

Choir Notes



It is mid-October, and we rehearse to sing at St David's Cathedral on Saturday 4th and Sunday 5th November. The dates feel ages off and then you suddenly hurtle towards them like an express. But there is no panic, and Jeff seems relaxed.

Many of the choir have sung much of the music before, though some a considerable time ago. Additional to the pieces mentioned last month, we now have a Mass by Casciolini (1697-1760) and the anthem *Insanae et Vanae Curae* by Joseph Haydn (1732 – 1809), both of which we

have sung before. *Insanae* is fun to sing. The Latin words translate as: *Frantic and futile anxieties invade our minds; they often fill our hearts with madness, depriving them of hope. What is the use, O mortal man, of striving after earthly things, if you neglect heaven? All things turn out well for you, if God is on your side.* The music starts fierce, but turns calm and gentle and reassuring. Haydn was, I am certain, a lovely man. Clearly the nicest composer, fun to have to dinner.

On 20th October, Jeff sends us the psalms for St David's: Psalms 20, 90, 145, and 17 - so four psalms for three services, but all are short. Someone asks, "Doesn't the Church run through the Psalter in numerical order?" I have not thought about this before, but it is an interesting point, as the selection for St David's goes from one end of the Psalter to the other. Jeff says that the Church used to have fixed psalms for specific days, but says that was eventually thought boring, so the individual priest or congregation could choose. Jeff wants Psalms 20 and 90 sung to chants different from those in the Parish Psalter. He sends the chants, which are notated differently from the Psalter versions, with distracting extra dots and asterisks, the meaning or need for which is unclear, but OK if you ignore them.

Then, one week before St David's, we sing Evensong at Saunderton. There are mistakes. Jeff sends an exhortation to try to learn our parts better.

Then we are at St David's. It is magical here. It's a long and winding road that leads to the cathedral door, as the M4 ends near Carmarthen and the A40 only reaches as far as Haverfordwest. Most cathedrals are high up and so can be seen from miles away. At St David's, they dug a huge pit in the hillside in 1181 and dropped it in. Because of this, you can't see it until you get up close and personal.

The cathedral has many internal stairs, rendering it a deathtrap for the elderly: singing while processing, keeping up with everyone else and remaining upright are challenging. Finding the rehearsal room and the toilets is hard, as the cathedral's many small rooms and corridors look much the same, and the many 90 degree turns are disorienting.

The weather is terrible, with frequent squalls bringing horizontal rain straight into your face. At 4pm, darkness falls in this, the country's smallest city, starless and bible-black.

So why magical?

Truly, I don't know. It could be its location perched on a western edge of Britain. It could be the services sung part in Welsh and part in English. It could be the different order of responses, which threw us slightly the first time that the Precentor sang them that way, without warning, in the first Evensong. It could be history, with St David buried here, though no-one knows exactly where, making it a place of pilgrimage, and also Edmund Tudor, father of Henry VII. It could be the beautiful ceiling of the nave, or the lofty tower above the Quire. Or it could be Jeff working his magic. Or it could be the magic of singing.

Well, the singing: what to say about that?

In the Eucharist service, we basses started the *Sanctus* by Casciolini uncertainly, despite having sung it well in rehearsal many times. Still, what happens, happens, and there are no second chances. One hopes that the congregation thinks Casciolini wrote it like that. The bad bits, and they are few, are out-weighted massively by the good bits, for instance the lovely solos in the Agnus Dei, sung by Cathy, Sarah, Karen and William. And both of the Evensongs are glorious. Jeff drives us to fever pitch in rehearsing Haydn's *Insanae et Vanae Curae*, urging us on to be lions tearing at animal flesh, and says no excess is too much. He transforms us into violent football supporters on seeing the opposition. This is not us at all, as we are really an academic and thoughtful crowd, but it's OK for five minutes and falls short of actual violence. And I like to shock the congregation. I hope that they will suddenly sit up to look out for tigers.