

Breathe on a smile

My latest singing holiday was the exact opposite of a sharp intake of breath. It was a couple of years since my previous Rub By Singers course and I'd also opted out of my regular choir's summer term, so to say I was out of practice was a bit of an understatement. But, true to form, Maestro Jeremy Jackman didn't let us utter a single singing syllable until we were good and ready.

Assembled in the helpfully clear acoustic of Dresden's Drei Königskirche, watched over by a dramatic modern mural in earthy tones, each morning and early evening we would prepare our voices via a humming warm-up routine. So far, so straightforward - although even humming can benefit from a technical overhaul. How to cope with the need to take a breath? This is where the smile comes in, as a natural DIY facelift avoids unmentionable straining effects on the muscles at the side of the neck, which would cause all sorts of havoc. The same lesson could be transferred to preparing for entries and taking breaths when the singing was finally underway, and the positive outcomes were three-fold: taking care of the instrument, avoiding a cacophony of aspirated sounds and, not least, looking pleasant!

There was much to smile about, in any case. It was great to be back amongst old friends met in European destinations various over the years and to get to know new ones, socialising and sightseeing together as well as making music. There's nothing quite like taking a holiday with people who share a love of singing. The group bonded well and as the week progressed, so did our grasp of the music. The sound took shape. A few days in, Jeremy rehearsed us in mixed-up formation, which had its challenges but ultimately gave us confidence and helped us to enjoy the full extent of the harmonies in his chosen pieces.

I'd had a go at practising the music in advance, but nothing compares to getting together with the purpose-built choir, the epitome of the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Then there's the encouraging expert at the front waving his arms about, clapping rhythms, ticking like a metronome, telling amusing anecdotes and generally working his musically-patterned socks off to get the best out of us.

Jeremy's 'hands across the water' repertoire was an inspired collection of music from two sets of composers: those who'd had some connection with Dresden and in each case a matching British one from the same period, 'marching in pairs backwards in time' through the programme, bookended by Schumann's *Sommerlied* and Morley's *I love, alas, I love thee*. Once we knew what we were singing about, we nailed our German pronunciation, which in fact was only needed for five pieces as some of the 'Dresden contingent' wrote in Latin. One such was Schütz with the delicious *Heu mihi Domine* which fast became my favourite, with a truly heart-rending chord at bar 32, now illustrated in my copy by hearts and flowers - possibly not the envisaged purpose of Run By Singers pencils.

Apparently Schütz - whose dates, incidentally, were very close to Bach, which could account for being somewhat overshadowed - didn't envisage 'performance' for this piece. It was more by way of prayerful communication between composer and singers. But our advertised programme had preceded us, so perform it we would! Before reaching our Saturday night concert and the culmination of our week's endeavours, we were also given the rare privilege of performing a couple of pieces in the famous Frauenkirche, the church of reconciliation. Celebrating the tenth anniversary of rising again out of the 1945 rubble, the restoration funded through international donations, it's an extraordinary bell-shaped building with Baroque decoration in pastel shades. Friday afternoon tourists sat in the pale wooden curved pews, appreciating Weelkes's *Hosanna to the Son of David* and Croft's *God is gone up with a merry noise* echoing up into the dome.

We had a great turn out for the main concert too, and thankfully managed to withstand the considerable heat that built up during the afternoon rehearsal in the Annenkirche. Getting the balance right in the unfamiliar acoustic took some experimentation, but finally we did justice to the pieces that had kept us company all week. The audience certainly looked engaged and entertained, and there were smiles all round.

Auf Wiedersehen and note to self and to my singing friends: keep breathing, keep smiling, and above all, keep singing.