

HCS Music report 2020-21

It feels unusual to report on a year where we have only performed live once in that time, and that a Come and Sing event, so perhaps there will be less to say than normal. But at the outset, I would like to offer my thanks to all who have stuck with the choir through this time, for the community that you have helped to create in our online rehearsals and for your patience in waiting for a return to some kind of normality. I bet none of you thought you would be wearing scarves and woolly hats at HCS rehearsals! It has meant a great deal to see so many so committed to HCS. And I would also like to thank Tim and also who took on the reins during this period and has had to deal with a lot of unexpected twists and turns. Thank you to Carol for your support as well and also to the rest of the committee for all that you do to make things happen.

To jog your memory, we postponed the Haydn Nelson Mass concert until the autumn of 2020 and then had to cancel that again. We then chose to focus our energies on preparing a video Christmas card which went out to the Mayor, to friends and supporters of the choir and to families. This was a learning experience for all of us although my acting career has disappointingly not taken off since. I thought that the videographer captured Henley very well indeed, something of the feel and spirit of the town and the choir. Clearly though, we would rather have been doing our Christmas concert in St. Mary's. Thank you to those who poured over your videos. They looked fun and festive and it sounded lovely too.

In the spring, we did an 'around the world' programme. The thinking behind this was that we felt it was easier to learn smaller pieces on Zoom than to try to learn the Brahms Requiem, so the programmes for spring and summer 2021 were, in effect, swapped around. I feel that this was the right decision and it was in a phase when we were watching the news most weeks to see what might change. It was hard to think too far ahead. It was indeed harder both to sing Brahms at home and also to direct it. There is just so much music and it's hard to know where to start when you don't know what is going on behind the screens! It was lovely to be able to do a Come and Sing day in the autumn of this year with, in fact, an excellent turnout both in the choir and in the audience. I am amazed how far people are willing to travel to be involved in a great choral work. People even came from Cornwall to sing! Our two soloists, Hilary Cronin and Hugo Herman-Wilson were outstanding and also very good-natured when I put them on the spot and asked them to coach the choir in vocal production. I do like getting soloists who enjoy engaging with the choir and I feel that this is important. Thank you too to Anita and Dave for their wonderful piano playing.

We experimented with various ways of rehearsing during the year, such as having small groups in the room and everyone else online, or having social distancing with open windows. That presented various challenges for me personally, trying to keep people engaged, but probably more challenges for those who had to organise and administer it. Thank you to all of you. As with all clouds, silver linings are not far away. It was a good discipline for me to have to

rethink my rehearsal process a little, to try to find ways of being disciplined and creative. That was quite helpful for me.

Moving forwards, there is a lot to look forwards to: I am keen to start recording little bits of our rehearsals. It can be very helpful for people to hear the choir back. It is hard sometimes to have an awareness of why a conductor is focusing on particular things or asking for particular things – hearing the choir from the outside can be very instructive but also give people a barometer of progress. If the clips are particularly good, we could use them promotionally in some way as well, short 20-second clips.

We have Onyx Brass coming to join us at Christmas and a lovely festive programme. We are singing one of the great choral works, Elijah, next term with players from the English Chamber Orchestra in a wonderful venue. And we have an anniversary year approaching for which we have commissioned a new work by one of our leading composers, Cecilia McDowall. We have seen an influx of new members post Covid. It has also been a great pleasure to hear that some of the vocal things we have worked on over the recent season are starting to stick and I have been pleased with the sound of the choir this term. The future for Henley Choral Society is bright.