



Newsletter

July 2020

Introduction

Kevin Ilsley

Another month has slipped by since the last newsletter. I'm afraid it feels a bit like Groundhog Day as I write this; the concerns I expressed last month remain the same and nothing has happened to reassure me. We still do not know when we will be able to sing together as a choir but it remains unlikely that we will be able to do so until after Christmas. We were hoping for some guidance from the government about the criteria that will need to be met for choirs to rehearse and perform and indeed some has been issued recently. But while non-professional choirs are advised to take note of the guidance, they are advised that for the time being they cannot meet other than in numbers specified for any social activity. That means that a maximum of six people can meet outdoors. Making Music has made representations to Government on behalf of the 7000 listed choirs in the UK asking for an urgent reconsideration of the rules. There is a dearth of research into the dangers or otherwise of singing together but recently Declan Costello, an Ear Nose and Throat specialist who also sings professionally, has secured government funding to carry out a study into this and wind instrument playing. It's unlikely that we'll have the results of this for several months though. I continue to take part in weekly online Making Music workshops, which keeps me up to date with developments and I will keep you posted.

We must remain positive. Even though we can't sing together as a group, Jonathan and Penny's plans are well advanced for us to start rehearsing music in September on line and we're very grateful to them for rising to the challenge. Jonathan has more to say about this elsewhere in this newsletter. This will be new territory for most of us, though I know that a few members have some experience of this with other choirs. It won't be the same as singing in the same space but it will allow us to wake up our vocal chords and begin to learn new pieces of music.

In the last month we've held another Committee meeting via Zoom and will continue to meet in this way until it's judged safe to meet in person again. We've also held a couple of social events; a quiz organised and hosted by Peter Brook and a virtual coffee morning, arranged by Liz Gait. I'm really grateful to both of

them for coordinating these. Both events were very enjoyable and it was really nice to see so many once familiar faces! We will be holding another quiz soon and this will be followed by another coffee morning – or perhaps a “cocktail evening”. I know that there are going to be some people who can’t join in with these social events because of the time they’re scheduled for, so we intend to ring the changes a bit. We hope to continue to put a social event on every couple of weeks, as long as there is an appetite for them. Please keep an eye out for emails advertising future events and give one a try if you haven’t already done so. The Members only Facebook page now has a number of enthusiastic contributors to it but we could do with a few more! Please consider joining the group if you’re a Facebook user. Have a look at our website too, which is being developed to meet the challenges of the current time. We’re very grateful to Jackie Tolliday for doing this.

At our last committee meeting we reviewed our plans for the coming year. There are many uncertainties at the moment but we have booked venues for a concert in the Spring and our Gala Concert in the summer. Our programme will depend on when, where and how we can begin to rehearse together. But even when that becomes clearer, we need to have an idea about the sort of choir we will be by then. Every year some members chose to retire from the choir and it may be that the current crisis will have brought that decision forward for some people. Equally, it may be that some members remain reluctant to gather together even when we are given the go ahead to resume rehearsals (with appropriate safety measures in place). We have decided that it would be a good idea to canvass opinion about members’ intentions, so will be sending out a survey soon to address this. We appreciate that members may change their minds between now and the time rehearsals start again but nonetheless it will be very useful to get an idea of how people feel at the moment. It would also be very helpful to have some indication about members’ intentions regarding attendance at the proposed Zoom AGM, so that we can plan for this too. Please keep an eye out for the questionnaire and complete it. The more responses we have, the better able we will be to plan for the future.

Finally, I would like to thank members of the committee for all the support they continue to give me during this difficult time. There has been such a lot of change to contend with. Our Zoom committee meetings are working well and we’re getting on with the behind the scenes business that keeps the choir going. I’m particularly grateful to Barbara for all the work she does on our behalf, to Mike for the assiduous work he does to keep our accounts healthy and to Bridget for chivvying me to write this and for putting the newsletter together!

Kevin Ilsley, Chairman

22nd July 2020

Musical Director

Hello everyone,

I hope you are managing to keep well and safe.

At the time of writing I'm not absolutely sure what Kevin will be saying about the medical situation of COVID-19. The good news is that, in recent days, a study into singing and wind/brass instrument playing, that is Government recognised, seems to be in full swing. It is run by an ENT specialist who happens to be a professional singer on the side(!) and so I guess that we should be grateful that, at last, some clinical testing of singing and the associated risks of that activity in a Coronavirus world is underway in this country. That said, it is more concerned with professional music-making rather than amateur/social and so I fear that we may well be some way off conclusive evidence. However, we should be grateful for small mercies, and fingers crossed that they can make quick progress (as well as a vaccine being developed - this seems to be moving on apace too) and get us back to what we want to be doing but only when it is proven to be safe.

