

**MALVERN FESTIVAL CHORUS**  
**ANNUAL NEWSLETTER 2019-2020**

**REPORT FROM JONATHAN BROWN – DIRECTOR OF MUSIC**

Clearly the content of this report does not reflect the hopes and aspirations that we all had last September. We entered what was the centenary season of the Society with enormous anticipation for a fantastic year's singing, including 2 blue-riband concerts - JS Bach's colossal St Matthew Passion in Worcester Cathedral with a stellar line-up of soloists and period instrument orchestra, followed by our Gala celebration concert of choral favourites conducted by former Directors of Music in the Forum Theatre with Regency Sinfonia.

In the end, COVID-19 heartbreakingly put paid to both of these concerts. The Bach had to be cancelled at less than 24 hours' notice which made the situation all the more gut-wrenching as we had built up to this performance over a good number of months and were ready to really show the world just what we were made of. Disappointing as it was to have to cancel the Gala concert, at least we were able to come to terms with this over a period of weeks, as we then began to formulate a plan for the future, the inclusion of that concert being included for this coming year. You will also know me well enough to know that I am wanting to ensure that the Bach will have its day, having had it within touching distance, and I am working with the Committee in planning for its performance in 2021-22.

The year began with a Come and Sing concert, consisting of Vivaldi's effervescent Gloria and Faure's beautiful Requiem. We were joined for this concert by 2 soloists – Lucie Fletcher and Chloe Underwood (current and former pupils of Malvern College respectively) and an Invitational Orchestra comprising of students of Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and friends. This was a lovely way to get what should have been our celebrations underway and it was lovely to welcome a good number of guests to the chorus, including someone from the Lake District who happened to stumble on publicity for the concert via social media and came down to sing with us. These 2 old stalwarts of the repertoire never fail to deliver and I think we all enjoyed coming together and performing them.

Then, of course, we made our annual appearance at the Malvern Priory's Carols for All concert, under Penny's leadership. It was the first time that I had actually sung with the choir for this event (I was in the audience the previous year). Once again, the mutual warmth between MFC and the Priory and its audience was very clear – it is a very special event in the calendar and one that we are all proud that we are part of. Thanks to Penny, of course, and not just for her excellent direction for this concert, but also for her rehearsal accompanying through the year – we are very lucky to have someone so caring and talented working with us and I, for one, am incredibly grateful to her for her support of us all. I would also like to record my thanks to David Angus for accompanying occasionally in Penny's absence but also for coming along and singing, and giving singers around him some additional confidence!

In what should have been a glorious year to bring MFC's first century to a close, I want to express my gratitude to you all. I was made aware of a good number of you writing to express your sadness and disappointment that the Bach had to (and quite rightly) be cancelled, but you also did so in thinking about me as well, and I was very touched by this. As I have already said, having to withdraw was one thing, but the fact that we had prepared so well actually does give us good reason to be optimistic about our hopes and aspirations for our repertoire choices in the future – quite simply, your commitment to the Bach as quite outstanding. The St Matthew Passion is a huge undertaking and the fact that we were on the cusp of delivering a fabulous concert gives me great heart looking forward. You worked so hard for it and I hope that your preparation gives you reasons for optimism and the confidence to keep pushing yourselves and your aspirations.

Finally, I must thank the Committee for their support of both the Chorus and of me. In trying times, you really do see the qualities of leadership from such a group, and they, to a person, have been absolutely first-class in the decision-making, guidance and general stewardship – times do not get much more trying than these!

Let us hope that next year will be less eventful! To start with, we will be rehearsing remotely which will be a new experience for us all – I am aware of other choral societies who have been working like this and the feedback has been surprisingly positive so I am sure that we can make it work. And, with luck and a following wind, hopefully we will be back in harness as usual before too long and present Haydn and Jenkins with our renewed gusto!

Thank you.

Jonathan

**Jonathan Brown – Director of Music** 11 August 2020

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### **TREASURER'S REPORT 2018/2019**

#### **Position**

The detailed Accounts are shown on the Statement of Financial Activity, the Balance Sheet and the accompanying Notes. The Report covers a truncated Season, with cancellation of the Spring concert in Worcester Cathedral at very short notice and postponement of the Centenary Gala Concert.

#### **Concerts**

Concert income for the season was £7,786 against outgoings of £14,890. The Season started with a "Come and Sing" but the performance of "St Matthew Passion" had to be cancelled at short notice owing to the rapidly deteriorating national situation of the Covid 19 virus. The remainder of the Season was then abandoned.

