

Choir Notes



It's 13th December - to St Paul's again! We meet at 1.30. Jeff arrives on the dot. There are no choir practice rooms as they are keeping them Covid-free for the boy choristers! Woe! So we have to practice in the choir stalls! Yay! Cynthia can't be here! Woe! But Sam Laughton is here to accompany us. Yay! He has never played the Stanford Canticles in G before! Woe! But in ten minutes he masters them! Yay! Jeff had told us at our last rehearsal that we were better practiced and ready than we had ever been before for a cathedral visit.

St Paul's is a massive, well-decorated barn of a place, famous for its echo. The Responses (Clucas) linger for seconds after we stop singing. The precentor is so far away that we can barely hear him. There are twenty three of us - not many for such a vast space. We have Debbie's sister Leslie; Chris, a valuable tenor from Aylesbury; Jem, who used to sing with us, so knows us well; and William, a semi-regular irregular, who often augments us for cathedral visits and special occasions, and will sing the bass solo in the *Nunc Dimittis*.

Cathedrals have great choirmasters (so do we!), but also singers with trained voices and technical skills, which we (mostly) do not have. But what we do have is a special

occasion, excitement and enthusiasm, and only one chance to get it right, so we go for it.

Then the service itself. Stanford's Canticles in G. The *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis* make a contrasting pair, so it is easy to see why so many composers have composed them. The *Magnificat* is the young Virgin Mary, full of wonder and excitement, while the *Nunc Dimittis* is old Simeon, welcoming death now that he has seen the Messiah, but still excited, as illustrated by the crescendo in the music.

Louise sings the Virgin Mary. She has practiced today by singing along karaoke-fashion with Sam as he practices. A member of the congregation tells me afterwards how surprising it was to hear such beautiful singing suddenly coming solo from the depths of the cathedral. Then *Expectans Expectavi* by Charles Wood. Jeff says when rehearsing to imagine asking God to come into your house for a cup of tea, to visualise what he wants. It is mostly quiet, but builds to a great crescendo. I think of Phil Spector's wall of sound. No-one tells me afterwards that they were hit by a wall, but one person says it was thrilling, so I guess that has to do.

And we so much appreciate all those who came from our parish to support us. Thank you all.

I couldn't make the Carol Service at Bledlow, but Greg writes:

With the music for St Paul's dominating rehearsals, Jeff chose three well known carols for the Carol Service on 19th December, plus Gaudete. We sing The Coventry Carol dramatically, so that "all young children to slay" is heard with a jolt before the quietness of the next verse. The In Dulci Jubilo arrangement was perfect for a small choir, in four voices, not eight as written, ending with the rousing "O that we were there". John Barnard's arrangement of So gentle the donkey is less well known and has musical tricks to keep the choir on their toes, including a final descant to surprise the listener. Gaudete (Rejoice!) is familiar from Steeleye Span in 1972, but Jeff coached the soloists to pronounce it correctly, as when published in 1582. Well done to all the soloists, including those in the eight congregational carols. At least this year the congregation was permitted to sing!

Afterwards, we stayed to thank Jeff and Cynthia for their hard work in 2021, including the hours of recording and mixing for Stephen's virtual services, rehearsing in a barn, and singing in church in Covid-secure groups from May. We also thanked the organisers and members of the 100 Club who, we hope, will renew in 2022.

Rob Hill

PS The choir's planned visit to Gloucester on 23rd and 24th April has been cancelled.