

WIMBLEDON CHORAL SOCIETY

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on Monday 25 September 2023 at St Mark's Church Wimbledon

The meeting began at 19.30 with Sarah Hendry in the chair and approximately 135 members and 5 apologies.

Anthony Wilkinson updated the choir on the Wimbledon concert hall project. The plan has room for a choir of 200 so that WCS will be able to perform there. He is still actively progressing various possible sources of funding and some parties are seriously considering funding for the hall. The CEOs of all the major London orchestras are very supportive. Anthony Wilkinson thanked the choir for their contributions and said that the website for the concert hall had been updated with input from Frank Gehry and the Merton Music Foundation.

Minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting held on 26 September 2022

Approval of these minutes was proposed by Neil Dennis and seconded by John Paramore. They were approved unanimously.

Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

Music Director's Report

Neil Ferris 'report:

We did a triptych of passions and an important reflection on last season was that this was the first full season out of Covid and concerts being affected by Covid, and I was thoroughly delighted by the musical attainment in all of the concerts. Your singing was superb.

The November concert in Cadogan Hall was affected by Covid and our audience was impacted. We sang Alison Willis' *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and Howard Goodall's *Unconditional Love* and your singing was superb and passionate.

Jo Tomlinson conducted the Christmas concert and she was absolutely delighted with your singing. We have taken into account feedback from you and the afternoon concert this year will be slightly different to the evening concert – it is too difficult to do two completely different concerts.

At Southwark Cathedral we did Bach's *St John Passion* and that will stay with me for a long time. It was one of my favourite concerts ever - especially that final chorale – it

was very fine singing and the conveying of the story showed how much you were committed.

We were back in Southwark Cathedral in June with Will Todd and his band to perform his *Missa Brevis* and *Passion Music* and had a blast. It was a wonderful atmosphere with a lot of fun.

For me it was really important to have a whole season unaffected by Covid and all the backwash. Your overall performance levels were astonishingly high and I am so proud of what we did together.

Due to the size of our choir, we are a little stuck on venues for our concerts. There is not quite enough room to perform with a full size symphony orchestra in Southwark Cathedral, Cadogan Hall or Holy Trinity. If we want to perform the big oratorios we need to go to Royal Festival Hall or Fairfield Halls. The latter is a beautiful hall with a great acoustic but you don't like bringing your audience there which I understand. However, if the committee decide to go back to Fairfield Halls it is because we wish to do a big oratorio and I would ask for your support with that should we try again. We had trouble at Fairfield Halls with the management and the marketing as they had just opened up again after Covid. I am just planting that seed as it is really important for us as an organisation that we can perform the large scale choral works. We might have to go back there before a concert hall is built in Wimbledon.

Thank you to all on the two committees. I am incredibly fortunate to work alongside a superb group of people. Thank you to Sarah for her inspiring leadership and I have really enjoyed working alongside you. Thank you to Michael who makes every rehearsal so easy and to John Britton, Laura, Helen and now Paula who have to work with me – thank you.

Thank you to all the choir for your smiling faces and commitment. A great year and I am looking forward to this new one.

Chair's Report

Sarah Hendry 'report:

It was a great singing season and it was great to be back. It was a themed triptych of passion which was an exciting idea from Neil. It encouraged people to think about what passion music really means and the contemporary take from Howard Goodall and the modern settings as well as *St John Passion*. It was a great idea and worth thinking about in the future about season themes with potential for marketing the whole series.

Reflections on Gratitude and Remembrance was unfamiliar music which we gradually got to know and appreciate and by the last few rehearsals everyone had really got into Goodall and Willis as well as Chilcott. It was a dramatic and emotional performance which deserved a full house. The discussion with composers was very successful too

and brought an extra dimension to the concert – one of the great benefits of working with contemporary composers which Neil has always encouraged us to do.

Christmas – as well as performing the live premiere of Michael's *Christmas Fantasy* at last it was a pleasure being conducted by Jo Tomlinson who keeps us on our toes.

It was wonderful to perform *St John Passion* to a full cathedral in the spring with top class soloists and Florilegium. There was lots of enthusiastic feedback and it was great to be back at Southwark Cathedral twice.

The Third Passion music concert with Will Todd was extraordinary – again the presence of the composer added an extra dimension which is one of the other exciting things about performing contemporary works. It was an amazing experience.

