



HENLEY CHORAL Society

HERE'S THE PITCH

Issue 40
October 2020

From the Editor

Wow. The 40th edition of 'Here's the Pitch' and what a period in the life of Henley Choral Society to cover. The coronavirus pandemic and lockdown in March 2020 meant rehearsals stopped and the March concert was postponed. With a lot of work from Peter and the committee, we started rehearsals on Zoom and a whole new chapter in the life of HCS began.

In this edition: farewell from retiring Chair Susan Edwards and 'hello' from incoming Chair Tim Wilson. Musical Director Peter, who has worked tirelessly to keep us singing, gives his perspective on page 3. I've rounded up coverage and pictures of the superb Classical Music on Mill Meadows concert given by Orpheus Sinfonia in September through the support of HCS. (I have a feeling we might need to recall that beautiful late summer afternoon of live music in the winter months ahead.) In the early days of lockdown, I optimistically started a weekly newsletter to keep HCS members in touch. It began with information about online music and a variety of items about the coronavirus and lockdown. 13 editions later it had morphed into a truly unique exchange of the musical

experiences and opinions of the lovely members of HCS; a very small selection of items is on page 6. You will also find an update from the Youth Choirs, a fond goodbye from long-term member Ian Tiffin and a competition nudging the bounds of sanity. Please enter just to let me know someone reads this newsletter!

Check out the news items on the website for further updates on all activities HCS including plans for a Christmas recording. Whether you are a singer or an enthusiastic audience member, we hope to see you before too long.

Angela Law,
Alto &
Newsletter
editor



Youth Choirs return to full rehearsal

Henley Youth Choir members started the autumn term with online Zoom sessions and are now looking forward to getting back to singing rehearsals in person after half term, starting on Thursday 5th November 2020. HYC started back online because, as Jessica Norton, Musical Director of HYC said, "We took the decision that, for the first half of the term, we would stay online using the same format that we did in the summer term. However, now, there are safe ways for us to meet in person and we are really looking forward to seeing each other again". This followed a very successful summer term which saw sessions held over Zoom; "I have really enjoyed the online sessions, they have been great fun!" was the overwhelming response from the young members. The term finished with an online performance in July, attended by fifty-nine families including the Mayor and Mayoress of Henley who said it was, "a brilliant evening!" This was echoed by parents, who commented, "The virtual rehearsals proved to be a real success and it was great that everyone had the opportunity to perform at the online performance."

The organisers of the Youth Choir were keen to continue sessions when lockdown started in March and were pleased that they were so successful. Fi Harding, HYC Administrator and Manager said, "We weren't sure how the youngsters would find the online sessions and so were delighted when we got such a positive reaction." One member of the Senior Choir said, "I really enjoyed the online singing sessions in the summer term as it helped to stay hopeful during a strange time." Another said, "I enjoyed Youth Choir because it was nice to keep singing during lockdown, and to see friends and familiar faces was lovely! And also, being a part of something and still going and having fun is why I enjoyed it so much!"

Asked whether they would return for the new school year, the three sisters who have been members since the Youth Choir started said, "Yes! 100%, It's such great fun." Jessica added, "The Youth Choir restarting is particularly important as a way to enjoy singing as we are aware that not all school choirs will be able to meet and so any singers are very welcome to come along and join in". Members of the HYC Committee have been working together with the Henley Choral Society Committee to ensure that best practice measures are put in place and the relevant risk assessment and policy documents are developed to ensure that rehearsals can take place safely for all involved. Fi Harding said, "We are looking forward to restarting our sessions in person, on Thursdays (5.30-6.10pm for Juniors and 6.20-7.00pm for Seniors). We welcome new members and anyone interested in joining should contact me on fi.harding@sky.com. There is also more information on our website www.henleychoralsociety.org.uk/youth-choirs. We are confident we have put all possible measures in place to ensure the safety of the youngsters and adult helpers whilst allowing a fun environment for singing."

Jo Dickson, Alto and HYC Administrator



Hello from new Chairman Tim Wilson

On joining Henley Choral Society 2 years ago, three things immediately became evident: what a friendly lot you are, how well run HCS is and the high standard of musicianship. This means my nomination as Chair could be taken in two ways, I can either sit back and relax, or I can only make things worse. Hopefully if (or when) I become Chair I can add to your successful history and enjoy making music.

