

## **PHOENIX SINGERS – ANNUAL REPORT FOR AGM (2019-2020)**

As I sit here writing this Conductor's Report on the Phoenix Singers 19-20 Season, future generations will find it hard to believe the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

At the present time, rehearsals and concerts remain abandoned for the foreseeable future. Singing is not allowed. Orchestras cannot play. Concert venues must reduce capacity so that audience personnel sit at least two metres apart. Live performance can take place, but no more than 8 people, each three metres apart. Rehearsal venues remain closed. It reads like something out of a Domsday novel but it is actually all true.

So, this Report is actually an historical document that future scholars will pore over!

The season began full of hope, promise and excitement. Our performance in December of Britten's Christmas Cantata Saint Nicolas, with tenor soloist Richard Edgar Wilson, was accompanied by Kingfisher Sinfonia and very well received by a near full capacity audience. For this concert, Phoenix were joined by Woodbridge School choir, as the Gallery Choir, and also the two young choirs from Sir Robert Hitcham's CEVA Primary School, Framlingham.

The Firebirds (boys) and Larks (girls), as well as supporting the audience in the "Nicolas" hymns, made a vital contribution to the first half of the programme, which comprised of Christmas carols as solo items for the young singers, as well as audience participation carols. The organist was Toby Ward, who on previous occasions has been a tenor soloist with us, now displaying his other considerable talent as a sympathetic accompanist.

The Britten style proved to be quite a challenge for the Singers, but after much hard work in rehearsal, the performance was hugely successful and, for me in particular, quite emotional. To see an adult choir and orchestra surrounded by young, enthusiastic, children singers, was exactly what Britten worked for and encouraged throughout his life. What a privilege to be part of his vision!

Rehearsals began again in January, in preparation for our performance of Bach's "St John Passion" at Easter. These progressed well and there was a confidence that this was to be a concert that would be memorable and part of one of our most successful seasons.

This optimism came to a sudden, devastating halt when rehearsals were abandoned the day before a Wednesday in the middle of March (a mere three weeks before the concert) as the virus (Covid19) caused the UK to go into Lockdown: nobody allowed out and about.

I am delighted to report that the committee agreed to offer the soloists and orchestra 50% of their concert fee, as a goodwill gesture to assist them in such straightened circumstances. This assistance was gratefully received by some, while others generously refused, asking us to donate their fees to the Society funds.

And, in many ways, so the situation remains: allowed out but with severe restrictions on many activities, including music-making, and meaning that we lost our summer Opera Evening in July.

The future? Well who knows? Rehearsals are not likely to resume in September and soloists and orchestra have been put on notice that our projected December concert is in doubt..... as, also, is the proposed concert at Snape in April 2021.

A season which began so well, and promised so much, has ended so sadly. It is important we remain optimistic about our future. The name "Phoenix" could not be more appropriate at this time. We WILL return to rehearsing and performing, but "need to ensure the health and safety of our members, those for whom they care, and our audience". How many times have I had to write that in the last four months or so?

**Geoff Lavery (July 2020)**