

Salisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 3RD DECEMBER 2020

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope the newsletter continues to find you well.

Here is this week's newsletter. Comments, suggestions welcome!

What's On Listings

In a bid to try and keep the What's On Guide column brief, here are links to sites that have been plugged recently in the newsletters (hopefully just click on the links which will take you to the right place online):

[Stay at Home Choir Projects](#)

[Self-Isolation Choir](#)

[Ben England Home choir](#)

[Voces8 Christmas Festival and Bach for Christmas](#)

[The Sixteen "A Choral Odyssey"](#)

["Stay and Sing" led by Hilary Campbell on 6th December](#)

NEW LISTINGS FOR THIS WEEK:

I have mentioned in previous newsletters the zoom come and sing events courtesy of the **Vasari Singers**. Their carol concert is moving online this year and you can choose to join the choir live via Zoom to listen and sing, or watch the simultaneous livestream on Facebook or YouTube.

<http://www.vasarisingers.org/event/christmaswithvasarionline/>

Another Christmas concert moving online this year is the annual Christmas Celebration with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by **John Rutter** and special guests. The performance will be available to watch from Thursday 10th December and for twelve days after.

<https://johnrutter.com/events>

Singing during lockdown

In a bid to keep this section brief as well, here is a reminder of the three links I mentioned in last week's newsletter, which have lots of singing opportunities, including plenty of vocal warm ups.

[Voces8 Academy](#)

[Deborah Miles Johnson vocal exercises](#)

[Hilary Llystyn Jones vocal exercises](#)

Christmas is coming (part two)

With Christmas less than a month away now, I thought I'd carry on writing something about Christmas music. I thought I'd write a bit about a well-known "Christmas choral classic" as well as veering off the beaten track again to mention a piece that isn't often performed very often.



Last week, our representative pieces were from Germany and France respectively. This week, we stay firmly on English soil for two pieces by **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872 - 1958; the first image is Vaughan Williams in 1913, the second in 1954). The two works getting a mention this week were written forty years apart from each other... and both were composed for a music festival that takes place in the summer! They were composed for the Three Choirs Festival which boasts to be the longest running non-competitive classical music festival in the world; having celebrated its 300th anniversary in 2015. The festival hosts an annual summer programme, lasting a week, packed with concerts, services, recitals, masterclasses, talks, theatre, exhibitions and more. The festival rotates between the Cathedral cities of Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester... similarly to the (three day) Southern Cathedrals Festival which rotates between Chichester, Salisbury and Winchester.



The **Fantasia on Christmas Carols** was composed for the 1912 Three Choirs Festival which took place at Hereford. The work is dedicated to Cecil Sharp (1859 - 1924; pictured left), who was a key figure in the revival of folksongs in England (for more information about Cecil Sharp and the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, have a look at the website of the English Folk Dance and Song Society:

www.efdss.org). The work is composed for baritone soloist, choir, full orchestra and organ. As with many of his compositions, Vaughan Williams prepared and authorised several alternative versions (with reduced orchestration) in order to bring his music within the range of smaller organisations. The original soloist for the Fantasia was James Campbell McInnes (1874 - 1945) who premiered many of Vaughan Williams' vocal works, including the baritone solos in A Sea Symphony and the Five Mystical Songs.

My recommended recording dates from 1966, featuring the Choir of Guildford Cathedral conducted by Barry Rose (b.1934; pictured right) who at the age of 25, was the youngest cathedral organist in the country, when he was appointed the first Organist and Master of the Choristers at Guildford Cathedral in April 1960. The baritone soloist on this recording is John Barrow who was the first lay clerk to be appointed at Guildford Cathedral. This recording uses the version with accompaniment for strings and organ. Listen out for "The First Nowell" hidden in the accompaniment halfway through... and for the bells ringing out the new year, before the voices gradually recede into the distance.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-vZ31eg7oY>

Vaughan Williams had always wanted to write a large-scale Christmas work; and he finally got to do so at the age of 80! The Christmas Cantata **Hodie** was composed in 1953-4 and first performed at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester Cathedral on 8th September 1954,



conducted by the composer. (*The Three Choirs currently takes place at the end of July / beginning of August*). The work is dedicated to the English composer, organist and teacher Herbert Howells (1892 - 1983; pictured left) who is most famous today for his large output of Anglican church music.

I think the best way to sum up this work is to say that it is like a service of lessons and carols, without well-known carols and all the readings are sung! The familiar text of the Nativity story is almost exclusively the property of a semi chorus (originally designed to be boy choristers) accompanied by the organ. Framed around it are settings of poems by John Milton, Thomas Hardy, George Herbert, William Drummond and Ursula Vaughan Williams. As well as the semi chorus and organ mentioned above, the work is scored for three soloists (soprano, tenor and baritone), chorus and orchestra and takes about an hour to perform.

My "recommended recording" for Hodie dates from 1965, with a star cast... Westminster Abbey Choristers, London Symphony Orchestra, The Bach Choir, soloists Dame Janet Baker (b.1933), Richard Lewis (1914 - 1990) and John Shirley-Quirk (1931 - 2014), all conducted by the patron saint of Christmas carol descants, Sir David Willcocks (1919 - 2015; pictured right). Click on [Hodie - YouTube](#) to listen and enjoy!



My personal highlights of the piece (which you might like to listen out for) are:

The first movement, with the choir crying out Hodie! Glory to God, Alleluia, with prominent brass...

The movement for unaccompanied choir called "The blessed Son of God" which is probably the best known bit of the piece...

The "Hymn" for the tenor soloist, with wonderful orchestral writing that could only be by Vaughan Williams (apparently this movement was a late addition of the work when the first singer of the tenor role complained that he didn't have enough to do!) ...

The impressive "March of the Three Kings", with each soloist taking a gift each...

The final movement "Ring out ye crystal spheres", it's those bells pealing out again, with the choir and orchestra full of optimism, something that we definitely need at the end of 2020!

It's really not that often you get to hear "Hodie" or for that matter, the "Oratorio de Noel" that I wrote about last week. I think that is mainly because choirs and audiences (quite rightly) like (dare I say expect) to have carol concerts with shorter items, including readings and audience participation. Maybe there's a way to perform these pieces with audience carols, better known items interspersed and perhaps some of the solo sections could be read rather than sung... what do you think? Is it worth it? I'd be interested to hear your thoughts!

Talking of Christmas...

As announced last week, Wednesday 16th December will be a Zoom Carolling session for members of Winchester City and Sarisbury Choral to take part in! The session will start at 7:45pm finishing somewhere between 9pm and 9:15pm.

With this week's newsletter is a separate attachment with the list of carols that we will be singing, together with what I'll call "Carols for Choirs cross referencing" and extensive notes on each carol. The separate attachment will be available on the member section of the website, together with a "user friendly" version of one of the carols. Enjoy marking up your scores!

That's all for this week folks, stay safe and keep singing!

Graham