



Welcome to the July lockdown special.

## **Covid-19. Coronavirus Pandemic**

### **Message to Fellow Choristers**

**Gentlemen,**

I hope you are all safe and well and staying as active and occupied as these Covid-19 circumstances allow. It is now more than three months since we returned from a successful visit to Kent and held our last practice sessions. There is no doubt our decision to suspend choral activity at an early date was in the best interest of our members. Many of whom (including myself) fall into the vulnerable category by virtue of age or underlying medical condition. You have probably read about what happened to those choirs in the USA and The Netherlands who failed to take timely pre-emptive action and suffered high infection rates and deaths. Fortunately, Welsh choirs have had no such experience.

At this present time there appears to be an emerging consensus that we are unlikely to sing in concert before St. David's Day 2021. However, we are hopeful that we can return to practice as soon as the risks have been comprehensively assessed and we have a safe environment in which to do so. This is dependant on scientific and medical advice, and consent from the Welsh Govt. I would not like to hazard a guess when we will reach this point but suspect it will be towards the end of this year at the earliest. In pursuit of this the Committee has been studying medical advice to choirs as it emerges and keeping in close contact with the Welsh Association of Choirs.

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For your information, this was broadly the conversation had by the reconvened Choir Management Committee, which met on-line via Zoom last Thursday (18<sup>th</sup> June). Another matter discussed was weekly conscriptions. The Committee determined these should be suspended for the shutdown but if any member wishes to continue payment (via Standing Order) or make a one-off contribution, please do so.

Additionally, at the outset of the pandemic the Committee agreed to continue with Steve's honorarium payment and make some payment to Penny. However, with only limited money coming in that is now currently under review.

The Committee has also been in contact with Steve and will discuss at our July meeting his outline proposal for short duration sectional practice sessions over two nights to enable the choir to ease back into a safe practice routine. To help this along, Dai Poole is conducting a survey of our Practice Room at Ebenezer Church in order to plan safe and socially distanced seating.

Finally, our choir has dealt with severe disruption on many occasions and of course survived the 1918 Influenza Pandemic. At that time, Abertillery with 55 recorded deaths in the first wave, was the second highest hotspot in Wales.

Stay safe.

Mick Bishop. Chairman.

## Phil Hill - Fifty Not Out

Since its earliest days hundreds of men have worn the tie of Abertillery Orpheus Male Voice Choir, yet very few have completed fifty years as an active chorister in its ranks. So to be counted among them is indeed a real honour, primarily for the individual concerned, but also by association, for all those men he has shared his choral life with.

These comments of course, are directed at our committed second tenor, and accomplished soloist, the ever-youthful Phillip Hill. In the same month and year Soyuz 9 was launched into orbit around the earth, Phil took the equally heady decision to join AOMC. And although the Russians came back after eighteen days, fifty years later Phil is still flying high with the choir.



Unassuming, witty, and extremely well read, Phil is both erudite and cultured. He is also a living historian who has participated in all important choir events since 1970; and is the only one of our members who has shared a practice room with one of our 1908 founding fathers, Dai Cheedy. In every sense Phil is a special individual, and definitely one of the boys!

So from everyone in the choir, our music team, and all who make up the AOMC family, congratulations to Phil on reaching this impressive milestone, and may he long remain the exemplar chorister and choir ambassador that he undoubtedly is.

When the choir is able to reconvene safely, the Management Committee, on behalf of the choir, will mark this achievement in time honoured fashion.

Mick Bishop (Chairman)

## Choir Social—Via Zoom

We recently held a Zoom quiz night for choristers, via internet. The first part of the Quiz was about the history of the Choir.

