

MALVERN FESTIVAL CHORUS
ANNUAL NEWSLETTER 2018-2019

REPORT FROM JONATHAN BROWN – MUSIC DIRECTOR

The 2018-19 season for Malvern Festival Chorus has been an enormously busy and rewarding one. How many choral societies can boast 3 bona fide concerts, a Christmas concert and a performance of Verdi's Requiem at Symphony Hall in one year?! I feel that it has been a successful year, with many musical highlights and the purpose of this report is to summarise the season.

We started with an early music programme of JS Bach and Mozart, including Bach's glorious Magnificat and Mozart's Coronation Mass as the two main centrepiece choral works. We were joined by 5 outstanding soloists – Louise Wayman (soprano - who had sung the Brahms Requiem the previous summer), Ali Ponsford-Hill (soprano), Simon Ponsford (countertenor), James Oxley (tenor – as MFC's president who requires no introduction!) and Jamie Hall (bass) as well as welcoming back Musical & Amicable Society – a baroque period orchestra. Other items in the programme included Mozart's Ave Verum and Louise's outstanding performance of his Exsultate, Jubilate, and the orchestra's beautiful playing of Bach's Air on a G String from the 3rd Orchestral Suite. This was a technical programme (any Bach is technical!) and, whilst we had the isolated challenging moment, there was so much to be really proud of and, moving forward, showed that we need not fear doing music of this complexity.

The annual Charity Carols for All Christmas concert in the Priory was most enjoyable and it was lovely to be able to sit back in the audience and listen to some lovely choral singing (and solos of course, both from the wonderful Sue Black as well as from members of the Chorus) and with our fabulous Penny conducting. It is clear that this is a very important event for us, given the warmth and the gratitude of the audience and the Priory, and we should be very proud of our association with it. Long may it continue.

Then, in March, we presented a concert of music that was very different, including 2 pieces never sung by MFC before – Goodall's Eternal Light and Otčenáš by Janacek. In addition, we also had Vaughan Williams' 5 Mystical Songs. We returned to the Priory for this concert, where Ali Ponsford-Hill returned as our soprano soloist (also singing songs by Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells), with our other soloists being the wonderful Quentin Hayes and Tom Raskin (who came in at the last minute to cover illness to our original tenor soloist and, given the Janacek being sung in Czech with top Bs, this was an amazing effort). Julian McNamara returned to play the organ for us (having played Messiah for us the previous March) and Ruth Faber played the harp. We were also delighted to have Penny play the keyboard part for the Goodall and accompany one of Ali's songs. Despite so much of the repertoire being new and unfamiliar, this was very well presented, despite some very difficult moments (in the Goodall particularly). The nature of the music for this concert was very much more melodic and the feedback from everyone that I spoke to both performers and listeners was undeniably positive and is food for thought for future programming.

Our final in-house concert of the year was back in the Malvern Theatres and featured Durufle's glorious Requiem. This is my absolute favourite piece of music, evoking so many different influences from the traditional ancient Gregorian requiem plainsong to the French 20th century organist tradition that Durufle grew up with. I was very keen that we performed this piece with the middle instrumentation accompaniment of strings, trumpets, harp, timps and organ, and we were, once again, joined by Regency Sinfonia and Julian McNamara on the organ. The strings of the orchestra were very much at the fore with other works including Brahms' Geistlicheslied, the wonderful Adagio by Barber and Zemlinsky's extraordinary Maiblumen bluhten uberall, the solo part being sung by Claire Williams – and what an amazing performance that was. For me, this was the most successful concert of the year, not least because I felt that

we were most secure with the music and able to convey and project that confidence. The music is far from easy, but we were certainly most comfortable in this concert.

And then, finally, we sang Verdi's Requiem in Symphony Hall. What an incredible experience! Not just us singing one of the great choral works in one of the world's great concert halls, but that we did so with such an inspiring orchestra of young people completely dedicated to their music-making, all of whom only seeing their music for the first time a week earlier! Their love of what they do really shone through and it was an absolute privilege for us to be part of this fantastic project. I am very grateful to MFC for providing the core of the chorus, and I know that the whole NSSO organisation were equally so. This is a real feather in our cap.

So, thank you for such an excellent year. A busy one, but one where we have made really good progress technically and musically. We have shown that we can sing a wide variety of musical styles and that we have the versatility to do so.

