

MALVERN FESTIVAL CHORUS
ANNUAL NEWSLETTER 2022-2023

REPORT FROM JONATHAN BROWN – DIRECTOR OF MUSIC

Another year has flown by! It does not seem like a year ago that I was writing last year's report. I always find it helpful to reflect on what I wrote the previous year as a starting point for the new report. This time last year I spoke about how we had returned to face-to-face rehearsals (with careful Covid monitoring of course) in Holy Trinity church hall whilst maintaining the option of joining rehearsals online. We performed The Armed Man by Karl Jenkins (at last!) and did a Come-and-Sing Messiah as well as an al fresco (!) Carols for All outside Great Malvern Priory.

I'm pleased to say that, this year, it has felt like we have returned to some normality at long last. Our rehearsal venue at St. Edmund's Hall at Malvern College has certainly been a big step forward I feel. And whilst the rhythm of concerts was a little different from before Covid, we have also increased the number of performances broadly back to where things were, having two of our own concerts plus the Come-and-Sing Mozart Requiem and a 'normal' Carols for All (this time inside the Priory!)

What was different was having a concert of Music for Christmas – there is so much larger-scale Music for that season and so it was good to be able to perform some of this. December's programme (sung in Christ Church, Malvern) comprised Finzi's In Terra Pax, Vaughan Williams' Fantasia on Christmas Carols, Saint-Saens' Oratorio de Noel and a setting of Gabriel's Message by John Rutter. For this, we were joined by strings and soloists from the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire – a link that we have been developing for a couple of years now and which chimes very much with our stated aim for supporting and encouraging younger musicians through offering opportunities for them to perform. You'll understand that this is something that's very important to me, given my role at the College, and I know that we have all been delighted with their contributions to our concerts. We were able to welcome them back for the Mozart Requiem, more of which anon. The Carols for All was back inside the Priory and we were able to reprise the whole of the Vaughan Williams Fantasia which was certainly a new departure for this concert.

I was keen that our second concert in May was lighter and secular in nature to contrast our more recent programming with an entirely British menu. The British Isles has a rich culture of folksong, and The Sprig of Thyme is a collection of some of these songs, skilfully arranged by John Rutter. Stanford's Songs of the Fleet was a fun contrast, with a more forthright declamatory style. For this, we were joined by Jamie Hall (a BBC Singer) singing the Baritone solo in the Stanford as well as some English songs by Vaughan Williams, Finzi and Britten. We were also joined by pianist Irina Chagunava who accompanied Jamie in his songs and the choral works whilst also playing The Lake in the Mountains, again by Vaughan Williams.

Our final concert of the year was, as I have already stated, a Come-and-Sing Mozart Requiem in Great Malvern Priory. With the Come-and-Sing now an annual event, this was, once again, a wonderful occasion, although I was very sad to have missed it – my daughter announced that she would be getting married the following day! I was hugely grateful to David Angus (a long-time friend of MFC) for stepping in and conducting the day. Royal Birmingham Conservatoire instrumentalists and soloists were joined by professional friends and contacts to a full orchestral rendition of this great work, with a choir of nearly 130 voices to produce a super performance, with visiting singers coming from far and wide. The hospitality MFC laid on was, as ever, first class, and our guests and visiting musicians were incredibly well looked after.

So, to the 2023-24 season. We have two performances of Elijah, where we will be collaborating, once again, with the 1885 Singers and Alison Hunka. In the past, MFC and the 1885 Singers have collaborated with one concert up here and the other in London. The first performance will be in early November in St John's,

Smith Square, with the return fixture in mid-February in Big School, Malvern College. This is a large-scale piece with a very large orchestra, the scale of which I have not embarked on before with MFC and about which I am very excited – it is a piece that I know well, having conducted it and sung the solo role. It has been a long time since MFC have done anything on this scale – possibly when Elijah was last performed in 2011 (other than the Verdi Requiem in Symphony Hall of course!)

The concert in May will return to the Priory and will comprise Rutter’s *Feel the Spirit* – a collection of traditional spirituals - and Bernstein’s *Chichester Psalms* (last performed in 1991), a variety of programme that, I hope, will have a wide appeal.

The season will then conclude with a *Come-and-Sing* Haydn’s *Creation* to round off the season.

It has been very good to return to a more normal routine – rehearsals and rhythm of events – but, of course, it has meant that we have been doing that much more, and I want to give my thanks to everyone who has made this year the success that it has been. Our committee have, once again, represented us all superbly, always prepared to go the extra mile and insisting that things are done really properly. They are such a careful, caring group of individuals who work incredibly hard and exhibit teamwork of the highest order. We are extremely lucky to have them.

