

PHOENIX SINGERS – Music Director REPORT FOR AGM (2023-24)

Every year I seem to say the same thing.... "Can't believe I am writing a report for the AGM again – where did that year go?"!

The season began way back in September 2003 with a lovely BBQ social evening plus quiz, and then an introduction to the main project of the year, the Vaughan Williams concert to take place in Snape in May24, and a look at the immense "Sea Symphony". I am not sure how useful this was, but it did serve to let people see what was ahead of them and to hopefully(!) do some listening, before we tackled the programme properly in the new year.

In October we turned to preparing for our December Christmas concert, consisting of a miscellany of carols plus two more substantial works. It saw a welcome return of Stephen Jones (Bass) as soloist in Vaughan Williams "Fantasia", plus two young singers, Emily Varney (Soprano) and Emma Louise Jones (Alto), for Vivaldi's "Gloria". The organist was Jonathan Rutherford and the children of "Sing Praise!" also participated delightfully. It was a good concert but, as one of our major concerts in the year, on reflection I am unsure that such a miscellaneous number of items provide the necessary challenge and musical depth. Nevertheless, there was a full audience who were warmly appreciative of the performance of all participants. This coming season, Bach's "Christmas Oratorio", in its entirety, is very much more appropriate and makes for a more substantial and challenging concert.

January saw us return to Vaughan Williams and a tough set of rehearsals ensued in preparing the "Sea Symphony". It is famous for its difficult choral parts and a big ask for a choir in singing the notes as well as the vocal stamina it requires. It took a while for things to "sink in", and I am grateful to Dominic, our accompanist, for his work in the sectionals and "note-bashing" rehearsals. We were delighted to welcome Carolyn Gibley, who came to several rehearsals, providing us with a full accompaniment, and this was much appreciated by us all. Dom is not continuing with us next season, and I am so pleased that Carolyn is becoming our new accompanist on a permanent basis from September. We are fortunate to have her.

The Easter break, when it came, was most welcome, and was followed shortly after by the first of our joint choir rehearsals with Beccles Choral Society. Suddenly a choir of about 70 becomes a choir of about 130 and there is no guarantee that putting two choirs together is likely to be successful. Like ducks to water, to my relief, two choirs became one more or less easily, and the day was tiring but hugely satisfying.

A few weeks later, and the final week before the concert at Snape, the two choirs successfully joined together once again. These joint rehearsals are a logistical nightmare and I am so grateful to the many people who were involved in ensuring that all the arrangements, on both occasions, went through admirably – not least the complex seating plan.

So, Saturday 11th May dawned bright and clear with glorious weather under a blue Suffolk sky. It would seem every time we perform at Snape Maltings we are blessed with wonderful weather: the Gods must be with us!

I was pretty sure that the orchestra were well-prepared for the marathon play that day and Lambeth Orchestra did not disappoint. The orchestral parts are fiendish – especially the string parts – and I am truly humbled by the amount of private practice that must have taken place by them all to produce such a professional, sympathetic accompaniment. We are fortunate to be able to call on them for the Snape concerts. Not only do they provide us with a professionally competent accompaniment, but also employing them is very cost-effective, considering we have not just the concert day rehearsal but also four more orchestral rehearsals in London.

Our soloists did us proud. Dawid Kimberg, from the Royal Opera House, was a last-minute replacement (the "Curse of Lavery" strikes again!) and was awesome. Just as good, was the young singer Camilla Saba Davies, who had flown over from Germany. They were lovely to work with and appreciative, like the orchestral players, of the welcome they were given.

As for the Choirs: What can I say? Awesome? Inspiring? Powerful? Sympathetic? Nuanced? So many other words would serve to describe your singing and it is almost impossible to capture what was achieved that night by Phoenix Singers and BCS. I needed to pinch myself to keep remembering that, in effect, we are two community, non-auditioned, choirs, and what was sung that evening was nothing short of professional and miraculous. People are still coming up to me, locally, and saying "they were there" that evening, and using the word "memorable"! Thank you seems somewhat inadequate to express my gratitude for what you did.

After the performance, I was exhausted as never before, and it has been good to have time off from May until September just to recover myself and take a break from regular weekly commitments. I am very grateful to the committee for allowing me this luxury and I was so pleased that the "Workshops Initiative", organised by Giles and led by Claire Weston and Will Baldry, on four consecutive weeks in June, were such a success. Not only did they make a pleasant change in repertoire, but gave a useful insight into vocal techniques and an opportunity to welcome many new-comers to Phoenix.

So ends another season. Successful musically and socially, I think. Much laughter takes place in rehearsals, but when the crunch comes in concert, your concentration and performance is totally focussed and professional in delivery. Your reputation is going before you and each concert presents us with new challenges in order to maintain this vocally high standard. This coming season we are performing "Christmas Oratorio" in December with Kingfisher and four splendid soloists, a Faure & Elgar programme at Easter, with two young soloists, and then an opera night next July of well-known choruses and arias. All different and contrasting works, which present their own challenges but should be hugely enjoyable to perform.

Two final thoughts. Firstly, these concerts are becoming increasingly expensive and consequently it remains essential that we perform to a full audience every time. This cannot happen simply by word of mouth; advertising them is essential. I thank those who have worked tirelessly to bring us to the attention of local media, not least Marie and her many FaceBook posts, but each one of you has a responsibility to use every means possible to advertise our concerts to the local population, to sell as many tickets as you can and to bring as many people as possible to our concerts. We can virtually guarantee that every concert evening will be worth attending ...go out and sell them.

PLEASE DO NOT JUST LEAVE IT TO OTHERS!

And finally: my grateful thanks to your hard-working committee. They are there behind the scenes steering this society forward successfully and I am grateful to them for the support they give not just to me but to us all in Phoenix Singers.

Once again, thank you all for your commitment, your determination to succeed, your appreciation of my feeble efforts at humour but above all for your aspiration to make Phoenix Singers what it is – a musical, vocal, success story in this community. I am so looking forward to this 24/25 season and the wonderful music-making we will enjoy together.

Geoff Lavery
(July 2024)