Henley Choral Society is a charity with two goals, that I interpret roughly as: first, to encourage the enjoyment of music in Henley and surrounding communities; second, to encourage music making at all ages including for our well-being. The pandemic has helped us realise what matters to us all. For me, and I suspect many of you the enjoyment of music and the making of music with others is very important part of my life; it isn't something to fill the time, it enriches me. So, this is why what we all gain in singing together, in promoting the youth choir and in performing is so important. The concert by the Orpheus Symphonia is a terrific example of what we can do (even though we weren't singing!). When you pay your subscription, donate as friend, help out, or sing, you are doing something important.

We are incredibly fortunate to have Peter Asprey as a Musical Director. His warm encouragement, knowledge and innate ability to get the best out of us is extraordinary. Peter is the reason I experienced such great music making when I came. His humour....

As I have got to know the committee and trustees better, I have witnessed a hard-working and devoted team of people, if I start to mention individuals I will forget someone - I hope you know who you are and please be certain you have my admiration and thanks. I do want to mention Nick Tuggey and Mark Turner, who we are very fortunate to have as Secretary and Treasurer. Having them as fellow Trustees is certainly a great source of comfort to me.

But there is one thing for sure, I can only hope to have a fraction of the success that Susan Edwards has had. I have

looked on in admiration over the last two years. And recently, her efforts to get us back singing together have been remarkable. What a great Chair Susan has been.

Finally, a little about me. I am a GP by background, although I gave up clinical work 9 years ago to concentrate on health policy work. I continue to do health policy work in a small social enterprise in Oxford. I live in Ewelme, from where few of the other choir members hail. I come from a 'musical' family, my father being an organ scholar at Cambridge, my sister is now a violin maker. I played 'cello and sang solo and in choirs most of my school years and into my early University years. After a short break from music I sang with Benson Choral Society for a few years. So, when I joined HCS, I had not sung for 25 years! All my life I sang as a bass / baritone. But, on joining HCS, I realised that I could more reliably hit a high G than a low one, so I moved up in the world to join the elite of the tenors. I am now having to learn how to sing a different part of the chord This is not the only notable voice transition I made, when I was around 11, I sang Harry (treble) in Britten's Albert Herring. The run was split into two, before and after summer holidays, during which time my voice broke.

I look forward to working and singing with you all in the coming years and hope I can build on the great work you have all done under Susan's chair'ship.

Tim Wilson, Tenor and Chair

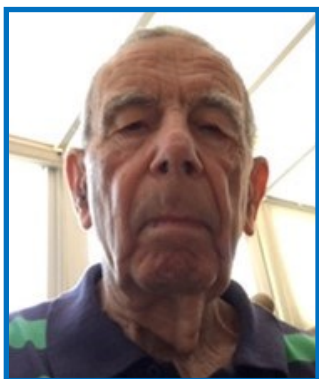


Farewell from long-term HCS member Ian Tiffin

I came to Henley in 1995 and soon after joined the choir. I hadn't really sung since leaving the church choir at 14. I hadn't learned to control my voice but under the tutelage of Mike Hails (he probably doesn't realise it) I soon settled in to it. Frances was our Director, for many years, and we were a small friendly amateur choir, knowing the names of most members. Concerts were held in the North Aisle of St Mary's using grubby platforms retrieved from a basement in Grey's Road. Now, after a succession of Musical Directors, we are a 100+ strong professional choir. We have proper staging for St Mary's and have even sung

in Reading. Covid has put paid to some of our activities and what we are left with is not to the taste of all members. Singing to my computer screen does not fill me with joy! Pat and I are contemplating a move to a Retirement Village in Romsey but we have to sell our house first! Best wishes to all my friends in the choir.

Ian Tiffin, Bass



****Competition time? You've got to be kidding!****

Did you know, that, for a very reasonable fee, you can hire a goat to attend your Zoom call or meeting?