The Charity's insurance policy excludes cover in the case of communicable disease and it was therefore impossible to make a claim. Following negotiations with Orchestra and Soloists, losses which might have amounted to £14,300 have been contained at £6,600, in round terms, and our thanks are due to Jonathan for his interventions with the professional musicians involved.

Members were offered refund of ticket sales for the St Matthew concert and £800 has been repaid with a further £70 in respect of coach fares. Sincere thanks are due to those Members who donated their ticket monies to Choir funds.

The carol singing at Morrisons and "Carols for All" at the Priory raised £1,516. After deduction of expenses, the Choir was able to provide a donation of £1,262 to Heartstart Malvern. Special thanks are due to Penny Vere for organising and conducting this event and to all those who helped and sang on both days.

The Chorus joined the National Schools Symphony Orchestra and choirs to sing Verdi's "Requiem" at Symphony Hall, Birmingham in July 2019. Rehearsals for this event, and the coach to Symphony Hall, were paid for in addition to Members' annual subscriptions; expenditure exceeded income by £146, largely owing to the cost of coaches relative to the numbers travelling.

Local enterprises placing advertisements in concert programmes this Season have been advised that the Chorus will not be invoicing them this Season. The loss of revenue is £1,200 but it is hoped to re-establish these relationships for future Seasons.

#### **General Income and Expenditure**

There were 124 paid-up subscriptions by the end of last season, 2019/20; these are the principal assured source of funds which pay our musicians. In addition, Gift aid raises an individual's annual subscription by 25% - at present 94 Members have given their support to the scheme. Subscriptions may be paid by direct transfer to MFC's Bank or by cheque/cash.

Members continued to raise money through the weekly raffle, the Bring-and-Buy, and interval refreshments up until cancellation of rehearsals. The accumulation of small and not-so-small amounts makes a valuable contribution to our publicity efforts and administration. Our thanks are due to all Members who put in the work to organise and run these things. Money raised at regular rehearsals and at social events has also contributed to the ongoing maintenance cost of the Website, which has proved to be an increasingly valuable information facility. Unfortunately, none of this money will be available to us in the immediate future, until normality returns, which means that overhead expenses will have to be met from annual subscriptions

### **2020/21 Season**

Budgets have been discussed for the forthcoming Centenary Season. It is hoped to present a concert in March 2021 and to stage the Centenary Gala Concert, in the form originally intended, in July 2021 but in the present circumstances, the position of these events is unknown.

New members are needed – their subscriptions provide an assured income for the year. Revenue from ticket sales, whilst never assured, is also a vital element in paying for concert venues, contributing to the cost of musicians and keeping losses on concerts to a minimum.

### **Gifts, Sponsorship and Fund Raising**

The Chorus had secured a grant of £1,000 from The Elmley Foundation in support of the Centenary concerts – this has not been paid and will need to be applied for again in due course.

Donations from two Members of the Chorus to support the March 2020 concert, in memory of deceased relatives, have been carried forward in anticipation of a future performance of “St Matthew Passion”, perhaps in Season 2021/22.

### **Independent Assessment**

The above figures are given subject to agreement by the Independent Assessor, John Connell, to whom the Committee’s grateful thanks are due.

### **Treasurer**

I will not wish to accept nomination for a further 3-year term as Treasurer after the end of the 2020/21 Season and would therefore take the opportunity of asking any Members with experience of business or charity accounts to consider making themselves available for nomination to take up the position as from September 2021.

**Michael P Tweedie – Treasurer**     July 2020

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### **CHAIRMAN’S REPORT**

As Barbara Moss says in her comprehensive review, this time last year “we were looking forward to ... a season like no other in our 100-year history”. What a year it has been. I’m very grateful as ever to Barbara for summarising our activities so well. I echo the thanks that she has given to various members of the choir for everything they have done to carry us through these difficult times.

There was a sense of eagerness and anticipation when we met at the beginning of our centenary season. Our Musical Director Jonathan Brown had put a tremendous amount of thought and effort into planning for the year and we were energised by the Come and Sing at Malvern Priory early last September, which attracted many visiting singers, several of whom subsequently joined our ranks. It a very enjoyable event and I’m very grateful to everyone who helped to make it a success, particularly to Jonathan, whose enthusiasm was infectious.

We had decided to concentrate on preparing thoroughly for our centenary concert in March, running rehearsals for this over two terms. There was an enjoyable short hiatus while several of us prepared for our annual Carol Concert under Penny Vere's able direction. We were very grateful that she was persuaded to lead us once again. For singers and audience alike, the Carol Concert has become an integral part of the Christmas festivities and once again it was a joyous occasion, whilst also raising a significant sum for charity.

