

Ely

A very successful reunion was attended by over 50 members and guests, and it was pleasing that included in that number were a number of leavers from the 1970s and recent years. After an excellent lunch in The Almonry Restaurant, instead of the usual speech we had an entertaining question and answer session. Questions submitted by members of the society were put by senior choristers to Paul Trepte and Sue Freestone, for whom this was their last reunion in their positions as Director of Music and Principal of King's Ely respectively.

Sarah MacDonald, Director of the Cathedral Girls' Choir, missed the Reunion for the best of reasons. On September 8th Sarah went to Salisbury Cathedral, where she was presented with the Associate of the Royal School of Church Music award, in recognition of her contribution to choral music at Ely Cathedral and Selwyn College, Cambridge.

Ely Cathedral Boys' Choir 2017-8

As always the choir year began with a flurry of special services. The Society of Ely Choristers, the Order of St Etheldreda and The Friends of Ely Cathedral always expect a good show just as the "new" choir is settling in, and these occasions certainly help us all to re-establish awareness of how fast we have to work.

The choristers gave their first parish concert of the year in Ramsey in early October. I decided to challenge the boys with learning George Butterworth's song cycle, "A Shropshire lad". This is hardly normal fayre for cathedral choristers but they were enthralled with the both the music and the poetry associated with it. (This piece will remain in their repertoire as we approach the end of the war centenary. We conclude them with the singing the Duruflé Requiem at 4pm on November 11th. The performance will be in the version for small orchestra and choir)

A carol recording session for you tube in October prepared the way for an unusual extra Christmas concert engagement for the full choir in London in early December in St Paul's Church, Onslow Square. This concert was filmed for restricted use on a web site intended to give elderly people greater access to music. A very worthy project!

The liturgical year with all the Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas, Lent and Easter requirements continued to unfold with much fine music making – especially so during Holy Week and Easter. Further parish concerts were given by the boys in Gazeley and Duddenhoe.

In the summer term 2018 there was an imaginative collaboration between the cathedral choirs of Ely, Norwich and Peterborough, reviving a custom which has been dormant for many years. The programme for a concert sung to a packed cathedral in Norwich was as follows:

Parry: I was glad

Woolf: Dark Sayings (specially commissioned; first performance)

Bernstein: Chichester Psalms

Organ duet: Holst: Jupiter

Holst: Nunc Dimittis

Ireland: Greater love

V Williams: Te Deum in G

Organ solo: Parry: Fantasia and Fugue in G

Parry: Blest pair of Sirens

Summer tour 2018 to Estonia

Despite the huge costs involved, touring abroad continues to be an integral and hugely enjoyable part of the chorister experience. Chapter has underlined full commitment to this by undertaking to contribute £5,000 every year. All other money is still raised by self-help in the form of fund-raising projects. At the time of writing this report the financial outcome of our summer tour has yet to be announced, but we do know that over the past two years we have managed to raise something in the region of £20,000.

I see that I have clocked up a total of twenty choir tours during my time as Director of Music. Mindful of the fact that the summer tour 2018 would be my last one, I wanted to take both myself and the choir somewhere new and different – hence the choice of Estonia. In the 1990s, the decade of my own earlier Ely Choir tours, we were all much less well travelled than we are now. So, rightly or wrongly, the prospect of a choir tour was arguably more of an adventure than is now the case. In order to really excite the sophisticated 21st century chorister it probably has to be to another continent or to somewhere genuinely “different”. I should perhaps add that we might have expected this Baltic country to be quite a cool option during the summer, but in the event, Estonia did not escape the 2018 heatwave, and we all fried there – just like everyone else!

The secret of a good tour is to get the balance right between singing, culture, sight-seeing and play. This applies just as much to the adults as to the boys, because I have always been mindful of the fact that our adult singers have to give up valuable holiday time in order to participate. The recent tour was especially successful in this way. The other essential is to have a dedicated team of staff looking after the boys. Over the years this has never been a problem and, with regard to Estonia, I make a point of thanking Peter North, Rebecca Woodward and Canon Johnson for their endless patience. Peter has toured with us on many occasions, but for Rebecca and Peter it was their first experience of how we do things Ely-style!

