**BISHOPWEARMOUTH CHORAL SOCIETY**

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**Wednesday 10th September 2025, 7.30 p.m.**

**at Sunderland Minster.**

Minutes of the last AGM (2024) have been published on the Society website – under Members’ News.

Anyone without access to these can request a paper copy from the Secretary (Tel: 522 7721) as long as this is made before the meeting. Nomination Forms for the elections are also available from the same source.

**AGENDA**

1. Apologies for absence
2. Minutes of last AGM
3. Matters arising
4. Chairman’s Report
5. Treasurer’s Report
6. Conductor’s Report
7. Election of Officers
8. Election of Representatives
9. Any Other Business

**BISHOPWEARMOUTH CHORAL SOCIETY**

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – 2024/2025 SEASON**

This was held at Sunderland Minster, on Wednesday the 4th September 2024. The meeting began at 8.40 p.m., after an initial rehearsal, with Mike Foster in the chair and 39 members of the Society present.

**Apologies for Absence :**. LC, JG, MG, CA, EA, CR

**Minutes of the last A.G.M. :** These had been previously circulated and were unanimously accepted as a true record.

**Matters Arising :** None

The following reports were presented at the meeting and are reproduced below.

**The Chair’s Report :** This report was presented by M.F. :-

We have celebrated our 75th anniversary year in style. We had an excellent Christmas concert with a wide variety of music as well as support from Hill View Junior Singers. It was delightful to see young children and adults performing together.

Our second and major concert of the year was Elgar’s, “The Music Makers,” a large-scale challenging piece of music supported by a forty-piece professional orchestra. It was a genuine pleasure and honour to be a part of something so grand and beautiful.

And finally, we had something different again in presenting the Choral Society’s take on some of the greatest songwriters of the 20th century.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the outstanding skill, patience and musical expertise of our Musical Director, David Murray and our superb piano accompanist, Eileen Bown. We are truly blessed in having such excellent musicians and teachers to guide us. They make the greatest challenges manageable and achievable.

I would also like to thank the Committee who manage to keep the ball rolling and are always positive in facing a diverse range of challenges. Of course, the community of singers play the main part and I know that many singers are active in the background providing tea and coffee, raffles, support through coffee mornings, maintaining the Hire Library, and many other ways. I thank you all sincerely. Our Patrons are also a dedicated group whose support is always gratefully received.

We do need someone to volunteer to assist Angela with the handing out of scores, as necessary at rehearsals – something which is essential to the smooth running of the choir.

We still, of course, face the challenge of finding and encouraging new membership and any helpful suggestions on how best to do this are always appreciated.

So, seventy-five years in and we still have so much we want to do. We have a challenging and exciting repertoire in the planning for the next three to five years. We plan more collaborations with young singers, and singing students who are at the beginning of their careers as well as commissioning work from contemporary composers. We have begun to play our part in the development of Sunderland as a Music City which aims to support the regeneration of the city through the arts, focussing on music.

We are currently in discussion with Canon Clare MacLaren the Provost of the Minster regarding the heating and lighting and we have had a positive response to our issues. We expect to see significant improvements in the near future.

We look forward to a successful and enjoyable year ahead.

**The Treasurer’s Report :** The Treasurer, JC, presented the following points :

1. The accounts for 2023-2024 are presented with the equivalent figures for 2022-2023 and 2021-2022 for comparison, however due to the pandemic there was only one ticketed concert in 2021-2022. This year 2023-2024 was the Choral Society’s 75th anniversary year and we decided to ‘push the boat out’ with a splendid concert on 16th March 2024.
2. The Society agreed to an increase in subscriptions to cover the increased cost of hiring and heating the Minster for rehearsals. My thanks to everyone who takes part in the raffle or buys refreshments at rehearsals as these make a significant contribution to income, as do coffee mornings.
3. At last year's AGM we asked those of you who can Gift Aid their subscription to complete a new declaration form. This enabled us to legitimately claim Gift Aid for 2023-24 and also retrospectively for the years 2021-22 and 2022-23. The figures in the accounts are correct for all three years. If you pay income tax and have not completed a declaration form please do so, this will enable the choir to claim Gift Aid of 20% on your annual subscription.
4. During the year the choir received a substantial legacy. We also had good income from our concerts so total income exceeded expenditure by £5,467.35. The committee has decided to use some of this unexpected income to purchase 50 copies of 100 Carols for Choirs for use by the choir, we sing carols from this book most years, so this is a long term investment. The committee has also decided to commission a piece from North East composer Lucy Walker, members will remember singing two pieces by Lucy at the concert last December. In keeping with our charitable purpose to educate about choral music, the committee has also decided to offer four bursaries to university singing students to join the choir, one in each section to give them the opportunity to sing with and contribute to the musical life of a choral society.
5. During the course of the year we had to cash in our bond with ‘Healthy Investment’ because the original named bond holders (the former chair and treasurer) had changed. All our savings are now held in the COIF Deposit Account. In total we have reserves of £34,149.63

