

## **EADCA: CORONAVIRUS UPDATES**

### **JUNE 2020 BEXHILL CHORAL**

We stopped rehearsals in March and haven't met since but I've kept in touch via email, and a couple of phone calls to 2 members who aren't on email.

We rescheduled our May concert to October, thinking we'd be able to restart in September, but have now re-scheduled it to May 2021 - this is at the De La Warr Pavilion so they deal with bookings.

Subs have been suspended as they were just about to come due, we are paying the conductor to the end of June, and will have to consider what we do about both if, as seems likely, we still can't restart in September.

We decided rather apprehensively to dip our toes into Zoom rehearsals because we felt we were perhaps losing touch with members, and thought rather than wait until September we'd try it out now. We didn't actually ask the members, apart from the committee, but just sent a message saying we were going to try it, which did get some enthusiastic replies, then the meeting link and some basic instructions. It worked very well in some ways - 32 out of 64 members joined us, even some real technophobes who more or less got the hang of it, and after some chat and explaining the controls etc, we tried singing along to recordings of some of the short pieces we'd been practising for our May concert (so everyone had the music), while Ken conducted. We'd warned people in advance about muting and not being able to hear other people. The meeting lasted about an hour. People said afterwards that they enjoyed it and really loved seeing everyone and Ken and feeling connected to the choir again, but we did have issues with the sound quality of the recorded tracks and need to try to improve this. We're really at the experimental and steep learning curve stage at the moment.

So I would be really interested to have any advice from Heathfield or anyone else who is doing this!

I agree with all the comments about risk assessments etc. - it's going to be very difficult to make decisions and we'll have to see what happens later in the year.

### **JUNE 2020 CONCENTUS**

We suspended rehearsals in early March including cancelling our June concerts and all other external events. The committee immediately met to discuss the best way forward as our primary focus was in member welfare.

We first devised an all-choir weekly phone contact with each committee member being given 9 member names, who proceeded to ring the first 3. Having chatted to each of the 3, they in turn were given 2 members to ring so that between them, the 6 remaining members of this cluster also received welfare calls. Over the next 2 weeks a different set of 3 members were rung each week, so that over the 3 week period, every member in the cluster received a call from a different person. At the end of the 3 week period, each committee member was given another set of 9 names and so the process started all over again. The end result is that many members often end up speaking to another member whom they are not familiar with.....and from that new friendships have been born! Might seem a bit complicated but it has been extremely interesting in finding out different things and talents of members that had never to date come to the fore?!

We also started a newsletter which is circulated to all every 2-3 weeks containing choir news and updates, articles of interest, a quiz and explanations of member achievements during lockdown.

Our next move was to finalise our Christmas concert programme. From this, two of our members set to work creating rehearsal training CD's containing all of our entire programme of music, both in full version and fully parted SATB lines, including secondary lines where appropriate.

Having purchased our repertoire of music, we scanned the scores then emailed them to all of our members. Only two are not on email so their copies were posted to them. This action meant that we could now start to learn their music with the aid of the CD's for those who required them.

At the same time we investigated various online media platforms for holding 'virtual' meetings and having trialled a considerable number of them, concluded that Zoom was the most user-friendly and reliable. As the 'free' downloadable version generally only allows 40mins use at any one time, we took the decision to purchase an annual licence (£120.00) which enables unlimited use of uninterrupted time per session.

Although a good number of our members are IT familiar, we also have a considerable number of members who had little or absolutely no idea as to how to use the technology. We therefore set up an IT support team consisting of 4 members, who between them carried out numerous Zoom training sessions with the latter category of members. The way this operated was for one of the team to set up a Zoom meeting and remain online, whilst the other 3 support crew would ring the individual members in their homes and physically talk them through the process, whilst at the same time each support team member was monitoring the Zoom meeting screen to ensure that everything was happening as it should. The end result was heart-warming to the point that the newly trained members now not only participate in rehearsals (more on that later) but have amazed their families and especially their grandchildren in their new-found 'techy' prowess in having Zoom meetings with them, and also with their friends! This in itself has opened up a completely new line of communication which is exceptionally valuable to a number of our members who live alone.

