

Sarisbury Choral Society

NEWSLETTER

THURSDAY 19TH AUGUST 2021

Welcome to another edition of ramblings from the conductor!

I hope the newsletter continues to find you well.

We continue our reminiscing through the archive; and find ourselves at the year **2018**.

From the Archives: 2018

At the beginning of 2018, Winchester City Festival Choir had their annual concert in **January** (Saturday 27th January to be precise). For the third time, it was held at Thornden Hall in Chandler's Ford, which, when open, is an excellent venue for choral concerts!

As is often with WCFC annual concerts, the second half of the programme had a single work, whereas the first half contained shorter items.

In choosing WCFC programmes, I try to fit everything around a theme; and the theme for 2018 seemed to be "Hands across the Ocean", combining works by UK or US composers. In the case of the UK composers, both of them are very well known in the US.

The main work for the second half was the Mass of the Children by John Rutter. The performance used the version for chamber ensemble, which in the case of the Mass is a wind quintet (flute, oboe, clarinet, French horn and bassoon), harp, double bass, organ, timpani and percussion. Combining this with two choirs (WCFC plus singers from Romsey School to sing the children's choir part) and two excellent soloists (soprano **Alexandra Stevenson** and bass baritone **Ed Saddington**) made a very joyful noise indeed!

The first half was made up of shorter items, but nonetheless challenging. I like coincidences in concerts, so it was lovely to find out that 2018 was the centenary of the birth of Leonard Bernstein. So it was that we were able to mark this occasion with a performance of his Chichester Psalms, composed for the Southern Cathedrals Festival in 1965. WCFC members will recall that one of the major challenges with this work is that the psalms are set in Hebrew. Jane Anderton very kindly found an immensely helpful sheet of advice on the Hebrew pronunciation... and we were joined for one rehearsal by **Stuart Olesker** (a friend of Paul Williams) who gave us some useful advice on the pronunciation... and gave us encouragement that we were doing the right things!

To begin the programme, we gave the **world premiere** of God's Grandeur by composer and organist David Briggs. Here is David Briggs himself with his own notes that went in the programme for the concert:

I was thrilled to be invited to write a new anthem for the Winchester City Festival Choir. It is the first time I have had the opportunity to set words by Gerald Manley Hopkins - these words literally

jumped off the surface of the page, when we were considering alternatives. The music begins ecstatically - after the powerful organ introduction the choir enters, with the voices high in their registers, to portray the all-embracing and powerful love of God. The middle section features an obstinate march, intended to portray man's unrelenting pursuit of human action ('And all is seared with trade'), and is followed by a warning about overexploiting the planet's resources ('the soil is bare now'). The work ends with an interpretation of nature's eternal presence and growth ('nature is never spent'), and how the Holy Spirit 'broods over the bent world ... with warm breast and bright wings', rather like a brilliant, everlasting and all-pervading peace dove.

If that wasn't enough, we managed to fit in a piano duet version (played by Gilly and myself) of Bernstein's Overture to *Candide*, and the wind quintet used for the Rutter joined Gilly to perform movements of a Sextet by Gary Schocker.



We even had a personal message of support from John Rutter for the concert...

Dear Winchester City Festival Choir, brought by electronic carrier pigeon, here are my greetings and best wishes for your forthcoming performance of my Mass of the Children. As you will have discovered, the work has a strong Winchester connection, with texts at the beginning and end by your very own Bishop Thomas Ken (of whose sermons Charles II famously remarked 'they ever remind me of all my faults'). I hope it goes really well, and that you and your audience enjoy the concert. All the best, John".

... and here's what I thought of the concert:

Dear all, in haste while I have WiFi on a train (travelling from Portsmouth to Christchurch today) ... goodness me, you were good last night!! I found the whole day a joy yesterday and thank you to each and every one of you for making it happen. Last night was proof (if proof was needed) that Winchester City Festival Choir know how to put on a good show. Last night's concert is definitely up there as one of my finest musical achievements. I hope it was for you too... and I hope that your supporters in the stands were inspired by the music making. Many congratulations to you all... and unending thanks to Deirdre who works tirelessly to make the concert happen. Bravo!!!

For **WCMF 2018**, Sarisbury and Winchester City went to **Romsey Abbey** to sing two contrasting mass settings: Mass of the Children by John Rutter was paired with the Mass in time of War by Haydn. Yours truly was conducting and we were joined by what I must admit is my favourite quartet of soloists: **Jocelyn Somerville** (soprano), **Felicity Turner** (mezzo soprano), **Adrian Green** (tenor) and **Ed Saddington** (bass baritone). For the record, Compton and Shawford were the other participating choir at Romsey, whilst Botley, Itchen Valley, Overton and Twyford had already sung in the "Winchester" concert the previous week, performing The Spirit of England (Elgar) and The Armed Man (Jenkins).



The WFCF "Summer Sing" for **June / July 2018** was originally designed for 2017, but was delayed in favour of "The American Connection" mentioned last week, which led nicely into the annual concert for 2018. The 2018 summer sing focused on part-songs from the turn of the 20th century, with music by Elgar, Stanford, Sullivan, Vaughan Williams and Charles Wood. This repertoire proved very popular!

Sarisbury Choral didn't do a specific event in the autumn of 2018, but did run a "Summer School" which focused on Blest Pair of Sirens and Crossing the Bar by Hubert Parry (2018 being the centenary of Parry's death), alongside an arrangement of The Ash Grove by Gordon Jacob and All in the April Evening by Hugh Robertson.

However, Sarisbury did have their annual Christmas concert in **December** at St. Paul's Church, singing items from Carols for Choirs 1, alongside the setting of the Magnificat by Vivaldi. **Sophie Aynsley** played piano and our soloists for the evening were soprano **Lucy Braga** and mezzo soprano **Fiona Jeppsson**. I adjourned to the organ loft on a couple of occasions, leaving **Michael Waterson** to lead some of the audience carols.



Winchester City had a carol concert again at Littleton, which was kept fairly simple, but it did include a little taster for what was to appear in their annual concert in early 2019... but that's for next time!

Stay safe and keep singing,

Graham