Here are the multiple choice questions: - answers in the August Newsletter

1. How many countries have the choir sang in ? (8, 9, 10, 11)
2. Choir sang before Wales Rugby match in Cardiff Arms Park. Who were the opponents ? (Tonga, Italy Japan, Rumania)
3. What year was this ? (1992, 1993, 1994, 1995)
4. After the choir sang in the closing ceremony of the rugby world Cup, a photo of Kevin Thomas with a famous celebrity appeared in the Western mail. Who was it ? Rolf Harris, Tom Jones, Shirley Bassey, Max Boyce
5. What year was this ? (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001)
6. Before the choir sang with the world choir, a chorister was slapped across the face by a barmaid in the Queens vaults. Who was it ? (Alan Nash, Brian Matthias, Glyn Andrews Kevin Thomas)
7. How many choirs made up the world choir in 1993 with Shirley Bassey ? (100, 120, 150, 180 )
8. How many choristers went to Missoula, USA ? (22, 24, 26, 28)
9. What year was Missoula tour ? (2004, 2005, 2006, 2007)
10. What state is Missoula in? .. Montana, Mississippi, Nevada, Missouri
11. What year did the choir tour Canada ? (1999, 2000, 2001, 2002)
12. Tom Bundred conducted the choir for how many years? (25, 29, 33, 38)
13. How many choristers in the choir in 1919 ? (100, 120, 130, 140)
14. When the choir sang with Peter Karrie in 1993 which West end musical was he famous.? (Les Miserables, Jesus Christ Superstar, Phantom of the Opera, Cats)
15. Orpheus and Eurydice are legends from which mythology? (Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Norse )
16. What musical instrument is on the choir badge ? (Angel harp, lyre, lute, zither)
17. How many recordings have the choir made ? (Lp/cd/cassette) (3, 4, 5, 6)
18. Robert Lloyd patron sang which part? (Bass, Baritone, 1st Tenor, 2nd tenor)
19. How many conductors has Abertillery had since 1908 ? (6, 8, 10, 12)
20. 1931 live radio broadcast, first choir from this area, where was it recorded ? (St. Michaels, Six Bells colliery, Cardiff Railway Station, Porthcawl Pavilion)

## Latest COVID Government Guidance

New guidance has been issued by the UK Government for England which basically only allows Professional groups to rehearse and perform, leaving Amateur groups high and dry for the time being:

[https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/performing-arts?fbclid=IwAR2Gulti6qnpU7IEkUh3HSLZz\\_i\\_IYZ5Spl8oIz19PZvAOyCbAeLxfXg3sY#arts-5-2](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/performing-arts?fbclid=IwAR2Gulti6qnpU7IEkUh3HSLZz_i_IYZ5Spl8oIz19PZvAOyCbAeLxfXg3sY#arts-5-2)

The Singing Network UK, a group of 27 organisations which oversees choral music across the UK, is challenging this new guidance as it unfairly excludes those professional musicians (conductors / accompanists) whose income is derived from working with amateur choirs and orchestras or ballet groups, as well as the loss from private tuition sources. This is not about the science or the need for everyone involved to feel safe, it is about the anomaly between the treatment of professional and amateur organisations. Copies of the following letter have been sent to the relevant Ministers of Culture — I include the Welsh Government version.

The letter has been signed off by Barbara Eifler, Chair of the Singing Network UK on behalf of Making Music and the following other organisations:

Marie Benton, Chief Executive, The Choir With No Name  
Caroline Bithell, Chair, Natural Voice Network  
Leslie East OBE, Chair, Association of British Choral Directors  
Manvinder Rattan, CEO, Sing For Pleasure  
Ben Parry, Artistic Director, National Youth Choirs of Great Britain  
Derrick Rowlands, Executive Member, Welsh Association Male Voice Choirs  
Jennifer Coleman-Peers, Interim Chief Executive, The Voices Foundation  
Clare Edwards, Director of Learning and Events, Young Voices  
John Croft, Chairman, National Association of Choirs  
Heidi Pegler, Chair, Association of Teachers of Singing  
Phillip Tolley, Choral Advocate, British Choirs on the Net  
Neil Chippington, Chair, Choir Schools' Association  
Tessa Marchington, Managing Director, Music in Offices  
Martin Baglow, Chairman, British Association of Barbershop Singers  
Hugh Morris, Director, Royal School of Church Music  
Nancy Philbin, Chair, Ladies Association of British Barbershop Singers  
Margaret Oliver, Chair of Trustees, British Kodály Academy  
Sir Andrew Parmley, Chief Executive, Royal College of Organists