During this process we also carried out some pilot Zoom rehearsals between committee members to investigate the best way to transmit music to the members, and also to establish how the latter could best interact in individual practice session?

Having worked out a system, we held a couple of trial full-choir rehearsals. One of our 'techies' hosted the meeting and I was made 'co-host', so giving me the ability to mute all members as I took rehearsal. For the provision of played music, I either use a rehearsal training CD (recorded into my iPad) or a keyboard, both of which were being played through an amplifier to my side. We concluded that better quality sound is gained to members in me playing music 'through the air' (with sound going from the amp then into the laptop microphone) as opposed playing it 'from' my laptop. These rehearsals were very well received and members confirmed they gained a lot out of the sessions.

Due to the success of Zoom, we soon established that we can form 'breakout' rooms! Having opened the 'meeting room', we then form 3 additional 'breakout' rooms. Following my welcome and notices at the start of each session (and having previously 'assigned' the Sops, Alto's and Basses), we then send each voice range into one of breakout rooms. We are very fortunate to have an MD team of 4, therefore one of us goes into each room, so allowing us to simultaneously hold SATB rehearsals. Following 30 mins we bring everyone back into the 'main room' and collectively sing what the individual voices ranges have just learned. Following this it's back to the breakout rooms again for another 20 mins or so to learn another song, then we end the session by all coming together again and recapping on the evenings learning.

Zoom does have limitations in that due to the need to mute members, I cannot hear anyone singing, unless I unmute any individual who requests help with any part of the music. However each member still has the opportunity to individually sing their parted line against the full backing track. We can never replicate the full benefits of 'live' rehearsals, however we feel we have the best gain that we can possibly achieve in consideration of the prevailing circumstances! More importantly the gains are far better than doing nothing!

Re professional fees, in being a founder member and the MD, I do not claim any form of payment. In consideration of the circumstances our accompanists have also declined receiving retention payments of their fees, so we are very lucky in this regard.

Re membership fees, as we had previously rehearsed for just over 2 of the 6 months of our spring term, we decided that as our autumn term is only 4 months duration, those members who had already paid their Spring term fees will not be charged any more for singing in this coming Autumn term.

Whilst we all accept the uncertainties of what lies ahead and timescales of being permitted to sing collectively again, we are nevertheless working positively towards recommencing rehearsals on Mon 7 September and in performing our Christmas concerts in December this year. We believe it is highly important to give our members a positive focus in having key milestones to work towards. Likewise we also accept that we may need to change our plans, which in effect have cost nothing to put into place and will lose nothing if these dates cannot be physically achieved.

In the event that return to rehearsals is permitted, we currently have a number of plans in place covering a wide variety of methodologies in bringing our members back together again, be that as a whole or in part.

In the event we are unable to perform our Christmas concerts in our usual performance venues and only if permissible, we already have plans in place to sing externally in ensuring our learning can be put into practice whilst at the same time, giving our members a sense of purpose and achievement.

Looking on the bright side and if we are unable to perform any of our music this coming December, then we have our Christmas 2021 programme of music sorted, as we do for our June 2021 concerts!

In consideration of everything said above viz rehearsal/concert/singing-wise etc, the safety, welfare and well-being of our members remains of paramount importance. Accordingly we will only act in accordance with government and all other official advice and only then, following our own invasive risk assessment before making any final decisions of our modus operandi going forward.

We are all living in very strange times at the moment which has caused us to adapt and do things in different ways to our norm. Accordingly our mantra is not to dwell on what we can't do and doesn't work, but to channel our minds and efforts on what we can do and to make it work!

I hope the above is helpful and we will be only too pleased to offer assistance and support to any group if anything referred to above proves to be of interest.

## **JUNE 2020 DOWNLAND SINGERS**

Having stopped rehearsals at the beginning of lock-down Downland now have an Easter repertoire on hold, hopefully for 2021.

As Alastair and I had anticipated being on holiday throughout May our rehearsal schedule had been changed somewhat. Realising the importance of keeping in contact with our members, I sent out a Newsletter encouraging people to keep in touch – this continues on a monthly basis and includes news from members, quizzes, humour and passing on information regarding the current situation. Apart from one, everyone has email and so this is a quick and efficient method of distributing the Newsletter.

