

## **PHOENIX SINGERS – Conductor's report for AGM (2021-22 season)**

Well, what a season this has just been! We returned to rehearsals in September 2021 after an absence of almost 18 months, we only just managed to perform a concert in December as the next Covid wave struck; you were rehearsed with an alternative conductor for almost the entire Snape concert rehearsal schedule and then, as Covid was hovering around, we performed our final concert of the season. As the season started, it would have been hard to imagine all that was in front of us.

Fears for singing again after such a long absence were addressed by Eric Tebbett who came and ran an evening of "Getting our Voices back"...and how wonderful it was to be singing again together. An evening of fun but also hard work, revitalising those parts of the body and voice that had lain dormant all those months. The rest of the September rehearsal time was spent singing Brahms' "Requiem" for the sheer pleasure of doing so... and this is firmly on my list for the future, by the way!! I was amazed that not only had almost all the pre-Covid choir returned but we welcomed new members too. Something that none of us had predicted and what a joy!

Work then began on our December programme that included the Christmas portion of Messiah: and yes, we were back! I was particularly pleased to note that there were quite a few people who had not sung "Messiah" before. It is easy to take for granted that we ALL know certain stock repertoire pieces, so to introduce well loved works afresh is always a wonderful thing. Rehearsals went well and then Covid escalated with a new and particularly virulent variant that meant only half the choir were able to perform on the evening of the concert. In addition, the original soloist "team" was altered three times in the week before the concert. We ended up with our third soprano soloist and a replacement tenor. A stressful evening but the sheer pleasure of singing and performing again overcame all the difficulties. It was a successful concert musically and good to work with Kingfisher once more, but there was not a large audience to hear us – disappointing but inevitable really, under the circumstances.

Work began in January on the difficult Elgar "Music Makers" in preparation for the joint concert at Snape in April 22 with Beccles Choral Society and Lambeth Orchestra. However, it became obvious after only a few weeks that I could not continue because of a back problem. Tom Appleton, an admirable musician and choir trainer, came to replace me. PS was very lucky that he happened to be free every Wednesday evening and so able to take all the rehearsals up to April, when I returned.

There were two joint rehearsals before the day of the concert, and the two choirs came together well. Tom Appleton took the bulk of the first joint all-day rehearsal at the beginning of March.

Diana Moore was the soloist in Elgar's "Sea Pictures" and "Music Makers" and we were fortunate that an artist of her international acclaim came to sing for and with us. Lambeth Orchestra, enthusiastic to play at the Maltings as always, were on good form, starting the all-Elgar programme with "Cockaigne". The concert itself was a great success but audience numbers have not yet increased to pre-pandemic numbers and this causes financial concern. It is amazing that we have this internationally renowned concert hall so close to us and that Phoenix are able to perform there (our second appearance there with me) and thoughts have already turned to a possible return soon.

With no time to waste, work began on Haydn's "Creation" for the concert at the start of July. Once again, a well-known choral repertoire work that some Singers met for the first time. A much larger Kingfisher orchestra joined us together with three soloists, who were all wonderful. I was particularly grateful to Richard Edgar Wilson, who stepped into the Tenor solo part the week before the performance. The audience seemed to be delighted with the evening, you sang your hearts out, and for me personally, it was such a marvellous occasion as I adore "Creation". It comes up fresh every time and you did all that I asked of you. Thank you for making it a special evening.

So ends a tumultuous season. Three successful concerts of very different pieces of music, all sung with enthusiasm and musicianship. We are a bigger society than we have been for many years and rehearsals continue to be hard-working but fun (I hope). We are learning all the time and facing the challenges of some difficult music. Next season will be no exception!

There are several things that we need to address, that require each and everyone to play their part in making it all happen. We are not unique in the issues we face. Choral Societies up and down the country are facing the same challenges into the post-Covid future. In no particular order:

- **continue to recruit new members** – especially addressing the usual cry of “we need more men”(!), but there again, it is always good to have more singers overall too, enabling us to have a richer and broader sound.

The new singers that have joined us this season are just SO welcome. New members bring fresh ideas and lend an objectivity that is not criticism of what we have and what we are, but an essential, useful and welcome part of our continued successful development. As well as their vocal skills, they bring ideas and experiences from other organisations, of which they have been members in the past.

- **everyone needs to advertise our presence more** – inviting people to our weekly rehearsals, but also advertising our concerts far and wide. Bluntly, without larger audience numbers, things will become increasingly more difficult financially. We are fortunate that we are able to perform with an orchestra so often, but each concert that uses orchestral forces is VERY expensive.
- **we need to increase the number of people attending our concerts by selling tickets.** At the moment, we have not sold anything like the number of tickets we did pre-Covid, but with concerts costing in excess of £4k.... well, you do the maths!

*[the PS committee, as well as other such committees up and down the country, are battling with this issue. Post-Covid, audience numbers have declined and various reasons have been put forward: people are still apprehensive of gathering in larger numbers; financial issues are beginnings to be felt; cost of transport; BUT – and most worryingly – people have simply got out of the habit of attending live music. During the Lockdowns, concerts became readily available on-line, in the comfort of one’s own home, either by subscription or on YouTube, and people have forgotten what an amazing experience live music really is. We have to re-acquaint them with this experience and remind them that what they see and hear sitting in the midst of a live performance is NOT, and can never be, replicated on a TV or computer screen]*

I am so looking forward to next season. The December concert will be a lovely start to the Christmas season, with two Masses, written when the composers were young. Schubert was 18 and Puccini was 22....oh to be that young again!. We are also reviving a short evening concert in St Michael’s church of Christmas carols, with audience participation and the Firebirds. They were to perform with us last December and were prevented from doing so because of Covid. So this year will be the first opportunity we have to perform with them again since December 2019.

Easter sees us returning to unfinished business(!), with our postponed performance of Bach’s “St John Passion” Then our usual summer concert at the beginning of July but I hope that rehearsal attendance will be more consistent this time. There were several evenings this last summer when I was in despair at the lack of numbers at rehearsal. It is dispiriting for those who do attend regularly and also incredibly frustrating to have to keep going over instructions that have already been given in previous weeks.

Finally, my thanks to the hard working and supportive committee and especially, thank you all of you. Your friendship and care for me (and my wife, I might add), when times have been very difficult this year, have been very much appreciated. I missed you all when I was away, but on returning you were so supportive and even still laughed at my awful jokes. Thank you. Oh, and particular thanks (almost needs not to be said because I almost take it for granted) for your singing. Your enthusiasm, commitment, determination, musicianship – they are all there in abundance and make Phoenix Singers the wonderful choir that it is. Congratulations, thank you so much, and here’s to 2022-2023!

**Geoff Lavery**  
(July 2022)