Apart from the intense administration involved in planning the logistics of choir tours, careful thought must be given to choosing the music to be sung. Estonia is known as a land of song, but the native singing is more associated with folk culture than with church music. Although there are few Estonian composers of real note, the obvious exception is Arvo Pärt. I did consider including some of his music in our programmes, but managed to resist the temptation to do so, arguing (to myself) that the point of an English Cathedral Choir touring abroad is to export the music of the English Choral Tradition. This proved to be a wise choice in that the audiences for our concerts listened intently and commented on the beauty of the music selected as well as on the standards of performance, and such comments certainly came from a well-informed clientele. Last minute changes to the advertised programmes did prove necessary for various reasons – usually associated with the strange lay out of the churches or the condition of the organ. On two occasions rehearsal time for our concerts proved to be either minimal (as with our final programme in the Catholic Church, Tallin, where two spoken masses intervened) or, in the case of Pärnu, non-existent. Such problems may well be part and parcel of touring, but they demand great flexibility and ability from all singers.

In the event, both concerts just mentioned turned out to be highlights, but for different reasons. The best singing of our trip was definitely that delivered at the final concert which was attended by the Deputy British Ambassador. A sense of climax to our tour was achieved here, and this was in part due to a strong awareness that this concert was the swan song for our two Head Choristers – Thomas Apostolou and Thomas Allen.

The Pärnu experience was probably the one which the boys will remember best – and not because of the music this time. After an afternoon visit to the beach there was an almighty thunderstorm which drenched them! The boys had to be taken on an unplanned march back to the hotel in the pouring rain to change into dry clothing. This irritating detour meant they arrived at the church ten minutes after the concert was due to start, and the programme had to be performed without rehearsal of any sort.

Non-musical memories of Estonia included time to explore the beauty of Tallin and Haapsalu. Outings included trips to beaches, to a sea plane museum, to a water park and to a fascinating farm museum. Meals were of a high standard in various hotels and restaurants as well as *al fresco* lunches purchased and masterminded on the spot by Mrs Trepte. Such lunches allowed us to introduce Canon Johnson to cheese straws and I know that this new experience was an unexpected treat for her (!)

Vicky Johnson also presided over one of the most important elements of all choir recent choir trips: our Tour Eucharist. This was a private, short and spoken service which took place in a shady area of a lovely church yard where we stopped on our way back from Pärnu to Tallin. It was informal, with bread and wine passed from person to person as we all stood in a circle. I shall probably forget much about all the tours I have enjoyed with Ely Cathedral Choir, but I shall never forget the special beauty and strong significance of those Tour Eucharists.

Paul Trepte

Ely Cathedral Girls' Choir 2017-8

We have had another busy and musically productive year. We welcomed three new probationers at the start of Michaelmas Term, as well as a new Assistant Organist, Aaron Shilson, who joined us after posts at Manchester and St David's Cathedrals. Particular highlights of the term included the YouTube filming sessions with the boys and men, and a packed 'Be a Chorister for a Day' event with over 20 girls from age 10 to 16 spending a day finding out about life as a member of ECGC. We also were honoured to be directed on more than one occasion by Christopher Robinson, one of our patrons, whose granddaughter is now a chorister. At the end of term we had a fabulous day trip to London to sing in the Great Ormond Street Hospital Christmas concert, where we hobnobbed with celebrities including Dame Patricia Routledge, Toby Jones, and Matt Barber. We ended the term by appearing in a couple of major daily newspapers (the Telegraph and the Times) after an invigorating – and freezing – photoshoot outside on the roof of the octagon. Highlights of the Lent Term included more YouTube filming, and the wonderful cathedral Candlemas event, which resulted in my first ever photo being published officially, as one of the Friends of Cathedral Music 2018 Christmas cards. We were featured again in the Times tossing pancakes in the Lady Chapel – I'm not sure what the general paper-reading-public thinks we do with our time, but it looks like we have a lot of fun dressed in cassocks! We had a busy Easter 'vacation', singing services throughout Holy Week and Easter itself with the boys and men. We then returned to school a few days before the summer term to record our first CD with the layclerks. It features a feast of Christmas cheese and promises to be very popular. After the summer term's many examinations, we were delighted to hear that one of our members, Maria Campbell, had been elected Head of School for the coming year. Results were pleasing, and our leavers have gone on to their university of choice and/or gap years.

The new academic year has begun with one of the most exciting developments in our recent history, with the advent of Year 7 and 8 choristers. No fewer than NINE new girls began as probationers this Michaelmas Term, and we are excited to see what they will accomplish. The recent changes in the UK's education system effected by Michael Gove have made balancing GCSEs and A-levels with a cathedral choristership stressful for everyone involved, and we are therefore in the process of gradually lowering the overall age range of the choir to remedy this. They are already singing beautifully and confidently, and I'm sure that this will be an excellent development for the future of the girl choristers in Ely.

Sarah MacDonald