

Meet the Conductor

Tell us briefly how you became a conductor.

Quite by chance! My family loved listening to music, but didn't play any instruments or sing. We had an upright piano in the living room, which was odd, as nobody played, and I didn't have piano lessons. However, I had lessons in school to learn how to play the 'cello and the flute and sang in the choir.

In my teens, I would regularly go with a group of friends who were equally mad about classical music, to hear the Hallé at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester. As a student, I became involved with the musical activities at the Adult Education Centre, played in their orchestra and sang in a chamber choir. I started to make music with different groups of friends and suddenly found myself 'directing' the mayhem, which is not the same as conducting.

It wasn't until I came to teach in Chester in 1978 that my musical activities blossomed. I was still singing in a chamber choir in Manchester but soon joined the Chester Music Society Choir in 1979. In 1980, I became a member of the Chester St. Cecilia Singers and during my 40 plus years with them, I became their Deputy Director. I also began conducting, starting with the Waverton Singers 1980-86 and from then on it has been one fulfilling series of choral relationships leading to my current role with FDCS since 2008.

Conductor, Musical Director or Director of Music – which is it?

This is a great question. I've been given all three titles, and behind the question is the more interesting topic of what is my view of conducting and the role of the conductor?

This may be nit-picking, but I see the term 'Musical Director' either as a limiting title which suggests that you only direct musicals, or that simply it should go without saying that the person who directs you should be musical!

I very much see my role as someone who directs the choice of music and plans the programmes we sing, based on an understanding of the choir, its enthusiasms, abilities and audiences. There is also an assumption that the role should "inform, educate and entertain".

For many, director is synonymous with conductor, but for me a "director" is setting the route map whereas a "conductor" is finding all the ways of successfully leading you along the route. I often joke that all I do is "move air about" but I know all too well that simply flapping your arms about in front of a group, in a range of frenzied motions, is utterly useless.

Conducting must convey the pulse or beat of the rhythms without being simply metronomic, as well as demonstrate the intention, shape and changing levels of intensity within a phrase, often linked to the meaning of the words being sung. As I'm at the front of the group, I have the best opportunity to balance the sound of each part and shape the overall sound. Above all, my role is to convey confidently what I believe are the composer's intentions and encourage each singer to respond individually to the music as well as reflect the collective passion in performance. Anyone who has sung in a choir will know that feeling of contributing to something much greater than they individually could achieve.

To misquote Eric Morecombe, singing all the right notes in the correct order, observing every dynamic marking precisely is **NOT** the ultimate goal – as such a performance only presents the notes and markings on the page – not the music hidden within. Obviously, accuracy matters, and we strive to sing accurately, but if the heart is not engaged just as much as the mind, then what is the point? What are you individually getting from the experience and what are you conveying to the listener?

So, I see myself as both a Director of Music and a conductor as both remits are inextricably linked.

When preparing scores and rehearsing them, which comes first – words or music?

Words, words, words! If the composer is responding to a text, then it's our job to give the text a central role in understanding and helping to create the mood, atmosphere and "meaning" of the piece. There are occasions when a composer has produced a tune which then requires a text, but for much of the music we choose to sing, we need to align our emotional and musical responses to the words, giving them a clarity which enhances the musical response. I spend a lot of time reading and discussing the text of a piece. It may just be the same old Latin text of a liturgical or Requiem Mass, but the thousands of ways in which composers have responded to and been ignited by the very same words is both fascinating and provides a key to how we interpret the music. One day, I would love to do a series of concerts, probably annually, which present the six late great mass settings by Haydn. Between 2014-2018 we included a setting of the Requiem Mass in each season, covering settings by Mozart, Goodall, Faure, Duruflé and Chilcott. Some of them added poetic texts in English alongside the Latin mass, but every composer found something personal and unique to convey in each setting: words are the starting and end point of interpretation.

How do you choose the music you perform, and do you have favourite pieces and those you hate?

As I said earlier, everything depends on context. I am lucky to work with a very supportive committee who are also willing to be "critical friends". I am also blessed to work with a tremendously knowledgeable and enthusiastic accompanist and together we form a team which provides the checks and balances necessary. I have attended performances where the conductor is having a great time conducting the performance or his favourite recording in his head, which has limited relationship to what is happening in front of him, despite the choir trying their very best to sing a work for which they have been poorly prepared and is simply beyond their collective abilities.

I reckon that I have directed almost 50 works in my time with FDCS. Some of them more than once, such as Handel's "Messiah", Faure's, Mozart's and Rutter's settings of the "Requiem". There are some works I can't wait to reschedule, such as Dvorak's "Stabat Mater", but I am always looking for pieces which excite me and I believe will excite the choir, as well as being appropriate and performable. There are pieces which I'd love to perform, but they might not be appropriate for the choir at this time, largely because of the demands on limited rehearsal time, such as Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms", Poulenc's "Gloria", or Stravinsky's "Symphony of Psalms". If I am not enthusiastic about or invested in the work, then I'd prefer not to select it and YES, there are pieces which I perform but don't particularly enjoy, but thankfully, they are very few!

Which do you enjoy more – rehearsals or concerts?

I always say that the concert is “the cherry on top of the cake”. As someone who has participated in both, as a choir member and as a conductor, I enjoy them equally but for different reasons.

Rehearsals are the time when we get to know a piece, find out its pleasures and its pains. From the conductor’s point of view, it is essential that the singers believe over several weeks that they are getting to grips with the music and making progress. There must be an element of challenge in each rehearsal, and nothing feels better than leaving it feeling that you have worked hard, enjoyed the process and made some progress. I know this as a choir member from being a Hallé Associate for the past few years.

Some of my greatest musical moments have been in concert performances, either as a singer: Vaughan-Williams Sea Symphony at the Proms, Mahler’s “Resurrection Symphony” in Chester Cathedral, Elgar’s “The Kingdom” and Brahms’ “German Requiem” at the Bridgewater Hall or as a conductor with this choir. You will see from my many reviews of our concerts that I am moved and thrilled by so many aspects of our performances. Concerts are the moment when we get the chance to share our unique thoughts and feelings about a piece with an audience. What could be better?