When we are going to be able to be able to meet physically is uncertain, and so I thought I would put some flesh on the bone in terms of letting you know how we are going to proceed with rehearsing in September. We are going to be rehearsing over the Zoom virtual platform. Over a 3-week cycle, we will have sectional rehearsals (ladies and chaps) which will be run by Penny and I - Penny will run the ladies for one week and I the chaps, and then we will swap the following week. The 3rd week of the cycle will be run by myself and will be a full rehearsal. The rehearsals will last an hour. Penny and I will be leading from the piano and making each part that we are working with clear. You will have your speakers on so that you can hear what we are doing but, when you are singing, you will have your microphone muted so that you will be able to sing with Penny and I but we won't be able to hear you - the delay that you will experience would make things very confusing. At various points during the rehearsal you will be able to ask for a particular passage to be gone over and consolidated. We are also looking at how we might be able to utilise the chat function too. Clearly it won't be possible to work too much on technique and so working on familiarity and vocal confidence of the notes will be the key priority whilst we are rehearsing virtually.

I gather that many choral societies are operating in this way and, whilst it can't replicate the real thing, it will at least allow us to function and to prepare for the concert in March. To start with, we will begin with Jenkins' The Armed Man and

Haydn's Nelson Mass, but we will also be introducing the repertoire for July's Gala concert as we progress through the term so that we have 2 concert programmes on the go!

Secondly, next week, we are going to introduce a virtual performance of Mozart's Ave Verum. I am going to be producing a backing track which will be the piano accompaniment and voice part-specific. The idea is that you will practise your part with the backing track, and then record (and, preferably, video) yourself singing it. Once you are happy with what you have done, you will send it in (logistics for which we are working on) and everyone's contributions will then be stitched together to create our first virtual performance! It will mean that you need to sing into one device to video/record yourself, whilst listening to the backing track through headphones on another device. I suspect that a number of you may have already contributed to such a project, so it would be great if we could have a record of MFC having a go. We will send out instructions next week about how to do all this plus the materials that you will need, but it should be good fun and I, for one, am looking forward to it. I hope that this is all relatively clear but, if not, don't despair as the instruction document should clarify what you need to do. With a mobile phone, tablet and computer, if you can have 2 of those, then you should be able to manage!

In the meantime, please continue to look after yourselves, and I look forward to the next few weeks of music-making in our brave new world.

All best, as ever,

Jonathan

Sing into the Funnel Please

Here is a link to an article from Wednesday 22nd July Guardian newspaper with more information about research project Kevin and Jonathan have both mentioned Sing into the funnel please: inside the Covid-19 lab hoping to declare singing safe

https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jul/22/sing-funnel-covid-19-lab-hoping-declare-singing-safe?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

Personal MFC Memories

Marion Couston

We moved to Malvern in 1966 and joined the then Congregational Church at Holly Mount. In early 1967, I joined the Malvern Musical Society, as the choir was then called, as two members of Holly Mount were members.

Leonard Blake was the Musical Director. At that time, we only performed two concerts a year and the first one was in May in the Priory Church. We rehearsed in the Upper Room at the Lyttelton Well and later at the Lyon Room at Malvern College, before moving to our present rehearsal venue of the Chase School.

In 1968 we joined with the Sopranos and Altos of the Abbey School and the Tenors and Basses of Malvern College for Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius. We had staging at the hills end of the Priory. I had sung Gerontius with Wimbledon Choral Society before we moved to this area and it is a piece I will always enjoy singing.

At that time the ladies wore white blouses and short black skirts. I cannot remember when we went over to long black skirts and eventually to black blouses with the scarf. I feel that the latter is much smarter for a choir.

I joined the committee in the 80's and became Patrons' Secretary, taking over from Phyllis Mellows, who had held the role for many years. Eventually the Patrons, who were mostly elderly, reduced so much in numbers that it became unworkable and ceased. I remember that I had to book their tickets at the Box Office and they would ask for 'a seat by the aisle so that my left (or right) leg can stick out!' At the time we were in the flat-floored hall at the theatre, later called the Elgar Hall.

I later stepped up to Secretary and then latterly to Chairman for four years. After that I felt that I should step down to allow fresh blood onto the committee. I must say that I do miss the meetings, although I am glad that I do not have the present responsibilities!!

I have many happy memories of singing with MFC and Cradley Singers, both in London and Malvern, and the surrounding area. On one occasion we sang in London just a short time before our summer concert. We were asked to go to sing in the Albert Hall for a Choral Prom - Carmina Burana. It would appear that one or two choirs had dropped out and we had been added. At first, we thought it impossible but one member took on the organisation, so my husband Stuart and I decided to go. Unfortunately, before the day, we realised that Stuart, who had had an operation the previous year, was not fit enough to go but he insisted that I went anyway. Some friends were staying in a caravan site in the Malvern area and they were able to look after Stuart, and he recorded the evening. The rehearsal went well (Diggory

Seacombe of Regency Sinfonia was on the drums!) and during the afternoon we picnicked in Hyde Park. I was lucky to meet up with some friends I had got to know on my singing weeks with Countrywide Holidays, who sang with Huddersfield Choral Society. From what Stuart said, there was a round of applause when all the chorus, probably over 1,000 of us, but I don't know exactly, stood as one at the start of the concert. What an experience.

