

Choir Notes – April 2025



This month we have the luxury of much practice time and easy pieces, as Jeff produces *Canticles* in A by Sir William Henry Harris (1883–1973) and then *O Lord Give Thy Holy Spirit* by Thomas Tallis (c.1505–1585 – they weren't too precise about birthdates in Tudor England - OMG another baby has arrived!). These are for evensong at Saunderton on 9th March. We have no services at which to sing from 12th January to 9th March. I guess Jeff may produce more pieces for us during the month for later services: we shall see.

Jeff has sent us our dates for the year. In addition to services in our own parish, we have visits to St Albans Cathedral and Bath Abbey (*left*) and three weddings, which will be lovely. It is fun going to weddings where you do not know the protagonists or their families, so

one can just enjoy seeing two happy families having a great time, and helping by singing to them.

Jeff has picked the Tallis piece for solemnity, as he has spotted the service falls in Lent. He gets us to sight-sing both the *Canticles* and the Tallis: we don't do too badly, as we have sung other Harris and Tallis pieces, so we know how they compose. By the end of the second rehearsal on 22nd February, we are singing both pieces confidently, but I am sure with room for improvement as Jeff tweaks our various parts.

Since his visit to New York, Jeff has got us to imagine that our nose is blocked as we approach high notes, and tilt our heads a trifle back. Look out for nasal sounds and head twitching when you next see us sing.

Then on 27th February, a minor disaster - the piano key has disappeared from its usual place of concealment, and no-one knows where it is. Text messages to people who may know prove fruitless. We haven't had the piano all that long (two-and-a-half years), but it feels like travelling back to the dark ages as we cluster round the organ, as the light is dim there and you can't always tell your crotchets from your minims on the music, leading to some avant garde music-making, or a car crash, depending on your point of view. We sing through the music for evensong, but no psalms or hymns are chosen yet.

As the music is on track for the evensong service on 9th March, Jeff introduces us to *The Reproaches* by John Sanders (1933–2003, organist of Gloucester Cathedral from 1967 to 1994, and director of the Three Choirs Festival from 1968 to 1994). This piece discusses the crucifixion from the point of view of Christ on the cross, similar in thought to works that we have sung by Tomos Luis de Victoria and the Victorian composer, Sir Frederick Arthur Gore-Ouseley, 2nd Baronet, about whom I imagine Donald Trump might say: "Great Name, Great Guy". I think that Gore-Ouseley's version beats Victoria for gloom/dejection, but Victoria beats G-O for beauty. Where does John Sanders come in my mental beauty parade? Nowhere yet, as we stumble our way through a first sight-reading. However, it is available on YouTube, where it is sung by the choir of Ely Cathedral, who, of course, sing it very well.

The next week (6th March), we launch into Psalm 91, which has been chosen since our last practice as the psalm for evensong. This psalm is about how safe we are from all sorts of nasty dangers, all spelled out one by one, as we are protected by God. Jeff views it as smooth and comforting, and not angry or worried or praising, which moods require a different approach.

We run through the *Canticles* ("don't punch out the Amen at the end, please", says Jeff, as the ending is naturally a bit whoomph, but he wants it smooth and calm). The anthem (Tallis) is also smooth, so the whole service will be smooth and relaxed - good for ending Sunday on a calm note.

Then we return to *The Reproaches* for Good Friday. Now this is a bit tricky. I fail to note at first that the first bass (my) words are above the music line, only the second bass words being below, and this causes difficulty and confusion for me, and I am sure others have their troubles. Jeff puts it to the vote, whether we continue with this, hoping that we can manage it by Good Friday, or abandon it for something easier. The choir votes *nemo contradicente* to go for it. Macbeth (before murdering King Duncan): "but should we fail...". Lady Macbeth: "We fail! But screw your courage to the sticking place and we'll not fail!"

Then to St Mary and St Nicholas for Evensong on 9th March. We practice. Cynthia has a cipher. This is not to say she is communicating secretly with the Russians: she has a stuck note on the organ. I do not know why this is called a cipher. The note eventually stopped and the rehearsal continues uneventfully, but not before the cipher reminds Jeff of his friend who went alone into a church at night to practice the organ. The church was empty and he locked the door behind himself to prevent interruptions. His practice went smoothly until he played a piece by JS Bach, at the end of which someone started clapping. He turned round, surprised - nobody there. So he carried on his practice of other music with no sound except his own playing, but then returned to the Bach. At its end the clapping returned. He turned towards the sound - nobody there! At which point the organist left in a hurry, somewhat shaken.

The service goes well, with most of the choir able to be there, minus one or two with colds, or away. A lovely end to the first Sunday in Lent.

Rob Hill