Our choir hostess is maintaining regular telephone calls with the membership.

Our committee trialled a Zoom meeting and although not everyone was confident enough to join in, we managed a meaningful discussion and agreed to trial Zoom rehearsals.

While this can in no way replace the interaction of a “live” rehearsal, it does help us all to stay in touch and allows individuals to work on learning pieces if they so choose. There are huge limitations and it is a steep learning curve, but it is better than nothing!

So far, we have held 4 sessions with an average attendance of 40% of members. The same people have returned each week which must indicate they are enjoying this form of contact. I am using the free package as I cannot justify the annual subscription at this early stage of the process. I use a PowerPoint presentation to take us through the rehearsal which includes our usual practice format of breathing exercises, warm-ups and repertoire. At the moment I am displaying the scores on the screen together with an audio file. All the teaching resource files are available in our choir Dropbox which everyone has access to. Desktops and tablets are fine but those accessing the rehearsal via a smartphone are obviously unable to see the score, so most have printed out copies for the time being. I have chosen pieces in the public domain.

Last week we logged in again after the rehearsal and held a social “chat”.

My next challenge is to try and encourage more members to join in. I agree with other comments here that, in some cases, this might be a lack of technological expertise, others may be afraid of treading an unfamiliar path, while one member has told me they want to sing with other voices around them and not in isolation.

As far as the venue is concerned, Trinity Church will not be open until September, following guidance from the church authorities. It is therefore not going to be possible for DS to meet on the premises before then. I intend to continue Zoom sessions until then with a possible break in August.

As our schedule usually includes some section rehearsals, I see this as a good way in to becoming “normal” again – if such a thing exists!

Fortunately, the choir does not have financial worries as neither Alastair nor I take a fee. As to subs – that is a decision yet to be taken by the committee.

## **JUNE 2020 EASTBOURNE CHORAL**

At present Eastbourne Choral Soc are not rehearsing at all. John, our MD, did offer last month to take some Zoom rehearsals on our old favourite, Vivaldi Gloria, which was to be included in our summer concert. However, apart from a few, ECS members seem very reluctant to sing online, so we have not pursued the idea at present. I am very grateful to Chris for explaining so clearly how it all works with Heathfield CS and I am going to send that part of his email to ECS members. I suspect some of the problem is a little “fear of the unknown”. I also appreciate that, as with me, part of

coming to choir is to be able to make music with others, chat with friends, have a cup of tea (and often cake!) with each other and generally feel part of a special community. I am using Zoom at present for school Governor meetings, which although necessary, seems very clinical and not a wonderful way to spend an evening, however lovely the people in the meeting are!

However, as it seems uncertain as to whether we can start rehearsing again properly in September, we may have to rethink. Perhaps by August we will know a little more and decide our course of action with a committee meeting. I have just exchanged emails with Andy, the bookings manager at All Saints church where we rehearse and he has no idea yet as to when they will be able to arrange church services let alone bookings for rehearsals etc. They are now preparing to open twice a week for two hours at a time for private prayer and are awash with “guidelines” about that alone!

We continue to pay our MD and accompanist a portion of their weekly fees, but this will have to stop at the end of the summer term, and we will see what happens in September. We do need to keep some savings for start up as it will be very difficult to judge income from subs and concert audiences for some time.

In order to start up again we will need to consider – Government advice, what the church will allow, how we can encourage people back,(some at present are hesitant about leaving the house), how we can rehearse safely (I have read so many articles on this I am quite confused!), and, above all, the wellbeing of our members.

In the meantime I send what I hope are upbeat emails to the choir each week with ideas of things to listen to, follow online, amusing clips etc to just try to keep the feeling of community going.

### **JUNE 2020 E/B SYMPHONY ORCH/CHOIR**

As most know, the Eastbourne Symphony Chorus meets for only one concert a year and has singers from many different groups.

We were unable to perform The Creation last April and so we have rescheduled it for Sunday 9 May 2021, as many now, I think. Rehearsals are minimum as many know it, and we welcome singers from all choirs who come to rehearsals when they can, hence some rehearsals on Sat afternoons. First rehearsal is 6 March...