I also want to extend a particular thank you to Penny who gives us such support musically. Accompanying is such a challenging job with so many musical skills needed, and we are so grateful to her for what she has done, both this year but also in what is approaching a 50-year association with Malvern Festival Chorus!

And then, finally, to you the singers who make MFC what it is. I feel that we have made good progress this year and I am so grateful to you for your commitment and energy that you show, week in week out. We are still adjusting to this return to normality after Covid, and I think it is fair to say that there is still work to be done – concert performing is a very different experience to regular rehearsal singing, and this is where we have/had forgotten what it feels like when under that added pressure. However, I think that we have a better understanding of this again now, and the more we do, the better we shall be. If I’m honest, I remain nervous about how many singers we have – particularly with *Elijah* coming up which requires a large chorus. We do see and hear positive signs from new members, visiting singers and our audiences, but there is still much to be done to get back to where we were pre-Covid, so please can I ask you to shout our name from the rooftops. Once again, our first rehearsal is an open rehearsal and a great opportunity for friends and family to come and experience what we do and see who we are, and I ask that you try and encourage others to come and join us.

So, thank you to you all for last year. It was great to have got back into the saddle after some very difficult times. Now let’s look forward to an exciting new season with purpose and ambition.

AVB, as ever,

Jonathan

Jonathan Brown – Director of Music August 2023

TREASURER’S REPORT 2022/2023

You may recall that at last year’s AGM, the budgets for the 22/23 season predicted a loss of £6875. I am pleased to report that, although Expenditure for the year was some £2432 higher than budgeted, the increase in our Income was some £7784 higher than budgeted, so the loss on the year was only £1523.

General income benefitted from some generous donations received from members on top of their subs, and from the regular raffles. Although the sums raised in this way might appear small individually, they soon add up to make a difference. Thank you to all who donate prizes, buy tickets, and to Jacqui who pulls it all together. Over £2000 was claimed in Gift Aid on your subs and donations, and the general increase in interest rates has contributed over £250 to our funds,

That said, we cannot be complacent for the coming season; Although we have no concert on “home ground” pre-Christmas, we still have our regular weekly rehearsal expenses; The expenses for Carols for All will probably exceed the door receipts again, so we will need to subsidise this from Choir funds. Hopefully our audience will once again be generous in their donations to charity. Our February Elijah concert is likely to be expensive to run, as it will require a larger orchestra of professional players, and professional soloists. Jonathan has advised us that the complexity of the work, and the number of players means we cannot rely on the students from the Birmingham Conservatoire. We do, however, intend to call upon them for our other concerts, as it is our stated aim to encourage younger musicians.

I know that we are all experiencing the general increase in inflation in our everyday life, and we do not want to cause financial difficulties for any of our members. Our annual subscription is far lower than other local Choirs, and we are aware through the Making Music organisation that nationally we offer a lower rate than many choirs. For this reason, your Committee are recommending a small increase to £125 for the coming season. This will be our first increase since 2019, and we will keep our discounts for students and under 30s. Of course, any voluntary donations in excess of this will be gratefully received, and I would urge all taxpayers to ensure we have a Gift Aid declaration so that we can benefit from that.

General Income	14596.27
Concert Income	<u>10986.17</u>
Total Income	<u>25582.44</u>
General Expenditure	9205.83
Concert Expenditure	<u>17899.66</u>
Total Expenditure	<u>27105.49</u>
Opening Balance 01/07/22 Current Account	8992.66
Deposit Account	<u>17059.55</u>
Opening BalanceTotal	<u>26052.21</u>
<u>Income 2022/23</u>	<u>25582.44</u>
	<u>51634.65</u>
<u>Expenditure 2022/23</u>	<u>27105.49</u>
Balance 14/07/23	<u>24529.16</u>

Current Account	131.08
Deposit Account	24311.32
Cash on hand	<u>86.76</u>
	<u>24529.16</u>

Because of the timing of the last concert of our season on 1st July, it was agreed at an EGM to extend the financial year by 2 weeks. This means that all our income and expenditure for the season is included in this report. It will also help matters next season, as the final concert is 29/06/24, giving us 2 weeks to tie up the finances before the end of the accounting period.

