

## Choir Notes – May 2025

We are now preparing for the services on Mothering Sunday, 30<sup>th</sup> March, and Good Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> April.

At our rehearsal on 13<sup>th</sup> March, Jeff hands out music for an 'Ave Maria' by Edward Elgar (1857-1935), which is headed Op. 2, No.2. We usually - and for obvious reasons - sing about the Virgin Mary, as a prominent historical mother, on Mothering Sunday. It starts with the word "Ave" marked "f". Jeff says he wants it loud enough to make her jump, if she heard it. We try, but Jeff says louder, so we try again, and he smiles.

We then move on to 'Solus ad Victimam', with words by Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and music by Kenneth Leighton (1929-1988), which we have sung on Good Friday before, but many years ago. Remarkably, much of the choir, who were with us then, remember it well, perhaps because it is a dramatic and memorable piece. There are many clashing chords, all resolved at the end when the resurrection occurs on a unison note - phew, what a relief!

On 20<sup>th</sup> March, we start with practice for Mothering Sunday, as Jeff cannot be with us the following week, which is rare; Cynthia often steps in, but can't this time either, so we are bereft and will miss a rehearsal. So, we need to learn the service now, hoping not to forget how it goes in the meantime.

We sing the Elgar anthem, which should be easy, but I find it difficult to pitch the notes right.

Then we practice the hymns, which are straightforward.

Then on to 'Solus ad Victimam' again. Jeff thinks that parts of this symbolise hell, so he wants a depraved edge to it, until the final note (see above - and see also if you can hear demons laughing in hell when we sing it).

All services seem remote when we first practice music, but Easter will be upon us like an express train, particularly with Jeff away next week. Let's keep our fingers crossed that we succeed.

On 29<sup>th</sup> March, we have one of the Bledlow Coffee-Time concerts, which are usually music performances, with only small movements, but this time the performers move a lot, indeed they never stand still, for it is dance! Luis Moore and Martha Bixley, who met when still at school, and then both went to university in Falmouth to study dance, perform a piece called 'Trio', choreographed by themselves. I am puzzled why it is called 'Trio', when there are only two of them, until Jeff introduces them and explains that there are three pieces. It is wonderful, and it stars the church as well as the performers, as it is a great dramatic place for dance, with the sunlight streaming in through the south windows.

Then that evening, many choir members go to hear the Lord William's Festival Chorus at Thame, with Jeff conducting, singing the Duruflé 'Requiem' and John Rutter's 'Feel the Spirit' (an arrangement of Southern Plantation Spirituals). It is a good order for them, as Duruflé is quietly contemplative, and the audience need waking up with a "bang", which the Rutter provides. Glorious! The Spirituals were sung by slaves getting what enjoyment they could in their enslaved condition. The powerful singing of soprano Dariella Miskaliuk, a Ukrainian refugee, brings home the deep sadness of several of the songs, which welcome death as an end to the suffering of slavery.

We next meet for rehearsal on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, and work through 'The Cross of Christ' (Royal School of Church Music 1957), headed *A Devotion for Congregation and Choir*, but with some replacement pieces, as we have sung it twice before. New pieces are welcome to the choir, and I hope by the congregation.

We practice both hymns and anthems in the service. The hymns are mostly old favourites, but I somehow get the wrong page to start with and it takes me a while to realise the mistake or why I seem to be getting the words wrong. It is '*There is a green hill far away*' but it takes me a whole verse to understand what I am doing wrong.

'*Is it Nothing to You*' by Sir Frederick Gore-Ouseley is replaced by '*The Reproaches*' by John Sanders (1933-2003), of which we have reached a reasonable standard, though with further practice needed to learn thoroughly.

Then '*For Thy Tender Mercy's Sake*' is replaced by '*Lord, I Trust Thee*' by George Frederick Handel (1685-1759), which I cannot recall singing before. Several choir members have sung it, or it almost sings itself, as it is easy and predictable, but saying that may put a curse on it.

Then the Bach Chorale '*O Lord Who Dares to Smite Thee*', from the St Matthew Passion, sung often before, and '*Ah, Holy Jesu*' by Johann Cruger (1598-1662), where Jeff asks us to imagine singing the first two verses to Christ on the cross, and the last verse to someone else.

Then we are to sing Elgar's '*Ave Maria*'. A different composition from the one for the Mothering Sunday service (Opus 2, No 1), in place of the often-repeated '*Ave Verum Corpus*' by Mozart.

And lastly, Jeff announces that we will sing '*Blessed be the God and Father*' by Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810-1876), on Easter Sunday, which is one of the choir's favourites, not sung for a few years, but we sing it straight off now, *con gusto*. Fantastic!

*Rob Hill*