

PHOENIX SINGERS – Music Director REPORT FOR AGM (2022-23)

Another season successfully navigated and with a rich diversity of works, all successfully performed and much appreciated by the audiences.

The season began in September preparing for the main December concert of a Schubert Mass and the Puccini "Messa di Gloria". The latter was never going to be easy and that is a good thing, as it stretches the choir into territory it does not really know and provides fresh challenges. In the event, although it was a reduced audience (right works – wrong time of year?), it was a most successful performance and one section of the Puccini was received with the never to be forgotten shout of "Wunderbar"! Our two male soloists were excellent, although one was a last-minute replacement, Dan Wright (from Norwich), who did us proud. An enlarged Kingfisher Sinfonietta provided us with a stunning accompaniment. We are privileged to have such a fine orchestra to work with.

In the same week, by way of an experiment, we gave a Family Carol Concert in St Michael's Church. Jonathan Rutherford provided the organ accompaniment and we were able to give "Firebirds" a platform. This was an endeavour worth attempting but there were too many things that were not quite right: timing, financially, practically and musically. It gave food for thought, however, and the Committee have responded with another Christmas Concert this season, but in a different format.

After Christmas, work began on Bach's "St John Passion". This was a continuation of our work on this piece, which had to be abandoned when Covid struck in March 2020. Unbelievably, from a personal point of view, I have proved that lightning does strike in the same place twice, and I found myself back on the operating table in Cambridge in March. I am so very grateful to Tom Appleton for once again stepping into the breach and steering you all through the rehearsals that I was unable to attend. My intention was to conduct the performance, but on coming home from hospital, it was perfectly obvious that this would not be possible and Tom conducted the performance. I understand that the lead into the concert was not without its challenges, as two soloists needed replacing at short notice. All the soloists were splendid, but mention must be made of Will Searle in the role of Evangelist. Once again, Kingfisher was in fine form. I was privileged to be a member of the audience and was in tears at the end of a most emotionally charged and moving performance of this great work. Congratulations to all who performed in it.

Just a word of warning about soloists and fees. We have been paying our soloists at a rate that was paid before Covid, four years ago, and the subsequent inflation that has affected all costs. This cannot be right, and we are out of touch with current fee levels. I have a suspicion, backed up by talking to quite a few singers that I know and respect, that we are experiencing problems with soloists dropping out of concerts because we were not paying them enough to make it worth their while to sing with us – given the transport difficulties caused by the location of Framlingham, which is not helpful. Very few London based singers have cars – especially the younger ones – and trains back to London from Framlingham are not convenient for our concert finishing times. The committee have already recognised this is an issue and have taken steps to remedy the situation; for which I am very grateful. Investing in our professional participants ensure Phoenix Singers continue to promote high quality performances.

I returned after Easter and the summer term was spent in preparation for our Coronation concert in July. Some wonderful, inspiring works including Mozart's "Coronation" Mass. We employed four local singers from Bury and Norwich and, as well as undertaking the solos in the Mozart, they were very happy to join the choir for the second half, consisting of works by Parry and Handel. For the first time since Covid, the soloists that we originally booked were the soloists who sang the concert. Yes, they were local and so transport was not a problem, but I subsequently discovered that we had paid them more than they would have received as Lay Clerks in a concert that evening at Bury Cathedral. My point above proved, I would suggest?

The organist was Christopher Moore, after having been let down at short notice by the original organist, and with such a difficult accompaniment, we were very fortunate to have someone of his calibre playing for us.

It was a successful concert, in many respects, with quite a full and appreciative audience; and who can forget the opening phrase of Parry's "I was glad"? Shivers down spines I would suggest!!

HOWEVER, and this is a critical observation coming up: we were lucky that the programme we chose to perform was not reliant on our normal size choir. From about 70 singers, we reduced to about 40, and the addition of the four soloists meant that the larger scale anthems were given the necessary fuller sound in the second half. Those, who did sing in the summer, did a wonderful job but it is very hard work when a choir is reduced almost by half and, in effect, becomes a chamber choir – which is NOT what Phoenix is meant to be. I get frustrated when people say "Oh yes, we want to sing in the summer term" but then either can't sing in the concert, book holidays during June and so miss rehearsals or, quite simply, decide to take the term off. This state of affairs cannot continue and the committee are having a "re-look" at this situation for the 23-24 season, with an attempt at innovation and to experiment with the format of our programming at the end of the year.

We continue to recruit new members and I was delighted to welcome those who came as new members last season. I hope we will continue enticing singers to join us, especially with the exciting programme of concerts ahead of us this year. "We need more men" will be the cry from our valiant tenor section, but there is always room for more in every section!

Marie has ensured that our presence on social media has been advertised on every conceivable group forum, but as individuals we can still do more. BE PROUD OF WHAT WE ACHIEVE IN OUR PERFORMANCES and go out to tell people and sell tickets to our marvellous concerts! We have increased the number of people attending our concerts this last season, but this increase needs to be maintained and will be particularly important this present season, with Snape coming up next May.

So, another year over – don't they go quickly? – and, by the time you read this, another has begun. Phoenix goes from strength to strength and I want to take this opportunity to thank you all for your hard work, your patience and your generosity in continuing to laugh at my jokes (I know they are always the same, but our new members haven't heard them before); but above all, I want to say how very grateful I am for the care & concern you have shown to me (and Linda) in what has been a second difficult year for us. I promise to try and do better this season.

Geoff Lavery
(July 2023)