

Choir Notes – November 2022



Jeff told you about the new Bechstein piano last month, but we hadn't used it then. The baby grand is still the big news. It is kept at the front left of the nave at Holy Trinity, so we can now rehearse using the front rows of seats - previously we swiveled the back seats to face the rear to be near the organ. Cynthia used to face away from us and turn through 180 degrees to talk to Jeff or us. Now at the piano, Cynthia faces forward and speaks without swivel, enhancing eye contact, and we can now all sing from the same hymn sheet!

There is other good news. We rehearse for Harvest Festival. Every year, Jeff, normally 100% positive, desponds at the lack of good harvest anthems. But this year, Ashstead Church, where Jeff sang as a lad, has had a clear out, and sent Jeff loads of sheet music. The pages resemble papyri from the tomb of Tutankhamun, with edges pitted and uneven, and the writing faded, but, peering closely, one can see that it is in English, with modern musical notation.

Jeff gives us two pieces from this archive. One is a harvest anthem called "*Fear Not, O Land*" by William Henry Harris KCVO (1883-1973). He was mostly a choir master and trainer, who composed relatively few works. Jeff tells us that he trained the young Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret in Windsor during the war to sing and play the piano. His anthem "*Bring us, O Lord God*", was sung at the Committal Service of The Queen at Windsor on 19th September. So he is quite famous.

We practice his anthem for three rehearsals. It is in a series called Oxford Easy Anthems. It is indeed easy, but not altogether a piece of cake, as surprises catch us out at first. Jeff gets us in the mood by telling us to imagine dancing round a maypole in the merrier bits. After we finish practicing it, we have the draw for the Bledlow Hundred Club: third prize went to Kate Dobson, Debbie's daughter, second prize went to Kip Manning, and first prize to Sam Turner.

Then in the last rehearsal before Harvest Festival we have cracked it, so Jeff asks Cynthia to go to the organ, while the choir goes into the choir stalls for a dress rehearsal. I can't hear or see Cynthia's reply, but Jeff asks her again more pleadingly to go to the organ, so she leaves her new-beloved piano, and treads the lonely thirty yards to the distant organ.

Another piece from the Ashstead treasure trove is the Canticles in E Minor by Heathcote Dicken ('Dickie' to his choir at Norwich Cathedral) Statham CBE (1889-1973). We were practicing this when the pandemic struck, but sang then only the Nunc Dimittis. Jeff has told St David's Cathedral that we are planning on singing it there, and they said great, as it is a lovely piece.

We will sing at two Evensongs in St David's on 5th and 6th November (as well as a Eucharist on the Sunday morning), so Jeff also hands out Canticles by Herbert Murrill (1909-1952). There is discussion about when we last sang this, and someone says confidently that we sang it at Southwell Cathedral. I went to Southwell perhaps three years ago (hard to work out how long ago anything happened now, as the pandemic is lost limbo time), but I have never seen this before, and it is frightening initially, as it is fast. We practice it more in the week after Harvest Festival, and we are catching on quickly. I learn that it was sung in Southwell nine years ago, before I joined the choir. Jeff also distributes an anthem for Remembrance Sunday. It's another one by William H Harris, called "*Holy is the True Light*". This one is easy, but published by Novello, so not another Oxford Easy Anthem. It is a peaceful piece, ending with '*Alleluia*', usually a rousing word, but here pianissimo, so quiet and respectful towards the dead. We are to sing it at St David's too, where William Harris was assistant organist, aged 14.

Rob Hill