

Leith Hill Musical Festival

A way forward

Preamble: it is evident from feedback from many directions in recent months that there are concerns which are affecting the whole-hearted involvement of our twelve choirs in the Festival. As the choirs are the Festival, this is of fundamental importance to our future. Recent discussions, including the meeting on Feb 26th, have suggested that there is wide-spread appetite for ‘development’ of what we do and how we do it.

The issues: there would seem to be three principal areas of concern:

- i. Repertoire
- ii. Competitions
- iii. The length of the Festival day

Repertoire: it is clear that most choirs would welcome much greater freedom in choice of repertoire in music that they sing as an individual choir, and also (for many choirs) rather less music to have to prepare would also be welcomed. In the past, repertoire of the smaller pieces has been entirely dictated by the Music Committee (although conductors have been encouraged to submit ideas). Allowing much greater freedom of choice would also widen greatly the styles/genres of music that might be performed.

Competitions: we have heard anxiety from many (but not all) choirs that they lose members or field smaller contingents of singers in the Festival because of the perceived pressures/exposure of Competitions. This could be alleviated by reducing the number of sections of the competitions and by allowing much greater freedom of choice of repertoire. In the longer-term, we could consider giving choirs the choice of whether they compete in the Competitions at all.

Length of the day: a radical solution would be to move all the competitions to a separate day, which would allow all choirs to compete together. A lesser, or interim, change would be to reduce the length of the competitions which would allow the day to begin later. Also, we could reduce the need for choirs to move several times on and off the stage or to a different hall, which will save time and fatigue.

Consideration of these three (often inter-linked) areas, and the many associated musical, organisational and practical issues within them, has led logically to a plan for 2020 and beyond, which we feel will allow the Festival to evolve and develop excitingly while preserving the important history and heritage.

Proposals

For the 2020 Festival: maintain the announced major combined works (Blue div *Vaughan Williams - Sea Symphony*, Red div. *Mozart - Mass in C minor*, Green div. *Blackford - Mirror of Perfection/Mendelssohn - Hear my prayer*) but restructure the competitions as follows:

Rather than following the current 'prescription' of five short pieces, each choir would instead present an 'own-choice' recital (max 20 mins), to include:

- i. A piece with accompaniment
- ii. A piece sung unaccompanied (a cappella)
- iii. A piece written by a living composer
- iv. Own-choice excerpt(s) from the major work(s) being performed in the evening concert

To minimise stage-movement, each choir could present all four pieces as a continuous recital, although the adjudicator (only one needed) would mark and comment on the sections individually - allowing winners for each of the four sections and an overall winner. Choirs could be given the choice of using their own accompanist or performing with the Festival accompanist.

In the evening concert, each choir could perform one of their pieces from sections i., ii. or iii. in the first half of the concert programme (directed by their own conductor) and prize-giving for winners of each section could be publically made during the evening as now.

If we do not have the current beginning-of-the-day 'warm-up' session (most choirs do some sort of warm-up anyway) and singing of the *VW - Spring Song* (which could be incorporated into the evening concert if desired) we could work to a morning timetable as follows:

- 10.30 am Choir A performs (up to 20 mins singing + 5 mins change-over)
- 10.55am Choir B performs (ditto)
- 11.20am Choir C performs (ditto)
- 11.45am Choir D performs (ditto)
- 12.10pm Short break
- 12.20pm Adjudication and announcement of winners
- 12.45pm End of morning
Lunch break
- 2.30pm Full rehearsal of major works with orchestra
- c. 4.00pm End of combined choir rehearsal (orch. reh. continues to 5.30pm)
Break
- 7.30pm Evening concert

For the longer-term - 2021 and onwards

Competitions: we should consider moving the competitions to a separate day (preferably a Saturday), which would further alleviate concerns about fatigue (main concert days would then begin at 2.30pm for choirs). This would allow all LHMf choirs to compete together, thus making far greater unity for the Festival, and open the way for other choirs to join too. If this day is held before the main Festival concert days, then winning choirs could still perform in the evening concerts in the main Festival.

Concerts: holding some of our major Festival concerts on weekdays makes it difficult for many who have jobs or other weekday commitments to participate. If for 2021 and beyond we held our main Festival over the two days of a weekend (ie concerts on Saturday and Sunday) we would overcome this obstacle. This would mean restructuring the choirs into two groups, rather than three, but this would have musical benefits (greater numerical strength of choirs which I believe we could accommodate on the staging), audience improvement (six choirs bringing their friends/relatives to each concert) and consequent financial benefits for the Festival. We are due to restructure choir groups/Divisions for 2021 anyway. If additional choirs wish to join or if participation by existing choirs grow in size, we could revert to three separate groupings, with the Festival held on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Attracting other choirs: while hoping that the existing LHMf choirs would wish to maintain wholehearted involvement in both the Competitions and the large-scale choral concerts, this restructuring provides the possibility for choirs to choose not to compete if they don't wish to, or conversely welcoming choirs who only want to take part in the Competitions day and not the combined large choral performances. This greater flexibility, coupled with greater range and freedom of repertoire, will make it much easier for new choirs to be attracted into involvement in LHMf.

The next steps

These proposals have developed logically out of views expressed at the Feb 26th meeting, together with written and verbal representations made by choir conductors, chairmen and others from within choirs. The April 18th meeting will give further opportunity for discussion and, for those unable to be present on that occasion, written comments and ideas can be fed through to Mandy Begg. Decisions will then need to be made at the General Committee meeting in May 2019 if development changes are to be introduced for LHMf 2020.

Jonathan Willcocks
April 2019