**MKCC Musical Director’s Report 2021**

I hardly know where to start delivering a report on a year where actually singing in a choir

hasn’t been something we have done very much of!

Moira’s chair report covers pretty much everything we have done, and I am grateful for her positive comments about how we have gone about managing the year. Because she has listed so many of our projects this year I wont necessarily list them all myself - this report will rather be a commentary on the year and some of my own feelings and observations from a Musical Director’s point of view.

The first thing we did after last year’s AGM was to compete for the first time in the MK Music Festival. This is something I have done for many years with MK Youth Choir and I had wanted to find a way for us to compete in our own class for some time.

Due to the early growth of the pandemic unfortunately the competition was severely depleted, with 4 other choirs dropping out that very week. so much so that there was only one group we were competing with, and as a Male Voice close harmony group they were hardly on an equal footing. However the adjudicator was a superb judge of skill and choral blend, and gave us a very well deserved first prize, after we sang a beautifully measured and blended performance of Cobweb of Dreams.

However it had become quite clear to me that lockdown was imminent as the spread of the virus was getting out of control and with many vulnerable members there was no way we were going to risk anyone becoming ill through meeting at choir. Stories were circulating about just such things happening in Japan and elsewhere, so the very next Tuesday, 17th March, we held our first Zoom rehearsal. The social aspect of meeting together in one place online was immediately the most important, and we have gradually discovered that music making and learning can also take place, but at different speeds and in different ways than with a normal rehearsal. It was exciting to feel that we were at the forefront of the UK move to Zoom choirs, and due to an interview on Five Live we then appeared on Good Morning Britain albeit at 6.30 the morning after our first session!

I was disappointed of course that not everyone has been able to attend our online sessions - and perhaps more so that some chose not to try. I understand that for some people trying to sing with others on a computer at home while muted sounds like a weird way to do it, but as our only viable option I am very pleased how many have managed to stick with it and persevere. I have always believed that success in music making is as much about the relationship between the people taking part as it is about musical prowess and achievement and thanks to all of you we have proved that to be the case in bucket loads this year. I am also personally extremely grateful that you have continued the weekly choir sessions because this has become my main source of income in a year when many other of my normal sources, Young Voices included, have either slowed to a trickle or even died out completely.

The story behind our next venture was the first in a series of fortunate happenstances that have become a feature of our lockdown year. The well known hymn-writer Graham Kendrick had been chatting to Carl the Young Voices bass player about a song he thought YV would be interested in. So I got an email out of the blue and a meeting was arranged - on FaceTime! Sure enough the song (about saving the planet) was brilliant and it might appear in a future event at some point. He was just about to say goodbye and call a close when he asked me if I could give my humble opinion on another song he had swimming around in his head. I said of course and he then proceeded to sing me “A Little Bit of Love” - he had it in mind as a charity fund raising vehicle for the 2.6 Marathon Challenge day which was coming up on 26th April. I immediately thought what a great community choir song and asked him if I could arrange it and put it on the Choir Community website - the combination of a popular writer and a free download was mouthwatering to the Global Choir network and within a week 6000 virtual copies had been distributed. This then gave me the idea of holding our own 26 song marathon and the challenge was born.

Graham paid us the honour of launching the event with his version of a klaxon (a countdown and a colander) and we had a lovely time singing along to some of our favourite songs as voted by you!

This was very encouraging in other ways because it also proved that we could hold an event on Zoom, witnessed live on facebook, that people could watch and enjoy, and the limitations of being online (chief amongst them being the time delay between everybody) didn’t matter.

The next opportunity to do something with others came very naturally. I had already planned an “Open Rehearsal” as part of Stony Live week - our normal Tuesday evening was going to take place in St Mary and St Giles church and anyone could attend for free - with the bonus for us being that the Vaults A capella night would be a short 30 second walk across the road!