Note : The meeting was asked to confirm by vote an increase in subscription from £125 to £140 to incorporate score hire (proposed by ES and seconded by DL) and this was accepted unanimously

The Chairman thanked the Treasurer for the accounts and his report.

There were no questions and the accounts were unanimously accepted.

**The Conductor’s Report for 2023-2024** was given by D.M :-

It was a bumpy start to the season. We had a lovely Christmas programme planned: Vaughan Williams featured in the first half, with Serenade to Music and Fantasia on Christmas Carols, and then our usual selection of lighter Christmas tunes in the second half. All appeared to be working well until a few weeks into the rehearsal period, when it became gradually more and more clear that the official membership of the choir and the numbers of members actually attending rehearsals were two very different figures. When I took a poll to see how many would be singing at the Christmas concert planned for St Mary’s a mere 26 singers had signed up. This was totally unworkable with repertoire we were doing and it became clear that the concert at St Mary’s could not go ahead. I cancelled it immediately. This then set some alarm bells ringing about the projected numbers for the concert in the Minster. It wasn’t much above 30. There should have been around 45.

This situation had arisen for a whole set of reasons- it wasn’t that people were staying away on purpose, it was more a mixture of illness, holidays taken at unusual times and so on. But the result was we were facing another possible cancellation due to lack of singers in the correct numbers. Another problem I was facing on a weekly basis was having to rehearse a slightly different group of singers every week: this meant that just when I thought that a certain passage was ‘nailed’ the week before, it had to be learnt all over again because the people that had been at the previous rehearsal weren’t there, and new people who had missed the previous rehearsal***were*** there.

Incredibly frustrating. We got there in the end, but it was a very difficult and unrewarding term for me. I was certainly not happy about facing even more problems in the new year with our Elgar programme and suggested in a letter which was circulated to everyone that either we all signed up for this March concert or we abandoned the idea. I also suggested that if the quorum was to be 26 singers then really I could see the whole scenario of my experience with Ryton Choral Society in 2017 repeating itself and it would have led to my departure, as it did then.

Happily there was an overwhelming response to this challenge and in a matter of two days we had 48 people signed up. Sighs of relief. But it’s a situation I don’t want to face ever again.

Back to the Christmas programme. It all went beautifully in the end. We did need a bit of tenor reinforcement and we had it in droves it really was rather magnificent to have two extra professional tenors with us. With the usual accompaniment of piano/organ and string quintet the Vaughan Williams pieces sounded fabulous. We had our regular soprano soloist Anna Dias who was fabulous as ever, and a lovely young baritone called Nick Stoner.

We also had the Hillview Junior Academy Choir with us who were delightful, and joined in with Oh Ebenezer, as well as doing their own numbers.

So it was a very delightful and enjoyable evening, ending as per usual with Chilcott’s inimitably outrageous setting of the 12 days.

 On to 2024 and the big concert of the season. Big in all ways. Very expensive with a huge orchestra and a top flight soloist. Big in terms of the technical and musical demands of the score. Big in emotional range and intensity.

From the first rehearsal it was clear that, given the patchy time we’d had before Christmas and the challenges that lay ahead with this piece, everyone was totally committed to this project. The music is tough to sing – its tricky on all levels, especially rhythmically. And then he adds in frequent, sometimes continuous changes of tempo and big rubatos. You all took it on board easily and at the afternoon rehearsal on the 16thMarch – the beginning of which by the way I’m still trying to forgive you all for your unashamed rendition of happy birthday to me- what a shock – you were actually in the very nice position of the leading the orchestra through the tempo changes. The concert opened with Parry’s I was Glad which was a spectacular opener.

This was followed by a sublime performance of Sea Pictures by our amazing soloist Sarah Pring. Several years ago we were lucky enough to have Sarah along to do this very programme and I had put in a special request for her when I knew we were going for Music Makers. We were so lucky to have her again.

With her sensational voice and a fantastic musicality she was as ever a real joy to work with, and the orchestra provided a fantastic luscious textural accompaniment to those wonderful settings by Elgar.

