



# Friends and Patrons Newsletter

Issue 1: Spring 2021

**W**elcome to our first newsletter for our Friends, Patrons and supporters. It's almost exactly a year since we last saw some of you at our Verdi concert, and we wanted to get in touch to let you know we're still here and what we've been doing since then. It's been such a strange and difficult year for everyone, but I hope you have stayed well and found things to enjoy. As you'll see, we have learned how to use Zoom like everyone else, and have managed to stay in touch with each other and have some fun, even getting to know each other better than was possible in the hustle of weekly rehearsals. The saddest thing for the Choir has been the loss of our dear and brilliant accompanist, James Recknell, who died of cancer in June last year. You will have heard him play at our concerts and we will miss him terribly. I'm grateful to everyone who has helped to hold us together over the year, and thank you so much for sticking with us - we are all so grateful for your support and look forward to seeing you again soon.



*Tess Wright  
pictured with her  
Christmas Raffle  
Prize-Dec 2020*

## Tess Wright-Chair

It's been the most challenging 12 months the Bury Bach Choir has ever experienced in its near-90-year history. As we began rehearsing the Verdi *Requiem* in January 2020, none of us could have foreseen that would prove to be our last full term of rehearsals together, and the performance in the Cathedral on 7 March, just before the first national lockdown, would be our only concert in 2020. This has been as disappointing for us as it must have been for you, our valued Friends and Patrons.

As might be expected, it took a while for us to work out what we might be able to do remotely but Zoom came to our rescue, enabling us to meet together and keep the choir community going. Zoom rehearsals were quickly discounted: everyone's differing bandwidth speeds means it's impossible to sing together successfully, so we opted for other approaches which have worked extremely well. You can read about them elsewhere in this newsletter.

My contribution has been to deliver a series of illustrated lectures on choral music we have performed in recent years. The talks explore aspects of the composer's life, the circumstances surrounding a particular work's genesis and premiere, and then some investigation of the music itself. Members are encouraged to dig out their scores and follow along whenever possible. So far I've discussed major works by Bach, Britten, Elgar, Handel, Haydn and Mozart; to come are Fauré's *Requiem* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. And if we can't rehearse after Easter, then I'll be looking for more pieces to explore – Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* and Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* look likely candidates. There's always an opportunity for questions afterwards – actually, they often prove to be the most interesting part of the evening!

**Philip Reed - Music Director**



*James Recknell and  
Philip Reed pictured at a  
rehearsal-March 2019*

It was with immense sadness that we learnt of the death of James Recknell, in June of last year. As our rehearsal accompanist, he played (literally) a crucial part in our preparation for **every** concert – well over one hundred concerts in all. He was a highly gifted keyboard player, and often performed on the harpsichord, piano and organ at our concerts. He was also, on occasion, our stand-in conductor. His musicianship was phenomenal and his contribution to the life of the choir over such a long period will never be forgotten. If you haven't had a chance to read Philip Reed's tribute to James, please follow this link: <https://bit.ly/300KnOj>

## Social Media Activities

*From the outset of March 2020's lockdown, a choir What's App group was established to maintain communication and a sense of community. One year on, the group is still thriving and the camaraderie amongst fellow choir members, a joy to behold. There's a steady medley of recommended links, quizzes, facts, birthday greetings and photographs plus input such as our choir Advent calendar, in which members contributed a whole array of entertainment to count us down to Christmas.*



*It wasn't long until we joined the Zoom community. Here, Julia Rance-1<sup>st</sup> Soprano, rounds up how we have used this platform to stay in touch.*

Every week, we have come together virtually over Zoom. This began on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, initially because we missed seeing each other and had no contact during the first lockdown period. We decided to meet over the internet to prevent our members from becoming lonely and as we are used to seeing each other every week, it seemed a perfect way to continue, in the circumstances we suddenly found ourselves in. Since that first meeting, the Zoom sessions have evolved into a whole variety of entertaining events that brighten up everyone's week and in which we all look forward to partaking.

## Online Coaching with Val and Graeme

We owe huge thanks to our wonderful co-presidents, Valerie Reid and Graeme Danby, who offered professional coaching online to choir members. The sessions were on Zoom, with singers divided into small groups by voice part. Zoom is far from perfect, because participants' different internet speeds make it impossible for a group to synchronise; cacophony ensued when we all sang at once! So we had to settle for muting choir members and singing along to the tutor's lead. Those of us who took advantage of the coaching enjoyed it for the chance to sing regularly, to see some of our fellow singers on screen and to focus properly on our vocal technique, especially breath control and improving sound quality. Some members have taken it one step further, benefiting from 1:1 coaching with Valerie Reid from the comfort of their own home.

Here are some comments from choir members:

*"Not at all intimidating. The vocal exercises were both interesting and effective. Felt very energised by the end of each session." Janet, soprano*

At first, we began with a simple weekly catch-up chat. Then, we began to 'theme' these to structure them slightly; we've had pretty much everything in discussion from current affairs to biscuits! We introduced the odd game such as a quiz and the popularity and enjoyment quickly spread to a whole range of games, entertainment and fun, including: guess members from their baby photos, Scattergories, Have I Got News For You, Christmas special, mystery objects, origami and we've even found ourselves balancing bananas on our heads?!

