



A Warm Whitechapel Christmas

After a term where concerts were still disrupted by Covid, LGQ's year concluded with our longstanding regular Christmas concert

by Phil Price



*Fi Dunn singing a solo folk song
Photo by Maja Dunn*

When we come to the old German Lutheran Chapel, St George's, in Alie Street, Whitechapel, we feel that we are entering West Gallery World. Although not a country church, this London backstreet chapel, with its minimally altered 18th century interior, including a two-deck pulpit and box pews, has the familiar feeling of home, particularly after over ten years of LGQ Christmas concerts. The only unusual features are that most of the memorials and the panels are in German, in ornate Gothic script, as most written German was until after the Second World War. One of the few post-18th century innovations is the fact that it actually has got a lavatory and a kitchen, from which that uniquely beguiling aroma which is mulled wine (or Glühwein, as we call it at Alie Street), floated out.

This is no longer the church of the German community in London, which is probably as large as it has ever been but is based in affluent Richmond these days, around the German school. But a good audience, with not a few Germans amongst them, gathered to listen. We launched off with Wesley's "Hark the Herald Angels sing" to the brisk and invigorating tune "Newton", an absolute favourite. We then sang a selection of West Gallery Christmas hymns and carols. Among these was "While shepherds watched" to the tune "Manton", one of so many versions of this carol which, as Francis Roads told the congregation, we think are all better than today's conventional tune.

An absolute highlight was a solo folk song by Fi Dunn, which held the audience in rapt attention, and after which any dropping pin would have been heard by all. We concluded, as always, with a German piece, and this year it was 'Kommt, wir geh'n nach Bethlehem!' ('Come, we're off to Bethlehem!'), known (sort of) to most Germans as a children's carol. Your reporter, conducting this, had a slightly complicated but brilliant scheme for audience participation, but abandoned it at the last moment, as the audience did not appear to be very participative, as Frances had sagely predicted. The quire and band sang and performed the piece very well, and it was much appreciated. Afterwards, the quire retired with the congregation to the back of the hall, for copious quantities of Glühwein and Stollen.

We have had a difficult term, with more than one event cancelled due to covid, and disruptions to rehearsals due to strikes. On the day, the quire performed a lot better than one might have imagined based on rehearsals, and our hearts were warmed as we wended our way home.

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I have my own way of organising rehearsals. My underlying desire is to use the available time as efficiently as possible.

Starting on time and finishing on time is one of my principles. LGQ rehearsals start at 7.30pm and last for two hours, with a break for refreshments. This means that at 7.30 we sing the first note, even if there are people still arriving. I was convinced of the need to do this by a bad experience with a professional conductor who led an amateur orchestra in which I used to play viola. "Let's give people another ten minutes to get here," he would say, if there were empty seats. And of course people took this to mean that it never mattered if they were a few minutes late. On one occasion we played the first note of an 8.00pm rehearsal at 8.20pm.

And just as it is a discourtesy to other members to arrive late, so I as conductor should not keep people later than they expect to leave. "Let's do that just one more time" can make things worse rather than better.

Members receive details of what is to be rehearsed, and in what order, usually a week in advance. All our music is downloadable from our website, so they can put it all in order in their folders, and do a spot of prior practice if they want to. Some do. Midi files are available for those who don't trust their sight reading. I spend some time putting pieces in what I hope will be the most effective order, and, in my mind at least, allocating rehearsal time to each one.

I don't stick rigidly to these time slots, but I am always mindful of the fact that extra time for one piece means less time for another. I have come across quite experienced choir leaders who forget this. "Oh dear, we seem to have run out of time" to me shows poor rehearsal planning. If one particular piece is causing problems, I am quite willing to give it extra time...at the next rehearsal.

Strong views are held by many choir leaders on the matter of warm-up exercises. If you've not experienced these, they often consist of singing nonsense syllables, such as lu lu or ma ma to scale passages or other brief musical fragments. Some believe that they are of great benefit. I personally think they are a waste of precious rehearsal time. I aim to warm up the quire by starting with a simple, familiar piece with limited vocal ranges, especially for the sopranos and tenors.

After one or two of these, we move to material which is challenging in one way or another, while brains are still fresh. If it is a new piece, we start by singing it through, maybe a bit on the slow side, with the instruments. Then as soon as we get to the end, I get the quire to sing it again, before anyone pipes up with "Francis, I don't think we got that bit in bar 22 right", or similar. I want people to correct their own mistakes as far as possible. It is amazing how much better bar 22 usually goes the second or third time, with no intervention from me.

