



By the time of the rehearsal on 5th December, things are getting serious, with our trip to St Paul's (left) looming on 16th. The bass section is without Greg and William, who know all the correct notes for the *Preces* and *Responses* by the trickster Gabriel Jackson, who throws in unexpected notes and harmonies all over the place. The basses present seem in random mode, hovering roughly round where we ought to be. Jeff, while not completely disgruntled, is clearly far from grunted, saying that

it is not our fault, as many men take up singing later in life, and never quite get a grip.

But the *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* by Hylton Stewart are better, and *Drop Down Ye Heavens* is going in the right direction, so there is hope.

On 7th December, to Aylesbury, to hear the *Petite Messe Solennelle* by Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868) sung by Aylesbury Choral Society under the baton of Jeff, who has no baton, but uses his naked hands only. Penglei Liang, who sang at a Bledlow Coffee-Time Concert recently, sings the soprano solo wonderfully. The tenor soloist is built like a tank, with a massive voice to match. The choir has relatively little singing to do, but what there is sounds of titanic difficulty, and they sing it with enormous enthusiasm and accuracy. There are three Bledlow Choir members singing and there are many more in the audience. I wonder, did Rossini do a *Grande Messe* as well? The word "Petite" is evidently ironic, as it lasts two hours, including the interval. Jeff says in the programme notes that it was intended for concert performance only, as it is far too long for any church service. His *Grande Messe* would be big, perhaps to suit for a chorus of elephants. Some of it sounds a bit *opera buffa*, like the *Barber of Seville*, so not all that "Solennelle" either, but quirky and different from mainstream church mass music.

By 12th December, our pieces for St Paul's show improvement. Everyone has been working hard at home on their computers. It is much better than last week, and we seem less likely to fall flat on our faces.

So, to St Paul's on 16th December. The security man asks if I am with the visiting choir: they can always tell by the large soft package of choir robes. We go to our usual (I feel I can say this after four visits) rehearsal room in the crypt, walking past statues of war heroes and clerics. The room is about the size of the nave at Saunderton and has a good acoustic. The choir is singing well, but Jeff needs to raise us to fever pitch, which he can do with a mixture of exhortation ("Watch me, stand up straight, don't look at the music, look at me, how can I control you if you don't look at me"), and fun, and kindness.

The room has a piano, played today by Sam Laughton, a good friend of the choir, who will accompany us later on the cathedral organ. Jeff wants us to open ourselves up. There is nothing to be scared of. We should be honest and moving. We should sing as if giving a Christmas present to a daughter's boyfriend. Sing the *Canticles* like soft and lush. Then for the *Responses*, think of the Fat Slob character in Harry Enfield, who ends every sentence with "cool" or "groovy". For *Drop Down Ye Heavens*, you want good things to drop down - things are not so bad, and good permeates everything. How can we fail with motivation like that?

Then the service. It is easy and relaxed, we are so well-tuned to give our best performance. Nothing should be taken for granted, of course, but we really are on best form - not up to a cathedral's own choir, but we are a village choir of members who love singing and want to succeed. So, a service based on hard endeavour and love.

But no resting on our laurels - we need to practice for the Carol Service at Holy Trinity in Bledlow on 22nd December. So, on 19th December, we get to work. There is much emphasis on the *Coventry Carol*, originally part of a Coventry mystery play, sung just before players re-enact the slaughter of the innocents. Jeff tweaks our performance by, for instance, putting weight on "little tiny child". He also tells us about a painting that he recalls, where the

soldiers who do the killing are naked, and he finds this particularly savage - mentioned to make us froth with rage. I google "slaughter of innocents naked soldiers" later, and a drawing by Raphael pops up, which might be what he had referred to.

And so, to Bledlow for the Carol Service on 22nd December. Now, you can't see Jeff's face as he is facing the choir. He sports a beatific grin while we sing *In Dulci Jubilo*, to persuade the choir to smile and look joyful. Then an even sweeter grin in *Silent Night* to indicate comforting sweet music. But in the *Coventry Carol*, when the soldiers come to kill babies, his face contorts into a fierce silent snarl, as if a tiger advancing on a hunting rajah, and we sing "slay" with an equal snarl. I hope that members of the congregation were not too frightened. In *A Christmas Blessing* by Philip Stopford (born 1977-extant), Jeff has asked us specifically to sing as if a choir of marshmallows coated in chocolate, so as to pour goo over the congregation. I hope that this comforted everyone after the ferocity of the *Coventry Carol*.

The choir has its Christmas party after the service at Jeff's house. This acts as a reflection on the previous year, when Greg runs through our events, and thanks Jeff, Cynthia, and everyone, and looks forward to next year. Some of our cathedral tours were cancelled, so we sang fewer such events, but next year we have Winchester on 5th February, St Albans on 24th and 25th May, Bath on 1st and 2nd of November, and Durham on 21st and 22nd February 2026. Jeff replies with thanks and congratulations, referring also to the Saturday Coffee-Time Concerts which have been so well attended, enabling us to pay so many talented performers, and help our finances. It is all so, so lovely!

And then Christmas Day. A full church, so much hearty carol singing, and the choir is largely rested after a busy month. We only sing *Ding-Dong* and *Joy to the World*, without a warm-up practice beforehand. The sermon for the children is in two parts, and these pieces illustrate what Revd John is saying. Fun!

And so, home to Christmas dinner and a rest, having sung throughout the choir year; now we are adjourned *sine die* until Jeff has recovered from December, and announces when we are to meet again.

Rob Hill