

BEDFORD CHORAL SOCIETY

Musical Director's Report 2016/2017 Season

I want to start this year's conductor's report by saying thank you. We are halfway through our Anniversary Year (in terms of performances) and it has, so far, been astonishingly good and very successful. So, thank you to all the members of the choir without whom the choir would not exist! Thank you to all the members of the committees who have planned and implemented the plans for the Anniversary Season. And thank you too to Tim for his continued and continual support and superb accompaniment at rehearsals and for being prepared to 'step in' when I am not available for rehearsals or other events. The strength of the team that runs this choir, and it is very much a team effort, is phenomenal.

The first concert of the season in November was conducted by Michael Rose, our Principal Guest Conductor. He has provided these comments on the concert:

The November concert focussed on choral works by Mozart – the main work being his great C minor Mass. This presents a challenge to any choir and BCS members put in a tremendous amount of hard, detailed work to master Mozart's florid writing for all the voices. The performance was commendably confident. The Society was joined by excellent soloists, among whom was Kitty Whately (just one of our County's musical alumni) who is rising quickly to 'star' quality. The same could be said of Neil Martin, the concert's cello soloist, who gave a splendid performance of Kabalevsky's concerto.

There were two other Mozart choral works in the programme: an early "Regina coeli" in the Salzburg Archbishop's favourite key of C Major, and a later "Kyrie" in D minor where Mozart (then free of the Salzburg conditions) display a more expressive harmonic language. A good standard of performance throughout was evident from the choir, orchestra and visitors.

There was no Carol Concert in this season so the next concert was the first in our Anniversary Year. It was preceded, however, by the first of our Training Days in February. We invited Christine Bunning to come to lead us to work on one of the works for the summer concert, namely Michael Hurd's 'Shepherds Calendar'. The day itself was most interesting, informative and entertaining and even though we had not learned much of the piece it helped enormously for the performance in June. As an aside, I do hope that more members of the choir will come to our second Training Day on 4th November with Benjamin Goodson. These days are designed to give us all more time to think about the technique of singing (something that we do not have enough time to do in our normal weekly rehearsals when we have to concentrate on learning the correct notes and interpretation for the forthcoming performance!) and so are extremely valuable in the overall development of the sound of the choir.

So our first concert of the 150th Anniversary year was on the very same date as the very first concert of the Bedford Choral Society, namely 30th April. In 1867 this was a Tuesday but in 2017 it was a Sunday. The choir's decision to hold it on the anniversary day proved to be a very good one because we sold the concert out!! This is the first 'sell-out' concert that I can remember in my time as Musical Director. Well done to everyone for this achievement. The concert started with the unveiling, by our President, of a plaque commemorating the anniversary year. This plaque is now proudly displayed in the Corn Exchange for everyone to see! As to the concert itself, it was a triumph! The choir sang brilliantly, the orchestra supported superbly and the whole programme reflected the history of the choir. I was determined to include at least one piece from the first concert. This we did – Mendelssohn's *Lauda Sion* – but we also included Handel's *Halleluiahs Chorus* from *Messiah* which we sang from memory! The impact of this was absolutely terrific and made a very fitting end to the very special concert. I also wanted to reflect the commitment of the choir to new music so we commissioned a setting of *Psalms 150* from our talented accompanist Tim Grant-Jones. This was the highlight of the concert for many and so I hope we will perform it again in the

future. Thank you to everyone who made this concert so memorable. The icing on the cake was that we got a superb unsolicited review in the Church Times.

And so to the summer concert. The theme for the whole year is English Music so we started with Vaughan Williams' *Five Mystical Songs* and finished the programme with Michael Hurd's *Shepherd's Calendar*. Maybe not a very well-known work but certainly a very rewarding one to perform and one deserving, in my view, of much more exposure. The rest of the programme was orchestral, played exceptionally well by the Bedford Sinfonia. I have heard some criticism of the fact that there was not enough choral music but the fact remains that we would not have had enough rehearsal time to learn any more and so I would rather perform less to a higher standard than perform more badly.

Finally we were once again asked to sing in the Proms in the Park. Although I was not present it was, by all accounts, once more a most successful occasion and one which attracted very good reviews through Facebook and other social media! This is an area into which we must venture actively as this is where we will probably attract younger members. Fortunately we now have a choir member who is vigorously pursuing this area of publicity.

The Celebration Choir has had more to do this year with involvement in a couple of Masses and some weddings. I repeat what I have said for the last 4 years, many thanks to the members of the choir who agree to sing at the events served by this small choir. These are essential in contributing both to the choir's reputation and to its finances! One event at which we were not asked to sing was the funeral of Malcolm Struthers, a past Chairman of the choir, but a large number of members attended to pay their respects to one of our staunch supporters.

The aims for the choir for the 2016/2017 season were to

- a) still recruit new members with the aim of 150 members for the 150th anniversary season in 2017
- b) deliver the strategy for engagement of new younger members
- c) build the confidence of members in their sight-reading
- d) continue to work on the tone quality of the ensemble

These aims were mostly met but we need to pursue aim (c).

Our aims for the 2017/2018 must be to

- e) still recruit new members in the wake of the 150th anniversary season
- f) continue to deliver the strategy for engagement of new younger members
- g) build the confidence of members in their sight-reading
- h) continue to work on the overall ensemble of the choir

As our 150th Anniversary Season reaches its climax may the Bedford Choral Society, the 7th oldest choral society in the country (as far as my research shows), continue to thrive and provide quality musical performances for many years to come.

Ian G. Smith
Musical Director

September 2017