

## Choir Notes – January 2025



This month we are heading for the Advent Carol Service at Saunderton (*left*) on 1<sup>st</sup> December, and then our Evensong at St Paul's Cathedral on 16<sup>th</sup> December, ending with the Carol Service at Holy Trinity on 22<sup>nd</sup> December.

Jeff has chosen the music for the services, which has been approved by the authorities at St Paul's (they don't want too many visiting choirs singing the same thing).

We will sing '*Drop Down, Ye Heavens*' by Anna Lapwood (born 1995), and the '*Canticles in C Major*' by Arthur Charles Lestoc Hylton Stewart (1884–1932) -

great name, great guy, as President-Elect D Trump might say. He (Hylton Stewart, I mean) was organist at Scarborough, 1908–1914, Blackburn, 1914–1916, Rochester Cathedral, 1916–1930, Chester Cathedral, 1930–1932, and St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, the last for less than one year in 1932, as he died that year, aged only 48.

We were practicing these pieces last month also, so we are getting to know them better, and also our new responses for St Paul's by Gabriel Jackson (born 1962). The Lapwood and Jackson pieces are tricky, with clashes in them, notes a semi-tone apart, so they might sound like someone singing flat; and it's kind of off-putting hearing other people singing an adjacent note, reducing your confidence that you've hit the bull's eye on the nose. Have I mentioned everything? No - there are also Psalms 116 and 117.

On 14<sup>th</sup> November, Cynthia takes the practice, as Jeff is away, and we have a run-through of the music for St Paul's, part of the valuable process of learning the notes.

Jeff returns on 21<sup>st</sup> November to apply his singing skills and knowledge to what we have learned. We spend much time on the Jackson Responses. One might think responses, being short, are easy, learned in comfortable sections. But no, they are a downhill slalom ride with steep bends and risks of disaster. By the end of the practice they are more secure. Do you know the line: Priest - "Endue they ministers with righteousness"; Choir - "And make thy chosen people joyful"? Well, to get us singing correctly, Jeff tells us to imagine that we are joyful as if we've had a lot of pudding.

Jeff is looking forward to St Paul's for many reasons, and one is that they have a quality Polish precentor, with a great chanting voice, who hits the notes amidships and gives us a cracking entrée to our lines. We hope that he will be there for us.

Then we move on to '*Drop Down*'. Jeff says "listen to the sops having a hard time". They sing "let the skies, the skies pour down righteousness" in a series of descending runs with a jump between each run, while other sops retain one note through each bar, clashing at the start of each bar, a vocal canter pirouette (no horse). How weird is that? And it takes some practicing to get it right. Will it revert to wrong next week? We must wait and see. Then a quick run through of the Hylton Stewart '*Magnificat*', followed by '*Adam Lay Ybouden*' - the latter is well-remembered from last year, and from years before that. Perhaps Jeff just wants to check that we haven't suffered collective amnesia, lest he be heading for disaster, but one can hear that it will be alright.

A sad note that none of us knew is that Hylton Stewart wrote two sets of '*Canticles in C Major*', and one choir member had bought the wrong one. Oh dear!

On the next day, having taken a roster, Jeff realises that we don't have enough sops on Advent Sunday to sing '*Drop Down*', which requires the sops to split, and one sop alone can't split. But then he finds more sops can sing after all, so it goes back on the menu.

We rehearse again on 16<sup>th</sup> November. Strange, eh? I mean, it's a Wednesday! Everyone remembers and turns up! Jeff is rehearsing his Thame Choir on Thursday for '*The Armed Man*' performance on Saturday. We go through the St Paul's music bit by bit, fine-tuning the emotion and enhancing communication with the congregation. The sops still have trouble with the clashes when the skies are pouring down righteousness. Jeff says with a chuckle, "That works, or will work when

the sops sing the right notes". By the end of the practice the sops are singing it fine. Then a quick run through the Advent music, which we already know well, and we are ready for both services.

The Advent Carol Service is lovely every year. '*Adam Lay Ybounden*' comes after the opening congregational hymn and lesson from Genesis, and gets us going with a medieval start; it was composed by Boris Ord only in 1957, but the words are by an unknown 15<sup>th</sup> century poet. How can anything go wrong after that? And nothing does go wrong. What a start to the Christmas season!