

PiH Chair Report 28th May 2021

Friends: Here we are again with our 2nd unusual AGM format. Let's hope it will be the last.

The future landscape of choir singing remains uncertain, as we have heard. But in the meantime, let's celebrate what we have.

I know many people are uncomfortable participating online. Those of us who have attended virtually have missed you. I am particularly sad that there have been so few opportunities to get involved in activism over this very long period. It would be lovely if people decide to get together in small local groups while the restrictions continue.

I do hope that some folk who rarely open Zoom may be here for the AGM, even if they have chosen not to join our monthly sessions regularly. I'll send this report out anyway.

Our monthly sessions have been a lifeline for me and for many of us who have taken part. They have punctuated our months with the promise – always fulfilled – of chat, song and joy. And, of course, a renewed commitment to activism.

When I click 'Join a Meeting', I anticipate both excitement and fatigue. Gradually I see, one by one all those little faces on my computer screen popping up. Someone said, they are like little honey bees in the nest! Seeing those little teeny Borrowers faces smiling and waving, just simply moving, gives me a lift.

Tiny moving faces smile, squint, some too dark to make out. People are drinking tea, stroking cats, adjusting their chairs. Other heads are cut off the top of the screen. We start silently mouthing something in broken synchrony, muted. I can hear the shaky sound of my own solitary voice on the sofa, along with the hum of the spinning washing and phone conversation going on in another room.

*A world made of islands, connected by sound
Vibrations of molecules flying around.
Recorded as data and sent down the wires
Ones and noughts to make up a choir.
Joining, listening, working together, making a start, singing together apart.*

The social connection and creative way of being together is not perfect by any means, but it has been a support for many of us. That's not to say we don't sorely miss the atmosphere, the space of shared sound and vibrations.

But Zoom has created opportunities for deeper - and at times more egalitarian - connections. A researcher from the University of Westminster writes that choirs have come to play an even more significant role in many participants' social lives during this time. Coming together virtually maintains vital social interaction, structure and rhythm during what have

often been isolating, frightening and shapeless weeks of lockdown. Choir members spoke of being *reminded there was a world outside my flat*; of the regular commitment in the month to *hang on to*; a *lifeline*; a sense of *escapism* and *much needed normality*, keeping our community close. A *feeling of belonging and togetherness*.

There is still, of course, *the visceral pain of missing voices*. We can't ever fully replicate that energy through Zoom, that collective dynamism that creates the gorgeous union of voice and minds and heart and souls.

One compensation is that, perhaps for the first time, we have discovered each other through deeper conversations and shared experiences.

I, for one, have thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated contributions from folk with wonderful and inspirational stories to tell. We heard from:

- Sally Wainwright + Margaret Ferguson Burns on their work with migrants in Greece and Calais;
- Eurig + Chris Booth who spoke about Male Privilege and Feminism.
- The Adoption of the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons was celebrated by, who else? - Sheila and Margaret - during our Burns' Night Open Session.
- Eurig popped up again, occasionally lopsidedly (at left-angles perhaps), to inform us succinctly and comprehensively about plans for COPS26. Jane's Stitches for Survival is keeping some of us busy in preparation for the conference.
- Activism through Social Media and Networking is a topic for ongoing discussion after an illuminating and thorough introduction by Lily.
- Kathy spoke movingly about her lengthy association with the recognition of International Workers' Memorial Day and Jane added her poignant tribute.
- Jan spoke about her work to ensure that the voices of people with mental health difficulties are heard.
- And Penny involved us in the Emancipation Songs project – another ongoing venture.
- And let's not forget, however hard we try, those silly December games.

Many, many thanks to all of you.

The greatest challenge of being alive, someone said, is to witness the injustice of the world, and not allow it to consume our light. Tough, but in concert perhaps we can do this. *One little step at a time*, as Ruth Bader Ginsberg said.

Edwin Morgan's wonderful poem, Foundation asks some questions, the 1st one being **'What would you put in the foundation stone for future generations?'**.

Here are some of my answers:

'What would you put in the foundation stone for future generations?'

Peace and justice
Love and compassion
Equality and equity
A thriving environment

'That's some foundation stone –'

Reconciliation and harmony
Serenity and tranquillity
Accord and synchronisation
A world free of nuclear weapons

'Why don't you take my question seriously?'

A dream, a vision, a different world.
No, make it a dozen different worlds,
**'laid tail to head like sardines in a tin
and poured all over with the lovely oil
of poetry and song: seal it; solder the key.'**

We can keep on, keeping on, together.

And now for some well-deserved thanks:

Kathy has done a fantastic job as Treasurer for a very long time. Last year she was keen to take a break. However, this was not to be. Without her, Protest in Harmony just would be a very different organisation. Thank you. Just – thank you. It's wonderful that Margaret Bremner is prepared to return to the committee and take on the role. Thank you.

Kathy has agreed to Chair the choir until May next year. Her calm presence, considered opinion and stalwart commitment to peace and justice are inspirational. But she is entitled to a life outside and I beg you to consider shadowing her in the autumn with a view to giving her a well-earned break from her leadership role. I am certainly looking forward immensely to just sitting back and singing without being on duty, delightful as it has been. I am sure Kathy feels the same, although she is far too nice to say it!

And warm thanks, also to our supportive, funny, empathic, friendly committee members: Jane, Lyn, Margaret Christie, Margot, Sheila, Sue and Sylvia. You have sustained me and

given me a reason to get up on many a dreich Monday morning. It would be so good to give you all a hug.

Again: please think seriously about joining the committee. It really is not onerous and contributes enormously to the smooth running of the choir.

Finally – another HUGE Thank You to Shereen and Penny for leading us with so much passion and dedication. I am sure I'm not the only person who is extraordinarily grateful for and heartened by their commitment and enthusiasm, especially during the dark times of the last 14 months. How hard it must be to motivate us when you cant hear us.

And thanks, of course, to John (and Sooty), who has once again magnificently guided us through this necessary process with his customary humour and tomfoolery. And thanks to Elaine taking Minutes. Your contributions are much appreciated.

Finally, I'll end with the closing words of Karine Polwart's 'Lost Words Blessing':

Even as the hour grows bleaker

Be the singer and the speaker,

And in city and in forest,

Let the larks become your chorus

And when every hope is gone,

Let the raven call you home.

Protest in Harmony is a sort of home – a place of safety and sanctuary as well as challenge – for me. Thank you for your sheltering arms.