Dafydd Elis-Thomas AS/MS  
Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism  
Welsh Government  
5th Floor, Tŷ Hywel, Cardiff Bay  
Cardiff CF99 1NA

15 July 2020

Dear Deputy Minister,

We are writing to ask you as a matter of urgency that **when you issue guidance on the re-opening of the performing arts you allow amateurs to resume musical activity following the same guidelines as professionals.**

Our data suggest there are around 700 music groups in Wales; with 40,000 amateur participants. These are adult leisure-time groups; if you count church and school choirs and ensembles as well, you could easily add another 1,400 groups and another 80,000 people.

All of these people are now prevented – in England - from making the cautious and staged return to activity they were preparing, by the latest guidance published by DCMS.

***We are hoping that in Wales you will consider this issue before finalising your guidance and agree with us that amateurs and professionals should be treated the same.***

DCMS gives no justification for this distinction between professional and non-professional, so:

***Are we considered to be incapable of assessing and managing risks?*** 86% of groups are charities, governed by a board of trustees, used to running their organisation and taking care of the well-being of participants. Groups are for everyone, so are likely to include a cross-section of professionals (including doctors!) well able to interpret and act on guidance. Youth and school group managers of course are highly experienced in safeguarding.

***Perhaps the sector is thought negligible in its financial impact,*** but actually it is an essential part of most musicians' living (the sector UK-wide spends £86.4m a year on professionals) and a core part of a venue's sustainability, through regular hires for rehearsals and performances. Spending by the sector also includes music publishers, associated trades (staging, uniforms, marketing, print, photography), hospitality, touring etc..

***But it's as urgent for the professionals that we return to being able to engage them*** as soon as possible as conductors, accompanists, players, soloists. The SEISS finishes in August when their income from the amateur sector will not be restored yet, certainly not if the DCMS guidance is implemented across the nations and continues to forbid activity.

***And venues are keen for us to return,*** at least to rehearsals in the first instance, so they can start building up their income again.

Our audiences, too, around 7.6m of them a year (UK figures), will be keen to see us back – we are their friends, their family, their community, we are the music they first turn to in their neighbourhood.

As a sector, we are utterly committed to the safety of our participants and we believe there is no reason for making separate rules for professionals and amateurs.

The musical activity we represent is part of the fabric of Welsh culture and life – and your actions now are crucial to ensuring its survival.

***As organisations, our colleagues and I stand ready to offer you and your team insights where helpful, and to support music groups with guidance, templates and help, if you let us move forward in line with the professionals.***

We invite you to join a choir or instrumental group as they meet online to hear directly from participants.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barbara Eifler', written in a cursive style.

Barbara Eifler,  
Chief Executive, **Making Music**  
Chair, Singing Network UK

**The Welsh Association of Choirs** received sent out a survey to members to gather information from choirs to illustrate the impact of COVID-19 virus on choir activities. This is a summary of the findings from the Survey:

## **Background**

The Welsh Association of Male Choirs represents 93 choirs in Wales with 14 Associate choirs in England, Northern Ireland, Australia, Channel Isles, New Zealand, Canada, US and South Africa. The purpose of the survey was to gather factual information from choirs to illustrate the impact of the Covid - 19 virus on choir activities and to identify possible difficulties going forward. It followed a previous piece of work which gathered anecdotal evidence from choirs on the initial impact of the pandemic. The Association are involved in two pieces of representative work with the UK Government and the Senedd in Wales. Working as members of the Singing Network UK the Association has contributed to a submission being made to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; in Wales the Association has submitted evidence to the Senedd Committee on Culture, Language and Sport for their inquiry into the impact of Covid -19. Context Responses were received from 53 choirs i.e. 57% of the members.