<https://www.cronshawfoldfarm.co.uk/goatsonzoom>
The website is worth visiting for the descriptions of the goats' behaviour in a virtual meeting alone. For example, this is what to expect if you book Elizabeth:

- Impeccable video call etiquette
- On point glossy coat
- Impeccably behaved children (mostly)
- A sense of moral duty

Frankly, that's a lot more than we expect from most HCS members.

So, apart from the temptation to hire a goat to appear at a rehearsal...it got me thinking...IF a goat were to attend a rehearsal what would be an appropriate piece to sing?

Happy puns, suggestions and ideas direct to me at angelalaw@everysense.co.uk

As always, there are no prizes but you might get an honourable mention at rehearsal, or even a goat...

Angela Law, Alto and Newsletter Editor



Random thoughts and memories of Henley Choral Society

How time flies. I joined the choir sometime in 2005 having heard the choir sing Brahms' German Requiem in 2004. I had briefly sung with the University of Reading's choir but then after extended work visits to the USA and Ireland decided to try my local choir. My introduction was somewhat inauspicious, 'Don't sit there, that's so and so's place' etc but I really enjoyed the singing so persevered. Wendy Hawkins soon roped me in as the alto rep. 'Why me, I've only just started?' 'I notice you smile a lot.' was Wendy's unconvincing and unreasonable reply! However, being a compliant sort of person, I took this on. Very few members were using email then and there was an expectation from some altos that I should deliver written choir information to each and every one! Hmm. How times have changed....

But for me, it was not only about the people but importantly about the music. The music we have sung has been a joy, enriching my life and introducing me to composers I might not have listened to such as McDowell and Maxwell Davis. The Kestrel Road, as some will remember, wasn't conducted by the current MD, Will Carslake, as he suddenly secured a scholarship to attend a workshop with Maxwell Davis which clashed with our concert date. This was disappointing but I thought it was right for the choir to encourage development of young musicians and we agreed to find a replacement conductor for the concert. This ethos of enabling the development of young musicians has continued and is one of which we should be proud. Our best example of this, of course, is our Youth Choirs.

Choir highlights for me include two performances of Handel's Messiah. The first in 2009 when we travelled with MD Will Dawes to Germany to sing with the Lichlingen's Figuralchor. After a very long and hot journey we arrived late for our first rehearsal to be met by a group of lovely, welcoming German choir members who had brought refreshments for us and the whole visit continued to be great fun. Next evening, we stood in a hot hall (yes for the whole concert) next to fellow German singers and I thought how some of our fathers had been involved in the WW2 nightmare killing each other and here we were, singing Handel together. Maybe not our finest singing but one of the most emotional choir moments for me. The Figuralchor had an 80% attendance qualification for singing in concerts which we later adopted. Learning to improve our singing through travel? The other Messiah performance high on my list was with Dei Gratia Baroque in 2019 at Reading Concert Hall under Peter Asprey's highly competent and

sensitive baton. Professional musicians rate the acoustics there and although I don't think we did justice to them, the whole collective effect was life-affirming and enjoyed by seasoned and debutante audience members and certainly the singers.

Singing Elgar's Dream of Gerontius with MD Ben Goodson, the Lea Singers semi chorus and some outstanding soloists was, for me, a great example of how spectacular music can make up for the libretto. Then there's the wonder of Allegri, Bach, Haydn, McDowell, Mozart, Vivaldi, new and well-known music all have given great musical moments, despite some initial moans from some choir members. We are lucky to have such experiences thanks to our MDs' expertise in compiling terrific programmes. After the last note, dies away there's the elation which just has to be celebrated at a local hostelry but of course, not before the last bit of staging has been loaded. Oh, to get back to those days again.

There has been a fair amount of extra-curriculum activities with the choir over the years, summer parties in members' stunning gardens, post-concert celebrations, trips to Germany and France, singing the weird music with other choirs as part of Oxfordshire's celebration of the 2012 Olympics which provided a real contrast to the Mozart we sang as part of a Chiltern's Art Festival. Through the choir, I have got to know so many of you including my fellow trustees and committee members and really value the friendships I have made. As Chair I have had an opportunity to get to know two of our outstanding, well informed and highly engaging conductors, Ben and Peter. Your company was a rich reward for the rather modest food I sometimes found for you before rehearsals. To you all, many thanks for what I have learnt from you, for the interest, fun and for our mutual achievements. May there be many more similar times ahead.

