



# Richard Morrison

## For the sake of everyone's sanity, let amateur bands and choirs resume!

**M**ost readers will know the phrase 'hope springs eternal in the human breast'.

Perhaps slightly fewer will know it comes from a poem by Alexander Pope (*An Essay on Man – Epistle I*). And even fewer, I guess, will be able to quote the sentence that comes two lines later: 'The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home, rests and expatiates in a life to come.' Right now that particular stanza is going round in my head, and I know exactly why.

Like millions of other people in Britain who make music for pleasure rather than money, I have been looking forward to that joyous moment when our choral societies, youth orchestras, brass bands, church choirs and amateur operatic groups burst into glorious melody again, after more than a year of enforced silence. A year that, in many cases, has been as tough on the mind and morale as it has been on physical health and financial well-being.

We have missed our weekly sing or tootle, not just because we love making music but because normally, at times of high anxiety, singing or playing an instrument with friends is one of the best stress busters known to humanity. But the peculiar nastiness of Covid-19 is that it has denied us even this solace.

As Pope asserts, hope still springs eternal – but only just. 'Uneasy and confined' in our homes, we have indeed 'expatiated in a life to come,' yet the return of life and normality seems an awfully long time coming. And I don't think the government's guidance, or lack of it, has greatly helped either professional or amateur musicians to survive the crisis. Indeed, they have sometimes been given directly

contradictory instructions, especially when it comes to the size of ensembles allowed to make music indoors.

The stigma attached to choral singing and wind instrument playing – the theory that such activities spread the virus more than, say, working out in a gym or jostling through crowds for the best deals in Primark – has never been conclusively proved, yet it has been allowed to linger. And choirs of older people, in which every single member has been vaccinated for months, are still discouraged from meeting.

### The peculiar nastiness of Covid-19 is that it has denied us even the solace of making music

As I write, the nightmare is not over, and I doubt it will be when you read this. We will probably be facing new variants of Covid for many months to come. But for the sake of our sanity, and the cultural health of our communities, we somehow have to get the amateur musical world up and running again.

We were assured that vaccines were our 'passports to freedom'. Yet most of the British population has been jabbed and we still face government disapproval for holding a choir practice or organising a brass band contest. We need to shift from the rigid and probably unachievable position of 'get rid of the virus before we allow such frivolities' to the more pragmatic strategy of saying that people desperately need their hobbies and

outlets for the sake of their sanity, so let's find ways of making them happen.

I know that thousands of amateur singers and instrumentalists have been able to communicate, and even make a limited sort of communal music-making, thanks to the wonders of Zoom and the tireless ingenuity of music directors up and down the country. Some resourceful groups, particularly those attached to religious institutions, have even managed to deliver a weekly stream of laboriously edited Zoom recordings for the benefit of their communities. That represents a triumph of determination over adversity. But the musical limitations of Zoom – most obviously, the impossibility of synchronising with other performers 'live' and therefore denying the chance of doing any genuine ensemble singing – have gone from being wearying to (in my case) existentially crushing.

The plain fact is that, without a properly flourishing amateur scene, Britain's musical life is a shadow of what it was. When did you last hear a live performance of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, or Mahler's Second Symphony? When was a pick-up band of hard-up freelance musicians last hired for a village-hall *Iolanthe*?

These things matter. Yes, in the eyes of certain key members of parliament, they are 'luxuries'. But so are pubs and football, and they have been allowed to spring back to life. A society without such luxuries is no society at all – just a big treadmill that traps humanity in its relentless rotation. It's time to bring back the important things in life. ☺  
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