I am very grateful to you all for two reasons. Firstly, that you are always committed to your singing and to the Society. Singing is a physical discipline that needs hard work and I really sense that you understand that and want to improve what you do, both individually and collectively, both physically and musically. And secondly, for your vote of confidence in me to continue, now, as your bona fide Musical Director. That has meant an enormous amount to me, and I am both grateful to you for that, and also excited about the musical journey that we are embarking on, with our centenary coming up. We have lots of wonderful music already planned for the next couple of years, culminating with the epic St. Matthew Passion in our mother church in March. Many challenges lie ahead but I, for one, am excited about embracing those to make us better as a choral society. The tradition of community choral singing that we have in this country is a wonderful one and something that makes our musical heritage so special. Thank you all for your part in this.

Jonathan Brown - Music Director

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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.

Concerts

Concert income for the season was £14,845 against outgoings of £23,998. Orchestral support for Autumn and Summer concerts accounted for a large portion of this expenditure, with organ, harp and piano accompaniment to the "Darkness and Light" concert in March.

The carol singing at Morrisons and Carols for All at the Priory raised £1,554. After deduction of expenses, the Choir was able to provide a donation of £1,270 to St Richards Hospice. Special thanks are due to Penny Vere for organising and conducting this event and also 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. Figures for this event will be included in the 2019/20 accounts but income has exceeded expenditure by approximately £200.

Fifteen local enterprises placed advertisements in concert programmes this Season, generating £1,475 which contributes to the cost of printing programmes thus enabling sales revenue to offset the production costs of concerts.

General Income and Expenditure

There were 125 paid-up subscriptions by the end of last season, 2018/19; 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 106 Members have given their support to the scheme. Subscriptions may be paid by direct transfer to MFC's Bank or by cheque/cash.

Members have continued to raise money through the weekly raffle, the Bring-and-Buy, and interval refreshments. 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 of the 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.

2019/20 Season

Budgets have been put together for the forthcoming Centenary Season, a milestone in the history of the Chorus. Expenditure is set to be somewhat higher than normal as the Committee has sanctioned the special performance of JS Bach's "St Matthew Passion" in Worcester Cathedral to mark the anniversary plus a Gala concert in June. These are anticipated to raise the profile of the Chorus and, as such, represent an investment in the future by attracting more singers to ensure the continuity of large scale mixed choral singing in and around Malvern.

New members will be most welcome – their subscriptions provide an assured income for the year. Revenue from ticket sales, whilst never assured, is 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

It will necessary to seek extra support through sponsorship and similar efforts in the coming Season. In recent years grants have been received from The Elgar Society and the Elmley Foundation. The Committee is working to seek out further sponsors and to submit bids for support.

It is intended to hold fundraising events throughout the year to strengthen the cash reserves of the Chorus. The Wine and Cheese evening at Bridget's house, although a culmination of last Season, has got the process off to an excellent start, having raised over £400. Ideas and help from the Membership would be much appreciated.

Our grateful thanks are due to two Members of the Chorus who have already made generous donations to support the March 2020 concert, in memory of deceased relatives.

Independent Assessment

The above figures are given subject to agreement by the Independent Assessor, Stuart Wollaston, to whom the Committee's grateful thanks are due.

Michael P Tweedie - Treasurer

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

It's been another busy year, well summarised by Barbara Moss our indefatigable Secretary in her annual report. It remains to me to add my thanks to hers to the many people who have helped to make the year so enjoyable, to reflect on some of the important developments that have taken place over the last twelve months and to look forward to our centenary season.

We were extremely grateful to Jonathan Brown when he agreed to step into the Musical Director's role at short notice last year. He has now completed his first full season with us, encouraging us to sing an eclectic mix of music, to get our tongues round unfamiliar languages and trusting us to tackle his favourite piece, Durufle's Requiem! Our rehearsals have been intense, starting fifteen minutes earlier than in the past and benefiting from the vocal warm-up exercises that Jonathan has introduced. It's clear that he puts a huge amount of preparation into our rehearsals and concerts but it's his unfailing energy, enthusiasm, good humour and encouragement that spurs us on to lift our performances. The MFC committee was relieved when Jonathan agreed to take on the permanent musical directorship and the popularity of that decision was evident at an Extraordinary General Meeting in March, when members voted unanimously to endorse it. We are fortunate to have such a talented and committed conductor and look forward to many more years of exciting music making with him.

As Director of Music at Malvern College, Jonathan's primary responsibility is to the school. We are grateful to the former Headmaster Antony Clark for agreeing to Jonathan's appointment with us and that the new Headmaster Keith Metcalfe has been equally supportive. Traditionally the Headmaster of the College has been one of our Vice-Presidents but it appears there was no formal mechanism for this appointment, or it has been lost in the mists of time. The committee agreed that a formal approach should be made to Mr Metcalfe to invite him to take on the role and I'm pleased to report that he has agreed to do so. We look forward to building on our relationship with the College and strengthening links in the future. Jonathan's colleague David Angus has also made important contributions to the choir. He has taken us for rehearsals when Jonathan has been unavailable and has also sung with us, adding backbone to the basses and the tenors, sometimes in the same concert! We are very grateful to him and look forward to his continued involvement with the choir.

