

## **SOME THOUGHTS.....**

*(as requested by Giles Pebody)*

In being asked to conduct the Phoenix Singers for a performance of "Messiah" last December, little did I know that, but months later on, I would find myself in a position of MD. I am well aware of the illustrious past of this choir – not least the legacy left by its founder, Malcolm Russell, who I had the pleasure to know when my family and I were in Suffolk in a previous life!

Giles has asked me to write about how I see my role and the musical development of the choir. This I am happy to do but it is important for members to realise that I am NOT Drew Cantrill and that any comments I make, and thoughts that I have, are not an implied criticism of what has gone before. Drew and I worked well together and I have great admiration for the professional work that he was able to do with the Phoenix Singers over the last five or so years. However, I am very different and well aware that my methods are not necessarily what everyone likes. By taking the choir for that term prior to the "Messiah" performance, at least you know what you are getting!

So first of all, let me make it crystal clear that our music making together (note!) has got to be fun and enjoyable. I have always believed that the power of music is to evoke many thoughts – some happy, some tragic – but underpinning all those thoughts are that participants need to enjoy what they are doing. Do not mistake my terrible jokes and somewhat bizarre sense of humour as anything other than a means to an end. The final result of our rehearsals and concert preparations needs to be as professional as possible in EVERY way – not just musical but in how we dress, how we 'perform', how we present ourselves walking on and off the stage. This all adds to the experience of the performers and the audience alike.

My constant mantra is: "to the composer, be true". We, as musicians, need to respect the intentions of the composer, producing as near as possible the accuracy of the notation BUT ALSO the musical atmosphere that we suppose was intended. The role of the conductor is to prepare the performers to reproduce the musical notation (notes, dynamics etc) accurately but the *interpretation* is everything to do with the "atmosphere" – and that becomes a matter of opinion!

Let us not forget, that Phoenix is a choir made up of a wide variety of singers. Some, possibly many, are experienced singers who have performed for many years in other choirs and bring a wide range of repertoire. There are others who are less experienced, find reading music difficult and struggle with the more difficult works in the choral repertoire. In this category, I admire those who do not read music but who perform totally from memory. We are a COMMUNITY CHOIR; no auditions, no sight-reading nor notational skills required. The trick is to mould these two disparate peoples into a cohesive whole. That requires the more experienced to patiently help those less experienced – not least by understanding the need to go over and over again passages of music, week on week.

The concert, at the end of such preparations, is but the icing on the cake; but that too has to be enjoyed. It is self-defeating to go into a final performance tense, frightened, worried. When that happens, the end result is always less than satisfactory. A sense of "well, we got away with that" should not be a phrase in our book. Consequently, works chosen, rehearsals scheduled, the amount of music to be performed, all need to be considered in the light of the above.

I want my singers to go into a concert well-prepared, obviously, but at the same time relaxed and in good voice to ENJOY the experience (that word again!). You will notice that in this season's rehearsal schedule there is no rehearsal on the Friday evening before the Saturday concert. If you cannot sing the work by the final Wednesday, what is the point in adding a further two to three hours two days later? All that happens is that you become tense and, worse, end up with no voice. Similarly, my final afternoon rehearsal is but a stitching together of the various performers; it is NOT a full-blown rehearsal, nor is it a performance – that is for the evening.

The programme of works for the next two years has been already decided. I was happy to go along with all that had been suggested and there are some standard repertoire works there: Mozart Requiem, John Passion, Britten St Nicholas, Kodaly Missa Brevis, Dvorak Stabat Mater. Hopefully, a variety of styles for everyone to enjoy and to challenge us. However, interspersed with these works, it will be good to have "study days" (seems to be the buzz phrase these days) when we can invite professional singers to spend a day with us, working on vocal techniques and exploring the voice as an instrument. Such days are also an opportunity to invite other interested people to join us.

To that end, each choir member (not just Committee Members) have a responsibility to encourage, cajole, persuade, friends and acquaintances to join the choir. It would be good to swell the ranks and, with a "social break" in rehearsals, enjoy new-found friendships. Enjoying each other's company leads to trust and that, in turn, leads to a better musical cohesion. We then work together as a choir not just a number of individual singers.

Finally, it is very easy to look at our audiences and consider that job "done". We need to attract full houses at EVERY concert, not just those "Monteverdi Vespers occasions"! The cost of concerts is rising steadily, not least in the fees of soloists. Working with orchestras has never been cheap but by attracting more and more people to our performances (fully confident that we are worth listening to, by the way), that makes possible financial stability and a secure future. That is part of my role too, as I see it. Keep the costs down as far as possible without compromising the quality..... something that becomes more and more difficult, year on year.

So, there you have it. Lots of words for you to digest and consider. I am happy for people to talk to me about anything I have written, of course. I look forward to us working together, enjoying what we do on a week by week basis, and always striving to achieve the very best musically, matched to our individual abilities.

***"We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams".....***  
(this is on my repertoire list too but just the quote will suffice for now!!)