

Working Group Report-Interim

1) Introduction

- 1) The Working Group (WG) is responding to a request from the Trustees to consider Recruitment and Retention (R and R) of new members/existing members.
- 2) The WG is made up of Susanna Hooper, Dee Walsh, Pam Child, Emma Fagg, Paul Jackson, Alex Sanné, Alastair Martin and Stephen Murdoch.
- 3) The WG therefore is representative of all four voice parts, and a cross-section of age-groups.
- 4) Intentionally however there is a bias within the WG towards more recent recruits to the choir.
- 5) This was effected in order to better enable a fresh approach to be taken by attempting to view the HCS as others, in particular prospective members and newcomers, view us.

2) The Problem

- 1) Andrew Padmore's views were sought. They are understood to be as follows.
- 2) He has confirmed that R and R is his main HCS concern.
- 3) The exception is the Alto section, which is at a satisfactory level in terms of both numbers and vocal strength.
- 4) The Sopranos require at least another half a dozen younger voices.
- 5) Any younger male recruits must be encouraged, whether Tenors or Basses.
- 6) The situation in the Tenor section is desperate. Recruitment is urgently required regardless of age.
- 7) Ideal numbers would be 60 Sopranos, 50 Altos, 25 Tenors, 25 Basses.
- 8) If, as would seem likely, a level of 25 Tenors cannot be reached and maintained, a slightly higher number of Basses might be acceptable.

3) Summary of the WG's initial views

- 1) The WG recognises the absolute necessity for change.
- 2) The era of the ubiquitous, well-supported local Choral Society, performing traditional works to large local audiences, has passed. It is unlikely to return in the foreseeable future.
- 3) The era of a plethora of local well-supported church choirs has also passed. This is as a result of changes in society which seem unlikely to be reversed.

- 4) The impact of such changes has led to a greatly reduced support for and interest in sacred/classical choral music.
- 5) The impact on HCS has been that the choir has diminished in numbers but increased in average age, particularly within the male sections.
- 6) The WG recognises the urgent need to proactively manage this change, as regards R and R.
- 7) The current approach to both R and R requires change.
- 8) There is a feeling within the WG that the choir's attitude towards, and work on the retaining of, new members is inadequate.
- 9) The issue of recruitment presents less self-criticism but an acceptance that the choir may well in future, of necessity, have to accept a higher turnover of membership, and to consider accessibility as a highly relevant factor as regards choice of music.
- 10) The WG has considered R and R as the paramount HCS issue, whilst recognising that other forces also apply and that there may be tensions between R and R best-practice aspirations and reality.

4) Retention of New Members

- 1) There is a logic to considering retention of new members first, as many of the relevant points and thoughts apply to both R and R problems but retention issues are more easily and immediately actionable.
- 2) It is felt by some that we are not a particularly friendly or welcoming choir, that we present as somewhat exclusive and elitist, and that far too little effort is made to reach out to potential new members, both pre- and postvoice assessment.
- 3) Recruits are, broadly speaking, of two types.
- 4) There will always be a smattering of experienced singers, with a background of involvement in church or cathedral choirs, the ability to play a musical instrument, membership of a school choir, membership of another choir. The retention of this type of new member presents less difficulty.
- 5) In the future however there will be an increasing need to attract and retain new members with little or no musical experience, with no true ability to read music, no familiarity with traditional choral music, no church background, no classical linguistic knowledge and, significantly, who are possibly unlikely to remain in the choir indefinitely.
- 6) The second group is likely in the future to represent the majority of new members.
- 7) We may well have to become accustomed to more of a shifting population of younger HCS choristers.

5) Ideas

Recognising, and even more importantly persuading **all** HCS members to recognise, that for newcomers and in particular inexperienced singers to join a group of choristers who have been singing complex works together for years presents a significant challenge.

