

WIMBLEDON CHORAL SOCIETY

**Minutes of the Annual General Meeting
held on Monday 26 September 2022
at St Marks Church**

The meeting began at 19.30 with Sarah Hendry in the chair and approximately 121 members present and 3 apologies.

Minutes of the previous Annual General Meeting held on 27 September 2021.

Approval of these minutes was proposed by Sharon Smith and seconded by John Paramore. The meeting approved the minutes.

Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

Music Director's Report

Neil reported as follows:

“As we emerge out of the pandemic and into our first, full, uninterrupted (hopefully!!) season since 2019, I wanted to say thank you to all of you for the sense of community and spirit that has got us as an organisation through the last tricky period. I am very proud of what we achieved in the last year, still with an interruption to our season, that finished with such a moving performance of the Rachmaninov All-Night Vigil.

As we cast our minds back to September 2021, our first nervous gatherings, shortened rehearsals, I am quite astonished at how we achieved such a magnificent performance of Mozart's C minor mass. It was a superb concert as a whole – the interview on stage with Roxanna, a superb rendition of Britten's Serenade for tenor, horn and strings.

The first interruption came at Christmas where it became impossible to make the concert work because of the national situation, and the risks were still around as we were shown in the lead up to our Messiah in Fairfield Halls. I was so sorry for those who had to miss out, and incredibly proud of the 80 or so of you left standing by concert day. The soloists and the orchestra were superb and I am very sorry that your performance didn't have the audience it deserved.

After what could have been a disappointing low point of the season, the collective will in tackling the demands of the Rachmaninov was inspiring. It was so noticeable how many of you put in extra efforts above and beyond the call of duty in mastering the Church Slavonic, inspired by our indomitable language coach, Irina. The performance and occasion were spell binding and profoundly moving. I am so glad that we made a positive statement with our concert in the light of what is happening in Ukraine.

Looking at the coming season, I wanted to try something a little different, where we explored a particular theme through our season, that gives a way of discovering new music, different styles of music, all based around a familiar story. I am so happy that you have taken to the current repertoire positively, and I am also glad that in some way we will be able to mark the extraordinary difficulties and sadness of the last couple of years by singing Howard's piece. I am very positive about how you are sounding, where we are heading post-Covid, and the rest of the season and indeed years to come. I would like to express my thanks to Sarah, to the Exec and Full Committees who have steered us with a firm hand through the last year, to the voice reps who do much work behind the scenes and keep me posted on just the right amount of information, no small skill, to Vicky our outgoing librarian

for her years of heroic service to you all, and to John Britton who has already got going in a super fashion. And to Michael because he is more than simply brilliant. We are all very lucky to have him.”

Chair’s Report

Sarah reported as follows:

“Thank you for coming along. Neil has talked about the highlights of last season and this one. Briefly, a few highlights and lowlights from me.

One was the sheer pleasure of getting back together to sing in person – and to see how our confidence as a choir started to come back. And it’s lovely this autumn to be back close to something like full strength.

It was a real achievement to perform Mozart to such a sizeable audience last November – the delight to be back was so evident among choir and audience alike.

Whereas it was a huge disappointment to have to cancel the Christmas concert – a difficult decision at the time but the right one. Most disappointing was have to postpone again the live premier of Michael’s Christmas fantasy, commissioned by us in 2020 – but we will do it this year!

February was third time lucky as we went ahead with Da Vinci Requiem recording at last. I was so proud of how professionally you did that. We have the release to look forward to in the spring.

I’m not sure if our March Messiah concert was a highlight or a lowlight! Those still standing by the day of the concert performed heroically – though, at a Covid peak, we were down to 50% of the choir and the audience were sparse. But Fairfield Halls was below standard in many ways and we will not go back there unless there are drastic improvements.

The 4th Merton Singfest in May was a highlight for the sheer pleasure of all the choirs taking part. Thank you to everyone who helped make it a success - particularly Colleen. We believe this is an important local initiative - something we can do locally even though we cannot (yet) perform here regularly. We are hoping to put it on again in 2023 – if you would like to help, please speak to me.

And our June concert. It was a magnificent achievement on the night to raise of £4000 for UNICEF Ukraine appeal. The cash donations on the night are testament to how moving the audience found it.

Thank you all for making it such a good season.

Looking ahead, we have an ambitious programme for 2022-2023. You told us in our last survey that you wanted to go on performing in major venues with top professional musicians. We are determined to maintain the quality of our performance and our reputation as on the finest amateur symphonic choirs around.

We can’t stand still if we want to do that. As you know we are planning another concert at the Royal Festival Hall, in 2024 or 2025, and we are actively planning another major commission – more about that from Isla shortly.

Times are tough financially. Our costs are rising. People are still not turning out for live events, like concerts, in the same numbers as before the pandemic. John will say more about finances in a moment. We have to budget judiciously – with the twin aims of keeping membership affordable and excellent value whilst also keeping up our standards and ambitions.