We reassembled for rehearsals in January, determined to be fully prepared to sing Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in German in Worcester Cathedral in March. Jonathan was meticulous in his preparation and rehearsals were intense. There was a growing sense of confidence as March approached and we were looking forward to a very special concert; several singers from the London 1885 choir were to join us and our President James Oxley had kindly agreed to sing the role of Evangelist.

Meanwhile events in China began to take centre stage. All too soon we became aware that the spread of the new infectious disease that had emerged there was not limited by borders. In January the editor of *The Lancet* urged our government to take urgent measures to contain the spread of the novel Covid-19 virus. By February, medical colleagues in Italy desperately advised the UK to act promptly to prevent deaths on the same scale they were dealing with. No official action had been taken by mid March, when we had our last rehearsal before the planned Worcester concert. Some members raised concerns about the safety of the event and we also learned that some ticket holders had decided not to attend it. On 12 March Jonathan told me that his former choir had decided to cancel their concert scheduled for the same night as ours. I then spent several hours contacting senior doctors; the official policy was that despite there being a number of local cases of infection it would be safe to hold the concert. Notwithstanding this, after further discussion with Jonathan and committee members, all agreed that the risk to our members and audience was too great, so with great regret the concert was cancelled. After so much hard work and preparation this was immensely disappointing, particularly for Jonathan, who had invested so much time and energy in the project. Perhaps the decision to cancel might have been taken sooner but at the time it was hard to go against the prevailing official advice. In the light of subsequent developments, I have absolutely no doubt we made the right decision.

In the wake of the cancellation some criticism was anticipated but in the event all the messages we received from members were supportive. A lot of work had to be done to mitigate our losses and to maintain good relationships with the professional musicians and singers who were to have performed with us. I'm particularly grateful to Mike Tweedie and to Jonathan for all they did at the time in this regard.

We had a busy time communicating with members and arranging for the safe return of scores. The committee agreed that rehearsals should be suspended and we took the difficult decision to postpone our summer Gala concert. We hoped to get back together in the autumn, but this would be "dependent on the way in which the current pandemic develops". Unfortunately, as we have indicated in subsequent newsletters, it is now unlikely that we will be able to meet again until early next year.

The government finally imposed a lockdown on the country on 23 March. I hadn't heard of Zoom then but it's now become an indispensable means of communication. Zoom Committee meetings have been held regularly and a number of social events have been hosted on the platform too. Several members taken part in quizzes and "coffee mornings" and these have gone some way towards maintaining relationships. Plans are well advanced to start Zoom rehearsals and we are very grateful to Jonathan for the work he has put into this and to Penny for agreeing to lead sessions too – something neither of them anticipated having to do. Some members have already enjoyed taking part in other online singing events, whilst agreeing that it is not the same as singing together in the same space. Nonetheless we want to do all we can to keep the choir together through these uncertain times and I am sure we will learn how to make the most of it, with practice and experience.

Members have been kept informed by email and with periodic newsletters. I'm very grateful to Bridget Corlett for taking on the responsibility for collating these and to all who have contributed to them. I'm also grateful to Jackie Tolliday for managing the MFC website, which has become increasingly important for keeping members and the general public informed. We are also making more use of social media; there is now a closed members' page on Facebook, which currently has a small but active membership. I'm grateful to Liz Gait for managing this.

Since March I've been taking part in regular Zoom workshops organised by Making Music, the national organisation that represents the interests of amateur music groups and provides help and advice for them. Most choirs are facing similar difficulties to ours. These have been dealt with in various ways; many choirs hold regular social events, some embraced online rehearsals early on, while others have decided to suspend all activities until they can meet again in person. Our committee is determined to carry on with activities on line. Despite current uncertainties, we have drawn up plans to put on a concert next Easter and to stage our postponed Gala concert next summer. We look forward to performing the *St Matthew Passion* the following season, in what we hope will be more settled times, but our plans are of course subject to events we cannot control and we will keep them under review. The government recently published guidelines for "live" amateur choir rehearsals, which are a bit confusing but seriously limit our options for now.