I have been auditioned several times, in accordance with the rules of the choir and in all my time with the Chorus I have been very lucky to have only missed 2 concerts. The first was November 2000, when Stuart had died in the September. Iain Sloane, who was the Musical Director at the time, said I could sing but as Secretary, I felt it was only right to obey the rules, as I had missed more than 3 rehearsals. Also, later, I had a knee operation and had to miss a concert.

I am sure if I carry on, I would remember many more happy times. But that is enough, I think.

Marion

Malvern- Bagnères Twinning Association.

Gina Butler

What a difference a few months make (to parody the old song...) Since mid-March we have all been propelled into a new, unwelcome world where human contact has been made virtually taboo and all the cornerstones of our everyday lives have been tossed aside. It seems a life-time ago since Saturday 14th March when we were trying to come to terms with the inevitable but somehow unreal cancellation of our concert. I remember meeting fellow-soprano Helen outside Waitrose that morning and we were both somewhat shell-shocked to find ourselves there at the moment when we should have been warming up our vocal chords in Worcester Cathedral.

Over the following days and weeks, it has become apparent just how divisive and destructive this period has been, separating people into individual islands and cutting off those close bonds of friendship and kinship on which we all rely. There are lesser casualties too and one of these concerns a cause with which I am very much associated – the **Malvern- Bagnères Twinning Association**. I'd like to think you have heard of it!

We have been in existence for about five years, growing from a chance invitation made to *Malvern Town Council* by an obsessively anglophile French teacher in 2015 to establish an official twinning partnership with his native town of Bagnères-de-Bigorre, a traditional spa town in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Our towns have a lot in common – we share a spa/water connection and we both have hills (although theirs are admittedly bigger). Considerable layers of protocol later our association came into being, municipal declarations of friendship and decorated scrolls were exchanged and the only thing remaining was to make things happen! That has been the job of our committee, a dedicated selection of Malvern francophiles working to provide opportunities for fellow citizens of all ages to participate in international friendship, visits and exchanges.

To date we have involved over one hundred individuals in our projects. An 18-strong pioneering group of eager adults from Malvern had enjoyed a fabulous five days in Bagnères in 2017. In 2018 a party of 30 French 17 year -olds staying with local families revelled in the delights of Malvern and immersed themselves in Shakespearean workshops led by actors from the RSC in Stratford. Hanley Castle School, RGS Worcester and Malvern College all participated in this visit. At the same time 10 French Primary school teachers were on a week-long study visit to Somers Park which was a great success. Last Easter a party of 50 (made up of 23 x 15 year-olds from Malvern Rugby Club, their parents and siblings) had an absolute 'ball' playing rugby against local French teams in Bagnères and finding out what hospitality French-style really means! It was a triumph!

Since then plans have focussed on an ambitious project for an exchange between local choir *Severn Voices* and a similar choral group in Bagnères; 2021 is pencilled in the calendar for these events.

And then.... came the Coronavirus Exocet.

All preparations were underway for a return visit by 22 adults from Bagnères, who were to stay with local families over the long weekend of 1st May, 2020. The programme was planned down to the last detail, restaurants booked, visits organised, families briefed, pets groomed – it was going to be just great!

Obviously, this wipe-out is not remotely in the same league as the personal traumas and tragedies experienced by people directly affected by the virus but it still represents a blow to human relationships and makes us sad. We very much hope to bounce back sometime soon and be able to re-schedule our planned programmes, including the many fund-raising and social activities which we organise throughout the year.

If some of you wanted to know more about us and maybe even join our association, we would be delighted. On one of those currently spare afternoons you could initially find out more via our website <http://www.malvernbagnerestwinning.org/>

Gina Butler

Chair MBTA

Dates for your diary

Wednesday 29th July 2020. 7.30 pm Zoom Quiz and Social Evening.

Week commencing Monday 3rd August Mozart's Ave Verum Workshop Week

Thursday 13th August 2020. 7 – 8pm Zoom Cocktail Hour.

Tuesday 1st September 2020. Proposed first Zoom Rehearsal, details to follow.

Tuesday 8th September 2020. Proposed AGM via Zoom, details to follow.

Editor's note

Thank you once again to all the contributors.

We are intending that future newsletters will follow, and we would be very grateful to have your ideas about what you would like to have included. If you have any links to interesting articles, performances and recordings that you think other members would be interested in, please send them to me. If you would like to edit the next one, let me know. I hope you enjoy the picture quiz, 'Countries of the World'.

Bridget

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COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD

