

Choir Notes – March 2023



14th January. To Southwark, to sing evensong at the cathedral. It stands between the Thames to the north, Borough Market to the south, London Bridge Station to the east, and to the west, a reconstruction of Sir Francis Drake's Golden Hind; a little further off, are Tate Modern and the Millennium Bridge.

Since we were last here, they have closed the west entrance, so you get in at the north-east corner, causing the choir, approaching from the east, to circumnavigate it clockwise in a manner of which Sir Francis might have been proud.

We have had just two rehearsals, and some choir members could not attend both. But Jeff is on fire (metaphorically) today, and we crack on through the programme. Last rehearsals are valuable, in teaching things which we then have no time to forget before the service. Jeff repeats tips which choirmasters the world over repeat, often to little effect, as choristers struggle to remember the tunes let alone embellishments.

Today, we are not opening our mouths correctly. Jeff recommends that we imagine inserting a banana, to gauge the correct aperture. He has suggested this before, but never brings a banana to illustrate. (The sweetest bananas are the little ones from the Windward Isles. I imagine that he might have a bigger banana in mind. This is worrying, as we need to know the correct aperture ...) He also stresses communication (telling the story), and letting rip. He suggests that we go to see a current movie, "*I Wanna Dance with Somebody*", a biopic of Whitney Houston. Now, I mostly don't like biopics of songsters, as they start out young and lovely, fresh-faced and enthusiastic, marry a wrong'un against the advice of parents and friends, suffer marital abuse, are exploited by managers, who steal their dough, turn to drink and drugs, and suffer early death. I usually can't face it. But in the interests of training, I go. I may learn about letting the emotion out and telling a story, and I hope to learn the size of banana that Whitney (or rather her impersonator for the film, the brilliant Naomi Ackie) used. The film illustrates perfectly singing from the heart. Whitney/Ackie, from teenage years, shows emotion and has a great voice. There are no bananas to be seen, but if she uses one, it must be a whopper, perhaps *Musa Ingens*, the biggest banana in the world, growing only in Papua New Guinea. She opens her mouth wide, and the sound floods out and is wild emotion.

Back to 14th January. The service is great. We do everything right! The cathedral is less immense than many, and so easier than some to fill with sound. Jeff congratulates us afterwards, and actually says that it is one of the best services that he has ever conducted!

And there is more, as we repeat the music at Evensong at Saunderton on 29th January. We are singing Evensong there on the last Sunday of those months with five Sundays in them. Several choir members say how much they enjoyed the service, as did I. We sang well, with fewer of us than at Southwark, but it is a smaller church, so we managed to fill it with sound. A member of the congregation told me that she liked it, as one could hear the words sung better here than at Southwark.

I could not quite work out what made it so enjoyable, then Kip (tenor) told me. The service celebrated the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, so we sang the '*Nunc Dimittis*' after having heard it in the old testament reading of the same passage, so the congregation got it with both barrels, so to speak. And at Saunderton the choir can hear Norbert speak, which is difficult for the choir at Bledlow, and he gave an ace sermon about the sense in which the blind Simeon could see the Lord, as promised to him by God, despite his blindness.

And the cherry on the cake was Cynthia's voluntary. I didn't ask what it was, but it was great!

And then back to work. We start on '*Magnificat Tertii Toni*' by Giuseppe Bernabei (1649-1672), and '*Sicut Cervus*' by Giovanni de Palestrina (1525-1594) - so a step back in time to enjoy.