Singfest is getting bigger and more established. Huge thanks to Colleen Spalding who does so much work for it and Peter Burton for writing *Little Trotty Wagtail*.

A lot of us were able to join in the *Sea Symphony* collaboration with Barts Choir, which was as a result of us being a high class choir so we get these opportunities - like us singing Carmina Burana this term with The Bach Choir.

Reflections on the season – I think that you are brilliant that you are so willing to take on unfamiliar music and be open to unfamiliar music and formats – there are always a few people who 'can't stand jazz' or 'don't like Howard Goodall – 'give it a chance! By the time we got to the end of the rehearsals we were so emotional at the concert it was great singing both those pieces.

The release of the album was so exciting to get all those star reviews and the acknowledgement of so many reviews gave to the role of the choir in financing the commissioning and the recording. It puts us in a different league to the vast majority of amateur choirs. You are a very special choir to have got behind this with all the fundraising. It was a huge achievement and you should be very proud of it.

There are challenges facing all choirs in getting audiences back. November was unlucky. We have performed on Bonfire Night before but we had a limited choice of dates. But we underestimated the difficulty in getting the audience back after two years of staying at home, plus a rail strike and terrible weather. It was not just us – Hertfordshire Chorus made a big loss on their *Mass in Blue* anniversary at Cadogan Hall. We did not bring in enough on tickets overall to balance the season budget. John will say more about that and the importance of maintaining reserves.

We could try to find cheaper venues, for example churches, but we are big and surveys always tell us that you want to perform in concert halls with top class musicians.

There is a critical role of choir members in selling tickets. We know from long experience that family and friends are crucial. Membership can't be just about turning up and singing – it's also about bringing in the audience and the ticket revenue. It is everyone's responsibility. It is not a big ask.

It has been a pleasure to have a range of young guest conductors who took us when Neil couldn't be here who were impressive and encouraging to experience the range of talent out there in the up and coming generation of conductors. We can all be very confident in the future of choral singing with that range of talent.

Thanks to all the committee members this season and to all the volunteers who have helped in big and small ways. Special mention for Helen who stood down as concert manager after a number of years. It is a stressful job and you just made it look easy. Isla is also standing down as deputy chair and you have been a rock over the years with your wisdom and your calming help throughout Covid - thank you very much indeed.

As I am standing down after eight years as Chair and ten years as concert manager. I want to extend my thanks to everyone who's made it such a proud and fulfilling thing to have done. It has been fun and energising. I've been very lucky to build on the foundations and vision laid by Neil Dennis. The DVR commission, premiere, recording, and now the cycle is beginning again with a new commission.

We did not foresee the pandemic which was a really hard time. We've come through it together and we are rebuilding momentum. Times look very bright indeed.

An enormous thank you to Neil and Michael we are so lucky to have such an outstanding team. Both are so modest and always go the extra mile for WCS. It is such a privilege to work alongside you both.

Most of us can be anxious about change - whether that's when Michael Ashcroft retired, or Neil Dennis stood down as my predecessor. Change is positive – the whole Exec has turned over in the last seven years and the show has stayed on the road. No individual is what makes this choir as special as it is – it is all of you that make it special.

Thanks to everyone who made it a pleasure for me and for your love and support for the choir in the hard times as well as the good ones. I know that you will continue to do the same for Alex and Ian and the committee.

Speech by Neil Dennis:

In our anniversary year of 2015, we needed someone with a steady hand to take us on this journey we were taking and to widen our reach and reputation. I had far too many fingers in far too many pies at the time so it was essential that we re-established the role of a proper chair for the Society. Back then the choir was very fortunate to have a

very effective concert manager who was also a member of the exec team and so knew how the choir operated and who played a significant part in it. Sarah agreed to take on the role of chair - for a while. I knew we had the right person to take it on. What a ride it has been. Sarah has been every inch the person we needed for the job - a very capable pair of hands and leading from the front, managing the exec team with a well organised and firm but fair approach to the meetings ensuring actions were taken up in a timely manner and notably providing much needed stability through a period of great turbulence. One of the main achievements that she mentioned earlier was seeing the *Da Vinci Requiem* from concept to that spectacular world premiere performance in the Royal Festival Hall including being interviewed by the BBC and more latterly finally seeing the production of the commercial recording of the same. Sarah has championed deepening and widening the choir's local connections in particular across Merton and most notably in playing a key role in establishing the Merton Singfest and encouraging all singers of all ages and capabilities to express their love of singing. During her reign we have also witnessed her at her very organised best when the carpet was taken out from under the feet of the BBC singers. As pockets of outcry were beginning to form in other parts of the musical world Sarah recognised that non professional choirs like us also needed their voices to be heard. The astonishing campaign that she launched across social media in March this year resulted in a letter being sent to the BBC signed by over 230 choirs that represented nearly 20,000 singers across the UK with coverage by the national press and Sarah being again interviewed by the BBC. Without a doubt this played a part in making the BBC at least suspend that decision - a major achievement and I take my hat off to you – magnificent.