I could not have managed this year without the support and encouragement of Jonathan and the committee, for which I'm very grateful. Our concert manager John Price drew up plans for the complicated business of staging the Worcester concert, Alice Osmond took on the task of reviving the Friends of MFC and Louise Rosoman shouldered the responsibility of managing Safeguarding issues. Our Membership Secretary Joy Black has kept us in order and is a very active member of our Facebook group. Mike Tweedie has steered us through some very stormy financial waters; we are fortunate to have the benefit of his expertise. Bridget Corlett has sourced our music with her usual quiet efficiency, making light of what is a complex and time consuming task. She also had to manage the business of collecting our concert scores and quarantining them at her house. Barbara Moss's role as our Secretary is time consuming and onerous at the best of times but this year there were periods when it was more like a full time job than a voluntary one. I am immensely grateful to her for her counsel, commitment and efficiency. We are all in her debt. Penny Vere has accompanied our rehearsals with her usual skill and cheery efficiency. We're fortunate to have the benefit of her musical talents in addition to Jonathan's. We're very grateful to both of them for rising to the challenge of developing ways to take rehearsals on line, a challenge neither of them expected to be facing at the beginning of our Centenary Year.

The committee has had to deal with unprecedented challenges this year and more are ahead of us. We will have to get to grips with the novelty of singing online and before we can sing together in person, we will have to give a lot of attention to risk assessment and health and safety issues. Most particularly, we will have to make sure the choir remains financially viable and we can only do this with the ongoing generous support of our members, for which we are very thankful.

My report would not be complete without me paying further tribute to Jonathan Brown. Under his skilled and enthusiastic direction we have become more focused and more disciplined. Our rehearsals have been intense but rewarding - Jonathan expects high standards of us and we have strived to meet them. There is no room for complacency but I believe that I'm not alone in believing that with Jonathan's encouragement our singing had improved significantly in the build up to the concert. It is a great pity that events beyond our control meant we were unable share our performance with an audience.

Malvern Festival Chorus has thrived for a hundred years and is, I believe, a star in the firmament of Malvern's cultural life. The current pandemic will not last forever. We look forward to better times. We will endure. We will survive.

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## **SECRETARY'S REPORT**

As 2019-20 was to be our Centenary season, we were looking forward to a special programme of events, making it a season like no other in our 100-year history. And so it turned out to be but in the most unexpected way.

Our plans included an Open Rehearsal and Come & Sing in Great Malvern Priory in September, to invite new members to join us for our celebrations, our first-ever concert in Worcester Cathedral, bringing Bach's St Matthew Passion to an audience drawn from the broader county and a Gala Concert in Malvern Theatres to which we had invited past conductors, one of whom – Rory Boyle – was composing a piece especially for the occasion. A Gala Reception was to be held after the concert to round off the season.

The stage was set for this celebratory season and events and preparations proceeded as expected for the first part. Musical Director Jonathan Brown had put together a group of young musicians and soloists to accompany the Come & Sing Faure Requiem and Vivaldi Gloria, and we welcomed visiting singers for a most enjoyable day singing these popular works. The informal concert attracted an appreciative audience who seemed to enjoy our performance too.

A small sub-committee led by Liz Gait had worked on publicity and sponsorship prior to the start of the season and Liz liaised with the printers to put together the annual brochure, which featured a special centenary logo, and which set the scene for the year. Alice Osmond agreed to take on a reformed "Friends of MFC", which got off to a slow but promising start. Jackie Tolliday's efforts to gain publicity in the local press for the Open Rehearsal and Come & Sing paid off with features, and the result of these efforts and those of members was an influx of around 20 new members.

We held our annual Carols for All concert in the Priory on 28 December, raising funds for Heartstart Malvern. Penny Vere had once again agreed to put together the programme, take rehearsals and be our conductor for this popular annual event. Over 40 singers found time in their busy Christmas calendar to take part and we welcomed a good audience to the Priory for an afternoon of festive music, raising £1,262 for the local charity.

In November a group of 20+ singers took up the invitation to sing Verdi Requiem with the 1885 Singers, conducted by Alison Hunka, in Southwark Cathedral. This was fortunately timed as we had rehearsed the work for the performance in Symphony Hall with the National Schools Symphony Orchestra earlier in the year.

During the autumn term and into the new year, work was going on behind the scenes to put together the concert in Worcester Cathedral. The team at the Cathedral started in November to publicise the concert and at a meeting with them in February, we jointly outlined the plans for the day. As St Matthew Passion is a long work with double choir and orchestra, and six soloists, there was much to put in place and the amount of organisation, in addition to months of rehearsals, undertaken by Jonathan in preparation for the concert cannot be overestimated. Publicity efforts in conjunction with Worcester Live, chosen for our ticketing, the Cathedral team and many MFC members saw the concert featured in more locations, both physical and online, than ever before.

