

Choir Notes – October 2020



We have asked Choir Members (Sopranos and Altos this month) to reflect on their experiences of singing during the lockdown. The weekly online services can be accessed at www.bledlowvirtualseervices.uk and <http://www.bledlowparish.org.uk/Coronavirus%20online%20services.htm>.

Debbie Dobson (Soprano)

With my science background, I could see the Covid monster thundering towards us long before lockdown. I could ignore all the headlines, both 'we are all doomed' and 'it's only flu': it was only when I ventured out that I saw how weird it all was.

Living an outdoors way of life, I haven't missed shopping (never my favourite) or partying, BUT I realised how many people I missed seeing every day, and, of course, CHOIR: I do SO miss choir, weekly rehearsals, services and, most of all, the people.

I'm really grateful to Stephen, Jeff and Cynthia for the virtual services which have kept me singing, kept us all connected and probably improved my musical skills. Singing into my phone whilst watching Jeff conduct is painful, (both for me and for David if he's about) and I've learned NOT to listen back too carefully, and that the fourth attempt is often worse than the first!

Singing solo means that there is nowhere to hide, no giggling in the back row of the sopranos and DEFINITELY no miming tricky bits. Then we almost started rehearsals again, but the latest rule changes stopped that - hey ho! We will be back, (socially-distanced in the churchyard, singing quietly in PPE?) but real people singing with conviction, watching Jeff at the front!

Jo Stewart (Soprano)

Boris, instructing us to wash our hands whilst singing 'Happy Birthday' twice and keeping our distance from others, did not immediately register with me the seriousness of the virus or the reality of what was to come.

Almost overnight life changed, the spread of infection took hold and choir, along with other gatherings and all group activities, were swept aside. Routine changed dramatically! A previously impossible peace in our daily lives, and a break from many commitments, gave a longed for opportunity to spend days rather than hours working in our garden. I admit I enjoyed the luxury of a new freedom but the daily up-dates underlined the devastation being caused to our whole way of life and the desperate sadness that came with this awful virus. When we lost our nephew, we personally related closely to what so many thousands are going through.

Neighbourly kindness has proved a silver lining to this massive cloud. For our choir, bringing us 'together' for the virtual services has been a blessing. The expertise of those who encourage us into contributing to them, Stephen, Jeff and Cynthia, working tirelessly to make good our efforts. Sometimes amusing and often frustrating. Having been appalled at the sound of my own lone voice on tape, I did my best to find a spot that might enhance the sound I was making.

Balancing the necessary computer, sheet music, mobile phone and headphones, all in the downstairs cloakroom, I tried! I think it would have made a comedy sketch! Consolation of course in knowing that I was not alone in my endeavours. Rescued, thankfully soon, on being informed that the equipment to enhance and correct our errors was at hand.

Keeping us singing in this way has been great and a worthwhile service to many, but nothing can really substitute singing alongside choir members and indeed congregations.

Sam Turner (Alto)

Bledlow Choir had a full calendar for 2020 (including visits to the American Cathedral in Paris and St Paul's) so we were devastated as we realised that none of this could go ahead. However, Jeff was in touch, even before lockdown started, to investigate how we could keep singing. He started with an hysterical Zoom rehearsal, where we couldn't even manage 'Happy Birthday'! The time lag meant that Zoom was unviable for recording (but it boosted our spirits!). Next day Jeff sent 'instructions' on how to video ourselves on our phones.

I was elated at the prospect of singing again with everyone, then realised that I had to record my solo voice (and, worse, my moving image!). A true lesson in humility! However, a choir is all about working together to produce something better than the sum of its parts. So I overcame my terror and pressed 'record'.

The combined results of our efforts were pretty decent. Bledlow Choir was contributing to a weekly on-line service, not just straightforward unison stuff, but proper brain-training, eight-part harmony in Russian, Stephen Bartlett-Jones' originals, new music - we were put through our paces. Seeking out places to record where there was no dog-barking, hoover or birdsong, and tussling with unfamiliar technology, meant that in those initial weeks of lockdown, I sang with purpose and those endorphins kept going.

Then there was the anticipation of the Sunday service each week. How would it sound? What musical treats would there be: 'two Jeffs', 'three Cathys' and my favourite 'Abide with me'? Whilst I miss the musical support of my fellow altos, choir and organ, this has been a remarkable time and we have shared a sense of something worthwhile having been achieved.

I think that my singing also improved a bit.

Kathryn Macneil (Alto)

Initially the virus was something remote in China. I was working in London. The company suddenly issued a clampdown on travel by public transport, and I realised how serious it was.

I thought that it might be over in a couple of months (how wrong can you be?!) and booked trips abroad for May and June - more fool me.

The choir hasn't met since March, but I have felt involved and connected, no small thanks to Jeff, Cynthia and Stephen who sent music and recorded learning tracks for us to sing.

What a challenge! You think you've almost recorded a piece, only to cough or run out of breath, or have your phone ring, and that's in addition to all the wrong notes! Your recorded voice shocks you- I learned what my fellow altos have to endure - but it has been a learning experience and I am hugely proud to have been a small part of the virtual services.

Then we geared up to our first socially-distanced and face-shielded choir practice excitedly, but were disappointed by the new restrictions. I hadn't got my hopes up too high as I anticipated the tougher rules.

We have amazing talent in the choir but special mention must be made of all the learning tracks that Jeff sends us, in particular alto parts - not easy for a tenor!