

The Royal Free Singers

Information for new singers

The choir was formed in 1973, by Benedict Gunner, from a small group of parents of pupils of the Royal Free Boys School in Windsor. With a current membership of around 150 singers, it is now a thriving and enterprising choral society and many of the original members from 1973 are still singing with the choir. The sociability and friendliness of our choral community is an important part of our ethos!

The choir has approximately 150 members and all parts, Soprano, Altos, Tenors and Basses are well represented. Several members have attended and supported the choir for many years. We are always keen, however, to encourage new members.

We do **not** audition potential new members. Our view is that if someone enjoys singing and wants to sing with others of like mind, then a warm welcome awaits them at the RFS. We have many strong singers who encourage those with less confidence. We are all learning.

Obviously it can help considerably if you read music, but a number of our members do not. Over time people have picked up the basics of notes, rhythm, tonality and harmony and some of the terminology used in music.

Most people have a good idea of the part with which they are most comfortable. If you come along to rehearsal you will soon find out what part best fits your voice. We sit in our sections: sopranos, altos, tenors and basses.

Cost

There is an annual subscription with a discount for prompt payment – due in September of each year. It's currently just over £100. In case of difficulty, other arrangements to pay may be possible.

As well as paying for rehearsal rooms, our accompanist and conductor(s), members' subscriptions subsidise our concerts, as it is impossible to cover the cost by ticket sales alone. We also fundraise in various ways throughout the year, and make grant applications.

Our repertoire

The choir has performed a diverse repertoire of primarily classical, sacred music, including occasionally some classical jazz, light opera and popular songs.

Because we are a large choir, we are able to take on major pieces of music.

The choir is versatile and to date we have sung in many languages, for example: Latin, German, French, Hebrew, Czech, Russian, Norwegian and Welsh to name just a few. Members of the choir who originate from various countries have been invaluable in helping us gain 'mastery' of pronunciation.

Rehearsals

The choir meets at the Trevelyan School Hall, Wood Close, Windsor, every Wednesday evening from 7.30pm (prompt) until 9.45pm. There is ample parking on site. The choir year starts in September and our breaks coincide with school terms.

- **Signing In:** Member lists for each vocal part are usually located with Linda on the desk at the back of the hall. Please sign the appropriate list to register your attendance, and make sure you fill in the column to say whether you will be singing in the concert.
- **Rehearsal set-up:** Please help set out chairs if you arrive early enough. Everyone puts their own and any spare chairs away at the end of the rehearsal.
- **Break:** We break for about 15 minutes half way through the rehearsal for a drink of fruit juice or water; there is a nominal charge for juice to cover costs. Volunteers from the choir take turns every week to pour the juice and a list is passed round at the beginning of each term to record the names of people willing to undertake this task (the drink and cups are provided).
- **Notices** are given at the break and there is a notice board on which we encourage members with private notices to post relevant information. Information is also circulated by email and is usually posted on the members' page of our website: www.rfs.royal-windsor.com. The password for the Members' Page is on our rehearsal noticeboard – or you can ask one of our members.
- **Rehearsal Etiquette:** Coming to choir provides a chance to get to know and make new friends and to meet existing friends. However we would ask that you do not engage in animated conversations with people close to you whilst the conductor rehearses other parts.

Please bring copies of agreed music to the rehearsals, as it is generally difficult to share with neighbours, especially where it is necessary to mark your own score. It is also essential to bring a soft pencil with you to mark your score, so that the agreed approach to singing the piece can be correctly detailed.

- **Music:** We order our music – to hire, or to buy – several weeks in advance of the first rehearsals, and it is then available for the first rehearsal.

If music is hired, the hire copy number is recorded alongside your name and this copy must be returned at the end of term – on the day of the concert, or after your last rehearsal if you are not intending on singing in the concert – so that all the hire copies can be sent back on time. Where a hire copy is not returned, the hiring singer will need to pay for whatever costs the hiring company levy on the choir for that copy (normally a full replacement cost).

- **Additional Rehearsals** Sometimes there are additional rehearsals where the conductor believes the performance would benefit from this. These usually occur in the final week or two before the performance. Where this is thought necessary, advance warning will be given and the location advised at rehearsal and via email for those who have this facility.

If Trevelyan school is unavailable, other rehearsal locations are usually at: United Reformed Church, William Street, Windsor or All Saints Church Frances Road Windsor.

Concerts

A diary of rehearsals, concerts and other choir events can be found on the Royal Free Singers website and is circulated by email every term.

We give three major concerts a year in Windsor and Eton: a major choral work at the end of the Christmas and Easter terms and a lighter work or a miscellany of music in the summer. There is also an annual Carol Concert in Christchurch United Reformed Church. Our performances are completed by professional soloists and musicians.

The choir regularly perform at Windsor Parish Church next to the Guildhall in Windsor High Street. We also perform in Eton College School Hall and on occasions at Eton College Chapel.

We prepare music for tours and outings, too, and other opportunities to sing crop up from time to time. We have performed with a number of other choirs and orchestras, such as the Chorale Caecilia from Antwerp, Dedworth Middle School Choir, the Fron (Froncysyllte) Male Voice Choir, the Black Dyke Band and the band of the Blues and Royals.

Concert dress *Women*: Long black skirt or trousers with plain long-sleeved tee-shirt or blouse (modest). *Men*: black trousers and shirts. For Carols and summer concerts, we add some colour.

