

Choir Notes

It has been said that the Visiting Choirs are the “unsung” heroes of cathedral music. Such choirs take over and keep the choral worship going during their choristers’ holidays. Bledlow Church Choir has now ‘visited’ 23 cathedrals, starting with Christ Church Oxford in 2007, for a total of 36 such visits. Jeff Stewart was a visiting chorister in his youth and has led other choirs on similar visits. I have collated a few thoughts from those outside our choir to summarise the general planning and rehearsal needed.

Salisbury Cathedral is a good example. It is renowned for the high quality of its choral worship, but the choir is away for about 140 days each year. This includes school holidays, tours, recording sessions and visits to parishes in the diocese. They have recently appointed a Visiting Choir Administrator. In a single year, they can expect to welcome about 45 choirs. They typically come from the USA, the Netherlands, the UK and usually one other country. Salisbury prefers a choir to sing the whole week in the summer holidays, but others book individual days, or two-, three- and four-day slots. The UK choirs include a small number of regularly returning and local ones, both chamber and church choirs.

The Administrator will receive enquiries, take bookings, give informal, practical advice, as well as checking the music choices, and make sure that the choir is looked after during their visit. Some choirs need help with the Anglican liturgy, such as for psalm chanting. Overseas choirs will need help on pronunciation, and psalm and hymn speeds.

Even after booking (“first division” cathedrals often book five years ahead) all is not necessarily straightforward. Choirs have been 'bumped' with only a few months' notice because a film company offered to pay to close the cathedral during that time.

It often falls to the assistant organist to produce 'Guidelines for Visiting Choirs and Organists'. Those for St George's Chapel, Windsor have an alarming opening: *'The rehearsal room is located in the Dungeon which, please note, is approached by very steep steps'*. Occasionally, a chorister will glimpse the stresses of being an assistant organist: *'Do not be offended if the congregation talk during your final voluntary - they always do that!'*

Hospitality varies considerably. At one choir drinks reception, an enthusiastic young verger mistakenly provided about 40 bottles of wine for a choir of about 25. Clergy are usually very complimentary and only occasionally refer to the rather pointed vestry prayer: *'O God, who art God from time immemorial, and to whom eternity is as nothing...'* (translation: your Mass setting was too long!).

A few years ago, Cantemus cum Spiritu was formed out of Choral Holidays. The choristers live throughout the UK and come together to sing at cathedrals. The choir can be as many as 45 to 50 adult singers from a variety of musical backgrounds, including some from Bledlow. The music is studied and learned in advance ready for intensive rehearsals at the cathedral on the day or throughout the week/weekend.

Not all eventualities can be anticipated, and the visiting choir has to adapt to meet whatever challenges they find. A certain degree of change has to be managed with the skill of the Director of Music and organist, often during final rehearsal. One good thing about being a member of a visiting choir is that it allows the chorister to visit many cathedrals and churches. The buildings themselves are wonderful havens, the silence restorative, and the architecture and fabric a testament to centuries of faith. Choristers are often able to see what goes on behind the scenes and visit parts of a building that the congregation never see. Not all choir members participate for reasons of faith - many simply love the huge repertoire of sacred choral music and enjoy proclaiming the Christian message.

What do the best visiting choirs do? Keep it simple. Choose music that they already know and remember that all parts of the service they are leading - sung and spoken - are important. It is not a concert. And, above all, enjoy the privilege and experience of singing God's praises in such a marvellous setting.

Bledlow was scheduled to be the visiting choir at Coventry cathedral on Sunday 26th April, but this is almost certain to be cancelled in the evolving response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The dates for our visits to St Paul's cathedral on Monday 7th September and to the American cathedral in Paris on Sunday 30th August remain in our diaries at present.

The choir sang a new anthem on 23rd February – Haydn's “*The Heavens are telling*” from “*The Creation*” which we hope will be sung again soon. The communion setting was a new one for us, by Peter Aston, and completed by Jeff's “*Agnus Dei*”. They will become regulars at communion services.

It is very disappointing that the choir will not be able to sing John Stainer's “*The Crucifixion*” on Good Friday at Holy Trinity, Bledlow. It is hoped that the choir will be able to assist with the creation of online services for the parish during the Covid-19 restrictions period.

Greg Moore (bass)