Susan Edwards
Alto and past Chair



Rehearsing in the time of Covid

It has been interesting to rehearse in a completely different way. I am aware that for the individual singer, the corporate experience is not the same, although some members have found very creative ways of joining up! Equally for me, it is a far harder listening experience. So one of the interesting things is that because it is much harder to hear what is going on, that has thrown the emphasis onto different areas in rehearsal. One of those is vocal production. I was so encouraged to see how differently people were breathing in our first 'live' session back earlier this week. I was genuinely amazed by the difference. This has really encouraged me that when we work consistently in a particular area, things really do change. It was the same in the area of accessing head resonance. I found that people got this idea very quickly on Monday because we have been talking about it a lot more

So while there have been downsides to the Zoom experience, I also feel that it has been beneficial in those ways. Personally, I have also enjoyed the spirit that

everyone has brought to the sessions - so friendly, positive, encouraging and sociable. That has been delightful to be a part of. I have been reminded during lockdown about how important choir is for members of HCS and it is a privilege to be a part of that in some way. I have been touched by the dedication shown by so many.

I also enjoyed hearing everyone's recordings. I was aware of how much effort went into that and also a fair amount of courage! I must say that it is hard work putting those things together but I learned a lot in the process, thanks to my friend Jeremy showing me the ropes! My technological skills have certainly improved during this time!

Peter Asprey,
Musical
Director, HCS



Free outdoor concert to cheer covid-weary crowd

Article by Luke Adams reproduced from the Henley Standard

ABOUT 150 people attended a free classical concert by the river in Henley on Saturday. The event in Mill Meadows was organised by the Henley Choral Society and featured a 90-minute performance by the Orpheus Sinfonia Orchestra. Visitors brought their own chairs and blankets and gathered around the bandstand for a 2.30pm start. There was a team of volunteers acting as marshals to encourage social distancing. The audience was welcomed in glorious sunshine by Peter Asprey, director of music at the society, who said: "There really is nothing quite like live music and it is certainly something that I've missed. "I'm glad we are also able to give the orchestra the chance to do what they do best." The concert opened with a rendition of Don Giovanni Overture by Mozart. This was followed by Summer from The Four Seasons by Vivaldi and Toreador March from the Carmen Suite by Bizet. The Wedding March by Mendelssohn was one of the more familiar arrangements, while the finale was Somewhere Over the Rainbow from The Wizard of Oz. The society had booked the orchestra to play at its spring concert in March but this had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. Susan Edwards, who has chaired the society for five



years, said: "We have never done anything like this but I think it was a triumph and we might do it again. "The orchestra loved coming to Henley and it was a completely different repertoire to what they would have done for the March concert. "I asked the orchestra if they could play something that we would have had from the spring concert, Ave Verum Corpus by Mozart. "We were going to pay them anyway as we wanted to honour the financial part of the contract, but thought maybe they would like to play for their money and they jumped at the idea. "It was absolutely magnificent. The feedback we received was that both the orchestra and the atmosphere were superb." Henley Town Council gave permission for the concert to be held in the meadows. "They were very helpful," said Mrs Edwards. "Our concert manager, Jane Hutton, also worked very hard on this. We hired chairs and the electrics from Henley Theatre Services and we were there from 10am sanitising and making sure everything was safe and compliant.

"I went down to measure up the bandstand to work out how many orchestra members we could have for social distancing. "There is always a lot to think about with a concert but even more this time because of covid. "To make it simple, I said there should be no charge and no money being exchanged and no tickets or programmes, just to reduce the risk of passing covid on. "Everyone was behaving and nobody had to be asked to move. "What I liked was that some people knew about the concert and had planned to come and there were other people wandering by who stopped and sat on the grass to



listen. It must have given such a good impression of Henley." Rosemary Woodroffe, who has been singing with the society since 1976, said: "What a stunning way to spend a Saturday afternoon. "It is well overdue given the year we've had and it is wonderful to be together even though everyone has to be kept apart. We have been doing Zoom rehearsals since March but it is not the same as being here and seeing everyone face-to-face. "They really worked hard to make sure everyone was safe and it was beautifully organised." Ben Willey, of St Andrew's Road, Henley, said: "It was fantastic. It is great that it could be put on and despite social distancing, the people of Henley could get back together to enjoy some great music." Diana Bentley, of Strathmore Drive, Charvil, who was at the concert with her husband David, said: "The setting is fantastic and the sun is shining – you can't beat that. "We both feel very safe and it is nice to be able to hear some live music again after so long without."