It remains to be seen what 2021 holds! Best hang on to our hats...

### **JUNE 2020 HAILSHAM CHORAL**

Thank you very much for your detailed and encouraging emails. It is good to read about all the systems you put in place to keep your choir singing as well as your ‘pyramid’ phone chain - brings back memories of emergency contact before email! These are strange times and I don’t think there is a clear solution to any of the problems.

Hailsham Choral, like most, decided mid March that rehearsals would have to be stopped and concerts would have to be postponed. Our Samson concert was due on 28 March and initially this was postponed to 19 September, but that has now been cancelled. We hope to perform Samson in Spring 2021, all being well.

Our (new) MD, Rosie Howarth was initially not keen to do online rehearsals. She said these had not worked well for other choirs she knew and would be no substitute. I attended a Making Music meeting for choirs (on Zoom) and others did have regular rehearsals via Zoom, but these were mainly community choirs and enjoyed a nice sing-along and chat afterwards. Our committee discussed this on several occasions and the feedback from the choir was that people had little enthusiasm for that. Instead I have been compiling a newsletter every week, with choir members sending in memories, pictures, funny links anything to keep the choir together. This has become a feature of the week and seems to be very much appreciated.

At the last meeting when it was clear life would not return to normal anytime soon and we would be unlikely to return to physical rehearsals in September, we discussed online rehearsals again. Rosie was prepared to have sectional rehearsals, do some warm up exercises, learn some short pieces, by Rosie singing, and others on mute, singing along, and perhaps a chat afterwards. It would in no way replace 'proper' rehearsals, but keep us together as a choir. We put this idea to the choir and the majority is now willing to give this a go. We will start this in September.

Personally I completely agree with Linda in her last sentence about making a risk assessment about an isolated long life or a shorter life with singing and human interaction, but I also think that as those in charge of choirs, we need to take the least risky decisions. I have seen the conflicting reports on choirs, some saying they are hotbeds of infection, and others saying this is not the case, and I sit on the fence, I'm afraid. All we can do is follow the government's advice really. The majority of our singers are in the over 70's group, some with underlying health conditions so I'm not sure how many would actually return to rehearsals in the short term anyway.

Financially I guess we are lucky in that our rehearsal hall is a Civic Community hall and they have so far not charged us for cancelled dates. All members have paid their subs for the 2019/2020 year, but we are not asking for subs of course whilst we cannot rehearse, so we will not have income until rehearsals start up again. We are continuing to pay both MD and accompanist their honorariums for the time being, as we'd like them to be around when we do start up (and Will Hancox writes amazing anecdotes for the newsletter!). This will obviously be up for review if all this continues for a very long time.

## **JUNE 2020 HEATHFIELD CHORAL**

Heathfield CS stopped rehearsing mid March when the lockdown came into place, and cancelled our May and June concerts. After a couple of weeks hiatus as everyone got used to the new situation, we started Zoom rehearsals on April 13th. The word rehearsal is a bit of a misnomer though. It became clear fairly early on that doing any serious collective work on a piece was impossible. The technology is just not there to allow people to both sing their own part and hear other choir members with sufficient reliability and quality to be useful.

So we have focussed on learning a new SATB song each week. We are very lucky in that Sebastian, our new MD, is conducting all his singing teaching over Zoom, so he is well used to the principles of remote conducting. He prepares a backing track and distributes music in advance each week, and then guides each voice through its part, much as he would at a normal rehearsal. And he conducts all of us in a few run throughs of the piece at the end. We can all hear the backing track and our own voices, but of course we cannot (sadly) hear each other. It's far from ideal, but better than nothing, and has enabled us to add things to our repertoire that I am sure will be useful for our less formal concerts when things return (hopefully soon!) to normal.

Like others groups, this approach has been popular, but not universally so. We get a turnout of between 30 and 40% of the choir, but it seems to be the same group each week. We also allow a fair amount of time in breakout rooms for general chat, and this has been popular for getting members who would not normally talk to each other to strike up new friendships. Seb also plays a piece of music each week for reflection, normally a piece that he has chosen to illustrate a particular style or technique, and this has also been well received.

