



I was away on holiday for the last choir practice of last month. One does not have to come to every single practice, but to get good results, we all need to get to as many as possible.

On 17th April Jeff says that he has been to a service of Tenebrae for the first time ever. Wikipedia says that Tenebrae is “a religious service during the three days preceding Easter Day, characterised by a gradual extinguishing of candles, and the *strepitus* or loud noise in total darkness at the end of the service”. Jeff tells us of a Tenebrae service where one choir member did not know about the *strepitus*. Someone threw a heavy book flat on to the floor, and a lady choir member jumped out of her skin. He proposes that we should have a Tenebrae service: maybe we need a health warning, Jeff.

We rehearse *The Cross of Christ* again. By now it has been much practiced, and we run through it quickly with just a few tweaks and embellishments, and it is sounding good. Then on to practice for Easter Day and *Blessed be the God and Father* by Samuel Wesley (1810-1876), which has a lovely soprano solo to be sung by Lucy Southby. What’s so good about ‘*Blessed be...*’ I hear you ask? Well, it has a solemn start, building to an unexpected joyous climax, followed by a short male chorus passage introducing the sweet and beautiful soprano exhortation to love one another, followed by a male *momento mori* passage, “All flesh is as grass”, before a final fugue, “But the word of the Lord endureth forever”. It packs in so much in a short piece.

But then disaster! I get a cold. Since Covid, it has been unacceptable to bring your germs with you to any meeting: singing is a particularly bad source of mutual infection, as was proved on Good Friday in 2022, when most of the choir got Covid while singing the Stainer’s *Crucifixion*.

So I miss the Good Friday and Easter Sunday services, including ‘*Blessed be...*’, despite having learned the pieces and rehearsed hard to get them right! But never mind, as I will sing them in Easter to come. I get a report on the services by WhatsApp in the form of comments made by the congregation to a choir member that “the choir was amazing, on such good form, the music sounded so good, especially the anthem”.

After Easter, we start practicing for our visit to St Albans Cathedral (left) on 24th and 25th May, where we will sing at Evensong on the Saturday, and at a sung Eucharist service and Evensong on the Sunday. There is a lot of music to learn. We start with a Mozart Mass in C, written when he was 17. How did he do it? Jeff says that it almost sings itself. Good job he says, almost, as we get bogged down in several places. This is a serious rehearsal, but we then practice John Glover-Kind (1880-1919)’s ‘*I do Like to be Beside the Seaside*’, as we have been asked to sing that at Bob Uglow’s 90th birthday party, coming up soon.

On 26th April, the pianist Peng Lin comes to Bledlow again to our Coffee-Time Concert. She plays Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata, then eight études by Scriabin, and Debussy’s Estampes (consisting of three movements - *Pagodes*, *La Soirée dans Granade and Jardins sous la pluie*). She plays amazingly. Can she come again soon, please?

On to 2nd May, largely spent rehearsing for St Albans. We are singing Canticles by Thomas Attwood Walmisley (1814 –1856) at one of our Evensong services. Jeff and Cynthia discuss that neither of them know any other composition by him, except certain psalm chants, but on the basis of these Canticles he was a gifted, if not prolific composer. He died aged 41, and was an organist, teacher, choirmaster and administrator, which might explain his low output of compositions. His father was a musician and composer, who died in 1886, ten years after his son. He completed a book Cathedral Music which his son had mostly written, but left incomplete when he died. It is among Jeff’s best-loved Canticles. He likes the alternation between the male and female voices, and suggests one can imagine the men as Old Testament prophets, patriarchal and stern, while the women represent Mary, the mother of

Jesus, gentle and kind. The Nunc Dimittis has much unison music which may reflect Simeon's realisation that he can now die, having seen the Messiah, before the music bursts into harmony, representing his vision of heaven.

We sing the Mozart Mass again. It is much improved since last week, so everyone must have been practicing: we are so lucky, compared to choristers of earlier ages, who did not have computer aids like YouTube, where much choral music is stored, sometimes with individual voices emphasised to help learning.

We also run through the party pieces for Bob Uglow's birthday, which we then sing on 3rd May at his family farm in Bledlow. This is fun, as Bob is a firm supporter of the choir, and this gives us a chance to thank him. Everyone is having a nice time when we enter. We sing our songs, including an arrangement of Happy Birthday by Stephen Bartlet-Jones, *The Goslings*, *I do like to be beside the Seaside*, and a short version of *Mary Had a Little Lamb* (Bob's wife being called Mary, and Bob being her little lamb). Jeff sings a romantic song from an operetta by Irving Berlin, and we leave the party in good spirits.

On 8th May, Cynthia takes the practice, Jeff having flown (in an aeroplane) with most of our alto section (and others) to Majorca with his company, They Shall Laugh and Sing, leaving Anne alone to sing the alto parts; Joe alone is present to sing tenor. Cynthia runs through much of the St Albans music, some of it sight-read for the first time, trying to cover as much as possible, given that we have only two more practices. She remarks politely that she sees discrepancies between what Mozart wrote and what she now hears. She also comments on the bass part of *Sing We Merrily unto God our Strength* that we sound less merry and more like we have bad stomach-ache. But we manfully take criticism in good part, and strive to please her more! We will succeed!

Rob Hill