Rehearsals were going well. Although many members had sung St Matthew Passion before, many hadn't done so in the original German. By February we were really getting to know and feel the music and text, and excitement was mounting as the concert approached.

Then the unthinkable happened. In the background the world had been changing, as Coronavirus took hold and was soon to be declared a pandemic. Confirmed infections in Worcestershire were almost non-existent in early March but in the absence of widespread testing, the medical advisers were warning that the risk of the infection spreading was far greater than the statistics were at that point indicating. Our European neighbours had started to ban large gatherings and lockdowns were being applied in the face of mounting infection and fatalities. People in our demographic, both choir and audience, were at particular risk. Even though bans on large gatherings and lockdown in the UK were yet to be applied, with a day to go to the concert we felt the only prudent course of action was to cancel. The government lockdown came into force 10 days later.

From this point on the possibility of getting together to sing was removed. Extreme care had to be taken to collect in hire scores from members and librarian Bridget Corlett put into place the necessary procedures to do that. This collection took place in the foyer at the Chase School, with members arriving at timed intervals according to surname, the last time we met at this venue.

In the absence of singing, from March to the end of the season our focus has been on keeping members informed and engaged. All Committee meetings have been held online via Zoom and a number of social events (coffee mornings and quiz nights) have been organised on the same platform. Around half of our membership have taken part in one of these events. A private Facebook group has been set up for members to share lockdown experiences and particularly online musical events that they have taken part in or been aware of. Our 2020 AGM will be held on Zoom and a member survey has been conducted to obtain feedback which will help with planning for the 2020-21 season. As we prepare for the AGM we are looking forward to music-making in a new way for the foreseeable future. This is to include virtual concerts assembled from individuals' videos and on-line rehearsals in the Autumn.

Before the singing world changed, we were carrying on with our usual activities at rehearsals, for which we thank the organisers: Viv Austen and Marna Gowan for the weekly raffle, Mike and Val Tweedie for interval drinks and Bridget for the Bring & Buys. The loss of these vital fundraising activities is another way in which our normal operations have been affected.

Thanks also go to Jackie Tolliday for putting together concert programmes, including the one for the concert that never was, undertaking PR with local press and keeping the website fresh and up-to-date, Heather Williamson for programme content, Richard Rosoman for taking on ticket sales for the March concert and Catherine Oliver for managing poster distribution.

In recognition of our centenary year we had intended to publish an update of the history of the choir. The first 60 years were documented in Malvern Musical Society – a History and it seemed to be a fitting time to bring this up to date. Marion Couston had kindly agreed to put together an account of the activities of MFC and a summary of works performed over the next 40 years, and we wanted to access the archives in order to add some details. However, before we were able to do this, we were barred from entering other people's homes in the lockdown. The history will be completed and published when we are able to do so.

We had news during the season of the deaths of three former members, Mary Walker, Kenneth Wells and Sue McClelland, and of member Ann Porter. Sympathies were sent to their families on behalf of the choir.

We owe a debt of gratitude to our Chairman Kevin Ilsley, who has steered us through this very difficult period. His medical background and contacts have proved invaluable in informing our decisions. He has spent many hours attending workshops held by Making Music, through which he has been able to feed back the experiences of other choirs. His emails and newsletter features, along with Jonathan's, have kept members informed and aware that everything possible is being done to ensure the choir will be ready to reconvene when it is safe and permitted to do so.

The Committee and Jonathan have continued to work on behalf of the choir, planning concert programmes and booking dates and venues for the next two seasons, in the anticipation that we will be able to start rehearsing and performing again some time in 2021. As one member said when asked what activities she would like us to organise “Only singing will do”.

**Barbara Moss – Secretary** 15 August 2020

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### **Friends of Malvern Festival Chorus**

This year saw the resurrection of the Friends of Malvern Festival Chorus. Members were asked to suggest to relatives and friends who usually come to our concerts that they consider becoming a ‘Friend’. The cost of a minimum of £45 (£80 for two at the same address) at the beginning of the academic year would give them a ticket and programme for each of our two concerts, invitations to social events and the AGM, and an acknowledgement in the programmes.

Sadly the take-up was not what we had hoped for with only four ‘Friendships’ being taken up through two members. Given the difficulties of this year, we hope that more members will feel able to recruit Friends for 2020/21 which will bring in more revenue at an earlier stage and contribute to our financial security.

**Alice Osmond - Friends’ Secretary** 2 August 2020

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