And I rarely go in for that tedious process of "part bashing"; singing the parts one by one, while the other three parts twiddle their thumbs. There are two reasons why I am against it; firstly, it bores the thumb-twiddlers; and secondly, it is de-skilling people to spoon-feed them in this manner. Occasionally we will work on a brief passage for one particular part that is having trouble. But mostly I encourage people to work things out for themselves. There speaks the retired teacher. Part bashing is in my opinion an inefficient use of rehearsal time.

The first rehearsal of a new session is what I call a "notes rehearsal". It's also a words rehearsal, but the purpose is to fix the music in people's minds, and to practice underlying texts. In subsequent rehearsals, having built strong foundations, I can fuss about diction, expression, dynamics, &c.

I usually aim to do half a dozen pieces before the refreshment break. And then, after the break, comes the conductor's greatest challenge: getting people back to their seats! They love to stand around, finishing their conversations.

I cope with this by beginning with another straightforward piece, and at the appropriate time I just start, regardless of who may not be back in their seat yet. This seems to be as good a way as any of hurrying folks up. For the penultimate piece I usually choose something joyful, to send people away with a good feeling. And finally we sing our closing psalm, 111 NV to *Oldham*, by Samuel Webbe. This has been sung at the end of every LGQ rehearsal since we started in 1997.

I'm not for one moment suggesting that mine is the best or the only way to plan a rehearsal, but that's how I do it.

We are sorry to learn of the recent death of former quire member John Miles.

Francis Roads writes:

John Miles was an early member of LGQ, but left us 12 years ago to move to the countryside. He hailed from Canada, where he had trained as a professional oboist, and served in the military.

He served us loyally as bass singer, leader of our band, and as Assistant Conductor. He was a person to whom I felt I could always turn for advice on musical matters. He may be heard playing his oboe on tracks from our first CD, Praise ye the Lord, which are available on our website.

John passed away on 8th December, following a heart attack.

Nicholas Markwell adds:

I remember John for his excellent oboe playing, with delightful baroque ornamentation, and also for his setting of verses from Psalm 69, Save me O God, which we have in YVR. It was a favourite of mine back then, and still is now. He will be much missed.



Inglewhite Congregational Chapel, near Preston, dates from 1826 and many wholesome hymns will have been sung there over the years.

Photo by Phil Price, on the way home from the Hymn Society Conference 2022.

The Quire Rehearsal

A winter's tale by Phil Price

I had agreed to take the rehearsal for the Winthorne Gallery Quire in place of Robert. I knew they had an important Christmas service coming up, but he had gone down with Covid and someone else had to step in. It was a scramble coming down from London that evening. The rush-hour traffic seemed to be back to the bad old days, in spite of all the working from home that is supposed to happen, especially on Fridays. By the time I had left the motorway and entered the B roads it was dark, time was short, and I was in some danger of being late.

Having taken me down ever more narrow and winding roads, my trusty satnav eventually led me into the centre of the village, the houses dark geometric shapes against the pale blue night sky. I could not remember whether the rehearsal was in Winthorne Church or Winthorne Church Hall. A little stressed, I eventually saw the spiky steeple above the treetops, found Church Lane, and crunched the car on the gravel outside the lych gate. There was a soft yellow glow coming from the church door and surrounding windows, and, glad to have found the right place, I walked quickly in.

The choir was already in position up in the gallery. I thought this was excellent—not many West Gallery quires actually get to do that. Calling out a word of greeting and apology, I hurried up the back stairs and moved to the front of the balcony. They were all in costume—I knew that they were a costume band, but I had not realised that they dressed for rehearsals. The costumes were absolutely amazing; I had never seen better. The choir seemed somewhat reserved, looking at me with slightly grave faces, but they felt very committed. Above all, I sensed they were glad to be there.

They had a little difficulty understanding me at first, and when they began to ask questions I had to adjust to their very rich local accent, but we soon established lines of communication. I reminded myself that although we were less than two hours from London, life could still be surprisingly different in these remote rural areas. Some of the ladies seemed to be staring at me as if they had never seen a man in a suit and tie before.

It seemed that they had not managed to print out the music in advance, so I handed out copies which they inspected with great interest. It was then time to ask the band to tune up, and I stood at the front, hands raised, all eyes fixed intently on me. I felt a little as if they were critically examining my entire person, as much as looking for the first musical gesture.

And they sang. I have never heard West Gallery sung like it. It was not so much the musical accuracy, which was somewhat variable. Those singers and players gave their heart and soul, and I have never been so moved by the rendition of “O praise the Lord with one consent” to Cranbrook, or “To God in whom I trust” to Mount Ephraim.

