Church Choir Report 2017 *Tom Howling*

January 2017 saw the inaugural *Bach at Twilight* concert. This was the first in a monthly series of concerts held in church by our own Director of Music Andrew Dean. This concert series ran throughout the year principally with Andrew at the organ (helped by the best page-turner in the world, Matthew Howling) but also featuring guest instrumentalists. The programme of each concert reflected the time of year playing the music of Bach in the candlelight in which it was originally performed. To get the ‘twilight effect’, each concert started at a time which corresponded to near-sunset (which was sometimes visible). This meant that the first concert was on late afternoon whereas by the summer, the concerts were late in the evening. These proved to be very special and popular events which brought many new faces into the church throughout the year. The concerts were enhanced significantly by the hard work of Chris Mann and Peter Williams behind the scenes stage-managing each event and projecting the organ playing onto a big screen at the front of church. A seasonal flavour was also brought by the ‘free bar’ proving a range of seasonal refreshment either at the interval or in the case of the summer concerts, before the start.

In February we took Choral Evensong on tour to Bradford Cathedral. It was an excellent day out complete with a curry organised by Ian Dayes. The cathedral staff looked after us well and appreciated our visit.

The choir played its usual role over the Easter services supporting worship on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday with a varied repertoire of seasonal music.

With exams looming Eve Goldspink stepped down as Head Chorister and retired from the choir – we wish her well in the future and hopes she continues to use her beautiful singing voice.

Monthly Choral Evensongs continued on the third Sunday of the month building up the repertoire needed for the choir’s summer residential week singing the services in Winchester Cathedral.

The week in Winchester in early August, organised by Rachel Howling, was the highlight of the choir’s year. We stayed along with a merry band of supporters in Winchester University. The opportunity of self-catering provided inspiration for a pizza baking competition. The fire alarms only went off a few times and despite these interruptions the competition was won by Lynda Gwyther – her ‘pizza’ was outstanding in its originality. Andrew (assisted ably by John Le Grove) worked the choir very hard during the morning rehearsals polishing the music for the daily evensongs in the vast and ancient cathedral). Singing such beautiful music in that incredibly historic and special space was truly inspirational for all involved. A special mention for Ben Collyer who successfully negotiated accompanying a complete Choral Evensong in a cathedral for the first time and Emily Howling who sung a beautiful farewell solo in Mozart’s Laudate Dominium. At the end of the trip Emily stepped down as a long-serving Head Chorister and choir member with over a decade of service. Aside from the hard work getting the daily music ready and fit to shine in the Cathedral acoustic we had many other organised activities. These included a trip to Portsmouth Naval Dockyard, a walk across the water meadows to picnic at the beautiful St Cross Hospital and a visit to the Great Hall of Winchester Castle with its round table.

Following the summer break, in September we resumed our weekly routine of Friday evening rehearsals and Sunday morning services with monthly Choral Evensongs on the third Sunday of the month. Social activities included the annual golf day organised by Mike Benford-Miller and many of the younger choristers took a weekend off singing to go on the church youth trip to Edale.

In October we had another trip away for the day to sing in a cathedral. This time it was the turn of Wakefield Cathedral which is surprisingly close. Unfortunately Andrew was not able to go due to illness and we were led by John Le Grove and accompanied by George Herbert. We were also joined for the day by some friends from the choir of St George’s church in Stockport. Again the choir sung very well despite the challenge of competing with some amplified pan pipes being played in the street just outside! The Howells Collegium Regale evening service was especially memorable. The World Buffet experience (featuring chocolate fountain) again organised by Ian Dayes was but a short walk from the cathedral and nobody was left hungry.

Unfortunately Andrew’s illness meant that he needed time out for an operation and I stepped in to run the choir as Interim Choirmaster for the remainder of the year.

It was challenging to say the least to be without Andrew during Advent and Christmas – even more so as it needed to be good to give Alex and Nick a suitably glorious send-off. The choir rallied round and with the support of friendly organists from both within the choir (Ben Collyer and Elsa Shah) and our friends from nearby (John Le Grove and Reg Holmes) we managed to complete Advent and Christmas Carol services with even more music in than ever!

The preparation for the festive season started as Mellor Choir dictates in a small Welsh fort for a whole weekend of rehearsals and other fun. Two particular highlights this year: The biggest and best ever cabaret organised by Mike Benford-Miller and the food masterminded by Nick Sanders – with the help of his team he manages miracles on a low budget – cooked breakfast for 40… no problem. Roast dinner with all the trimmings and no fuss… Amazing! The preparation that the weekend in Belan allows us made the frantic festive music-making possible. We were cheered at Winter Wonderland, critically acclaimed by a mystery worshiper during advent and partied long into the night at the choir Christmas Party.

We looked forward to what 2018 had in store – Nick and Alex’s farewell service, Trip to Leicester Cathedral, Summer residency at Rochester Cathedral but most of all Andrew’s safe return and rehabilitation.