Ideas suggested (though not necessarily all agreed by all WG members) include:

- 1) Appointment in all instances and preferably immediately upon first attendance at rehearsal of two mentors or buddies who would ensure that the new recruit sat with them, always, in a good position, next to and preferably in front of and not behind experienced singers, and so far as possible away from singers of other voice parts. Even if this risks dislodging more experienced singers from their favoured position. The mentor/mentee match might perhaps relate so far as is possible to age similarity. The two to one ratio will ensure the likelihood of permanent cover.
- 2) The offer to each inductee of additional tuition, possibly with other inductees or willing experienced singers, in relation to the more challenging parts of music being rehearsed. The arrangement of informal self-tuition/rehearsal groups amongst voice part groups, to be promoted and facilitated by VRs.
- 3) The possibility of avoiding altogether recruitment at certain points of the year, for example when particularly challenging and potentially off-putting works are being rehearsed, in order to prevent new recruits drifting away. Or, put the other way, a clear intention to ensure that new recruits join only at a time when we are rehearsing music that is relatively accessible, bearing accessibility in mind as a prerequisite in our musical choices and plans.
- 4) Limiting (perhaps with exceptions at the discretion of the choral directors) the numbers in those voice parts that are well-populated when there is a debilitating shortage of singers within a particular voice part. It is noted that it is even more challenging for a novice singer to join a numerically-reduced voice part, with consequentially still less chance of retention.
- 5) Introducing and maintaining a maximum age limit. There is a diversion of views on this subject. Some take the view that ability should always supersede age requirements. Others believe that the lack of an enforced upper age limit permits complacency and neglect in relation to necessary rejuvenation.
- 6) Reducing/waiving fees for all new members, regardless of age, for 12/18 months. Again this is not agreed by all the WG.
- 7) Reducing fees for all members up to the age of 30. Likewise not universally agreed.
- 8) Introducing a system/an option to pay fees say thrice yearly rather than annually.
- 9) In extremis, paying aspiring, local young professional singers on an hourly basis to rehearse and perform with us in order to bolster and provide choral confidence to under-populated voice parts. Not agreed by all the WG.
- 10) To adjust/postpone the requirement for a formal audition, in particular for younger people and novices (at the discretion of the choral directors). Think flexibly. Think inclusively. Err on the side of risk and taking a chance on novice recruits. One size may not fit all.

- 11) To broaden our repertoire. To recognise that complex, classical singing is a niche, that it is music to which those with a degree of natural musicality, with experience, can and will graduate. To move away from our classical repertoire, at whatever discomfiture or displeasure to traditionalists, to demonstrate that we can perform modern, secular works, thus to persuade newcomers and in particular novices that it is not such a leap to learning the more complex classical pieces. It is noted that the Polyphonic Choir is able to offer a broad repertoire. This may be much more difficult for a larger choir but that should not deter experimentation. It should be emphasised that whilst there is no appetite or enthusiasm within the WG for 'dumbing down' generally, there is a recognition of and support for meeting novice singers 'half-way'. It is also recognised that such a movement might alienate existing choristers, and might even lead to some members leaving the choir but that if such an approach would help secure the future of the HCS then it should be adopted notwithstanding the risks.
- 12) First impressions. The 'Meet and Greet' team need to be more proactive and better briefed. They are the face of the HCS to all newcomers. The team must reflect all parts and ages. They should ensure that at least one voice part mentor is appointed there and then, and help accommodate the newcomer within the voice part seating (see 1) above)
- 13) At and during the first rehearsal(s) the newcomer must be cared for at all times, including during the break. Far too often newcomers are spotted alone during the breaks.
- 14) Communication with new members. They should be contacted after their first rehearsal(s) by phone or email to obtain feedback, discuss problems or queries, ascertain whether they will be continuing, if not then could the reason be elicited and discussed. The new member must be made to feel valued and appreciated. This must be part of either the VR or mentor/buddy role.
- 15) Social events, of a very informal 'bring and share' nature for example, should be promoted, not with a primary fund-raising aim, but simply of growing the sense of community within the choir.
- 16) Group communication, giving members 'a voice'. More use of email/website to exchange views informally. Impressions, feedback, problems. A questionnaire seeking confirmation from members as to skills and expertise they might be willing to share for the future health of the choir. The promotion of the feeling that it is not 'us' and 'them', just 'us'. Winning hearts and minds and cementing newcomers in place by inclusive communication. The creation of a choir App (cf Meetup Groups for e.g. and other choirs) for ease of communication and increased influence on individual members. The modern method of inclusion. Facebook is less directed, whilst it remains a useful social medium within the HCS. An App on members' Iphones would enable an inclusive, collegiate communication, driven from the centre.
- 17) All the above underpinned by a feeling that we should, in terms of retention of new members swallow our pride and recognise that other choirs of whose music we may not be at all enamoured may well have better ways than do we of retaining members. A view that we should reach out to other choral organisations and learn.