Penny Vere has continued to accompany our rehearsals in her unassuming, expert way, turning blizzards of notes on the page into mellifluous sound. Her ability to pick out and emphasise a particular voice part is remarkable and much appreciated! Penny has added her voice to concerts as well and once again organised a successful Charity Carol Concert last Christmas. We are fortunate to have the benefit of her fine musicianship.

I know I've repeated this ad nauseam, but until I was elected to the MFC Committee I had no idea how much work was done behind the scenes to keep the choir running smoothly. Committee members give freely of their time and I am very grateful for their support and commitment. I'm particularly grateful to Barbara Moss for her tireless work as our Secretary. She and I have attended workshops to learn more about developing and promoting the choir, where we have shared ideas with representatives of other choirs. I'm grateful too to our Treasurer Mike Tweedie, who manages our finances so prudently and to Bridget Corlett, who travels far and wide in her search for our music. Bridget also hosted most of our committee meetings and Kate Cross welcomed us when Bridget was unable to do so. We very much appreciate their generous hospitality. John Price has managed our concerts efficiently and keeps us on our toes about health and safety issues. Joy Black has taken on the pivotal role of Membership Secretary, a particularly important responsibility as we strive to encourage new members to join us. Thanks are due to them and to all members of the committee, who attend our frequent meetings uncomplainingly.

We have reviewed the governance of the committee this year and made some significant changes. Last year we adopted a Safeguarding Policy, in consultation with the Charity Commission and Making Music. This has been modified to make it more fit for purpose. We are grateful to Louise Rosoman, who has kindly agreed to take on the important role of Safeguarding Officer and will keep our policy under review whilst also managing the DBS process for members of the Committee.

The success of the choir rests on our ability not only to create and perform interesting programmes but also to encourage people to come and listen to us. Heather Williamson does a magnificent job in persuading us to buy tickets but we each need to take on the responsibility of encouraging friends and relatives to come to our concerts. Some of our audience numbers have been disappointing. We have established a publicity sub-committee to try to remedy this and are grateful to Liz Gait for improving our visibility on social media, to Jackie Tolliday for her work on our website, to Julia Needham for producing publicity materials and working closely with the theatre and to Catherine Oliver for distributing posters. The sub-committee is working hard to forge links with local businesses and schools with the aim of increasing sponsorship and strengthening our links with the local community. We hope that the work that is being done will help to boost our audience numbers for our forthcoming centenary year. We have adopted a new logo for this – selected from a number submitted by members for consideration. We also hope to have an updated history of the choir ready for next year and are very grateful to Marion Coulson for the work she has done on this.

As I said in my last report, if the choir is to thrive we must attract new members. After a period when membership was falling, our numbers have begun to increase. We hope to establish links with local schools and to encourage young singers to join us. The talent and interest is there – half the children in the NSSO chorus that sang in the Verdi concert in Birmingham were from local schools. We also hope that we might attract more members at the September “Come and Sing” event. But many singers have joined us because of a personal approach from current members and this may well be the most effective way of ensuring the future of the choir.

It’s not just committee members of course that make important contributions to the life of the choir. I echo Barbara’s thanks to everyone who has helped with fundraising events, been involved with our social activities and gone out of their way to welcome new members. Our social events have been very enjoyable and have provided the time and space for us to get to know each other better. I appreciate though that some members simply want to sing and that is what unites all of us – our love of choral music and the opportunity the choir gives us to create it together. Thank you all for your commitment, for turning out to rehearsals week after week in all weathers and for taking Malvern Festival Chorus into its second century.

Dr Kevin Ilsley – Chairman

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SECRETARY’S REPORT

I’m writing this as our extended season draws to a close and realising that it was around this time last year that Jonathan first sounded us out about taking part in the National Schools Symphony Orchestra’s 25th Anniversary concert of Verdi’s *Requiem* in Birmingham Symphony Hall. The response was immediate and positive, with the result that around half of our members took part in the day in July 2019, performing with talented young musicians and singers, an amazing and inspirational experience. We hope the young singers and players will build on the enjoyment of music-making in this way, as we have done over the years.

For many members this was the grand finale to a season of musical variety. Our first full season with Jonathan Brown as Musical Director has taken us on a journey from the of the 18th century with J S Bach’s

Magnificat and W A Mozart's Coronation Mass for our November concert, via the 20th and 21st century with a programme including Howard Goodall's Eternal Light, Ralph Vaughan Williams' Five Mystical Songs and Leos Janacek's Otcenas in March, before moving back to the 19th and earlier 20th century for our summer concert featuring Durufle's Requiem. We sang in no less than five languages and Jonathan continued with his coaching to help us with the vocal techniques required for the different musical styles of the works.