As far as the future, we will be holding a committee meeting (via Zoom!) in August to review the situation and government guidelines in place at the time and make a decision then on how to proceed. Our hearts all want to start the new term in September as normal, but our heads all fear that this will be impossible. We will make decision on subs for next year depending on what we decide then. We have the same demographic challenges as other societies, and have also to consider the problems of dealing with an audience which typically has the same issues as the members. There is also the question as to what restrictions our rehearsal and concert venues may place upon us. So the future is uncertain to say the least, we will hope for the best but plan for the worst.

### **JUNE 2020 LOCAL VILLAGES CHOIR**

We ceased rehearsing on March 16th and haven't met since. I have spoken to and read posts from many choir leaders attempting Zoom/Facebook rehearsals, and have concluded they are hopeless. Apart from the occasional group email to reconnect with people, inviting them to check in with news, we have not met, and have no plans to resume in the short term. The subs expired before Easter and have not been renewed. My income has fallen off a cliff.

However I have hatched a plan to try to use this lockdown hiatus as an opportunity for choristers to develop their choral skills by planting the idea of bringing willing participants together in quartets to develop the confidence to hold their own vocal line without the stabilizer wheels of others around them. I judge that there will soon come a time when 5 people in a large room (4 singers and me) could sing in harmony at 2m+ distance from one another. Taking the a cappella repertoire the LVC has performed relatively recently, or even the quartets and choruses from the Mozart Requiem, for which we were in mid-preparation, there has been some interest among some of my members to give this a try. These would take the form of private singing lessons more than choir rehearsals.

I've also kept an eye on the scientific research around singing, and I understand there is resistance to the notion that singing is toxic. This may be correlation over causation, with the Covid clusters reputedly found in some choirs across the US and Europe giving choirs a bad reputation when possibly it was as much the close proximity, even the means of sharing transport to and from rehearsals, that did the damage.

While I suspect Covid is here to stay, and there may well be a second spike in the late Autumn, I think we will each arrive at a calculated risk assessment, as we do when we drive a car or cycle, or visit a hot country with endemic malaria or eat shell fish, and decide whether we want an isolated long life or a shorter life full of human interaction and singing.

### **JUNE 2020 NOTEWORTHY VOICES**

## **JUNE 2020 PHOENIX CHOIR**

### **JUNE 2020 SEAFORD CHORAL**

A decision was made to continue to fully support our MD and accompanist throughout this pandemic and we will continue to do that.

Many of our choir members paid their normal choir subs despite Summer term being a relatively new addition to our normal practice. We are continuing to review all scientific evidence and will decide when it is safe to resume practices in our venue. We understand that singing will not take place in churches for the foreseeable future given the properties of Covid-19 and our present feeling is that unless a vaccine is in circulation before the end of the year we cannot meet again until 2021 at the earliest. The safety of our choir remains

paramount to our decision. We have considered outdoor singing but, given the aerosols we so efficiently produce and everyone 2 metres apart it is hard to see how we could avoid some being downwind.

We kept our choir informed via email newsletters and various committee members provided quizzes, and accounts of lockdown activity which were very interesting.

Our MD Colin, and Rebecca, one of our soloists made some recordings (sent out with newsletters) and this went down very well, especially at Easter when our next performance was due in St Leonards Church on Good Friday. Choir members had an open line to us

at all times so we could support when needed and they also sent us their activities - mainly with Gareth Malone. Everyone who has taken part has really enjoyed it. We let Gareth do our digital training for us. Thanks Gareth.

I wrote to the SCS committee again last week to openly discuss the situation and simplified it, giving five options of action. All responded with clear views and apart from one all agreed that, taking everything into account, we should not meet again until 2021 and

continue to support our musicians. Given the regulations for deep cleaning our venue (a large church) both before and after practices it was not viable. We will, of course, keep reviewing this.

We are exploring ways of some type of singing together digitally. One of our committee members has a vast knowledge of such things for which I am grateful. Our AGM, due in September will also be held digitally with papers and reports as well as voting done beforehand. We will continue to support our members. We are a community choir and this is important given the circumstances.

### **JUNE 2020 SOUTHDOWN SINGERS**