The key to our ambition and standards are our musical team - Neil and Michael. I don’t need to tell you what we owe them. They are a marvellous team. Please show them how much you appreciate them.

Sarah Burston has stood down due to other commitments.

The AGM is once a year. The rest of the time, you can reliably leave it in the hands of your committee to keep the show on the road.

Under our constitution, the choir is managed day to day by an executive committee of 5, the Chair, Vice Chair Isla, Treasurer John, Marketing officer Anna and Secretary Tracy along with Helen the concert manager. We are heavily supported by the wider full committee members – the 7 voice reps, Jeremy, Peter, Andrew, Sarah, Angela, Sharon and Gwen, the librarian Vicky and the membership secretary Laura. We are helped on a regular basis by Colleen, our Friends secretary, Paula who compiles our programmes, and Neil who manages the website and send out newsletters.

This team has done an amazing job over the last two and a half years, keeping the show on the road in uncertain times. They are a lovely group of people and they make it a pleasure to be the chair of this amazing choir. I know you want to join me in saying a huge thank you to them.

It's a small number of people for a huge busy choir. So it is no surprise that several are standing down this year after many years of responsibility. Gwen and Andrew are standing down this AGM as Sop 1 and tenor reps; and Vicky is standing down as librarian. We are all very grateful to you for your service to the choir.

The other person who has 'given me notice' that she wishes to step down is Helen, our concert manager – a role she has carried out for a number of years, liaising with our concert venues and making sure everything runs smoothly on the day; before that Helen was a 2nd soprano voice rep. So she deserves a rest. Before she can, we need someone to take her place. It's a co-opted post so we don't need to vote someone in tonight but we are looking for a member to take on this important role as soon as possible please. If you are interested please speak to Helen or me: we have a job description with the detail.

Two other things we are looking for help with:

One is opening up the church on Mondays. Thank you to the people who have already offered to be on a rota for this. We could really do with another couple of pairs of members to join the rota, so that it is sustainable. Please speak to Tracy if you can help with this important logistical task.

The other is front of house management for concert venues that don't provide this service. Typically that is our Christmas concert and concerts in Southwark Cathedral and Holy Trinity Sloane Square. Ideally the front of house manager would not be a choir member as the peak of activity is just before the concert starts. So we have decided to experiment with offering a modest payment to a non-choir member to take on this role. If you know someone responsible who might be interested in doing this, please speak to Tracy. It could be a young person still studying for example or a retired person.

Last of all from me on the theme of changeover. I too have made the difficult decision that the time is coming for me to stand down as chair. Very difficult because this is such an enjoyable thing to do, a source of great pride and a sense of achievement leading such a marvellous choir full of lovely people. But for personal reasons and because it is good for the choir not to get set in our ways, I have decided that I should step down this time next year. By giving advance notice, I hope it will allow the choir to identify my successor in plenty of time and allow a thorough handover.

So all of you, this is your opportunity. If you would like to do it or if you can think of someone who you think really ought to do it, we want to hear from you. If you'd like to talk it over and find out more, please do speak to me."

Treasurer's Report

John reported as follows:

“Unlike the previous year, we held all except our Christmas concert in 2021-22. Unfortunately the Christmas concert is generally the concert that makes a surplus which goes to offset some of the deficit on the other concerts, so that, together with reduced audiences possibly because of continuing concerns about Covid, resulted in the far higher than anticipated loss on concerts of £30,000.

On a positive note, the response to our June benefit concert for the children of Ukraine was simply magnificent – we played to a packed Holy Trinity Sloane Square producing a surplus of £2.8k which together with donation from the audience exceed £1.9k enabled us to pay UNICEF a total of £4,722.

Finally we were able to make our recording and most of the costs of that, £40,745 were incurred and paid before the year end. The costs of mastering the final recording will fall into the current year.

A good proportion of choir members returned to the choir during the year, hence the increase in subscriptions received, although the total is well below the level of fees received prior to Covid (330k in 2020).

Income from Easyfundraising and SmileAmazon continues to grow but we still need a lot more members to use this simple and entirely free method of online purchasing, because there is huge potential for more income from this source.

Our music library has also been doing a good trace and I am pleased to say that the current year is looking even better in that regard.

Overall whilst our total financial resources are significantly down last year, they are still slightly more than they were at the end of June 2019, the last full year before Covid and provide the society with reasonable financial security going forward.”

John thanked Annette Cowley for auditing the accounts.

Approval of the accounts was proposed by Neil Dennis and seconded by Deborah Raymond. It was carried unanimously.

John continued:

“Having survived the pandemic, our choir is looking forward to exciting times ahead. We have already heard from Sarah about some of the upcoming events and invitations received by the choir and who knows what opportunities may come our way once the Da Vinci recording is released early next year.

From an analysis of the surveys many of you filled in not so long ago, it was made abundantly clear to the Committee that our members, want this choir to:

- Continue to develop; to work with quality orchestras and soloists;
- to perform at leading venues;
- to commission new works from respected composers.

