

Dartington Community Choir (DCC) Choral Workshop and Concert

Saturday 24th February 2024, Buckfast Abbey, Devon

MASS FOR FOUR VOICES - William Byrd

GLORIA - Antonio Vivaldi

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The day started off ominously with more rain (it seemed to be raining all week!). However, by the time we were all sat in the rehearsal room (Dartview 4) the sun was streaming in, and the blinds had to be partially closed to avoid blinding the altos! Alleluia! (I'm an alto!)

After Roger (DCC chair) Robinson's administrative announcements, Tori Longdon welcomed the 100-strong attendees enthusiastically. We then started our warm-up gently, to get our bodies and singing muscles in shape.

Tori gave us a bit of background on the pieces we were singing; the Byrd mass was originally written at a time when Roman Catholicism was illegal in England, and was therefore practised clandestinely, generally in private chapels. The Vivaldi was originally written for girls' voices, and is a joyous piece to sing, even though, as we were in the season of Lent, it may not have been the most appropriate to sing at this time, but no one complained – at least not the monks in the Abbey!

A show of hands indicated that most people had sung the Gloria before, but the Mass was largely unknown to us. Tori expected this, and so we began with the Byrd. Tori rehearsed us energetically, but very patiently, dividing the piece into manageable chunks, and keeping us engaged all the time. Simon Dunbavand (DCC music director) was at the keyboard as our rehearsal pianist, and was extremely helpful in playing the voice parts when he heard us faltering! The morning seemed to go very quickly, and soon it was coffee break, which was split between lower voices and upper voices, which worked well in rehearsing the piece. After coffee, it was Vivaldi, which was taken at a brisk pace to get through it by lunchtime!

After lunch, the rehearsal was in the Abbey. A bit of time was taken to ensure everyone in their place had a sight line to Tori. Robert Pecksmith at the organ was introduced, and soon the rehearsal was again under way. The acoustics in the Abbey took us a little by surprise, but we soon got used to the sound, and we were grateful to Robert's prompting at the organ. It was really good to have Tori at the helm. She kept us moving in a positive direction and did not seem to tire at all. Her dynamism helped us keep the momentum going, and again the time just flew by.

Supper was a buffet dinner at the conference centre, and I must compliment the catering staff, as the choice of food was varied, and quite delicious! This feast was included in the workshop fee!

It was soon time to get ready for the concert, with a proper public paying audience! Everyone gathered in the Medieval Hall, looking smart and excited, in their black attire. The rain seemed to have returned, but only in a little drizzle, so the short walk to the Abbey was not too bad.

We started with the Byrd, and although we may not have been word perfect, we got the musical tones right, and it felt quite melodious. The pace may have been a bit slower than it should have been, but I believe that it suited us, having only learnt it in a few hours.

The Vivaldi was a joy to sing, and I was impressed with our soloists, Anne Willie, Carolyn Westwood, and Harriet Barlow, who are all members of DCC. They aren't professional singers, so it was very brave of them to take the solo parts on! Well done to them!

Overall, the day was really good fun, and we were amazed by what we could achieve in just 6 hours! Thanks must go to Carol Robinson and Robyn Roberts for the organisation of it all. Tori was a marvellous and inspiring teacher and conductor. And singing in the Abbey was just uplifting! I would recommend the day to anyone who might be thinking of joining a future DCC workshop.

EAP