

Twickenham Choral Conductor's Report 2020

Those of you that have become familiar with my conductor's reports over the years will perhaps recollect that I tend to discover or, some would say, impose a particular 'character' on the Season from which we have just emerged. This year I would like to call it – no prizes for guessing – 'The Covid-19 Season'. This monster virus has adversely hit the choir as an institution as well as affecting individual choir members in all sorts of ways. However, the conductor's report is not the place for a journalistic rehash of the breadth and scale of the pandemic's global devastation.

Instead here is a reminder of the Season which started so brilliantly with a concert on 28 September 2019 at St Martin-in-the-Fields. Since we took the opportunity to air again some of the repertoire from our Spring concert and Italian tour, it was no problem to have a concert so early in the season. Unlike many of the concerts we have performed in St Martin's, the choir featured in both halves of the concert. **E. W. Naylor's 'Vox dicentis'** got the concert off to a rousing start with a scintillating a *cappella* performance from the choir. Chris Britton's confident singing of the short but tricky solo at the end concluded the motet in a gentle mood. This was followed by **William Harris's** glorious '**Faire is the heaven**', by now a choir favourite. After the Brandenburg Sinfonia strings had performed Mozart's Adagio and Fugue in C minor, the full orchestra joined us for **Felix Mendelssohn's 'Hear my prayer'**, with Kathryn Singleton singing the dramatic soprano solo and Alison Williams taking over at 'O for the wings of a dove'. Kathryn and Alison had both sung the complete piece either in our local concert or in those grand Italian Cathedrals and Basilicas. It was splendid to hear them again singing this piece so well on home ground. Incidentally, I had been offered the services of the professional soprano who was due to sing Mozart's Requiem in the second half of the concert for this solo but, I thought, why do that when we have two such fine singers of our very own? I have lost count of the times we have performed **Mozart's Requiem** at St Martin's. An excellent set of four soloists accompanied by the Brandenburg Sinfonia playing their hearts out and the choir at full throttle made this, in my opinion, our best central London performance of Mozart's Requiem to date. The audience, rising instantly to their feet for the ovation, seemed to think it was all right too! This was another Twickenham Choral triumph.



At this point we got our heads down for a big, big season including our first Cadogan Hall concert as well as two concerts both due to be held at the Landmark Arts Centre.

Cadogan Hall's availability was limited but the committee thought it worth sticking our necks out to perform on 4 January 2020 given that one of the pieces we had on the programme had a Christmas flavour and that it would be within the 'Twelve Days of Christmas' period. Also, this should be a good time to get the best orchestral players. To look briefly on the gloomy side, it turned out that there were engineering works on many of the feeder railway lines and Sloane Square Underground Station itself was in fact closed. We also mislaid our star soprano soloist Sophie Bevan in the middle of the Christmas/New Year period due to voice loss, she 'being great with child'. However, things started to look up. We had as stunning a band as ever from Bob Porter's stable of extraordinarily talented freelance players. How nice for the conductor to know that he can elicit the performance and interpretation he wants from such a range of experienced and brilliant players, as long as he

himself gives the correct signals and has marked up the orchestral parts well in advance to within an inch of their lives. Three works, none of them remotely easy, made up the programme: **Francis Poulenc's 'Gloria'** and **Arthur Honegger's 'Christmas Cantata'** in the first half and **Poulenc's 'Stabat Mater'** after the interval. Katherine Broderick, another star performer who had previously sung the Mahler 8th concert for us in St John's Smith Square, was luckily available at short notice. Her performance of the soprano solos in the two Poulenc works was exquisitely beautiful and poised and she also kindly agreed to sing the small solos in the Honegger together with the baritone Peter Lidbetter, both of them from the balcony. It is perhaps fair to say that the choir found it was a tough term's work preparing these three gigantic pieces and it seems that the Honegger only came into focus for many of you on the day of the concert! The choir numbers were somewhat decimated by a winter bug (not the Coronavirus as far as we know) but those who survived sang extremely well and the concert was a fine success with the audience vociferously demonstrating their appreciation at the end of an exciting evening. The choir's general opinion appears to be that 'we love Cadogan Hall' so the good news is that the Hall has already been booked for 12 March 2022 – our big Centenary concert. We will perform Mendelssohn's 'Elijah' a hundred years on from when the newly formed Twickenham Musical Society gave their first public concert of that very work.



Without a break we got down to preparing the following gorgeous but challenging repertoire: **Arvo Pärt's 'The Woman with the Alabaster Box'**; **'Tribute to Caesar'**; **'Which was the Son of...'**, and **Christopher Tye's 'Omnes gentes plaudite'** for five voices; **'Peccavimus cum patribus nostris'** for seven voices, and **Orlando Lassus's 'Missa Bell Amfitrit Altera'** for double choir. It was such a delightful programme to prepare, even if the altos and tenors experienced a few difficulties with the clefs in Tye's 'Peccavimus'. Sadly, three rehearsals before the concert, just when I felt that the choir had turned a corner and really got a grip on the programme, the mixed metaphorical rug was pulled from under us by unique circumstances quite beyond anybody's control. The rest is history...



A final word of thanks! I think you know that the choir is run very well indeed by the Officers and the Committee. These people work hard on your behalf. With a Centenary Season just round the corner, hopefully due to become a reality, rather large sums of money are being successfully raised through the industry of Maggie Crisell and others. The nitty gritty of day-to-day as well as concert-to-concert admin such as producing publicity and programmes; seeing that the choir music is available to hire or buy; seeing that the choir's finances are in order; having the logistics in place on the day of concerts; these and many other jobs, often done quietly behind the scenes, should be gratefully acknowledged and appreciated. Many thanks to all of you. And special thanks to Chairman Helen Coulson, who always keeps the wheels greased and running smoothly, and who has risen wonderfully to the occasion in this current crisis, accepting Rebecca Taylor's offer to nurse the choir into the digital age, embracing necessity and setting up the Zoom rehearsal sessions which have been such a lifeline for the choir both socially and musically. I would like to publicly thank Rebecca and Helen while also praising all of you for your strong loyalty to the choir and your enthusiastic dedication to great choral music.

Christopher