

Sarisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 29TH OCTOBER 2020

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope this newsletter finds you well.

Here is this week's newsletter in a slightly different format.

As usual, comments, feedback, suggestions welcome!

Small steps for singers

We are hoping to restart small scale rehearsals soon; and in conjunction with this, I have been asked to give some guidance on masks suitable for singing, which are specially designed types of face mask that make singing more enjoyable than singing with a normal face mask!

Masks for sale

Banks Music Publications have masks for singers on sale, which have a specially designed lightweight frame that holds the mask material away from the nose and mouth, allowing normal vocal production and projection:

<https://www.banksmusicpublications.co.uk/greetings-cards-gifts--accessories/ppe/singers-face-mask-with-wash-bag---black>

The **Broadway Relief Project** is a group of Broadway designers that normally make costumes for musicals on Broadway. The team were enlisted by the City of New York to create over 2 million medical gowns for hospitals in New York. They also produce a mask for singing:

<https://www.broadwayreliefproject.com/>

Masks made to order

There are a growing number of suppliers making masks suitable for singing to order, including:

<https://www.funkymasks.uk/store/p/singers-masks>

<https://www.misskiddy.com/product-page/singers-mask>

<https://alisoncrutchley.wordpress.com/singers-masks/>

Do It Yourself!

Joan Fernley has produced patterns for making masks for singers and has uploaded tutorials on YouTube. In fact, many of the suppliers above are using her pattern!

The YouTube tutorials are available here: [Joan Fernley Mask Tutorials](#) and for those who are Facebook users, Joan has a Facebook group called "Masks for Performers":

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3438493592850143>

Deirdre from Winchester City choir tells me that "I have made the mask designed by Joan Fernley, downloading the pattern and following her tutorial. Her video is excellent, and the pattern can be printed off. Folks can buy them, but they cost nothing to make out of a bit of sheeting e.g. an old pillow case (I use interfacing for the middle layer of three). I have tried two other designs, courtesy of one of my daughters and I think that the Joan Fernley mask is the best that I have tried singing in. There is plenty of room in it, and glasses do not steam up (much)".

Many thanks to Deirdre for her review! If anyone else has experience of using a mask to sing, or wants to comment about masks suitable for singing, then do let me know. I hope this round up of masks available has been helpful!

Brahms Requiem (part eight)

We have reached the final part of our series looking at Brahms Requiem in context. So far, I've mentioned about the history, the choice of text, composers that Brahms was influenced by and other choral music that Brahms himself wrote. I've deliberately left the elephant in the room until last, which is to do with the language of the text... and the question, *should we perform it in German or English?*

I have thought long and hard (at least ten months, so before lockdown) about how to put this article together and I hope what follows is a balanced article! Here are some views about choosing which language to sing in from a couple of well-known conductors, together with a few thoughts of my own.

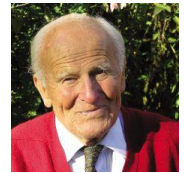
Firstly, some wise words from [David Hill](#), Musical Director of "The Bach Choir", from an article he wrote for the Choir and Organ Magazine in 2011:



Just as Bach set the Passions in German for Germans to understand immediately what they were hearing, it could be argued that Brahms was attempting something similar. There is a strong case for the vernacular being used wherever it is being performed: English National Opera is a publicly funded organisation committed to that principle, and Germans nearly always sing Handel's Messiah in German... I could go on. I think choirs and their conductors must decide what they can cope with best, given the time available. However, I would strongly recommend German for one overriding reason: it is the language for which he composed the music. The way in which the words, music and phrasing are inextricably linked is unquestionable; no matter how clever the translation, few will manage to replicate the structure and syntax of the German. Proper word and syllabic emphasis is at the very core of realising the textural and musical expression.

Here is David Hill's predecessor of "The Bach Choir", [Sir David Willcocks](#) in an extract from William Owen's book: "A Life in Music: conversations with Sir David Willcocks and friends", published in 2008 (Incidentally, I recommend the book!). Although Sir David is being asked about the St. Matthew Passion specifically, the points he makes about language are, I feel, relevant to Brahms Requiem as well:

Nowadays, it's rather more difficult to put on a work like the St. Matthew Passion in English, because there's a new generation that wants to hear it only in German, with imitation instruments of Bach's day. They feel that performances in English miss so much of the original. It's true that the notes fit the recitatives much better in the German original, but it's so important to understand what the text is about... One year I had the chance to record the St. Matthew Passion under completely different conditions. I'd just performed it with "The Bach Choir" in London singing in English with the English Chamber Orchestra playing modern instruments. Very soon after I was asked to conduct it in German with the boys of Regensburg Cathedral and the Choral Scholars from King's College, Cambridge with Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Well, I enjoyed them both. They were absolutely different, but I felt that Bach would have approved of both as well.



