomed Caroline and me into the parish, meant a lot to me.

Also commented upon widely was the level of village input into the services. We had different readers almost every week, of all ages, and including Lord Carrington on Easter Day. We had a team of intercession-writers – quietly organised by Emma Smith – who managed thoughtful and varied material in a period where, most of the time, there was only really one story in the news. These were Eugenie Bendyshe-Brown, Colin Lees, Nick Oakley and Emma herself. We had hymns and prayers contributed by two generations of the Fawkner family and even 6-year-old Pip offered a Lord’s Prayer. Melissa Stewart did two beautiful solos, and I could always rely on choir stalwarts like Cathy and Derek Stone, Jem Leslie, Sarah Daly (whose rendition of “*I Cannot Tell*” remains my favourite recording of the lock-down), Lou Bushell and, of course, Jeff for short-notice solos. We also had a jaw-dropping guest appearance from Adam Smith, one of Jeff’s students, for my arrangement of *The Lord’s My Shepherd*. Cathy and Pam Whatmore produced beautiful calligraphy for the Lord’s Prayer. Fi and Andy Mitchell created a whole, parallel, monthly Explorers’ service, complete with songs accompanied on the guitar and Lego animations of Bible stories.

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Where next? Well, services have resumed in person at Bledlow, and the embargo on hymns is compensated for by Cynthia being a weekly presence for a while. Nonetheless, there are still some parishioners unable to attend in person, and many who will miss sung music during services. There is discussion about whether the services may continue in a reduced form until normal music resumes in church. If so, they will continue to be posted on the parish website at [www.bledlowvirtualsevice.uk](http://www.bledlowvirtualsevice.uk). Whatever happens in the coming weeks, I can say that because of this hare-brained project, I am one of those rare people who has had the luxury of enjoying lock-down, and I am grateful to everyone (including those who watched week-in, week-out) who made the services such a roaring success. Thank you!

*Stephen Bartlet-Jones*