

Choir Notes - April 2026



We start February by practicing for our upcoming visit to Chichester Cathedral on 21st and 22nd February.

Now, usually approaching such an event, there are pieces we have learned well, and others less well, so Jeff does the pieces needing intensive work and improvement first; but this time we know the music well, so he does a run-through of everything for the Saturday Evensong and Sunday Matins at the rehearsal on 5th February, and covers the Eucharist and Sunday Evensong on the 12th.

There is a lot of music to get through, so the rehearsals are a bit longer than normal, but all is straightforward, except the *Benedicite, Omnia Opera*, set by Herbert Sumsion (1899-1995), which much of the choir seems to have forgotten on 5th February, despite earlier rehearsals of it. Well, it is a little unusual. We practice it again on 12th, and by then everyone has remembered how it goes.

We meet at Chichester Cathedral for a rehearsal at 2pm on Saturday 21st. We rehearse for the Evensong at 5.30 pm, but also have to cover the music for the Sunday Matins and Eucharist Services, as early Sunday services prevent us practicing in the choir stalls before Matins. Some cathedrals have difficult acoustics or layouts, making it necessary to get used to local conditions, but the Chichester choir stalls are fine from the start [NB: *with the front stalls having been constructed for small boys, the only way the sopranos could be comfortable was by having neither legs nor hips!*]. The only tricky bit is the vertiginous spiral staircase up to the Song School, where we do most of our practice. It must go up one of the towers, I think. All of us make it, both up and down, and the room itself is fine.

Jeff says choral conductors mostly concentrate on getting their choirs to hit the right notes and rhythms, but he wants us to focus on singing sweetly and beautifully (nothing raucous or rough). There are many things to think about when singing, and now we have beauty on top of everything else! But we give it our best shot. He also says that he feels great confidence in us, and a good feeling for the services to come, which is nice.

Our music for this trip is by British composers, except for the *Cantique de Jean Racine* by Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924). The services fall during Lent, so most of the music is quiet and contemplative. Who cannot feel the emotion in *Thou Knowest Lord* by Henry Purcell (1659-1695)?

On to the *Benedicite* at the Matins service on Sunday. I often think when just starting a piece “Why on earth are we singing this?” Then when we sing it at a service after weeks of practice, I think “Why on earth have we never sung this before?”

I am sure many of us use versions on YouTube to learn the music. I think Jeff’s interpretation is better than any of the versions there. It’s mostly joyous, but with a spooky part in the middle. “O Let Israel bless the Lord” stands out among the general ‘let rip’ nature of the rest. What a belter! Do it again please, Jeff, in Bledlow.

We have all worked hard to achieve a high standard, which results in an altogether lovely weekend.

The choir takes a rest from rehearsal on 27th February and 5th March to recover from our intense Chichester weekend, and also because many of us are away on the 5th.

On 31st February, we have a Bledlow Coffee-time Concert, which is a trio of clarinetists, who met while in military music groups. They play music chronologically from Gibbons through Purcell, Mozart, and Beethoven, and then to a recent military composer, whose work was found in an archive of military music. All the music was great and sounded good in Bledlow Church, the acoustic of which does not suit everything. There were 108 people there, which enables Jeff to pay the musicians reasonably, which pleases him, and with a balance to support both the Church and the choir.

Looking ahead, we will sing at Bledlow on Mothering Sunday (15th March). Jeff has WhatsApped us *Mother of God* by John Tavener (1944-2013), which the composer wrote for his mother. We will only have one rehearsal for this. I hope it will be easy! Then we will start to rehearse for our Evensong on 29th March at Saunderton, Good Friday and Easter Sunday at Bledlow in early April, and our visit to Sherborne Abbey for a full weekend on 18th and 19th April. So we will be busy! I can’t wait to find out what music we will be singing.

Then a final exciting coda to the month; Jeff WhatsApps us the news that he and John Walton have planned a Tenebrae Service for Good Friday, involving not only great music, but also candles and lights being gradually extinguished, until only a single candle, a symbol of our Lord, remains. Drama, eh? See you there!

Rob Hill