



# Hyfrydol



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St Swithun's Choir e-newsletter

December 2022

## This month

The Advent season is here and Christmas looms with lots of singing ahead. A small band of Swiz choristers is supporting Phillip in the Hornsby Messiah presentation at the Catholic Cathedral on Thursday evening, 1 December. Our annual contribution to the week of carols at Royal North Shore Hospital will be from 12 to 1 pm on Monday 6 December. On the following Friday we will be represented at the annual Lessons and Carols service at the Gordon Quarter, ARV's refurbished premises in Gordon. Lessons and carols at the Sunday morning service the week before Christmas and the usual 10 pm Christmas Eve service precede our final outing for 2022 at 8 am on Christmas Day.

We are reprising a couple of the choruses from Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* at the Swiz Lessons and Carols service, and again on Christmas morning. Reprise is the name of our Christmas music game this year. The anthem at our November Evensong service, *There shall a star*, will have another outing. And several choruses from Messiah will also have airings.

## Last month – November

The Advent Evensong service began with the *Matin Responsory* for the first time in many years, sung from the west door. As Phillip commented, "Coralie (who sees this newsletter) would have been pleased." We sang Stanford's *Evening Canticles in Bb*, also after a long break from it. The anthem was composed by Felix Mendelssohn and is the subject of the following item.



## There shall a star

The anthem we sang at our Advent Evensong service was the one chorus Felix Mendelssohn had completed of an oratorio that he hoped would mirror the success of Handel's *Messiah*. His premature death in 1847 from stroke at the age of 38 years and 9 months stopped the process after he had composed a soprano recitative, a male trio and an SATB chorus.



Apparently, it was his brother who named the unfinished work *Christus*. The libretto is credited to Christian Charles, Baron von Bunsen, a German diplomat and classical scholar.

The opening recitative draws on Matthew 2:1; *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.*

Felix Mendelssohn

The text of the male trio (tenor, first and second bass) follows immediately – Matthew 2:2; *Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.*

The chorus seems to be a logical continuation of the story of the Magi: *There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel.* But the words come from Numbers 24:17 and are taken out of context.

Commenting on chapters 22-24 of the book of Numbers, Peter J Naylor wrote:

"This section begins by recording the last stage of the journey (from Egypt), which left Israel encamped along the Jordon opposite Jericho, poised to enter Canaan ... The events which took place on the plains of Moab probably covered the last five months of the fortieth year ....."

Balak, a king of the Moabites, sent for Balaam, a diviner from Pethor, a city on the Euphrates, hundreds of kilometres away, to come and curse Israel. Balaam was reluctant at first, but after receiving an improved offer of benefits, he set off to meet Balak. There is no indication that Balaam was a follower of God – he offered sacrifices to Balak’s gods when they met – but God intervened twice, first in a dream, and again in a rather bizarre incident involving Balaam’s donkey, forbidding him to curse the Israelites.

Balaam prophesied four times under the direct influence of God. Each prophecy related to one of the promises God made to Abraham. The first confirmed that Israel would multiply greatly – “Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel” (Numbers 23:10). The second stressed that God is among His people – “The Lord their God is with them.” (Numbers 23:21). The third confirmed that Israel would inherit the land.

Understandably, Balak became increasingly agitated as Balaam continued to bless Israel rather than condemn. He ordered Balaam to go home without the ‘honour’ that had been promised him. Balaam, however, continued speaking the words given to him by God.

The fourth prophecy contains the text that Baron von Bunsen suggested for, and Mendelssohn used in, his chorus (Numbers 24:15-19).

*The oracle of Balaam the son of Be'or,  
the oracle of the man whose eye is opened,  
the oracle of him who hears the words of God,  
and knows the knowledge of the Most High,  
who sees the vision of the Almighty,  
falling down, but having his eyes uncovered:  
I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not nigh:  
**a star shall come forth out of Jacob,  
and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel;  
it shall crush the forehead of Moab,  
and break down all the sons of Sheth.**  
Edom shall be dispossessed,  
Se'ir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed,  
while Israel does valiantly.  
By Jacob shall dominion be exercised,  
and the survivors of cities be destroyed!*

While the prophecy clearly relates to the people of 1400 BC, and the time at which it was made, Christian commentators have imbued this fourth one with a much longer time scale and see in it a reference to the arrival of Christ on Earth. Baron von Bunsen chose the German version of the highlighted text for the libretto. We have tried to find the English translator who found the dramatic *and dash in pieces* words, but that person’s name seems lost in obscurity.