## **Key findings Impact on activities**

The vast majority of member choirs ceased their activities in mid-late March 2020. This included practise and performances. At an early stage the Association postponed two major massed concerts at the Royal Albert Hall and St David's Hall in Cardiff In all 454 events were cancelled; the majority were local concerts but some more significant events were also cancelled e.g. Annual Concerts. Half of the concerts cancelled were being organised to support local and national charities. More than 40 of the concerts were hosting concerts with guest choirs from the UK and overseas Choirs also cancelled 43 choir tours throughout the UK and Europe.

## **Impact on funding**

There are a number of financial elements which have been impacted – performance income, fund raising activities, member subscriptions, lost insurance and travel costs, income from letting owned premises 43 member choirs were able to provide an accurate assessment of the financial losses incurred from March – June 2020 with a total estimated incurred loss of £139,900 - an average of approximately £3250 per choir with the most significant single loss being £15000.



## **Keeping in touch**

Since the cessation of activities, all choirs have made arrangements for member choristers to come together in some way in order to at least be kept informed of developments. However, some choirs have embraced social media to keep in touch socially and in some cases to maintain musical practise.

Zoom is used for rehearsals and social events; there are regular phone calls, e-mails and newsletters for those who do not have access to social media. In smaller community settings face to face contact also takes place. In some cases, Musical Directors have been the animators of music-based activities; however, in many other cases active committees have led the 'keep-in-touch' and social events. However, a small number of choirs highlighted the difficulty in keeping in touch because of lack of access to social media and expressed concern over the number of choristers falling out of contact.

## **Future risks – practise premises**

Only 3 of the responding choirs own their practise premises; one other choir retains theirs on a long-term lease. The other choirs rent (or are given) practise space in churches, chapels, schools, community halls and private premises e.g. rugby clubs and hotels. There are clear financial threats in the future whether a choir owns or rents practise space.

For owners there will undoubtedly be upgrading costs to take account of the 'new normal' with social distancing and hygiene requirements.

Some of those renting may not be able to do so in the future if the cost of upgrading and improvement is prohibitive and/or the owners of the premises decide not to offer their premises for rent in the future. The majority of respondents have concern relating to practise premises going forward.

## **The Future**

Optimistically, 50% of responding choirs are taking bookings for 2021 and beyond. Some have booked their Annual Concerts for 2021. The Welsh Association have delayed by one year their major Massed Voices concerts in Cardiff and London. However, this means that 50% of choirs have not started planning their activities for the future, largely because they are cautious to move forward without official advice and support on the health risks. The respondents to the survey with comments such as:

'As soon as it is safe'

'When we have guidance'

'When there is a vaccine'

'When advised to do so'

### **Main concerns**

There are some major concerns which are emerging to some extent because of speculation about the societal changes which may emerge in the future. The main issues raised by choirs include:

- Impact of social distancing and hygiene requirements on future practise arrangements
- Potential closure of practise venues
- Possible closure of many of the remaining small, indoor performance venues
- Older choristers with underlying illnesses may be excluded from choirs
- Loss of interest in choral music during a prolonged break
- Vulnerability of choristers and audiences
- Decline in singing skills during a prolonged break

### **Viability**

Half of the respondents were bullish in their attitude to the future viability of their choir but they did recognise that there would be challenges and changes

A small number of choirs are pessimistic about their continued existence

Some choirs predicted a significant drop in membership because of the age of many choristers

There are also concerns about a loss of interest amongst choristers and audiences.

However. There is a common recognition that much work will be required over the next few years if choirs are to return to anything like the quality and activity levels which prevailed pre-Covid.

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**The Welsh Association of Choirs.** As of 28 June, 350 CDS and 27 DVDs have been sent to 188 Care Homes with a further 36 CDs donated to every hospital radio station in the Principality. AOMC submitted a list of 14 care homes and nursing homes in the Abertillery area, who should now have received these items.

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The next Choir Quiz, via Zoom, will take place on Friday evening July 31st. If you would like to join please contact Kevin Harris. If you are a regular contributor then Kevin will post you the Zoom link via email.