Ian Thomas – Treasurer July 2023

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CHAIRMAN’S REPORT

It’s that time of year again, when reports have to be written for the AGM. Time, once again, to reflect on the year’s activities and to think about the future. Barbara has already written her report, of course, while I struggle to make a start. I’m very grateful to her for giving such a comprehensive overview of the year and I echo the thanks she has given to members of our committee and others who have contributed so much to the Chorus throughout the year. Barbara has continued to give unstinting service to us, quietly managing our affairs with dedication, skill and efficiency. Not a week goes by without some issue arising that requires her attention. I am enormously grateful for the support she gives to the choir and to me in particular.

Rereading last year’s report, I’m struck by how far we have come in the last twelve months. We started the season reflecting that the choir *had* survived the worst of the pandemic and we dared to hope that we might return to some semblance of pre-Covid normality. Relocating our rehearsals to St Edmund’s lifted our spirits. Grateful though we were to Holy Trinity for the use of their hall through the first months of permitted rehearsals, St Edmund’s offered us a much larger rehearsal space and a better acoustic, not to mention a rather superior piano! We have been able to arrange the seating in a more chorally appropriate way and our rehearsals have been much more enjoyable. We are grateful to Jonathan for negotiating the hire of the hall on favourable terms. He has led us throughout the year with enthusiasm and skill and we appreciate his continued commitment to us. We’re grateful too, to our long serving piano accompanist Penny, who has played for our rehearsals and has joined our ranks to sing in concerts as well. Jonathan was unable to be with us for our end of season “Come and Sing” performance of Mozart’s *Requiem* in Malvern Priory, because his daughter was married the same weekend! We were fortunate indeed that his colleague David Angus was able to deputise for him, taking us for rehearsals as well as leading us on the “Come and Sing” day. There was a sense of optimism at that concert, of hope for the future. It was a very enjoyable day, with lots of smiling faces! Our membership numbers had increased modestly and some of the many singers who joined us indicated that they might join our ranks next year. Let’s hope this proves to be the case.

I’m very grateful to my fellow committee members, who give up their time so generously to manage the affairs of the choir. We have met regularly throughout the year via Zoom but decided to hold our final meeting in July “in person” – the first time we had done this since the start of the pandemic. Thanks to Alice Osmond for hosting this. As we sat around her table, we were conscious of how different the dynamics were when compared with meetings held on line. We were much more alert to each other than we could possibly be when staring at flat images in windows on a screen and our meeting was much more sociable. The

committee couldn't have functioned without Zoom and we will continue to make use of it as circumstances dictate, but – as is the case with rehearsals – there is no substitute for gathering together in person. It was a pleasure to welcome Liz Gray and Sarah Doyle to our last meeting as observers. I hope that other members might take the opportunity to do this in future, to see how we work and perhaps to put themselves forward to join us. We need new enthusiastic members to help us to meet the challenges ahead. We particularly need someone to take on the responsibilities of Concert Manager, a role filled by Mary Whitehouse for the last year. We're very grateful for her contribution to the work of the committee but sadly she has now moved from Malvern and has had to resign. We wish her well in her new home. At last year's AGM I asked specifically for someone to take over from our long-standing Treasurer Mike Tweedie. Ian Thomas came forward and has committed himself to the role with commendable efficiency. We are very grateful to him and also to Mike, who remains a member of the committee.

Many members have said that they have enjoyed the social events that were organised this year. I'm grateful to everyone who has helped to make these a success. Should anyone have any ideas about other social events we might hold, then please suggest them.

Enjoyable as our social events are, making music is our primary concern, the reason we turn out to rehearse week after week regardless of the weather. We are part of a long choral tradition but if we are to carry this forward, we have to consider our situation. How can we maintain or increase our membership? Is our repertoire attractive to singers and to audiences? Should we join forces with other choirs? We are of course about to collaborate again with our friends from London, the 1855 choir, joining them for their performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in November and welcoming some of their members to our concert next Spring. But there are opportunities for joining forces with more local choirs and we intend to explore this.

Throughout the year, I have continued to take part in on-line seminars organised by Making Music, the national umbrella organisation that represents the needs and interests of amateur orchestras and choral societies. I've taken part in discussions and debates with representatives of choirs from around the UK. We share many of the same concerns about membership and finance. MFC has fared better than many choirs. Some did not survive the pandemic; presuming that it would be a short-lived affair they put things on hold and lost contact with their members, who then drifted away. Others who, like us, learned how to use Zoom and continued to engage with their members fared better but some have lost a larger proportion of their membership than we have. Everyone has had to face increasing financial pressures and many choirs have increased their membership fees. It's clear that our fees are now at the lower end of the scale and we will have to consider increasing them if we are to continue to put on large-scale concerts with full orchestral support. Such concerts do seem to be more appealing to audiences and to visiting singers, as evidenced by our last Come and Sing event – and these generate more income.