Our traditional charity fund-raising at Christmas was this year in support of St Richard's Hospice. We're grateful to Penny Vere for putting together a lovely programme, rehearsing and conducting us for Carols for All, as well as keeping us together for carol singing at Morrisons. As usual the public and our audience were most generous, such that we raised a creditable £1,270 for the Hospice. A group of MFC representatives went there early in the New Year to present a cheque and were welcomed with a tour and explanation of their work.

We were pleased to welcome a good number of new members during the season. The increase in PR and social media activity, enthusiasm of members to invite friends to an Open Rehearsal in September and concert programmes that have proved attractive to singers, have all been instrumental in achieving this. With our Centenary season now upon us, we're working hard to continue this trend, starting with an Open rehearsal and Come & Sing in early September.

Sadly, we had news during the season of the deaths of former members John Sabey and Graham Evans.

Social events have provided the opportunity for members to meet others they might not get to know otherwise, as well as adding funds to the coffers. Both the Fish & Chip Quiz night and Wine & Cheese garden party were well supported by members and family/friends. We thank Kevin Ilsley for being an entertaining quizmaster and Bridget Corlett for hosting the garden party. For once, the marquee proved essential as the fine weather broke at the wrong moment. We also thank Dee Brook and Ollie Marks for putting on coffee mornings to help welcome new members to the soprano and alto voice parts.

Bring & Buys, weekly raffles and rehearsal refreshments all bring in much needed funds and our thanks go to Bridget, Viv Austen and Marna Gowan, and Mike and Val Tweedie for organising these activities, as well as to members for contributing goods and prizes.

Ensuring that all the details are in place for the smooth running of concerts is always on the agenda for the Committee meeting. A challenge this season was to improve sightlines and add capacity to the seating for the choir in the Priory for our March concert. After much research and planning, staging was hired from Leominster Choral Society, transported and erected on the day. Our thanks go to Kevin, John Price and Bridget's husband Malcolm for their efforts to bring this off. We understand that the Priory are looking at how they might make the space more flexible for hirers in future and we were invited to provide our input.

Publicity to generate awareness of the opportunities to sing with us and attract an audience is also high on the Committee's agenda. However, MFC members who are not on the Committee have contributed greatly to this during the year. Special thanks go to Jackie Tolliday for press releases and keeping our website interesting and up to date, Julia Needham for producing posters, theatre brochure advertising and liaising with the theatre to ensure we're included in their digital and email advertising, and Catherine Oliver for taking over the management of poster distribution. Jackie has also taken over production of concert programmes, doing much to encourage new advertisers and enlisting help from Heather Williamson for content about the works performed. The sale of concert tickets to members at rehearsal is also an important responsibility for which we're very grateful to Heather for taking on.

Looking forward to and planning for our forthcoming Centenary season has been a big part of our work during this season. Making this special has been a challenge made easier by the inspiration and ideas put

forward by Jonathan for the programmes and venues. This has taken us into new territory as we entered into discussions with the Events team at Worcester Cathedral for our March 2020 concert. Taking part in a concert in the Cathedral will be a new adventure for many members and a first in the history of the chorus, befitting the celebratory theme of the season. We're delighted that our President, James Oxley, will be joining us for the role of Evangelist in J S Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. The celebratory Gala Concert in June 2020 in Malvern Theatres will be no less exciting, particularly for long-standing members, as Jonathan has invited former Conductors who are available, to join him in conducting the choir. More details to follow!

These exciting plans will come at a cost and so energies are going into encouraging sponsorship from a variety of sources. Whilst we will be appealing to the traditional sources of sponsorship of musical societies and events, we would also like to reach out to organisations in the Community and we're looking for help from members in doing this. Our focus is two-fold, primarily to sponsor new members and secondly, to generate sponsorship for our concerts. Please give thought to contacts you have who could be willing to support us in this way.

My report wouldn't be complete without offering my thanks to our Chairman, Kevin Ilesley for his support and guidance throughout the year. The choir is very fortunate to have such a strong leader to steer us through the ever-increasing requirements for the running of a charitable organisation in a correct and transparent manner.

And so, on to the exciting prospect of our new season. Our AGM on Tuesday 10 September will be preceded by an Open Rehearsal on 3 September and Come & Sing in Great Malvern Priory on Saturday 7th. We encourage you to invite singing friends to these events and non-singing friends to the concert, and we look forward to seeing you then.

Barbara Moss - Secretary

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