Dynamic and young orchestra banished our lockdown blues

Review by Trevor Howell reproduced from the Henley Standard

“WOW! That’s that feeling we’ve not had in six months playing live, together, to an amazingly appreciative and fabulous audience what an atmosphere! Thank you so much @henleychoral for making it possible and bringing music to life on the bandstand in #Henley once more.” This tweet from the Orpheus Sinfonia will resonate fully with several hundred live-music-starved locals who attended the orchestra’s socially distanced concert on the bandstand at Mill Meadows. Congratulations to the Henley Choral Society for inviting such a special group of musicians to perform, making up for the earlier cancellation of their planned collaboration last March.



Under artistic director and international cellist Thomas Carroll, the Orpheus Sinfonia aims to attract the best young conservatoire graduates and help them launch their music careers.

This dynamic youthful ensemble is a beacon of the orchestral scene, noted for producing high-quality concerts, exploring ground-breaking creative ideas and engaging proactively in accessible performances, outreach work and community interaction.

With players cut down to a covid-secure string quartet and a minimal smattering of wind, brass and percussion, sound projection, competing with an intermittent strong breeze, was an inevitable issue for some.

However, from the moment the opening bars of Mozart’s Don Giovanni Overture crept in the quality of the playing was never in doubt. Special credit must go to the leader, who sailed her way impeccably through Vivaldi’s Summer from the Four Seasons and Elgar’s Salut d’Amour, ably supported by her quartet partners. She is a natural soloist, setting a high-quality benchmark for others to aspire to.



The chosen programme was a veritable pot-pourri of popular numbers spanning three centuries, clearly designed to satisfy a wide range of Classic FM-style tastes, from the sublime Ave Verum by Mozart to Mendelssohn’s Midsummer Night’s Dream, selections from Bizet’s Carmen Suite and Gershwin’s I Got Rhythm. Predictable audience participation came with Strauss’s Radetzky March, during which clapping to the beat is a long tradition and a staple of the New Year’s Day concerts in Vienna. The clappers were in fine fettle, responding obediently to Thomas Carroll’s baton. Arlen’s Over the Rainbow was a fitting sign-off and thoroughly enjoyed by all.

What next, we ask? Is this just the welcome start, weather permitting, of risk-free live performances that have been craved by so many during lockdown? Let’s hope it will prompt another inspired initiative, indoors or outdoors, while the opportunity allows.



Postscript to the concert...

Soprano Joss Lynch wrote to say ‘whilst up a ladder doing the floral decorations outside the church for Harvest Festival, I had a call from Jonathan Penny from Help Musicians UK. He said they had received a donation from our recent concert! He was most grateful and seemed to think I was behind it - I was honest enough to admit to complete ignorance. I have been involved with HMUK for some years now and they keep me informed of what they are up to. This year, they have twice released a large sum of money from their reserves to help musicians who have been unable to perform during lockdown, through their Financial Hardship Fund.’

In the publicity for the concert we said: If anyone would like to support the music and talent we all love so much you can donate to Help Musicians, an independent UK charity: <https://www.helpmusicians.org.uk/support-our-work>

And it’s not too late! Do please support the freelance music community as they need it so much at this time.

Angela Law, Alto & Newsletter editor

From Week 4: performing Haydn at home

This was Felicity's second attempt to complete the March concert piece at home.

'We got all the way through it this time and dressed for the occasion - and the choir had expanded, so I had two soprs to compete with. This shrank the audience to one - but he was appreciative and kept the vocal chords well lubricated. The soundtrack was King's college choir - and frankly, the altos on the recording were just

too quiet. I missed my fellows a lot but it was uplifting and the orchestra was very loud. The dogs hated it - we got a very poor review and some howling.'