For that to happen, we will require resources, both human in terms and time and effort and financial.

The last time that the annual subscription rate was increased was back in 2019 – we held it steady through the Covid period whilst allowing those less able to pay anything they felt able to do and indeed retained the same rate for a further year.

We can no longer continue to do that. We are all more than aware of increased costs' our venue, both rehearsal and concert, need to cover increased in electricity and gas bills, in order to retain and engage

our musicians we believe in paying them a fair rate for their services. Whilst we will be looking to raise funds in the form of donations towards the new commission, it is tempting fate to believe that the entire cost of will be covered by such donations, so we need to build in sufficient reserves to cover that commitment.

Whilst we have had to increase concert ticket prices this year, tickets sales are never likely to cover all the costs of our concerts. We have attempted to cover part of those costs with advertising and sponsorship, but such income is hard to find at the current time, so concert deficits will still have to be covered by our subscription income.

The proposed full subscription for the current year, agreed upon and proposed by the full committee, is £180. Whilst that does represent a significant increase this equates to £60 a term – less than £5 a week. Having researched other London choirs, both large and small, it appears that our increased fee will still be significantly less than those charged by many comparable choirs – so many of which charge more than £300 a year – and indeed less than those charged by a number of much smaller choirs e.g. another small local choir charges £225 a year (£75 a term). At less than the cost of a single pint in the Alex, we hope you would agree, that our proposed subs represent extremely good value.

Conscious that there are those for whom the cost of membership is an issue, the increase in fees payable by the unemployed, under 25's and full time students has been restricted to just £5. I should also say that no one should ever feel that they cannot remain a member because of the costs of membership and I am always prepared to discuss individual circumstances should the need arise."

There was a question as to whether the two ticket rule applied – it was confirmed that it does. There was also a question as to whether members could pay the full subscription in three instalments– John clarified that they could but should please speak to him.

Adoption of the proposed subscription rates for 2022-23 was proposed by Colleen Spalding and seconded by Sean O'Connell and it was unanimously approved by the meeting. .

There was a question as to whether we have a Friends scheme – Sarah confirmed that we do and it is run by Colleen Spalding with details available on the website. Colleen said that Friends paid full subscriptions throughout Covid.

Election of Executive Group and Officers

The following officers were proposed for election to the Executive Group of the Committee: -

Sarah Hendry	Chair
Isla Smith	Vice Chair
Tracy Sherman	General Secretary
John Gale	Treasurer
Anna Lemmon	Publicity Officer

These elections were proposed by Vicky Isaacs and seconded by John Hewitt and carried unanimously.

The following officers were proposed for election to the Committee: -

John Britton	Librarian	Laura Stewart	Membership Secretary
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These elections were proposed by Diana Tsung and seconded by Tim Rogers and carried unanimously.

The following Voice Representatives were proposed for election for a two-year term:

Therese Kennedy-Laing (Sop 1)	Sarah Harris (Alto 2)
Martyn Wake (Tenor)	Jeremy Collis (Bass 2)

These elections were proposed by Jean Pinchin seconded by Mary Padden and carried unanimously.

Commissioning

Vice chair Isla Smith said that the commissioning sub group had been formed – members were Anna Lemmon, Tracy Sherman, Fiona Harvey, Neil Ferris and Andrew Oliver. The group met before summer and was working with the same budget as for the Da Vinci Requiem £20,000. A number of possible themes for the commission had been suggested: John Logie Baird, climate change / David Attenborough and peace.

Neil had drawn up a list of 14 choral composers and the group had reduced that list by 5 or 6. There is a broad base of composers, all of whom can deliver a piece of music. At the next meeting the group would reduce the number to 3, having listened to their work. The commission is expected to be ready for 2025. Themes will be proposed to the candidates and then we will choose one.

If anyone has any ideas on what to propose to the composers, please let us know.

Any Other Business

There was a question as to why the November concert was on 5 November. It was explained that available dates were offered by Cadogan Hall from which the choir could choose. These are usually the beginning or the end of November. It was suggested that maybe we could have the autumn concert in October and start preparing in June or hold the concert later. The executive committee would consider this idea.

There was a question as to whether the choir's name was Wimbledon Choral Society or Wimbledon Choral. Sarah explained that the registered name with the Charity Commission is Wimbledon Choral Society but we have been using Wimbledon Choral for marketing purposes, to give a more up-to-date feel.

There was a thank you to the committee for having taken on board the idea that the Rachmaninov concert would be a fundraising concert.

There was a question about whether the choir was going to tour again. Sarah explained that there had been a plan to take part in the Co. Mayo choral competition but it had folded following Covid. Isla would look at alternatives. Any ideas please to Isla.

There was an opportunity to sing Carmina Burana at the Royal Albert Hall with the Bach Choir on 29 October 2023. This was the weekend before our own concert. . There was a show of hands and over 100 singers were interested.

The meeting closed at 8.28pm.