- 18) Finally above all else to ensure that the message is clear to every HCS member that retention of newly recruited members is what will ensure that they/we can continue to sing.

6) Recruitment of New Members

- 1) To reiterate, it is felt that there will always be a modest intake into the choir of experienced singers. They are not our primary concern.
- 2) Experienced singers will continue to join as a result of their established interest in traditional music choices and the attraction of an auditioned and professionally directed choir.
- 3) Our focus must be upon those who have become 'lost' to our type of choral music. They are going to be far more numerous and present much more of a challenge. We need them.

7) Ideas

- 1) Much of what is said above in relation to retention applies also to recruitment. In particular in relation to fees, repertoire, accessibility, communication.
- 2) Image is important. In an age where we are as we know going to have to communicate with a potential future membership that may have little instinctive regard for our tradition we have to make a conscious decision as to how we are trying to portray ourselves to the public.
- 3) There has been discussion about the appearance of exclusivity/elitism.. It is no doubt attractive to many of those of us who have a background in our music that we have a more traditional appearance, that we emphasise the audition. That we pride ourselves on a degree of relative musical elitism. That however may not be and in fact probably is not attractive to most possible members.
- 4) A glance at the main photograph of the choir on the home page of our website is all that is needed to convince the perhaps slightly older chorister with choral experience that we are perfect for him or her.
- 5) The problem lies in the fact that those choristers are not in the majority of the prospective members who we are going to have to entice to join the choir. They will be an ever-increasing minority. And will join in any event.
- 6) The choir has to appear younger, not necessarily in age, but in outlook.
- 7) Potential recruits in the second grouping, that is those without much background in the tradition, themselves fall into two groups.
- 8) Broadly speaking those groups are firstly older people who are settled in the town, with families, school commitments and mortgages and all the other trappings of middle age or impending middle age. Those people who are likely to still be here in Harrogate for years to come.
- 9) Secondly there are younger singers. They range from their late teens upwards. It has been pointed out by several WG members that there is an unhelpful correlation.

Those young people who are interested in choral singing are probably amongst the most likely to leave Harrogate and head off to University elsewhere. Furthermore that there might well be a particular demographic issue in Harrogate in that a high proportion do not return. Harrogate is not a city. There is no University.