Felicity Bazall, Alto (and retiring librarian!)



From Week 6: brilliant advice on German pronunciation

'Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herren Leben
I was excited to hear that we have the Brahms Requiem in our sights; one of my favourites, and the sentiment seems so appropriate at the present time.

"Selig sind die Toten" - "Blessed are the Dead"; except that Luther's translation says so much more than the one we are familiar with. The Latin has "Beatus", not "Benedictus", so "blessed" is clearly the wrong word, but modern English translations using "happy" are so jarring. One meaning is "fortunate", another is "blissful": but "selig" is more spiritual, it captures the fact that it's something to do with the state of your soul ("Seele" in German). Luther was translating from the Greek, and apparently the Greek word is "Makarios", which refers to a pre-Christian concept of the dead, after a virtuous life, entering the world of the gods and living on a higher plane.

"Selig" is the first and last word of Brahms' Requiem, and I think he chose it to set the tone of the whole piece: the message is that a good death is the ultimate purpose in life and is the culmination of all that we try to achieve in life; with it, we enter a state of permanent stillness, calm, and serenity.

But it's a word that English choirs have such difficulty with! It's easy enough to remember that the first consonant is a very soft "z", and the final "g" is a very soft "ch" as in "loch", but it's easy to forget that the poetry depends on that beautiful long pure "e" sound, which can so easily be massacred into an ugly diphthong as in "sailing". (I cringe whenever I hear the conventional English pronunciation of "Beethoven"). It's not actually that difficult to get it right; unlike "ü" and "ö" it's a vowel that does actually exist in English: it's just that in English it's always the first half of a diphthong. If you struggle with it, say "earwig". Now say it as three articulated syllables: "ee-a-wig". Now drop the second syllable: "ee-wig", and you're pretty close. Practise it! It's not just "selig" that uses this vowel, it runs as a leitmotif through the whole piece: "Meine seele verlanget und sehnet" ("my soul is waiting and yearning": you can feel the yearning in the long vowel).

If you feel "selig", you can't help but sound "selig"! Relax, smile, breathe deeply, feel inward contentment, let your soul long for the Lord, and let the audience feel it too, before you even start singing. After our long incarceration, this is going to be a wonderful release.'

Michael Kay, Bass

From week 11 – happy memories of 'disastrous' performances

I do not think Didcot was our greatest disaster. I remember in the early days, when we performed in the north aisle at St Mary's, a much more dangerous event. At one under rehearsed point, the choir became completely disconnected with the orchestra and the only option was for the conductor to stop, go back a few bars and re-start the piece. A hideous embarrassment for us all but apparently unnoticed by the majority of the audience.

On another occasion we were prevailed upon to give a first performance of a work by a local composer. It was a sort of mock medieval cantata with corresponding harmonies and words. We managed the music but the words, a sort of mish-mash of medieval English and Latin, could not have been appreciated by anyone. In our defence, the score was in manuscript written for the composer's convenience with the words crammed in afterwards in "spider script". The Henley Standard reviewer was very kind! Such occasions make one realise just how much the choir has moved on over the years.

Ian Heriot, Bass

Stanford in lockdown from Weekly Newsletter 3

Written in the early days and to the uniquely weird rhythms of Stanford's 'For lo, I raise up' that we were due to perform in the March 2020 concert

For lo I'm in lock-down

For lo I'm in lock-down like all of the rest of the nation,
As covid-19 sweeps the earth,
We are in our dwelling places for what seems like years.
It is terrible and dreadful,
There is no yeast in Waitrose, there's none on the shelves.
The loo rolls also are scarcer than hen's teeth
And I'm addicted to evening news.
And my husband's spread himself,
Into every room of the house now.
We gather on Thursdays to clap the NHS,
We stay all at two metres distance
Our faces untouched by any humans,
And we always sanitise our hands.
Yea, he scoffeth the snacks
And biscuits are a distraction unto him
But my worry is exercise and taking it
Then shall police sweep by with a drone that shall
Pass over and shall pass
To say 'guilty,' 'guilty'
Even he, even he
Who walks with his Dog.

Angela Law, Alto & Newsletter editor

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www.henleychoralsociety.org.uk

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