

Music Director's Report: Jubilate Singers, for the year ending 31 January 2023.

It is with great pleasure that I present my fourth report as Music Director of Jubilate Singers. Despite the continuing curse of Covid we were able to maintain a semblance of regular activity through the year ending 31 January 2023, with the exception of March and April when the choir chose to pause activities at the height of the Omicron Covid wave.

We reached within a few days of a publicised performance in Akaroa in March titled 'Animals, Humans and Birds' before having to cancel. Ironically, this was a programme that blended repertoire from several of our concerts that had been postponed through Covid in 2021. It was a diverse and fun programme that hopefully we will find the opportunity to perform somewhere in the future.

On resumption of rehearsals, we began preparing for 'Fabulous Folk', our third cabaret-style performance at the 'A Rolling Stone Restaurant and Bar, 579 Colombo St. We were assisted in this by drummer Ted Meager (who has drummed on all three Rolling Stone performances) violinist Amandine Combes-Guerin (her second Rolling Stone performance) and bassist Josh Wright a last-minute replacement for the advertised bassist Brad Grainger. As for the previous outings we presented two performances – at 3.30pm and 8pm.

The repertoire this time leaned heavily on the *Folk Songs for Choirs* Books 1 and 2 edited by John Rutter already in the Jubilate Library, plus a repetition of selected favourites from the earlier A Rolling Stone outings – 'Swingers!' and 'Fooling Around', both subtitled 'hot choral jazz from cool classical dudes'. The Fabulous Folk subtitle was 'Feel-good folk from cool classical choristers'.

In the aftermath of 'Fabulous Folk' I polled the choir regarding the repertoire. Sixteen choristers responded and voted their favourites as 1: 'Soon May the Wellerman Come', 2: 'Turtle Dove' (arr. Vaughan Williams), 3: 'The Golden-Birch Tree Grove', 4: 'Haul Away Joe', 5: 'Dashing Away With the Smoothing Iron' (arr. Rutter). The most polarising piece, scoring an equal number of top and bottom marks with little in between, was the challenging transcript of a Jacob Collier version of the Beach Boys' ballad *In My Room*. Especially appealing in this was the electric-bass playing of Josh Wright, and the soaring violin solo from Amandine Combes-Guerin.

For the second, and only other concert we managed in the year, the Jubilate Singers and executive kindly agreed to stage a retrospective of my choral compositions selected from five decades of writing. The concert was held at The Piano in conjunction with a book launch of *A Complete Absence of Wit & Wisdom*, a collection of my articles, reviews, lyrics and talks from over five decades.

Chris Watson, from the Centre for New Zealand Music, videoed the concert, with sound recording by Thom O'Connor. The videos, of each item presented separately, will be available for public viewing from May 2023 on the SOUNZ YouTube channel.

It was a great privilege for me to have my music recorded and performed by the Jubilate Singers, and, when not *a cappella*, with a variety of expert accompaniments from Jeremy Woodside (piano), Amandine Combes-Guerin and Roger Buckton (flute). My gratitude extends to everyone and this includes the guest choristers Courtney Hickmott, Andrew Jeffries, Roger Buckton and Peter Hind.

Our last project for the year was in the name of education: performing as a sample choir for a New Zealand Choral Federation 'Giving Direction' workshop taken by Andrew Withington, recently returned from doctoral study in choral conducting in the United States. It was a pleasure for Jubilate Singers to participate, and gratifying to observe the expertise evident amongst these young and talented musical leaders of the future.

In light of the lingering Covid it was decided not to sing carols at the hospital. Our very own carol king, Denis Guyan, led us in the singing of some of our favourites at our final rehearsal.

That Jubilate Singers is in good heart is testimony to the cohesion of the choir's administration, and in particular the tireless work this year of singing president Steve French and secretary Vivien Hicks, both long-serving members of the choir and executive, and our non-singing volunteer, treasurer Brian Curtis. Committee members have also contributed greatly, especially Kelvin Lynn for his successful fund-raising endeavours, and Ally Mullord for her dexterity in the digital domain. My appreciation also to former committee member Rachael Hawkey for her writing, compiling and editing of our October concert programme.

My task as musical director is made considerable easier by the pianistic skills of Denis Guyan and Rosemary Allison, both of whom have contributed to the smooth running of our rehearsals by willingly assisting as accompanists. My appreciation also goes to Felicity Ward O'Brien, Rachael Hawkey and Denis Guyon for their musical advice and assistance in coaching during sectional rehearsals.

An especially big thank you as always goes to Steph Gilks, our music librarian without whom we would have nothing to sing. Hers is a task to rival Sisyphus, but unlike that Corinthian miscreant, her boulders reach the top. We are very lucky to have such a patient, methodical and enterprising person in charge of this essential service, which is why we always return our music on time and with without unnecessary pencil markings removed.

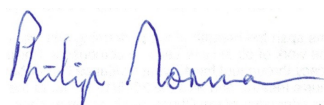
A special thanks also to Peter Hewson for his stage dressing of the *Wit & Wisdom* concert. His props, for this, which included a head adorned with a 'Norman' helmet crafted for the performance and a display of A1 posters from the past helped bring a sense of occasion to the presentation.

Musical highlights of the year for me were many – the earthy ensemble exuberance of 'Soon May the Wellerman Come', the salty sea spray of 'Haul away Joe', the plaintiveness of the Slavic 'The Golden Birch Tree Grove' and the ensemble cohesion in 'In My Room' were amongst my favourites from the 'Fabulous Folk' concert. *Wit & Wisdom*, and I confess to bias here, was one long highlight, with perhaps my biggest frisson of nostalgia coming from hearing after 47 years *Surrealist Landscape*. As I recall, the loudest audience applause was for 'Love is Commercial' (*Love Off the Shelf*, 1986), thanks in no small part to the character singing of Peter Hewson and the over-the-top choral close, capped by soprano Courtney Hickmott's florid embellishments.

And so to the future, I continue to keep in mind:

1. That we need to broaden our audience base.
2. That we need to continue to attract and encourage young singers.
3. That we need to increase core membership particularly men, and light, high sopranos.
4. That we need to continue to be a choir known for its high-quality performances.
5. That we need to continue experimenting with repertoire and choice of performance venues.

My overall compass continues to be the Jubilate motto of 'Joy in Singing' – joy for the audiences as well as the performers. Joy comes in many forms, including having music that is pleasurable to sing and that challenges us (but not to the point of frustration). Joy is having a fun time in rehearsals but also in the savouring of improvement at each turn. Joy is in the friendship that membership of the choir can bring. Joy is also experiencing the magical choral moments when our whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.



Philip Norman,
Music Director,
Jubilate Singers,
24 April 2021