This report would not be complete without a reflection on the Covid pandemic. We might be forgiven for thinking that it had disappeared but sadly those of us that caught the virus this year were reminded that it's now endemic; currently there are estimated to be over 800,000 active cases. Fortunately, infections are generally milder now. I hope we don't see an upsurge later in the year. We will continue to use Zoom so that anyone who feels unwell can join our rehearsals on line if they wish.

There is a great sense of commitment in our choir at the moment and I really appreciate the support everyone gives to it. Despite the challenges we face, I am optimistic about the future and am looking forward to our 104th season.

Dr Kevin Ilsley – Chairman

August 2023

SECRETARY'S REPORT

At last! We have enjoyed a nearly normal year of singing; we returned to one of our pre-pandemic rehearsal venues (St Edmunds Hall, Malvern College) and put on three concerts and Carols for All. We welcomed 15 new members during the season and a few who have returned after Covid. At 73 members, our numbers are still below where we were 4 years ago but moving in the right direction.

We had decided it was important to offer members the opportunity to perform in a concert before Christmas and also to signal to Malvern that we are still going strong. The programme included festive pieces by Finzi, Vaughan Williams, Rutter and Saint-Saens, which were new to most of us and enjoyed by singers and audience alike. We were accompanied by players and soloists of Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (RBC) and the venue was Christ Church, which we found could just about accommodate our current numbers with a small instrumental ensemble.

Some of the pieces from this concert were reprised in Carols for All in the Priory, our annual carol concert at which we raise money for a local charity. This year we chose to support Malvern Hills Food Bank and we were pleased to have Jonathan rehearse and conduct us for this event. We also sang carols in the Priory grounds while the farmers' market was on and with Eileen Tomlin to lead us. The combined collections resulted in a donation of £1,243, which the charity was grateful to receive.

We were delighted to be back in Great Malvern Priory for our next concert in May, which featured Songs of the Fleet by Stanford and The Sprig of Thyme by Rutter. We welcomed baritone soloist Jamie Hall (who had sung with us in Bach's Magnificat in November 2018) and pianist Irina Chagunava, a graduate of RBC, to accompany us. Once again, they were pieces with which many members weren't familiar and there was some hesitancy in our performance.

For our summer concert, we invited local singers to a Come & Sing workshop and concert of Mozart Requiem in the Priory, and it proved to be a fantastic finale to the season. With around 78 visiting singers and 50 members, and accompanied primarily by players from RBC and with their young soloists, it was a magical sound. We had felt disappointment when we discovered that Jonathan would be unable to conduct us, due to a clash of dates with his daughter's wedding, but he arranged for David Angus to rehearse and conduct us, and David and we rose to the occasion. We are hopeful that the friendly welcome given to visiting singers (and the tea provided by MFC members) and the singing experience will encourage a good number of them to join us next season.

Whilst we were back to rehearsing normally, we thought it prudent to continue to offer Zoom rehearsals. This allowed anyone who had a cold or felt unwell, or who couldn't get to Malvern in time, not to miss a rehearsal completely. Most weeks a small number took up the option.

Rehearsals were back to normal in other ways. We reinstated weekly raffles to raise much-needed additional funds for our concerts, as well as the once-a-term bring and buys. Jacqui Richardson organised the raffles and Bridget the bring and buys; we thank them and everyone who contributed by supplying prizes and items for sale, and by buying raffle tickets and gifts/produce.

Your Committee and a number of other volunteers have worked tirelessly behind the scenes during the year. MFC Rules and the Welcome letter for new members were updated and thanks go to Joy and Alice for their work on these. The Rules were subsequently issued to all members, and we gently remind everyone to read through them again, to ensure you understand your responsibilities as a member of our Chorus.

Having agreed to take on the role of Safeguarding Officer, Joy reviewed our Policy to ensure it is still fit for purpose and we are following the protocols, and Barbara and Joy led the process to ensure that the retention of members' data adheres to the guidelines within the GDPR Policy.

Another way in which normality was resumed was the production of full Concert Programmes, with advertising to help fund the cost. A team led by Jackie Tolliday swung into action in the autumn term to produce the first programme. Businesses which advertised in the past were approached, most of whom agreed to resume their activity with us, and a small number of new contributors was found. Thank you to Jackie, Mary Whitehouse, Alice, Barbara and Ian (ensuring we received the money!), who worked on this. There is a lot of other work to be done when compiling the programmes and we thank Jackie, Alice, Heather Williamson, who prepares the programme notes, and Edwina for her proof-reading contribution.