Perhaps the toughest challenge was the period that kicked off in March 2020 with the worldwide Covid pandemic and the serious impact it had on all live music activities especially choral for the best part of two years. Drawing on all her experience of managing and organising in the face of adversity Sarah worked with the team and Neil and Michael to ensure that the choir stayed alive and kept in contact with all the choir members. Through online sessions, virtual recording, and the occasional sneaky rehearsal, emails and every other tool available so that when we able to rehearse safely we still felt that we were still one big Wimbledon Choral family.

It is also where her kind and generous side were noticeable, although that was evident throughout her time as chair. She would be the first to divert the credit for driving this choir forward on its journey to her team around her but there has to be a leader, a chair, a guide, a driver, a public representative, a listener, a captain to run this ship with a vision and this has been an exceptional captain.

Sarah on behalf of everyone we extend our warmest thanks to you for the terrific job that you have done. I am delighted that there is now a second member of the PCC – the Past Chairman's Club. Well done.

Treasurer's Report

John Gale's report:

The year to 30th June 2023 was our first 'full' year of concerts since the year ended June 2019, the year during which I took over the role of Treasurer.

We held four wonderful concerts in the year, but for a variety of reasons, which have been discussed at length by your Committee and Executive, we continue, as do many other choirs, to be frustrated by lower than expected ticket revenue. As a result, our financial performance does not reflect our superb musical performance. That said, last year's significant increase in the membership subscription, the first in four years, contributed to a surplus in general receipts and payments of approximately £18,000 which went a long way to covering our concert losses.

As you will see from page 5 of the accounts, we paid the balance of the costs relating to our recording and purchased a stock of CDs. Whilst sales of the CDs have yet to cover the cost, we do have nearly 500 (approximately half) in stock for sale now and in the future and I anticipate receiving our first royalty payment on the worldwide sales of physical and digital product by Signum Classics sometime before the end of the current financial year. It takes the best part of a year for royalties to work their way through the system and you will remember that the recording was only released at the beginning of April of this year.

Also encouraging, is the increase in hire income from the use of our music library by other choirs.

The overall difference in receipts and payments for the year results in a net reduction of £3,851 in our accumulated reserves.

Whilst on the subject of reserves, I would like to address comments from members that have been fed back to me as to why the Society feels the need to fundraise, whilst holding the level of reserves that it does.

Wimbledon Choral Society is a Registered Charity and your Executive are its Trustees. Charities are required to hold reserves for a variety of reasons, but primarily in order to safeguard the charity's future and to prevent insolvency. The level of reserves to be held by any particular charity is not defined, but has to be determined by the trustees based upon the specific perceived risks applicable to the charity concerned. There is no right or wrong amount to hold in reserve, but your Executive has from time to time discussed its 'Reserve Policy' which, as stated at the top of page 3 of the Trustees

Report and Accounts, reads as follows: *“The Trustees consider it prudent that the Society should maintain reserves sufficient to cover the costs for a whole season.”* I make no apology for that policy and in the light of what happened to choirs during Covid, I think your Executive made a very wise decision. We plan concerts a year or more in advance and sometimes enter into financial commitments which have to be met regardless of whether the event goes ahead. As an example, had Covid struck a few weeks later than it did, we might well have had to pay the artists and other costs in relation to our recording which was scheduled for May 2020 – without being able to actually make that recording.

Costs will of course change from year to year based upon the nature of the concerts performed. Last year our total payments amounted to £99,470 – whereas our total general reserves, after deducting funds specifically allocated (as set out in note 2 on page 7 of the accounts), amounted to £71,469. It is for that reason that we have budgeted for a surplus in the current financial year in order to restore our reserves to a more prudent level.