The Music Makers made for a compelling and emotional 2nd half, and in terms of your choral singing and achievement that evening it was an absolute triumph. It also exhibited again some wonderful orchestral playing, and of course the icing on the cake was having Sarah sing the mezzo solo part.

What a triumph, and I felt we were on even keel again and everyone was vocally and musically back to normal. It was certainly one of the best concerts we’ve done together.

The summer term saw us doing The Great American Songbook. I found this a very enjoyable experience, and it was great to revisit these numbers that we have sung now quite a few times over the years. In fact it didn’t take too much relearning which is always a nice experience. With our usual string quintet and piano orchestrations I thought they sounded fabulous. It was a very enjoyable evening, slightly put on edge because one half of our Birkett and Fisk duo didn’t make it. James was stuck in Verona. Very nice for him I suppose but not much use to us. Fortunately, James had installed a backup plan. His former pupil Bradley Jonson stepped in at the last minute and played with seemingly consummate ease. Hugely impressive, and he and Emma brought immense pleasure as well as generating a lot of admiration for their skill and talent.

The end of a very enjoyable and in many ways rather moving evening, full of some of the very best in popular music of our times. And a lovely end to the season.

What do we look forward to now? We have in our Christmas concert two very different halves. The first half features to so called Christmas Messiah, which is Part 1 of Messiah plus Hallelujah. We will have four young soloists joining us – more of that presently.

For the second half we have a mixture of twentieth and twenty first century Christmas music. Some of it will be contained in the White Carols for Choirs books of which the Society has invested in quite a few more copies over the summer. There will also be a performance of John Rutter’s very sweet Christmas fable set to music – Brother Heinrich’s Christmas.

We are again joined by the choir of Hillview Academy who are singing Love Shone Down and Jessye’s Carol as well as joining us again in Oh Ebenezer. They seemed to enjoy it last time so much we thought we’d do it again.

And at long last I have managed to persuade my ex-pupil Lucy Walker to accept a commission from us for a new Christmas piece. You will remember we did two of her pieces last Christmas. This piece will be special because it will be dedicated to Bishopwearmouth Choral Society. Lucy, for those of you who don’t know this already, has become the go to young composer for choral music in this country and has written for St Martin’s Voices where she is composer in residence, for Anna Lapwood’s Pemrokeshire singers, for BBC Singers, for Voces 8 and The Sixteen.

 Something that is being developed within the choral society is a set of choral scholarships. This is in the form of an invitation to young solos singers to join our ranks so that they lend their vocal quality and musicianship to us, and are rewarded with a very modest fee, but more importantly the opportunity to sing solos at concerts, and have a few more opportunities for concerts on their own provided. The first of these appointments has been made: Davina Halford - MacLeod will be joining the altos from this term for this academic year. Davina is a great singer, and is in her third year at Newcastle University. I know she’s really excited about joining us and we will all enjoy having her with us. I am gradually approaching other suitable singers and hope to have soprano, tenor and bass scholarship in place very soon.

On to the new year, and we are making the biggest concert of our 2024-25 season Creation. This is a piece I adore. The last time we did this was before Covid, and it was in our 70th anniversary season. It was the first piece the society sang when it was first formed in 1948 by Clifford Hartley. I remember it being hugely popular with everyone in 2019, me included so I’m really looking forward to it.

And finally the summer brings us the Brahms Requiem, in its version for piano duet which I also love. This will slightly break with the tradition of doing something lighter in the summer, but I think its good not to get into too predictable a pattern. And this is surely one of the greatest pieces in the choral repertoire. Its a hefty sing. There are no movements ‘off‘ for the choir – even the soprano solo movement is accompanied throughout by choral singing. But tis full of the most sublime music, and a deeply personal and unique approach to the Requiem Mass. It will bring the season I think to a stunning conclusion.

**Election of Officers** – These were conducted as follows :

For the election of the officers of the Society, the present incumbents withdrew and the meeting was temporarily chaired by EB. As there were no other nominations for the posts of Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer it was unanimously carried that the present incumbents – M.Foster, E.Watson and J.Cripps would continue in those roles, which they agreed to do.

MF resumed the chair. There were no nominations for the roles of Alto and Tenor Section Reps but the present holders (DL & MR) agreed to continue in the roles and this was unanimously accepted.

**Any Other Business** :–

There being no other business, the meeting closed at 9.10 p.m.

Eileen Watson,

Hon.Secretary.