

Choir Notes

In the late 1880s, John Stainer conceived the novel idea of writing music for Passion Week that would be well within the reach of village choirs. He composed the music to W J Sparrow Simpson's libretto and the result was an oratorio, "*The Crucifixion: A Meditation on the Sacred Passion of the Holy Redeemer*", published and first sung in February 1887. It was well received at the time and the 70 minutes long piece has out-lived almost all church choir music of its period, becoming a popular favourite in the teeth of harsh judgement by some critics and historians.

Stainer was writing at a time when Bach's *Passions* had only recently been introduced and his *Meditation* was designed to form an integral part of an Anglican service using the normal resources of choir and organ, together with five congregational hymns. The libretto alternates well known biblical prose narrative with new verse expressing a Christian's response to the events from Gethsemane to the Cross.

When rehearsing *The Crucifixion* (sung by the choir in 2007 and 2012), Jeff's direction was simple. If the words are merely intoned to pleasant enough music, then the story will be heard, but if it is sung with expression and meaning, then it becomes a powerful celebration of Christ's Passion. His direction was met on Good Friday at 6pm in a packed Bledlow Holy Trinity.

Jeff was in spine-tingling form as the tenor lead, and his friend Eddie Wade (currently singing a principal role alongside Roberto Alagna in *Andrea Chenier* at Covent Garden) reprised the baritone solo from 2012 with huge authority – their well-known duet "So thou liftest thy divine petition" summed up the dramatic performance. All 22 of the choristers experienced the emotion of the piece, whether it was in the well-known anthem "God So Loved the World", or the shouting of "Crucify Him" within "The Appeal of the Crucified". From the silent start to the service, through the rousing choruses and ultimately to the "Amen" after the last hymn, a familiar story had been re-told in a way that everyone understood.

There is a lot of clever accompaniment that goes on during the service and it became understated during Cynthia's careful and skilful organ playing, particularly with the soloists. The "thank yous" to Jeff, Eddie and Cynthia, and comments made to the choir after a silent exit from the church, were heartfelt.

Nearly 48 hours later, at the Easter Day Communion service, the mood had lightened, and we sang "Blessed be the God and Father" by Samuel Wesley, composed some 50 years before *The Crucifixion*. We listened to the beautiful singing by soprano Kerri, who never seems to take a breath. It is a long piece, but it tells a story which bears repetition.

Just turning now to fund-raising, Rob Hill is still collecting supporters for the Choir 100 Club and it is not too late to join for the June draw. Additionally, we have hired the Village Hall on Saturday 8th June at 8pm to enjoy Victor and Albert's Variety Nightmare. For those who watched them five years ago, they have a new routine which is billed as "a roller-coaster ride through the world of variety and entertainment". See the advert in this month's *Messenger* or ring Jo Stewart on 01844 347057 for tickets.

On the weekend of Saturday 1st and Sunday 2nd June, we are the visiting choir at Southwell Minster in Nottinghamshire and we look forward to going back to a small town with a beautiful minster to sing two Evensongs and two Eucharists. More about that in the next issue of *The Messenger*.

Choir member