

# Choir Notes

As a mum of exuberant pre-schoolers, choir rehearsals offer a rare evening of stillness within the eye of a gloriously chaotic storm. Time permitting, I cut across the fields on West Lane, through the long shadows and high grasses; then over the old railway line and up above The Lyde, where the cow parsley reaches ever further across the track in its annual bid to undo another 'old lost road through the woods'.

The bell tower's resident honey bees are entering their busiest season now, and are still flying long after our rehearsals begin. It's certainly been a busy few weeks for us too, as we prepared to return for a weekend of services in Southwell. The choir previously sang here in 2011 and 2013. A beautiful Nottinghamshire town on the River Greet, Southwell is home to the first Bramley Apple seedling and, of course, the spectacular Norman minster with its Gothic carvings, Romanesque doorways and a very warm welcome.

We sang two Evensongs and two Eucharists across the first weekend of June, and it was lovely to see so many familiar Bledlow faces in the congregation (dubbed 'our groupies' by the Dean).

Jeff had chosen a wonderful range of music spanning five hundred years, from the haunting polyphony of Victoria's, '*Jesu dulcis memoria*', to Haydn's furious, almost vitriolic '*Insanae et vanae curae*'; from Fauré's mesmeric '*Cantique de Jean Racine*' to Ley's timeless '*Prayer of King Henry*'. He even had his own Agnus Dei, written for Bledlow a few years ago, sung in a cathedral for the first time (they want the score!). Kerri gave a spell-binding performance of the soaring Benedictus from Haydn's '*Little Organ Mass*', and William, Derek and I had great fun with Purcell's '*Thy word is a lantern*'.

I have very little experience of solo performance, and, as I was soon to realise, all the preparatory note-bashing in the world cannot prepare you for those last lonely, sweaty-palmed, anticipatory minutes before it begins. As a former paid-up member of the Roller Coaster Club of Great Britain, it was precisely the same feeling as when you're strapped way back in your seat, facing the clouds and being cranked ever more slowly and noisily towards some awful precipice.

But then, something extraordinary happened.

A strange logic which had remained stubbornly elusive throughout rehearsals suddenly scolded that this was actually an amazing opportunity and I *really* ought to enjoy myself!

And I did. It wasn't perfect, but it was immensely exhilarating. It felt like the vocal equivalent of staring doggedly at the swooping track ahead, flinging my arms high in the air and shrieking 'weeeeeeeeeeeee' all the way to the end of the ride. And then wanting to do it all again. Goodness it's intoxicating stuff!

A little village choir might conjure up the notion of a safe and pedestrian repertoire, but this couldn't be further from the truth. We're all extremely fortunate to be a part of a choir which sets challenges and takes risks. It certainly keeps me on my toes, and I'm sure it gets the best out of us all too!

For me the stand-out piece of the weekend was Sumsion's '*They That Go Down To The Sea In Ships*'. From an alto perspective, it's a wonderful sing - long, luxuriant phrases written for the very richest parts of our voices afford a really good wallow as we weave beneath the sopranos, and the whole piece is tremendously evocative. I hope that we get a chance to perform this in Bledlow one day, but in the meantime I'd urge anyone who is unfamiliar to track it down and have a listen - it's absolutely gorgeous!

Enormous thanks must go to Jeff for all his patience, risk-taking and diverse choices of music; to Cynthia for her meticulous playing during rehearsals and throughout the weekend; and of course, to Greg for keeping us steadily supplied with all the necessary paperwork and learning tracks. Our next cathedral visit will be to St Albans at the end of October.

We leave rehearsals under the first stars and I head home with the bats and owls, past the soft bass ruminations of the Suffolk rams - their dark faces fading like Cheshire Cats into the deepening twilight, until just a single eye remains, watching me close the gate.

*Sarah Daly (Alto)*

PS

To accumulate funds to support Cynthia, we arranged for Victor & Albert to perform their Variety Nightmare at the village hall on 8<sup>th</sup> June in front of 80 loyal choir fans and friends who were kept on their toes by the dynamic duo mixing topical and physical gags with music. Well done to those who were "dragged" on to the stage to act and dance - Sarah (scribe above) politely declined and her husband got that part! Funny that no hands went up when Victor asked if there were any singers in the audience!