- 10) The logical conclusion from 8) and 9) above is that we may require a different approach to each of the two groups.
- 11) The general consensus is that we can make inroads into recruiting the younger people, that a majority may well stay with us for a short period, but that it is worth accepting the notion of a shifting population within the choir. Better to have young people in the choir for a short period of time with the hope that they might one day return, than not at all. Fluid membership is a reality.
- 12) It is clear that we can attract young people of school age, whose lifestyles may well be much more governed by parental choices. We have good connections with Harrogate schools. It is felt that we should advertise within local schools, with sixth forms in mind in particular. It is known for example that local schools offer participation in the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and that joining a choir on a weekly basis for 12 months would be seen as a new skill that would qualify towards the award. D of E contact points can be easily identified from websites.
- 13) There is a feeling that we have probably more or less exhausted the option of significant recruitment from local churches, but clearly we still have excellent links.
- 14) We should reach out to local organisations. A promotional film should be made and distributed to schools and colleges in particular. We should as individual members be prepared to visit and address local groups, armed with films and promotional literature, on the attractions and merits of joining a choir. There may need to be a different approach to different age groups.
- 15) We should approach the Harrogate RUAS choir. We can learn from them. We might suggest a joint concert, perhaps a charity event. We might suggest an exchange deal whereby choristers from each choir might have an organised session singing with the other. Each choir has something which the other has not. Individually some of us would not at all be attracted to a rock choir, but as a Choral Society we have to get across to those singers who choose to join that type of choir that we are not such an elitist, stand off crowd as might appear to be the case, and also that our music can be very exciting. We understand anecdotally that the boredom level is reached relatively easily in RUAS but that the gap between the two is seen as too great by singers who have thought of/tried to make the switch to classical singing.
- 16) Community projects. Partnership with local professional groups/music makers.
- 17) Complimentary concert tickets to schools. Ditto to other choirs. Ditto to representatives of other organisations.
- 18) Website upgrade needed. See 4) above but also generally. It needs to look younger.
- 19) Cheaper concert tickets for invitees of younger people, family and friends.
- 20) A bring a friend/partner rehearsal combined with an informal social evening. On a periodic basis.

- 21)** Informal bring a friend/partner/ anyone social events.
- 22)** Open rehearsals for newcomers only (with a leavening of existing members). To avoid the overwhelming ratio and to focus on the newcomers rather than the choir.
- 23)** Introductions (written/oral/electronic) to each piece explaining musical significance and portrayal as a work of art rather than a piece of devotion. If we can stagger induction into the choir, then an informal introduction by the Trustees to the choir's ethos, background and plans.
- 24)** Identification of our ethos. What indeed are we about. If we don't know then how can we persuade others.
- 25)** Use of 'Come and Sing' projects, at modest cost and with specific taster concerts.
- 26)** Joining of forces with other choirs to address the (common) recruitment problem. What are others doing, if anything, that we are not. A glance at the website photos of other choirs would seem to indicate that we are not alone in experiencing demographic problems.
- 27)** Local radio contact. Offer to come and promote the next concert by way of discussion interview, offer to come and talk about the joy of choral singing. Offer to perform live/record specifically for local radio with a recruitment theme. We might record a short musical commercial for radio with brief sound bites from a cross-section of members.
- 28)** Creation of a small, younger choir to use as a publicity vehicle in schools and colleges.
- 29)** Creation of a slightly older, small choir to use as a publicity vehicle in places of work, hospitals, public spaces, at community events.
- 30)** The purchase and regular presentation of a publicity stall, replete with backposter, leaflets, joining forms, photographs of previous concerts, a rotating complement of a two or three public-friendly, communicative choir members. This could be run out at all choir concerts, concerts by other groups, local events, local country shows, church fetes, and any other events to which we might secure an invitation to pitch up and sell ourselves.

8) Conclusion

It has been much easier to assess the difficulty than to provide solutions. The WG will continue to consider the R and R problem and will report again.
Harrogate Choral Society

Some practical matters that are recommended, in relation to retaining new members, could however be ordered to be actioned immediately with little difficulty and must be so. Choir members cannot be ordered to be friendlier and more accommodating to newcomers but need to understand that they must be so.

The questions of ethos and profile have been raised.

The view of the WG is that these must henceforward, in turn, be defined and then developed to reflect such definition.

The WG does feel strongly that easier accessibility for inexperienced classical singers to the music that we sing is the key if the HCS is to survive. The issue of possible internal objection must be risked and faced down, even at the risk of losing some members. This need however only be temporary, for a few seasons, and it is hoped that those members who will oppose it instinctively might thus be prepared to desist from opposition in the greater interest of survival.

The WG would be happy to reconsider and explore any issues that the Trustees think might warrant further exploration.

This remains an interim report.