Just to put the cat among the pigeons so to speak, here is conductor and musicologist Joseph Fort. Joseph recorded the Brahms in 2017 with the choir of King's College, London: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOQRW4wymY4>

So what do I think? Well, I'm happy to perform it in German or English. To date, I have only been involved with performances in English, but that certainly doesn't put me off wanting to perform it in German. I'm glad that I learnt it in English first; whenever I watch / listen to a performance in German, I feel that I appreciate it more, because I know what the words mean, because I've sung it in English, rather than following a libretto.

To help me make a decision on the choice of language, I take into account these two factors:

- I fully support David Hill's excellent point above: **I think choirs and their conductors must decide what they can cope with best, given the time available.** The Brahms is challenging enough musically before you add in the extra dimension of a language that isn't familiar to everyone (not everyone who sings in choirs is a linguist). I also fully support performing it in English for any WCMF performances, in order to match the purpose of the Festival: *"To provide an opportunity for smaller choirs to perform more demanding works which they would be able to undertake with their own resources"*. If I was conducting a performance in German, I would be keen to bring in someone who speaks much better German than I do! Alternately, I would involve someone from the choir to help with pronunciation. I think David Hill's point about rehearsal time available is really important and much of that comes down to how much work singers do in between rehearsals.
- **We need to think carefully about the audience.** With more and more music performances being available for free online, not to mention live music being written off for the best part of six months in 2020, we face an ever increasing challenge of getting "bums on seats" at our concerts. Is the audience made up of people with Music degrees or German degrees or general Music lovers? Is it easier for choir members to sell tickets to audience members if the performance is in German or in English? People often tell me that they're not coming to a concert because everything is in a foreign language, is this an isolated case, or do you find a similar reaction? If the performance is in German and the words are printed in the programme, is it engaging for the choir to be singing to an audience who have their heads in their programmes, following the words from the choirs (hopefully) impeccably trained diction? Related to that last point, I do feel that audiences like (and appreciate) having a few words from the conductor / performers at concerts; and I expect that I was the first conductor to do so in the 2019 Festival; certainly the first in my 14-year involvement with the Festival anyway!

I hope I've managed to give a balanced argument about this subject and if you feel that I haven't, I hope we can agree to disagree. As I always say, your comments and feedback are welcome! I hope you have enjoyed this exploration of Brahms Requiem and I hope you've learnt new things about the work alongside new pieces of music. I know that I certainly have! Perhaps most of all, I hope that when you next listen to Brahms Requiem (in whatever language!) you can listen to it afresh. I know that I will.

Talking of Brahms...

On watching the Brahms Requiem rehearsal videos that I've recommended to you over the last six weeks (which I hope at least one person has found helpful), I was slightly intrigued to find out that the Rundfunkchor Berlin have been involved in a staged performance of the work, which has been performed across the world (but not yet in the UK I think). More details here: <https://www.rundfunkchor-berlin.de/en/project/human-requiem/> Something innovative for a choir in this country to do sometime perhaps?

If you haven't had enough of Brahms Requiem yet, you might like to join with vocal ensemble Sonoro for five workshops on the piece:



<https://www.sonoromusic.com/sonoro-concerts/brahms-requiemonline-workshop-series/>



The last word on Brahms Requiem (until someone else does a choral workshop or similar on it) goes to Italian conductor Claudio Abbado (1933 - 2014) with this performance from 1997. I'm recommending this performance as I remember watching it on TV when it was broadcast to commemorate the centenary of Brahms' death: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOoWUIyBn0Y>

Live Music Making!

In my capacity as Director of Music at St. Faith's Church, Havant, since September, I have taken over the responsibility of coordinating the Wednesday lunchtime concert series which we have been able to restart. I thought you might be interested to know that next Wednesday's concert (4th November) features guitarist Derek Hasted and flautist and pianist Gilly Slot! The concert starts at 12:30pm and will last approx. 45 minutes. Further details are available on the church website, where we hope to live stream the concert. If we're unable to do that, we will be live streaming it via the church Facebook page, where you can also find the last few lunchtime concerts.



<https://stfaith.com/>
<https://www.facebook.com/stfaithschurhhavant>

That's all for this week folks. I hope you're still enjoying the newsletters.

Stay safe and keep singing!

Graham

PS. Keep an eye out for further updates about rehearsals from the committee.