

Brockham Choral – Music Director Report – 2022-23

As we approach our fourth year of working together, I continue to be delighted by the strong quality of music making and enthusiasm within our group. A year ago, I invited the choir to be brave as we approached our repertoire for this past season; I am pleased to report that I have been impressed and buoyed up by the choir's commitment and focus during so many points throughout the season.

Winter 2022

RVW 5 Mystical Songs
Mozart Laudate Dominum
Haydn Nelson Mass

Working on this repertoire demonstrated real strengths for the choir, particularly in lyrical classical repertoire. The Mystical Songs – while mostly known – posed interesting challenges in precision and pitching which the choir responded to well. We were delighted to be joined in this event by soloists Sally Carr, Lauren Macleod, Graham Cooper and Oskar McCarthy (understudying for Arthur Bruce who was indisposed). We were also thrilled to be working with the British Sinfonietta who we will work with again twice more in the 2023-24 season.

Spring 2023

Fauré Cantique de Jean Racine
RVW Toward the Unknown Region
Britten Hymn to the Virgin
Smyth Mass in D

I would like to commend the choir for its determination during this project which was not easy. We were impacted on many occasions during this rehearsal process due to some covid numbers and illness on CB's part, some initial difficulty on securing scores through NewSPAL and the complexity of the Smyth Mass as a new work. This demanding programme took great skill and dexterity and I was particularly pleased at the outcome in light of these challenges. That said, the physical demands of this programme were significant and I will work with committee to continue to review the technical strength and stamina of the choir to ensure that all members feel they can be secure throughout the length of our concerts. For me, the biggest challenge of this concert was felt in the stamina required and while I was delighted that so many rose to the challenge, this was something worth further review. I would encourage us – if in such a situation again – to trust that the music we have provided is enough for our audiences and that we need not add additional works purely for the programme length, but rather on reflection of the entirety of the determined programme. Special thanks to our soloists, Jenny Bacon (standing in for an indisposed Joanna Tomlinson), Judy Louie Brown, Joshua Baxter and Jon Stainsby. Our organist was Will Campbell, who did sterling work on a very challenging set of scores.

Summer 2023

Feeling Good – various octavos by Moore, Joel, Whitacre et. al. including Rutter *Feel the Spirit*.

A very interesting concert to manage in very limited rehearsal time, we met the challenge of a vast sum of music very well. Our strengths lay in certain tight unaccompanied repertoire (Daniel, Daniel, Servant of the Lord – which we ultimately added to our tour list) and in Rutter which was a very successful work. Areas for improvement included the rhythmic precision of certain octavos (Rusby Underneath the Stars feeling particularly difficult at times) and increasing the confidence to sing unaccompanied more consistently in tune. This is an area for continued review which, for various reasons, we have not explored greatly following covid. The “café” format of the evening was interesting and certainly something I’d welcome exploring again, although perhaps not every year. The very limited rehearsal time was a stressful point from my perspective – not least as Summer term is often busy due to my other professional commitments – and while we reached the challenge, I would hope to have a longer rehearsal period in the Summer term for such a programme in the future (I do recognise that tour commitments this year in particular had an impact on this!).

Our mezzo soloist was Ellen Smith; we were accompanied by Marion Lea who provided two piano items. Cole Bendall provided tenor solo for Daniel, Daniel, Servant of the Lord.

Tour 2023

Selections from Britain, France and the United States, supported by Rutter *Feel the Spirit* (soloists: Anne Mitchell, Jenni-Lee Potter, Cole Bendall + semichorus sopranos for When the Saints go Marching In).

I reflected on this in the immediate aftermath but – to repeat - the experience of making music together in these very special spaces was so powerful. I’ll certainly be taking with me the intimacy of our performance at Ouisterham where so many of us had moving experiences feeling like we were performing just for one another; the power of the sound in Beauvais Cathedral and watching Bastille Day celebrations with a baguette in hand (feeling particularly French); our first concert in Conches-en-Ouches working under pressure to have a truly joyful performance. I’m sure you’ll agree that our work with Rayburn Tours went well here and everyone in their own way worked to make these concerts a success. We are indebted to our committee for their support, particularly Jane, Mick, Ed and everyone who helped to put the project together. We are also grateful to Helena Twentyman who came along as tour accompanist.

General Reflections

Bravery was the watchword for the 2022-23 season – and you have demonstrated this by the bucketload in tackling a wider array of repertoire than most choirs of comparable sizes dare to explore. It is because of your general musicianship and commitment that I feel emboldened to work on this music with you because you are capable of a great sound. As you commit to learning and studying the work in greater detail, you have found strength and security in your sound – this has historically been the case in other projects we have undertaken.

The watchword I would propose for the 23-24 season, therefore, is preparation. Our programme for this season consists of known works from the repertoire that you will have likely sung before (Bach *Magnificat* last performed in 2014 and Verdi *Requiem*, last performed in 2001!) as well as music which you will never have sung before but is lyrical,

playful and – above all – FUN (Roth *A Time to Dance*). I hope to ensure that our rehearsal space is a place where we can feel ready for all aspects of our performances this year – your continued work and commitment to learning will go a long way in us achieving that together.

Thanks

This has been a challenging year for me with a large increase in professional commitments elsewhere alongside my move eastwards; you have continued to make it fun and enjoyable to work with you on so many pieces of music this term. It's not a huge hardship to travel to Dorking from Sevenoaks every week when you get the welcome that Brockham Choral gives you. Your kindness has made me feel welcome on many occasions. On a personal note, you've also continued to extend that same kindness to my now wife, Alicia – whether she's been in cheering us on or as a bumper. I am very grateful – and very fortunate – indeed.

Thank you to our office bearers and committee who have worked tirelessly to produce our projects. Particular thanks this year go to Jenni and Nick who have worked extremely hard especially on sourcing copies, printing and more besides to ensure we can achieve our goals successfully. As ever, my thanks to Marion, whose amazing skills as an accompanist mean that I can focus my efforts on listening to you all and helping where I can to produce the best quality of singing in our work together. I look forward to another brilliant season ahead.

CJB, Aug 2023.