

Malvern Festival Chorus. COVID 19 Update 1

Dear Members,

Six weeks have slipped by since my last update, despite my best intentions to keep you informed about news about the choir. I apologise for not communicating with you sooner than this. I hope you are all well and coping with the current restrictions to normal life.

Well, here we are approaching the end of a glorious May, when we should be looking forward with eager anticipation to our gala concert on 27 June and still enjoying the glowing satisfaction of having performed our centenary concert in Worcester Cathedral on 14 March. But of course March 14 will be remembered as the date on which our fortunes changed and our future became uncertain. We find ourselves still in various states of lockdown, unable to sing together or to meet socially. But we are fortunate to be living in such a beautiful part of the world and able to enjoy the countryside that surrounds us. I'm sure I'm not alone in becoming more aware of the subtle changes that each day reveals in the natural world, more appreciative of birdsong and the ever changing flora. And more conscious of the insatiable demands of the garden!

As I said in my previous message, I hadn't heard of Zoom before March but it's now insinuated itself into everyday life. We used it to hold our first on-line Committee Meeting last week, which went without mishap. I've also continued to take part in the Zoomed Making Music workshops that I referred to in my last message. These have been very engaging and informative, enabling members of choirs and societies from all over the UK to share ideas and concerns. Making Music has also put a lot of COVID related items and ideas on its website, which I'm still working my way through.

Two major questions dominate the Making Music workshops and these were mirrored in our committee meeting: how can we keep music societies together during this pandemic crisis and when can we expect to start singing together again? We do understand that some members are only interested in coming to rehearsals and singing in concerts. Choral singing is our primary concern but many members also enjoy the social life of the choir. In my last email I invited members to suggest ways in which we might stay in touch with each other but there wasn't a huge response. Since then a closed Facebook group *has* been set up (thanks to Liz Gait), which is for members only. I know that not everyone is a fan of Facebook but if you do use it then please search for the group (Malvern Festival Chorus Private Group) and consider joining it. We hope that it will become a social space where we can share news about choir members but also a place where we can share ideas, news about the choir and information about the wider choral world.

There have been no other substantive developments. Some other societies are meeting up virtually via Zoom for social events, for coffee mornings or quizzes for instance. Some are holding rehearsals on line, but this is universally acknowledged to be a very different experience from live rehearsals. Zoom is not set up for music and whilst the system can be tweaked to iron out some of the glitches inherent in the software, the differences between participants' internet speeds and bandwidths mean that it is impossible to sing in time with each other, so microphones need to be muted. Furthermore the size of our choir presents difficulties that are additional to those experienced by small choirs. A lot of thought and work will have to be done if we are to explore the possibility of

rehearsing on line in any form. To do so would put great demands on Jonathan and on Penny, neither of whom envisaged this being part of their job description!

What of the future? The committee took an early decision to postpone our Gala concert and in doing so were ahead of the curve; several other societies have only recently cancelled their summer concerts. There is a growing realisation that it will be several months before public health experts give the green light for choirs to sing together again. There's been no official word about this from the UK government but in France and Germany the current guidance is that choirs may be able to reconvene in September but not in groups larger than ten. On the current evidence, I think our government is likely to make similar proposals, eventually. That said, we must make provisional plans for next year and are hoping that we will be able to hold a concert at Christmas in some form. We are in discussion with venues about dates for concerts in Spring and Summer next year, when we hope to perform the works that had to be abandoned this year. We plan to hold these in Malvern.

These uncertainties make it all the more important, the committee believes, that we do all we can to hold the choir together until we can enjoy singing together again. We do understand that some members are primarily interested in choral singing but if you do want to share in any other activities whilst we are unable to do that, we would be grateful if you could fill in the attached questionnaire, with your preferences for the proposals listed there. These are not exclusive; if you have other ideas about how we might move forward we would love to hear about them.

As I indicated in my last email, thanks to Mike's sound financial management and Jonathan's excellent relationships with musicians, our finances are in better shape than we feared they would be. But there remain many uncertainties about the future. We need to maintain a sound financial position but equally, if we are unable to function as a rehearsing and performing choir this has implications for the subscriptions we charge for membership. The committee is considering this at the moment and we will keep you informed about our proposals.

On a final note, thanks to those of you who took part in the quiz that was organised by Bridget and circulated with my last missive. Congratulations to Penny, who was the winner! I look forward to giving her the promised bottle of something fizzy when we are next able to meet. Perhaps we might organise another quiz soon, on Facebook or via Zoom!

I hope that you stay safe and well and I look forward to hearing from you.

With very best wishes,

Kevin

Dr Kevin Ilsley
Chairman
Malvern Festival Chorus
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