After about 40 minutes, we stopped for a break. There did not seem to be tea or coffee, but one of the musicians produced a metal flask of what turned out to be brandy, and a sip of that refreshed us. After the interval we tackled William Knapp’s “In my trouble I called upon the Lord” and eventually concluded our rehearsal with “Praise ye the Lord; our God to praise” to Oldham. I stopped conducting now, and just listened.

“By precepts he hath us enjoined
to keep his wondrous works in mind
and to posterity record
That good and gracious is our Lord.”

When the rehearsal was over Jacob, one of the basses and, it appeared, the senior member of the quire, shook my hand warmly and said that I would never know how much it meant to them that I had come all

the way to Winthorne Church to enable them to sing. “Tell Robert we are very thankful to you. Very thankful. Let him know that as soon as he is well I will pay him a visit myself.” His eyes were moist and he seemed reluctant to release my hand.

When I got home I rang Robert to tell him how it went. He seemed surprised.

“Didn’t you get my message?” he said.

“What message?”

“We decided to cancel rehearsal in the end. We’ll do it next week. I suggested you need not come, given the weather and the train strikes. I assumed that is what you decided to do.”

“I went straight to Winthorne Church; I didn’t have time to check my phone.”

Robert paused a moment, then said:

“We rehearse in the village hall down here. The quire has not sung in Winthorne church for years, except on special occasions. It was the old village church, but it’s not in use any more. My old Dad told me there actually was a gallery band there back in the day, at least that is what his grandfather Jacob once told him.”

For a moment, time seemed to pause.

“Hello?... hello?...” said Robert.

I drew a slow breath,

“I think I have a message for you,” I said.



Phil Price believes he took this photo in Elham Parish Church in Kent, and it is a reminder to us all to be thankful that sermons are probably much shorter now than was the case back in West Gallery times...

“Good Singing Still...”

25. Instruments used in West Gallery Bands

Nothing sounds so out of tune as a flute, except two flutes.
(attributed to Mozart)

The two key-bugles and bassoon that George Eliot heard as a child at Chilvers Coton must have made an entirely different sound from the three fiddles and bass viol (i.e. ‘cello) that the Hardy family played at Stinsford (“Mellstock”). A band leader would have recruited any competent player, whether from the militia band (woodwind, brass, serpent), or a local dance group (violins and cellos—occasionally, double basses). Obsolete instruments which survived in WG bands include the key-bugle (a military band instrument), the cross-blown flageolet (an imitation flute), and the serpent. The bass-viol reported in many bands (Hermon French used the word in 1972) was sometimes an actual viol, or a double bass, but most frequently a ‘cello. Abel, the last professional viol player, died in 1787, well into the WG period. Stringed instruments were sometimes made locally, and if the village joiner could not oblige, the blacksmith or coppersmith might make the body of a fiddle or ‘cello. Several metal ‘cellos survive, in playable condition. Some locally made ‘cellos had flat backs, like a viol (or a modern double bass). Hostile reports of improvised instruments like the bladder and string, or ‘bumbass’ need not be taken too seriously. Wind instruments, though normally low-cost, were professionally made. There are a few reports, from about 1840, of the chromatic forms of concertina, and portable forms of harmonium, such as the seraphine. In fact, bands could be quite different, each having its unique sound.

Often the church was responsible for buying and maintaining the instruments, and churchwardens’ accounts detail the expenses incurred: £1:10:0 for a “flut”; £2:2:0 for a clarinet; £5:5:0 for a bassoon; 3½ yds of serge at £0:1:10 per yd for a bag for the bass viol £0:6:5. Thread and tape for same 8d. (A violin bag needed only one yard of serge and 2d of tape.) Regular payments are recorded in church accounts for reeds, strings, and ‘hareing ye bow’. At Swalcliffe, Oxon, in 1782 the church collected £7:14:3 to buy a basic band: hautboy (oboe), vox humana (tenor oboe) and bassoon, complete with reed cases, spare reeds, and instruction books. The last 2s 6d was spent on a fat goose as a Reward “for purchaseing and proving the instruments”. The church later added a bass viol to its band. (M Byrne. A church band at Swalcliffe. *Galpin Society Journal*, 17, 1964, p 89)

Flutes with 1, 4, 6 or 8 keys, 5-key clarinets, and 6-key bassoons, are difficult to play in remote keys, while Ron Emmett said that the first note to come from a serpent was “merely a basis for negotiation”. This was recognised at the time (and is still, though to a lesser extent, true)

“The Bassoon, like all other wind instruments, is, of itself, imperfect and requires the assistance of a good Musical Ear to help its imperfections and blow it tolerably in Tune.”

