

Choir Notes – January 2024



To Holy Trinity for rehearsal on 15th November. We are refining Howells' *Magnificat*. However much we practice a piece, there is always room to improve. We work hard, and when we are nicely exhausted, Jeff moves on to Benjamin Britten's *Deo Gratias*, a piece which shifts a bit, but we sing through it. It will contrast with the slow and thoughtful *Remember, O Thou Man* at the Advent Carol Service. The Britten piece should make people sit up and say "Wow", but silently, as in church.

On 18th November, I go to the Church of St John the Evangelist in the Iffley Road, Oxford. Why mention that? Because three Bledlow choristers (Cathy, Derek and Moira) are singing there with a choir called Opus 48. The main piece is a Requiem Mass (or Missa de Defunctis, which sounds better) by Tomas Luis de Victoria. There are shorter pieces by other Spanish Renaissance composers, including Christobal de Morales. We have sung works by Victoria and de Morales in Bledlow, but I guess we may never sing the Victoria Mass as it is long, and suitable only for death. But what a piece to have at your funeral. It was composed for the funeral of the daughter of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor - it is just glorious!

30th November is the last rehearsal before Advent Sunday and our visit to St Paul's on 4th December. Jeff is magic in knowing how many rehearsals we need for anything. The Howells piece for St Paul's has sounded shaky, but today it comes together. There comes a point where everybody knows a piece well enough to look up and watch, and the music becomes rich and LOUD. It varies when this will be from piece to piece. For the Arvo Pärt *Magnificat* we are getting there with only three rehearsals. Jeff comments that composers can achieve amazing effects with easily sung music, here by an unusual combination of voice parts. Pieces which at first seem difficult can turn out easy and vice versa, but Jeff always knows how long we will take to learn anything.

The Advent Carol Service at Saunderton is good. The Pärt *Magnificat* goes well, and the Britten probably makes everyone sit up. A great start to the Christmas season.

And so on 4th December, to St Paul's. There was a rail strike on 3rd December, with no trains, and warnings of cancellation of overtime and trains on 4th, so everyone comes early to avoid being late. This is our fourth visit, so we head east to the practice room; but are then told that there are mysterious noxious vapours there, so we are led back west to a gasless rehearsal room. Cynthia sadly is not with us today, but we have an ideal substitute for her in Sam Laughton, a skilled musician who played the last time that we came here, and has kindly joined us for the day. We are boosted by our several regular irregular choir adherents, including a strong contingent of tenors, which is helpful, as otherwise we would have had only two.

Jeff whips us up like a football manager in a changing room. He tries to get us singing to match or at least approach the glory of the building. And the service goes really well. Jeff records it on a device (an iPad, I think). The recording is far from perfect, but pretty good. I listen afterwards, and to me, the best thing among many lovely bits are the Aylward *Responses*, because we know them off by heart, and can LOOK AT JEFF! It is amazing and thrilling how good they are, both because it's a great composition, and because looking at Jeff, we come in throughout together, with no ragged entries, with oomph and joy. It is also lovely singing both canticles and anthem all by Howells.

It can be hard to hear a choir at St Paul's. It is so big. But today a member of the congregation told me that while not a rock concert, he heard and liked everything.

We are so fortunate that our small village choir can sing in such a place, which is nearly all down to Jeff's coaching and commitment. Thank you, Jeff, for a fantastic experience!

Now heading towards Christmas: what joy!