Mendelssohn chose to finish his chorus with an arrangement of a very popular Lutheran hymn composed by Philipp Nicolai fifty years earlier – *How brightly shines the morning star*.

And while Balaam spoke the Word of God in his prophecies for Balak, his life did not end well. He eventually lured the people of Israel away from God and into idolatry and when God intervened, Balaam perished in the slaughter that followed.



## Salisbury 2023

The organising committee met towards the end of last month to hear from Trish who has just returned from a brief exploratory visit to Salisbury. She reported favourably on the Merchants House Hotel where accommodation has been booked. For our aborted trip in 2020 we had booked accommodation in the Red Lion Hotel, parts of which date back to before the Cathedral was erected during the thirteenth century. The Merchants House Hotel is not as ancient, but it dates back a few years. It is a family-run boutique hotel in what was once a 15th Century merchants’ house, known as *The Catherine Wheel*, a



regular drinking haunt for Cavaliers. One of the rooms, *The Nelson Room*, is where on the 20th December 1800 Nelson himself stayed after being wine and dined and given the freedom of the city.

Trish said that some of the rooms are small, but that the place is clean and fresh and welcoming.

The choir's preparation for singing at the Cathedral can be deduced from looking at the calendar for 2023 on the last page of this issue of *Hyfyrdol*. Phil will probably call extra rehearsals for the travelling choristers on several Saturday afternoons through May and June next year.

There will be a welcome dinner in Salisbury on Friday evening, 7 July 2023 where we can gather and tell the stories of our adventures between Sydney and Salisbury. We have invited the Director of the Royal School of Church Music (RSCM), Dr Hugh Morris, to be the guest speaker at this function. The headquarters of RSCM is located within the Cathedral Close.

We are planning to have a final celebration in the Refectory at Salisbury Cathedral after our last Evensong service on Sunday 16 July 2023. A number of the Cathedral staff will be invited as our guests. Guests of travellers will also be welcome, if they are booked in and paid for in advance of the function. More information about this event will be given nearer the time.

Risk assessment is a thing to which we must pay due attention. We give notice we shall be asking travellers to pass medical histories, confidentially of course, to one of the several medical professionals who will accompany us. This will help them advise you/us on what to do in the event that an emergency arises.



### Calendar for 2022

Day	Date	Time	Location	Service/activity
Monday	12 December	Noon	RNSH	Carols
Friday	16 December	10:15 am	ARV Gordon	Lessons and carols
Friday	16 December	5 pm	Bannockburn oval	Carols
Sunday	18 December	9 am	Swiz	Lessons and carols
Saturday	24 December	10 pm	Swiz	Christmas Eve
Sunday	25 December	8 am	Swiz	Christmas Choral Communion

### Calendar for 2023

Day	Date	Time	Location	Service/activity
Thursday	2 February	8 pm	Swiz	Rehearsals resume
Saturday	25 February	5 pm	Swiz	Lenten Evensong
Saturday	1 April	6:30 pm	Swiz	Messiah presentation
Friday	7 April	8:30 am	Swiz	Good Friday Service of Word and Song
Sunday	9 April	9 am	Swiz	Easter Day Communion
Saturday	20 May	5 pm	Swiz	Ascension Evensong
Sunday	18 June	2 pm	Swiz	Huguenot service
Saturday	24 June	5 pm	Swiz	Farewell concert
Thursday	6 July		Salisbury	Travellers arrive
Sunday	9 July		Salisbury	Evensong at St Thomas Church
Mon - Sun	10 - 16 July		Salisbury	Services in Salisbury Cathedral
Sunday	13 August	9 am	Swiz	Full choir resumes
Saturday	23 September	7 pm	Swiz	Foundation concert
Saturday	4 November	5 pm	Swiz	Evensong for All Saints
Saturday	2 December	5 pm	Swiz	Advent carols
Sunday	17 December	10 am	Swiz	Lessons and carols
Sunday	24 December	10 pm	Swiz	Christmas Eve
Monday	25 December	8 am	Swiz	Christmas Day Communion

Some dates for 2023 from August are subject to amendment.

