



Choir Notes - March 2026

On 8th January we have our first rehearsal after Christmas. Jeff is away, so Cynthia runs through the music for our visit to Chichester Cathedral on 21st and 22nd February.

We are singing '*Wash Me Thoroughly*' (Samuel Sebastian Wesley 1766-1837). This involves the basses entering at one point with the words "For I acknowledge my faults...", which amuses the female choristers present, at the idea of men ever accepting that they have faults.

We sing many of the Chichester pieces straight through, as most of us have sung them before, some many years ago. When I joined the choir, I often felt all at sea when other choristers knew the music from their repertoire, but you soon catch up! And then you remember it well.

On 15th January Jeff is back. This was a day of monsoon-style rain; roads were flooded, but Cynthia made it from Oxford just after we had run through '*Thou Knowest Lord*' with Jeff at the piano. Henry Purcell (1659-1695) composed this. Did you hear it sung in Westminster Abbey at Queen Elizabeth's funeral? Jeff asks us to sing it as desperate for forgiveness and redemption. Great music for Lent.

Much of the rehearsal is spent learning the '*Benedicite, Omnia Opera*', in a setting by Herbert Sumsion (1899-1995), a composer of much great choral music. This piece calls itself "Shortened Form" but it is still long and repetitive, so the challenge might be to keep up interest and excitement all the way through. We are not singing a setting of the '*Venite*' or the '*Benedictus*', so we need to sing the '*Benedicite*' well.

Then we sing '*Drop, Drop, Slow Tears*' by Margaret Woodley (1949-extant). Jeff says that he will tell her that we are singing this in Chichester, as she likes to know about outings for her piece.

We rehearse for Chichester on 22nd and 29th January too, working through music for four services that weekend – two Evensongs, Mattins and Eucharist.

On 29th January, Jeff starts by saying "How lovely to see you all", before noticing over a distance of 15 feet that Cynthia, at the piano, has new glasses. Perspicacious but wrong, as Cynthia says "No", but she is wearing her reading glasses as she finds it difficult to distinguish between sharps and naturals. Jeff: "So you're becoming a tenor". It's a while since Jeff has playfully insulted anybody, so it's nice that he chooses the tenors instead of the basses.

Drop Drop Slow Tears' has been macerating in our minds since the rehearsal on 15th January, and now is deeply emotional. Then we sing '*Cantique de Jean Racine*' by Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924). This is labelled his Opus 10, composed in 1865. It won a student prize at the École Niedermeyer, his music school, to which he was sent by his parents from the south of France at the age of 9. We have sung this before, so we can hit the ground running. It has some good bass entries: we are first to sing in the piece, with the tenors and then the altos joining in. Jeff asks us all to sing it so that no-one can notice another voice joining the harmony, though he says that this is difficult by the time the sopranos come in. The idea is to avoid disturbing the silence of the night too much. We get to the word "Jette", translated in the score as "turn on", but my schoolboy French thinks means "Throw", followed by "us your eyes, Divine Saviour". So the music at this point is getting to the appeal to God, and Jeff asks us to express a relief of feeling that God is looking after us.

At this point a heavy object drops to the floor with a loud bang. It sounds as if a choir member has collapsed, so Jeff is worried, but then quickly relieved, as it is just a briefcase full of books that has tumbled. Jeff tells us about one of his choirs singing '*Blessed Pair of Sirens*' in Hayes Church, where some of the choir had to sit on plastic patio seats. It was a hot day, and some of the seats were melting and bending. Eventually, a whole row gave way, sending the singers to the floor backwards, with their feet in the air. Oh Dear! But luckily, no-one was hurt.

On Saturday 31st January, we have a great Coffee-Time Concert at Holy Trinity: Adrian Thompson singing '*Winterreise*' by Franz Schubert, accompanied by Iain Burnside. Adrian is the President of the Lord William's Festival Choir in Thame, of which Jeff is the conductor, so they are friends. Iain taught Jeff at the Guildhall School of Music. He is a well-known vocal accompanist and you might have heard him presenting on Radio 3. Do you know '*Winterreise*? It is mostly about a chap given the elbow by his girlfriend and wishing for death. Absolutely gripping. Wonderful!

We then stop practising for Chichester, as we prepare for Choral Communion at Bledlow on 8th February. With only one rehearsal to prepare, Jeff pulls '*Ubi Caritas et Amor*' by Ola Gjeilo (Norwegian, 1978-extant) out of his back pocket. We sang this two years ago. Jeff says if we cannot make a fist of it quickly, we can use the '*Cantique de Jean Racine*'. Now, you couldn't get two pieces more different than these. '*Ubi Caritas*' is in Latin, so no surprise that it is a "chanty" piece. Not like a sea shanty, I mean, but more like monks in a cloister. We get to grips with it well, so we sing it at the service on 8th February, grouped around the piano, as the speaker which plays the organ to the choir (which otherwise you can hardly hear in the chancel) is fizzing and popping like an amplified lemonade factory - very distracting. There are good virtuosic piano bits for Cynthia between the chanting.

We have only two rehearsals before we visit Chichester. Singing at four weekend services involves a ton of psalms, and we have hardly started on them. Jeff often takes the psalm chants from the Gloucester Psalter. This puts verse numbers in brackets where there is a vocal trap coming, like a medieval cartographer labelling a place "here be dragons". I don't see that it helps much, as most of the choir still falls into the trap. But it is all part of the fun! We will succeed!

Rob Hill