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The Committee are looking to arrange a possible 'socially distanced' choir get together at Abertillery Park on Saturday 29 August 2020 (Bank Holiday weekend) at 11.00 am. No singing - just a social and to allow the Committee to update the choir on the situation and future plans and to meet up as friends. This will of course depend on the use of 'bubbles'.

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The next AOMC Newsletter will be sent out in August. If you would like to view the Newsletters simply visit [www.abertilleryorpheus.co.uk](http://www.abertilleryorpheus.co.uk) and visit the members page.

# **A Lockdown Lament**

*12th June 2020*

*During the Coronavirus Lockdown period*

*Kevin Harris (Top Tenor)*

*Abertillery Orpheus Male Choir*

*2006 to present*

It's Friday night, our choir social  
We meet online, not at the local  
With pint in hand, poured from a bottle  
A break from those, we'd like to throttle

All set up and now zoomed in  
My camera's on, so I'll begin  
The faces packed into my screen  
Like masks you wear at Halloween

I see the face of David Poole  
Whilst sat upon my kitchen stool  
There is no reason or no rhyme  
For him to join before half time

Jeffrey Anstee bears no grudge  
For when on tour he is our judge  
And when it comes to drinking port  
He necks it like he's back in court

Our Treasurer plays Ukulele  
A happy chap he strums it daily  
He pays our cons into the bank  
From Lute to Loot, his name is Hank

We practice music avant garde  
Lead by MD Stephen Bard  
South America he has crossed  
To find a city once was lost

Michael Bishop, our chairman vocal  
Not from these parts but still a local  
A highway's man with memory vault  
Filled with tarmac and asphalt

Fred the Fag sings deepest bass  
Like singing notes in lowercase  
His skills extend to snare and drum  
And Ragtime Band with extra dum

Somebody said that someone's cracking  
That someone being Gareth Spracklen  
He said to somebody something lairy  
Then somebody made him secretary

Our concert sec is bright and jolly  
He goes by stage name Phillip Tolley  
He costumes up as many men  
His clothes supplied by Mr Benn

There's Lyndon, Phillip, Jeff and Rob  
And Kevin squared complete the mob  
In after concerts, they all sloop  
To start the singing as F Troop

Basher Wallace sings quite bravely  
I would too if from the navy  
Built like Popeye broadest chest  
Medals proud just like Sylveste

Now when it comes to Chairman Vice  
The man elected had no choice  
Just when he thought that things were rosy  
F troop shouted, "vote for Cozy"

First we had a member Gwyn  
Then we got a man called Glyn  
We nicknamed Glyn to none but Gwyn  
Confused poor Gwyn so called him Blakey!

With music filed from A to Z  
It helps us to all to get ahead  
So when Steve says we're ready to start  
We wait for Penny who's pulled it apart

There are more crew lest we forget  
Like Mervyn Howells and Les Annett  
There's one who hides his sweets so coy  
A young man Brett, a Bevan boy

Matthew Hollings and Nick Coad  
Second tenors A La Mode *(in fashion/modern style)*  
Malcolm Williams, Bernard Ass  
Pump it out like air and gas

There's Arthur Rees who likes a scan  
As he flies round like Superman  
There's Paul Lane with his Asda trolley  
Their so attached we named him Dolly

Phil Hill, Fred Hatton and John Tiley  
Curtis J regarded highly  
Trevor Jones and William Marr  
Boys from Cwm that land afar

David Peddle and Russ Porter  
Cornerstones like bricks and mortar  
Nigel Jones and old Ken Lloyd  
But only one could fill the void

So here we gather Friday night  
Each man a victim of this plight  
Four months ago, we went to Kent  
Locked down since then, more days that Lent

No music now just chats and quizzes  
From week to week as timeline whizzes  
We'll do our best to see this through  
Until we get to rendezvous

Tiny Rebel I foretell  
When we get off this carousel  
But now my friends to you as others  
I say 'stay safe' this Band of Brothers

