

Choir Notes

For as long as I can remember, singing has been an important part of my everyday life. Earliest memories are of my mother switching on our Ultra Radiogram and dancing round our living room, singing to the popular tunes of the day. Later I joined in, and together we sang in the house and elsewhere, often in competition with each other. I still sing to myself; favourite songs, well-known operas, hymns - in fact anything that happens to be buzzing through my head at the time - on one occasion much to the postman's surprise! He was walking along the back of the house to deliver the post and I was in the kitchen bellowing out my favourite part of Verdi's *Requiem*. We both ended up laughing.

School, both as a pupil and teacher, brought many opportunities to sing; morning assemblies with the daily singing of well-known hymns; school choirs and choral societies; and as a teacher who was very involved in the school musical productions, I always had snatches from works such as *Dido & Aeneas*, *The Mikado* and *Oklahoma!* to sing.

Choirs and choral societies have formed a significant part of my life. A few of us, aged 10-11, in the small village choir, would meet for practice on Friday evenings and go rapidly through the hymns for Sunday before rushing back out to play. On Sunday we wore no robes, just our Sunday best. A little more serious were those at school where we learned and performed some of the more famous pieces. In 1963 I joined Aylesbury Choral Society, to which I still belong.

Then came retirement – no morning assemblies, no school choirs or musical productions, but one day I saw in *The Parish Messenger* a notice from the organist, John White, saying that he wished to re-start the church choir. We few, full of apprehension, sang mostly hymns, rather badly I fear. To my horror, I found myself singing the alto part for the first time ever, not easy when you rely on sight-reading and the music is on one page and the words on another.

Then, to misquote a popular song of my youth, "Along came Jeff, an ordinary guy..." (well, perhaps not so ordinary!). He took us in hand, starting with "note-bashing" so that we could sing with greater confidence, later teaching us how, when and where to breathe, often accompanied by the waving of arms, or hands on heads or round the waist, or other contortions aimed, he said, at improving our performance. He is also very insistent that we express emotion in our singing – "You do not sing 'Heaven' the same as you would 'Hell'."

Cathedrals have become an important part of singing with Bledlow church choir. Unfortunately, my cathedral days are over, but I have many happy memories of the visits that we made to them. I have loved most of the things I have sung, either to myself or with others but, if you were to ask me my favourite, I would say, without hesitation, *O Magnum Mysterium* by the American composer Morten Lauridsen. Why? Because, unusually, the altos have a beautifully melodic part. We start down low, rise up four notes then back down to the starting point; then up a little higher to A (my favourite note), and down; then (deep breath) up to what is, for me, the height of achievement, top D, **and we have to hold it for six beats** before returning to base. We repeat this twice, each time, for me, becoming more exciting, until we drop right down for the final Alleluias.

On that note I shall stop writing, but I hope to carry on singing for some time to come – without it, life would be dreary.

Pam Whatmore