On the day of the performance: There is an important rehearsal in the afternoon before the main performance. It is expected that those singing in the concert should also attend this rehearsal, if at all possible. This is the only opportunity for us to practice with the orchestra and soloists who will be singing with us and to make sure we have the best staging arrangements.

If you are not able to make the rehearsal but intend to sing in the concert, you let the chairman and / or stage manager know, and ensure that someone saves a place for you in your part.

Occasionally volunteers are invited from the choir to sing certain (generally small) solo parts. If anyone has an interest in doing this generally, then please let the conductor or a member of the committee know. The conductor will decide who is to sing solos or in small groups.

If you are a member of the choir, you are entitled to sing in all of our concerts.

Concert Recordings: Most of our concerts are recorded on CD and are available for purchase. We try to use this opportunity to provide local arts colleges with a project, thereby helping to fulfil one of our charitable aims.

Support on Concert Days: We rely heavily on a few of our members and their friends and relatives to provide support at concerts, such as staffing ticket desks at concerts, acting as stewards and on occasions preparing refreshments. If you are able to offer your (or another's!) services to assist us at our concerts, this would be very much appreciated.

The committee

There is a committee of around 10 people and a number of others take on certain key tasks. The committee meets every six – eight weeks to discuss the business of the choir including the planning of future performances, outings, social events and choir finances. Ben Gunner also attends.

Committee members are all elected at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) in October/November. Anyone can stand for any of the committee positions. The chairman can hold office for up to 5 years.

Current committee membership: Richard Try (Chair), Heather Wing (Secretary), Mike O'Shaughnessy (Treasurer), Patty Dismore (Concert Secretary), Frankie Stringer (Social Secretary), Peter Carey, Gill Tucker, Corinne Ashley, Lovaine Bunce, Alison Russell, Ria Crawford-Smith, David de Bromhead

Our conductor

We are very fortunate to have Benedict Gunner as our regular conductor. Ben formed the choir in 1973 and is still our inspiration.

Ben studied organ, singing and conducting at Trinity College of Music, London and was head of music at the Princess Margaret Royal Free School in Windsor from 1977 to 1989. He also conducts the Orchestra of London.

Ben is a singer himself (tenor) and has sung with many of the leading chamber choirs throughout the 70s and 80s, an experience which inspired him to set up his own choirs and orchestra.

When, on occasions, Ben is unable to take a rehearsal, he arranges for a guest conductor who is known to the choir to step in, so that there is no break in continuity and rehearsal time is maximised.

Our accompanist

The choir has been very fortunate to have excellent accompanists over the years. Our accompanist is John Chantrey. John is an extraordinarily accomplished pianist and provides a level of musical accompaniment which is second to none.

Our Patron

The choir is very privileged to have Jonathan Willcocks - well known and celebrated conductor and composer - as its patron. His compositions encompass large-scale orchestral scores and chamber music. There are now many recordings of his work, which include Magnificat, Lux Perpetua, and Ring Ye Bells. He is active in music education and since 1989 has been the Director of the Junior Academy, Royal Academy of Music.

Tours and outings

The choir undertakes tours every other year, mostly in Europe. Recent tours include the Transylvania region of Romania in June 2002, Portugal in 2004, the Baltic States of Estonia and Latvia in 2006, Norway in 2008 and Poland in 2010, Slovakia in 2012 and Spain in 2014.

We have also sometimes undertaken exchange tours with choirs from, for example, Goslar and Bad Harzburg in Germany, the Limburg and Antwerp areas of Belgium, Szentendre in Hungary and Gronigen in North Holland.

Everyone is very welcome to come on tour with the choir and to bring their partners or friends with them. Not only is it a fantastic experience to sing in another country, but it is also a great way to get to know fellow choir members both from RFS and from other choirs abroad and to have terrific fun.

There are also occasional weekend tours to other parts of the UK, and a day's outing every summer.

Our social events

Social events and fundraisers are organised at various times during the year: quiz nights, a Christmas party, special anniversary dinners, for example,

Additionally we hold choir fund-raising events such as our periodic Plant and Produce Sales, Bottle sale (usually quite a lot of wine!), Christmas card and gifts sale, plus the 100 Club – a chance to win prizes.

FRIENDS of the Royal Free Singers

The choir has a number of 'FRIENDS'. The purpose of the FRIENDS of the Royal Free Singers is to bring choir and audience closer together. FRIENDS support us with an annual fee and have opportunities to join in choir activities, including tours and social events.

If you want to know more about the FRIENDS and if you and people you know might want to become one then the person to contact within the choir is: Melva Wood, tel: 01753 865046, email: wood729@btinternet.com.

Publicity and ticket sales

Flyers and posters are provided for members of the choir well in advance of concerts, so that these can be placed in strategic places to attract people to come along and enjoy the experience of listening to RFS. There is an electronic version too, which can be emailed. This is increasingly being taken up by members to send to friends to encourage them to come along.

One of the main ways we obtain funds for the choir is by selling tickets to all of our performances. We would ask all to play your part by selling as many tickets as you can for each performance.

Access

In line with the friendly ethos of the Royal Free Singers, we welcome people of all ages, race, religion and disabled people. Let us know if you need any assistance to enable you to join us and fully participate, and we will do our best to assist you in any way you can.