

MAKANA CHOIR SCHOOL

CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT FROM NOVEMBER 2020 TO SEPTEMBER 2021

2020 was a very tough year for the world in general and cathedral music in particular – around the world, not just here. 2021 was, if anything, worse. It might not really feel that way, but perhaps that is more of an indication of how used we have all become to life with COVID. In last year's AGM, I saw, as I was reading over the minutes last week, it was mentioned that our country was experiencing a rise in cases in the Eastern Cape, and we were concerned that this might curtail our efforts to get things going again. Well, that turned into the second wave, which, in severity and duration, was worse than the first. Since then, at the beginning of May, cases in Gauteng started rising again. That turned into the third wave, which has been the worst yet; and, indeed, it is still with us nearly four months later. This third wave, it also turned out, affects young people more than the previous ones have done.

The changing situation regarding the pandemic has had a number of effects on the day-to-day running of both the Choir School and the Committee. Last year, the committee began meeting on a more-or-less monthly basis owing to these changing conditions, and this year, that schedule was maintained, with all meetings taking place on-line. Difficulties with connections and data (not least of which our own) were a nuisance, and on-line meetings are certainly not ideal – when one has an alternative. That said, the installation of fibre in the town has helped.

It's become customary in chairpersons' reports in previous years to talk about the 'highlights' of the year that's been. This year *has* had some, but somewhat fewer than previous years. Perhaps the biggest highlight of this past year is having a Cathedral music team who have managed to keep choral and other music going at all in these unprecedented conditions, in which regard, I would like to pay tribute to, and publicly thank our Director of Music, Kepa, for his energy and dedication, as well as our organ scholars, Bayanda and Jonathan, as well as Peter Breetzke and everyone else who has contributed – a contribution made no less substantial owing to our *de facto* lack of a titular organist.

However, highlights there have been. In the happy period between the second and third waves, which included Holy Week, a comparative (and I stress 'comparative') plethora of musical events took place. The Cathedral's *Imvumi* choir of largely high-school-aged singers sang at services on Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter Day. Two local choirs also sang at the Cathedral. *Saeculum Aureum*, a small ensemble, of which I am a member, comprising five singers (all of whom also sing in the Cathedral's Consort choir), sang at an evensong commemorating George Herbert (a service that has become something of a staple over the past few years), and presented a concert on Easter Day of Easter-themed music. *Byrdsongs*, another local choir, sang for Corpus Christi in June. The day-to-day work of the Choir has continued too, when circumstances have allowed: rehearsals, vocal and theoretical training, and services. As we started going back into lockdown, a number of our choristers, including our Head Chorister, Xolisa Foley, also became involved with leading worship in the online services: a testament to the success of the project in which the Choir School is involved. Xolisa, and our junior organ scholar Bayanda are now writing Matric, and will be leaving the choir. Our best wishes go with them. Jonathan, our senior organ scholar has been appointed as the choir intern in addition to his organ-playing responsibilities.

I stress, again, what with the ever-changing COVID restrictions, and the state of the pandemic generally, the fact that any of this was able to happen at all is a highlight all its own – and thanks is due, in no small part, to Kepa for his energy and determination to keep things going.

If things were not difficult enough, we suffered another setback in May when the organ was struck by lightning, doing significant damage to the circuitry, and rendering the instrument virtually unplayable. This misfortune rendered urgent something that had been a subject of discussion in meetings for most of the year, namely, the state of the organ's upkeep and playability. The instrument was assessed by the firm Pekelharing Organ Building and a repair bill in excess of R80,000 was presented. Happily, insurance was willing to pay up, and we now have an organ that not only looks the part, but sounds the part too.

Another significant event in the Cathedral's musical life was the departure, earlier this year, of our Dean, Andrew Hunter, and the subsequent appointment of Mzinzi Dyantyi, who had been sub-dean, to the deanery. I extend our thanks to both Andrew and Claire Hunter for their support over the years, and our congratulations and very best wishes to Mzi as he shoulders the responsibilities and faces the challenges of the years to come.

The Makana Choir School was set up in 2009, with the goal of fostering the growth of church choral music by providing scholarships to talented young singers to attend local schools. This past year, we have been able to give scholarships towards the school fees of three choristers, as well as four half scholarships to choristers who have now served out their probation period. In addition, we have been able to give scholarships to both our organ scholars. We, therefore, extend our very great thanks to New Settlers Foundation and individual donors, and to Cathy Meiklejohn our fund-raiser, without whom none of it would be possible.

As our pre-COVID budgets included things like transport and choir camps, which, owing to the pandemic, were not needed, or able to take place, we ended up with something of a surplus, which we were able, with the agreement of our donors, to put to a number of good uses: increasing our digital capabilities with new recording equipment, expanding our repertoire with new sheet music, and tidying up our appearance with new robes. Not all of these have come to fruition yet, but, as they say, watch this space.

I've already thanked our fund-raiser, Cathy. I must also thank the rest of our committee for their service, and, perhaps most especially our very able Secretary, Maggy Clarke. My predecessor, Professor Paul Walters said of her in last year's Chairperson's report: 'I have never worked with such an outstanding "Secretary" as Maggy, whose speed, accuracy and meticulous attention to detail has made my role as near a pleasure as it is possible to be.' I can only agree.

This past year, many have been waiting with increasing impatience for their vaccinations. It really is the only effective way in which we can get back to a semblance of normality. Speaking for myself, as I have a history of heart trouble, it did not seem wise to be in too close contact with anyone more than was absolutely necessary, which, unfortunately, included singing here. Happily, as of the 20th of August, everyone in South Africa aged 18 and up is now eligible to receive their COVID vaccine. I believe and trust that, once we're all vaccinated, we will be able to get back to our musical life here. I certainly look forward to that day, and I would urge anyone who has yet to register for their shot to do so.

Glyn Lloyd-Jones

Chairman, Makana Choir School Committee

September 2021