Some sessions have been sensible and informative and others: silly and hilarious. No matter what we've done though, they have ALL been entertaining and kept us going during this past difficult year. The routine of the weekly Zooms has given us back some structure to our weeks and has given choir members a regular, enjoyable event in the diary. Quite apart from having the most amazing fun, we have learnt a huge amount about each other and grown closer in our friendships and understanding of each other, which quite frankly is not possible during a weekly rehearsal. This by far, has been one of the biggest benefits. We all feel privileged to have had this strange opportunity and know that when we can all finally see each other again, things will be different, but for the better.



*Graeme Danby and Valerie Reid*

*Photo taken Dec 2019*

*"The online coaching sessions have been really important to me. Having a date in my diary where I am doing something I would consider normal is so good. When we are on Zoom both Val and Graeme are full of energy, enthusiasm and expertise, and the hour whizzes past all too quickly. I am so grateful to them." Gill, soprano*

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*"For me, the online coaching experience is getting better and better, as I get used to this new way of enjoying and getting the best out of my singing. I feel I'm learning a lot and I'm looking forward to more sessions." Mike, bass*

*"I think we've been really lucky to have access to professional coaching while the choir can't sing together. I approached the first session with some trepidation, not knowing what to expect. But it turned out to be a very happy hour, seeing fellow altos, practicing techniques through exercises and having a jolly good sing too."* **Carolyn, alto**

*"It's been helpful and fun. Graeme and Val's knowledge and expertise on voice control and projection have enabled me to continue to practise over these long months and my confidence in singing has grown. These strange and unprecedented times have granted us this extra privilege."* **Julia, soprano**

## Two Apex rehearsals

On 16 March all live music-making stopped dead in its tracks and the Choir ceased meeting in person for almost nine months.

Meanwhile, the Committee worked hard behind the scenes, drawing up risk-assessments and making very detailed plans to enable some sort of music-making to take place safely for those able and willing to meet again and sing.

The school was not available, but The Apex welcomed us to their large Covid-secure concert hall, and on 8 December thirty choir members queued up to complete the new formalities needed for live rehearsal.

The entry requirements were formal and time-consuming. We arrived in staggered timetabled groups, checked in on the NHS app, wore masks, took a temperature check, sanitised our hands and ran through a questionnaire. Once inside The Apex we sat in our socially distanced, pre-allocated seats, kept our masks on and resisted the urge to socialise. It all felt very odd.

Doors stayed open to increase ventilation, so it was quite cold in the hall. Philip conducted from behind a screen, wearing a visor, and Christopher Moore accompanied us on his electronic keyboard. To begin with our singing was understandably tentative, and we struggled to hear each other. However, as the hour wore on, we began to adjust. It felt quite emotional to be singing together again after such a long time. The hour flew by and we left carefully, not daring to chat until we were safely outside the building

### Christmas Raffle

On Page 1, Tess Wright is pictured as the winner of The Christmas hamper, kindly donated by The Mansfield Family. She was most insistent that it be redrawn but this was vetoed by the choir! The raffle raised over £500 and we are enormously grateful for all your contributions.

*"How lucky are we in the Bach choir? We have enjoyed online get togethers, including talks about some of the works we sing, general chats and quizzes, all of which have served to keep our friendship and shared love of music going. The icing on the cake however has been our online vocal coaching sessions with Graeme and Val. What fun! And not just fun but I for one have genuinely learnt some great techniques to improve my singing such as breathing techniques and generally making a better sound. We look forward to getting back to what we love and that is singing together. When we do I shall be putting into practice what I have learned."* **Sue, soprano**



The second rehearsal on 15 December was in many ways even more emotional, because it was our attempt to celebrate Christmas together, singing carols and excerpts from The Messiah. And we were joined by our Co-Presidents, Graeme Danby and Valerie Reid, who sang solo numbers and duets for us, plus Graeme drew the Christmas raffle. Both rehearsals were live-streamed, so that Choir members who could not be with us at The Apex in person were able to join in from the safety of home. Comments:

*"I was a bit nervous beforehand about so many of us being together in one indoor space, but from the moment I arrived I felt entirely relaxed. To sing again with other choir members, even with face coverings, was such a joy, it was really exciting."* **Mike, bass**

*"I was unsure about singing with a mask, but having missed singing so much, I felt I had to give it a go. I was very surprised that actually it was fine and I could sing with a mask on although obviously it would be better without it. I enjoyed both rehearsals and though we couldn't really have much interaction with the rest of the choir members there, I was a bit privileged to be able to have a quick word whilst taking their temperatures etc. I am looking forward to when we can sing again."* **Liz, alto**

*"Despite the mask, the strangeness and standing two metres away from the nearest person, plus being able to hear how rusty my own voice was, it was fabulous to be singing in a group again. I needed this and look forward to our next live rehearsals."* **Tim, tenor**

### Useful Links

Choir website: [www.burybachchoir.co.uk](http://www.burybachchoir.co.uk)



Bury Bach Choir



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### In the next issue:

- Hear from our Co-Presidents
- Choir Update
- Future Plans