

## Aylesbury Festival Choir – Chair’s Report May 2020

Well, to coin a phrase, “What a difference a year makes!”. This time last year we were looking forward to the final event in our 60th Anniversary Year, the Buffet Lunch Party. Now we are wondering when, maybe even if ever, we will meet to sing together again. COVID-19 has had, to repeat a much-used phrase, an “unprecedented” effect on AFC. We are, of course, not alone in this, and many are wondering what the long term effect on musicians will be. The Committee remains optimistic that some form of communal singing will be able to resume at some point in the planned Autumn Term, but my confident statement last year, referring to our foundation year, that “we can proudly claim to have been singing continuously ever since” does now seem somewhat hubristic.

At the date of writing we cannot say how the next months will progress, so your Committee has a number of options which we will keep under review. We recognise how much enjoyment you found in our rehearsals for the postponed “*Gloria!*” concert, and also how much effort everyone put in. Our options aim to avoid wasting that hard work where possible, without jeopardising the other plans we have. To give you an idea of what we might propose, while recognising none of these might work out exactly as stated:

1. If restrictions are lifted fully by the end of July at the latest, that will give us August to plan a concert properly (Committee meetings etc.), and in this case we could have “*Gloria!*” on 5th September (AMC is provisionally booked). We’d have 2 rehearsals (27th Aug, 3rd Sep), then the concert, then move on to “*Messiah*” as planned.
2. If restrictions are lifted fully a bit later, say during August so we could meet again early September, we don't think a full concert is possible, but would like to consider a more informal performance of what we have recently rehearsed for “*Gloria!*”, but without soloists, to be held at BJS towards the end of September. This would not be an extensively advertised concert, but we’d see it as chance to celebrate surviving, and do that with family and friends. Then we’d carry on with “*Messiah*”.
3. If restrictions are lifted fully even later, say October time, we think “*Messiah*” would then be out of the question, but we could reschedule “*Gloria!*” as our (full) concert in November. Then we would need to re-plan our programme for the following seasons.
4. If restrictions go past the end of the year...let's not go there!

Although you have not heard much from us since lockdown, your Committee has kept in touch (including agreeing on the above options), and I would like to state here my appreciation for the support and teamwork they all demonstrate. We even held our first “virtual” meeting on Zoom, although I must confess this was at Nick’s prompting. It’s not my most comfortable medium. Just see how uneasy I look in the photo...



I’m not going to call out names this year, just to say...Pat, Lynda, Jean, Sheila, Lyn, Kate – thank you! I’d also add a mention for Nick, who has kept me on the path of what is possible, and eased the contacts with the soloists and musicians who were to be involved in “*Gloria!*”.

Back to happier times...we did indeed hold that Buffet Lunch Party. We had a very enjoyable lunch at Weston Turville Golf Club, where our invited guests included Helen Blakeman, who had been our Conductor from 1984 to 1994, and Barbara Fell, the only surviving member of the original group which became December Festival Choir in 1958. Members past and present enjoyed the opportunity to chat and catch up with each other and to share musical memories, and we had a celebration cake. We were also pleased to welcome five of our previous Chairmen, covering a period of 27 years. However, the photo here possibly shows you why I prefer to refer to my role now as simply "Chair"?



The Lunch was a happy social event, and gave the Committee an idea that other social activities might be of interest to choir members. Committee members cannot themselves take on the organising of such activities in addition to their other duties, but we have offered support to other members of the choir who propose an event which they are prepared to organise, possibly as a group. Regrettably, nobody has yet come forward – but the offer still stands!

Maybe I should actually say something about the music? AFC is truly fortunate in having the services of an optimistic, and only occasionally grumpy ("Smile!!"), Music Director in the person of Nick Austin, and an exuberant, highly competent, and tolerant, accompanist in the person of Rowena Gibbons. I know we all benefit from their professional support in our endeavours.

We did of course have that very successful concert at the end of last year, a selection of "*Choral Classics*"; was anyone else somewhat daunted by being faced with *Blest Pair of Sirens* at the end of the evening? Highlights for me:

- *Gloria del Fuego*, a new piece by one N. Austin, actually written to commemorate our 60th Anniversary, so very much "our" music.
- Felicity Davies, sometime accompanist for us, back as a soloist and taking on her real love as a singer.
- A mass audience participation in the singing of the "*Hallelujah Chorus*". I must confess I was a bit nervous about this; Would we get any volunteers? Would the singing be ragged? Would the audience pick up the mood? Oh ye of little faith! I should really have trusted Nick more, because it was a great success. Lots of audience enthusiasm (with some secret singing along) and probably about 20 extras up on stage with us, including one David Lidington, of whom more later. But clearly, great music overcomes all obstacles.

We also repeated the Christmas Carol Concert, but with a lot less success than in 2018. Was it the weather? A better attraction for the children elsewhere? Not enough advertising? Not enough support from our own members? Whatever the reason(s), the Committee will need to think carefully if we are to repeat the experiment this year (all things being normal of course).

Last year we had two failed attempts to visit Malvern for an away day with Piers Maxim. Piers has a long history with AFC, and has been our President in recent years. However, his career now takes him away frequently and contact has been difficult to maintain. Therefore, this year the Committee has agreed with Piers that his time in the role of President has come to a natural end. We are grateful for his support and assistance over the years, particularly, in my case, for his advice when we were recruiting Nick (a task early in my time as Chair).

I am delighted, however, to let you know that Sir David Lidington has kindly accepted the Committee's invitation to become our new President, starting from the date of the AGM. David has been a good supporter of AFC in our audiences, where of course he was an invited guest as MP for Aylesbury. He is also a singer, tenor of course, and has been heard singing along from a seated position during some of our Handel performances. As I said earlier, he came up on stage for the mass singing at our last concert. I have pointed

out to him that, as President, he and Helen will still be invited guests. Maybe that was what convinced him?

I hope you find some, ideally all, of the above interesting. On behalf of the Committee may I extend our hope that you and yours stay healthy and safe in these troubled times, and that we are able to sing together soon, under more normal conditions. As government guidelines become clearer, we shall work hard to ensure rehearsing and performing remain safe activities, but if anyone is worried do please let us know your concerns.

Mike Elliott  
(Chair, Aylesbury Festival Choir)

**Happier Times!!**