WG music needed fully chromatic instruments, and accounts of bands often complain about out-of-tune playing. Violins and ‘cellos, if the natural gut strings were true, could be played in tune, though frequent retuning during the service was a drawback.

Some churches objected to violins on principle, and La Trobe wrote :

“The violin is very properly excluded, since, beside its weakness as a solitary house, or to regulate the dances that grace a village festival, renders it a very unfit medium for Sabbath praise.” He also rejected the clarinet and flute, and said “the bassoon must go at all hazard”. (See Appendix 1)

Surviving records suggest that wind instruments were about twice as common as strings. The minimum size for a band was two, air and bass; three was better, four meant support for all four vocal parts. Many bands were larger. In ‘*The Grave by the Handpost*’ Hardy says the Chalk (i.e. Maiden) Newton band one Christmas included ‘two or three violins, two ‘cellos, a tenor viol, double bass, hautboy, clarionets, serpent, and seven singers’. Puddletown Church had an 8-piece band. Ralph Dunstan also refers to a large band : ‘*As a lad of ten, I was a member of the choir of a village chapel near Truro, and played successively, the piccolo, flute, clarinet, euphonium and bassoon.*’ An extra bass instrument could add a decorative line, and Dunstan also noted : “*Every player of a Bass Instrument—if ‘worth his salt’—could supply his own orchestral ‘part’, and often play it with very fine effect.*”

Extra parts among the higher instruments allowed the band to double parts at the octave (§46), and also made it easier for singers in the congregation to hear their parts. Pictures like Thomas Webster's show almost everybody looking at books, some obviously music, some shared between singers and players.

(Rollo Woods comments: Mike Bailey added to my 1995 text:) Most revival quires have found it useful to have two instruments available for each part, half strings and half wind. Flexibility of tone is available when each part has both strings and woodwind, since either can be invited to drop out when variety is needed. Try to avoid unison flutes! Musically, the most satisfactory standard disposition of woodwind is to put the clarinet (a strong instrument with a wide range) on the air an octave higher, flute (somewhat quieter, especially the small-holed period ones) on the alto an octave higher, oboe (still loud, but of smaller compass) on the "second" (tenor or treble, not the air), and bassoon and serpent on the bass. There is some evidence that the clarinet was played accompanying tenor voices, which it can do at voice pitch for the most part, whereas the flute, oboe and violin cannot.

18th and early 19th century clarinets and flutes in adequate condition are sometimes available, but should only be taken on by an owner willing to spend some time and money on keeping them working. Oboes and bassoons are much rarer and more expensive. Ideally, only period or reproduction instruments should be used, but this is a counsel of perfection. Not every good musician can afford an extra 5-key clarinet as well as a standard model. Modern reproduction instruments are at least designed to play at modern standard pitch. The flutes mentioned in early accounts may have been recorders, like the 'flute' John Wesley played, since the music is sometimes found transposed for a recorder in F (even professionals in those days were not expected to play recorders in both F and C on demand). Later MSS refer specifically to the *German* flute. Wooden treble and tenor recorders are acceptable, especially for earlier works. However, the characteristic sound of the plastic descant (soprano) recorder is less suitable. Recruits need to be able to read fairly well, and a violinist who can produce the authentic village fiddle sound is especially welcome.

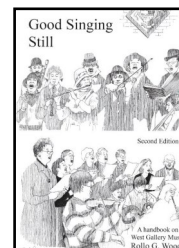
At a church service, it is the band rather than the choir which is unusual and attracts the congregation's attention; it is important that they should not be a source of distraction. Members of the congregation have said how glad they are that the costumed quire did not go and hide in the gallery, which they knew to be the "proper place".

(Rollo Woods added: Much of this section was originally added to my text by Mike Bailey. In adding to it I have tried not to alter his work.)

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published by The West Gallery Music Association in 2017 (2nd Edition)

'Good Singing Still' 242pp is available for £5 + £2 p+p



Rehearsals next term at St Michael's Paternoster:

January 4th & 18th, February 1st & 15th, March 1st, 15th, 29th

Events:

St Thomas's, Finsbury Park, Evensong on Sunday 5th March



LGQ Upbeat—The Newsletter of the London Gallery Quire

Edited by Phil Price Copy Editor Nicholas Markwell

If you have news, a viewpoint, or an interesting musical activity or story,
your contribution is very welcome.

contactphilprice@yahoo.co.uk. Non-electronic submissions welcome on paper at any rehearsal.