Turning to Fundraising, when I joined the choir in 2001, raising funds for the choir was not so much an occasional one-off event, but something that went on all the time. Every week there would be a table selling a variety of items, music scores, second-hand records and CDs, plants and so on and I think there was a separate fund raising committee at the time.

In the 22 years since then, I can remember only two special appeals for funds – the first was to help towards the cost of our Centenary Concert at the Royal Festival Hall and the second more recent appeal was to help meet the cost of our first recording. Whilst the costs of the recording worked out at approximately £200 per member, donations were entirely voluntary and everyone did whatever they could to contribute to the final result – many spent countless hours making things for sale and I think everyone would agree that the overall collective effort was well worth it. At no point has any member been required to pay more than their normal annual subscription to belong to the Society, so I hope no one feels that they are always being asked for money.

We do seek to find additional funding from outside of our membership. You might have noticed in recent programs a beautiful advert inviting gifts and bequests that can be used for the purpose of dedicating either a concert or musical composition in memory of someone, or something. This is a long-term project, with the aim of building a ‘legacy fund’ to enable Wimbledon Choral to commission new works and to put on concerts that we might not otherwise be able to afford. We also have a vacancy on the Executive for a Sponsorship Officer whose role it would be to foster relationships with local and national organisations with the hope of obtaining advertising revenue and

grant funding. This position has been vacant for as long as I can remember and it would be wonderful if a member felt able to take this on.

Finally I should like to express our thanks to Annette Cowley for carrying out her annual Independent Review of our accounts as required by Charity Law.

Membership Contributions for 2023-24

Following last year's significant increase, we propose more modest increases this year as follows:

Full subscription – an increase from £180 to £190;

Reduced Rate for the Registered Unemployed from £75 to £80;

Reduced Rate for those aged 25 or younger from £75 to £80;

Rate for full time students – no change, remaining at £30

Full information together with details of how to pay will be made available on our website following this meeting.

Approval of the accounts was proposed by Fiona Wickens and seconded by Martin Wake. It was carried unanimously.

The subscription rates were proposed by Alex Youel and seconded by Isla Smith. The subscription rates were unanimously approved by the meeting.

Election of Executive Group and Officers

The role of concert co-ordinator is a co-opted role and appointed by the Exec committee and Paula Lambe has been appointed.

The following officers were proposed for election to the Executive Group of the Committee: -

Alex Youel	Chairman
Ian Gleeson	Vice Chairman
Tracy Sherman	General Secretary
John Gale	Treasurer
Anna Lemmon	Publicity Officer

These elections were proposed by Jeremy Collis and seconded by Peter Hickson and carried unanimously.

The following officers were proposed for election to the Committee: -

John Britton	Librarian	Laura Stewart	Membership Secretary
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These elections were proposed by Tilly Richardson and seconded by Sharon Smith and carried unanimously.

The following Voice Representatives were proposed for election for a two-year term:

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Therese Kennedy-Laing (Sop 1) Sarah Harris (Alto 2)

Peter Hickson (Bass 1)

These elections were proposed by Laura Stewart seconded by Sharon Smith and carried unanimously.

Commissioning

Neil Ferris: We commission small pieces and large projects like those from Cecilia McDowall and Michael. The update for the latest commission is that Tarik O'Regan is looking to write a major work for us for 2026. He is from Croydon and now lives in the USA. We have not yet signed the contract and we are looking for a co-sponsor in the USA but we will have first rights to the recording. It will be about 30 minutes or so. It will have an orchestration to fit into Cadogan Hall. The themes are to be explored. He is not available until late 2025 hence the date of 2026.

Neil explained that he gave a list of 10-12 composers to the commissioning committee of male and female, global and a mixture of established and young composers. This was reduced to 3 then to 1.

Neil was asked if it was secular or religious and said that he did not know but probably secular as we have not had discussions around a religious text.

We are getting a payment for the *Carmina Burana* concert which will go into the commissioning fund.

Any Other Business

Three charities presented to the choir on why they should be chosen for the Christmas concerts. They were Nerve Tumours, Katherine Low Settlement and Learn English Together.

The meeting closed at 20.43

In the interval, the choir voted and Nerve Tumours was voted to be the charity for the 6pm Christmas concert and Learn English Together was voted to be the charity for the 3pm concert.