We are also indebted to Jackie T for her work to maintain the website and in obtaining features in the press. When writing a PR piece to send to the local press we try to include some interesting facts about the concert that we hope will catch the attention of the reporters. We had considerable success in obtaining features in the Gazette this season.

Thanks also for help received in putting on concerts: Bridget for designing and printing tickets for sale to members, Richard Rosoman for managing the sales and members for volunteering family and friends to man the doors and sell programmes, Malcolm Corlett for helping Kevin to collect and bring in staging when required and Bridget and all those who provided food for, and helped with, putting on the Come & Sing tea and concert drinks.

Our social event for the year was a Quiz night for members, partners and friends. Jacqui R found an excellent venue in the Swan at Newland, Kevin supplied the questions and was quizmaster, Alice scored and the conservatory was full to capacity. A good evening was had by all, even those in teams which didn't come first or second in the friendly competition! Thank you to everyone involved.

We had sad news during the season of the death of a former long-standing member of MFC, Jean Clift. Condolences were sent to her family on behalf of the choir.

Kevin has once again worked tirelessly as Chairman on our behalf. Thank you, Kevin for supporting me and for steering the Committee through another busy year. Our thanks also to Jonathan, for a full season of singing, for challenging us with new pieces and for all the work you do behind the scenes to put on our concerts, and to Penny, our rehearsal accompanist. MFC simply couldn't exist without dedicated people in these key roles.

We have another full season in prospect for 2023-24, starting with our collaboration with the 1885 Singers to bring Mendelssohn's Elijah to an audience in London in November, a concert in which a number of our members will take part, and in Malvern in February when we'll welcome members of the 1885 singers to join us. We hope you will continue to enjoy singing with us and whenever possible, provide your support for our activities and projects.

We'll be starting the new season with an Open Rehearsal on Tuesday 5th September, and we look forward to welcoming you and your singing friends then.

Barbara Moss – Secretary August 2023

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT

In common with other amateur choirs across the country, our membership suffered greatly during COVID. Many of our older members decided to retire from singing altogether, we sadly lost some members through their deaths and despite our best efforts through weekly Zoom practises and monthly newsletters, many former members did not return to the choir or respond to enquiries about their possible return. We were unsure of just how many members we actually had left, but regular singers numbered only between 35 and 40.

The very successful 'Messiah' Come and Sing at the end of the 2021/22 season however, showed that the appetite for choral singing was still there, even if some folk were still cautious about attending group singing activities. Joyously we also had previous members rejoin us and therefore started last season with 73 singers, of whom 9 were new choir members, giving us 22 sopranos, 30 altos, 8 tenors and 13 basses. We also decided to compile a new database of members to ensure we have up to date information, and so requested that all members renew their membership forms.

Over the year we have both lost some members due to ill health, often from recurring throat/ chest problems and gained much valued new ones. At the end of the season, numbers were holding up, with 23 sopranos, 28 altos, 8 tenors and 12 basses – a total of 71 singers. We count ourselves a welcoming, friendly, open group of people and continue to actively recruit new members, looking forward to the continuing growth and health of the choir.

Joy Black - Membership Secretary August 2023

Friends of Malvern Festival Chorus

Since the world and MFC reopened following the pandemic there have been various pleas to members for recruitment – of new members, of committee members, of volunteers to help with various tasks – which is vital if we are to continue as a big choir performing the large choral works which give us so much joy. And there is a further element to this recruitment to ensure our long-term viability: Friends of Malvern Festival Chorus.

Numbers in the Chorus and the Committee have increased since last year but the number of Friends stands stubbornly at three (via two members). It is a difficult time to ask family and friends to join as Friends but the reality is that, if people outside the membership of the Chorus are not brought in, the financial burden of rehearsals and performances is borne entirely by members. So it is in your interests as members to try to persuade people to become Friends.

I know that there are members of the audience at our concerts who come every time we perform. Why not invite them to become a Friend so that they can feel more part of us? We do try to make a fuss of our Friends!

To be a Friend costs £45 per year for which they receive a ticket for two concerts a year and a discount of 25% off a third concert (not including charity concerts). They also receive a programme (in which they are acknowledged) and invitations to our social events and the AGM.

Alternatively, a Member can become a Friend themselves and pass on (by gifting or selling) their complimentary tickets. This means that if you invite different people to concerts you can still support the choir in this way.

We would love to have a large 'family' of Friends who can feel part of MFC and help to support us, but we can only do that if you introduce us to them.

As ever, I am very happy to answer any questions you may have and my contact details are on the website.

Alice Osmond - Friends' Secretary July 2023