As Stony Live in its entirety was cancelled it seemed the only thing to do would be to invite some of the Vaults Stalwarts (namely 5 Men Not Called Matt) (There’s 7 of them and they’re not all men) to guest on our Zoom session and teach some Shanty Choruses. A hasty scrabble for any live footage of singing in the pub yielded just enough material, and we had a wonderful evening learning some of those fabulous songs and sharing some of ours.

The next event rather fell in our laps too. Someone at MK Disability Awareness Day had heard that we had done a Virtual Choir recording and got in touch to ask if we would do one for them. - I said no we hadn't but that we could go one better and hold a live event featuring all their diverse groups. What’s more we could invite Electric Umbrella to be special guests and learn some of their brilliant inclusive songs in the process. A joyous evening transpired and once again I felt that MKCC were at the heart of our wonderful City, enabling something truly community based to happen which without us could not have taken place. I am truly proud to be involved with a group that can carry this off, in the same way we had performed at the High Sheriff’s service the previous year.

It is time to mention and thank my illustrious colleague Ian Riley, who has graced our accompanist slot with humour and great skill for many years now. A composer and conductor in his own right, he has long entreated me to join together with some of his choirs and launch an MK and district choir festival. We were going to do something of this nature originally in the summer, but a not dissimilar opportunity arose in the autumn. We decided to put on a short presentation of virtual recordings to mark Remembrance Day, and I thought Only Remembered would be a suitable choice. We had earlier in the year tried one of these Virtual “Stamp Book” recordings of speak To Me My Father, which for numerous reasons didn’t quite work out as hoped. (apart from the substantial technical requirements the actual thought of singing alone into a phone didn’t really appeal to many and I don’t blame anyone!) However there was just enough enthusiasm for this and we actually finished it thanks to Ian’s wizardry with Video Editing. We had also started off with only 3 choirs, but by the time of the event we had 9 altogether, and the diversity was very satisfying, and we were able to extend it to a decent length - It was essentially another free event to attend but we raised a healthy amount for the Poppy Appeal and it proved that something worthwhile could be produced.

Among other music this year we have enjoyed a wonderful composition by Ian called Sing For Joy, (which has also proved popular with many other choirs up and down the country), a beautiful piece by Elaine Hagenburg called O Love that Will Not Let Me Go, and in a more folksy vein, Lady of Autumn, Hope Lingers On, and Window to Window.

It might be a good time to mention some of the positive aspects of choir life online. I have both received and given support across the wider Choir Directors network and there have been many groups on social media and on websites who have risen to the challenge and shared resources and advice on everything to do with running a music group over the internet. I have been able to visit other choirs and online groups. One such group was run by Maggie Wheeler, (who some of us knew from her cult status as Janice from “Friends” ®) and I have discovered some great songs and bought arrangements from some of the musicians I met at that group. Maggie also joined us a couple of times and loved it and I hope will do so again very soon.

Other choral directors such as Tim Allen, Beth Morgan and Richard Swan have monetised their events very successfully and shared their knowledge of the technology required.

Encouraged by this and after much discussion with the wonderful Steering Group we decided to actually charge for a Zoom christmas event. This we did on 22nd December which was pleasingly close to Christmas and really felt like a seasonal celebration. This time an audio recording of a new song was preferred to a video and Love Came Down seemed an appropriate choice which included contributions from many choir members. Grateful thanks are due to Phil Catterall, Nick Rowlandson and Karen Howard for providing and keeping recordings safe so that we have a wealth of past performances to sing along to, without which a concert would simply be learning tracks which are no fun for anyone!

This current term has been an opportunity to find new music and try new songs. We have enjoyed pieces by Will Todd, and Jennifer John, plus favourites by REM and the PROCLAIMERS, and the first few in what I hope is a long series of folk songs. I will continue to find music that both challenges and uplifts, which should keep us going until such time as we can meet in person again.

It is hard to imagine what it will be like, but we will do it at the right time and in a safe way, so that the wellbeing of all choir members is paramount.

Another huge thank you to the amazing steering group for their hard work and dedication - as always they are a pleasure to work with and I look forward to many more years of fun and exciting music making with you all.

Craig McLeish February 2021