Derbyshire Singers
Conductor's Report, 2024–25 (Season 51)

As I write this, my first conductor's report as your (still relatively new!) Musical Director, we are underway rehearsing for my seventh concert with the choir. Where has the time gone! It has been an immensely exciting and satisfying start to my tenure directing the Derbyshire Singers, and I have been warmly welcomed by everyone involved, for which my thanks. Not least as I am only the third Musical Director in the choir's history!

The 2024–25 season started off with a bang, performing two of my favourite Baroque choral works, **Bach's *Magnificat*** and **Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum***. The former work was familiar to many members of the choir, but still, as with many works by Bach, requires a lot of committed work to get ready for performance, and the choir rose to this challenge. The latter work was mostly unfamiliar to the choir, so I was pleased that they relished Handel's unerring optimism and joy throughout the work, and gave it a stirring performance. We were joined by no less than five excellent soloists: Lizzy Humphries, Danni O'Neill, Matthew Farrell, Matthew Spillett and Nic Beemster. It was also a huge delight to perform these pieces alongside the amazing players of the Musical & Amicable Society, a period instrument orchestra I have been fortunate to work with regularly over the last five years, and they brought the performance of both pieces to even greater heights.

Our first **Christmas Concert** together took place in the stunning setting of County Hall in Matlock, which gave a real sense of grandeur to the event. It was great to be able to work with the fantastic Eleanor Kornas, who commuted all the way from France to join us for the concert, as well as Harlequin Brass, and the brilliant tenor Andrew Mackenzie Wicks, familiar to so many in the choir. The choir gave assured performances of a range of carols, from the familiar to the much less familiar; I was delighted to introduce them to Richard Runciman Terry's beautiful setting of **Myn lyking**.

Fresh from the Christmas and New Year break, we tackled one of the great choral works of the nineteenth century, **Brahms**'s much-loved ***A German Requiem***. With such a piece, there will always be a certain level of familiarity already amongst the choir, so it gives a real opportunity to put extra polish on for a performance. Once again, the choir excelled itself in the concert, particularly in the unrelenting passages at the end of the third and sixth movements. We performed the piece with accompaniment in the form of an eight-player chamber arrangement by Iain Farrington, scored for flute, oboe, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, bass and piano; this achieves the orchestral colour of the full version, without breaking the bank or overwhelming the choir! We were once again joined by players from the Musical &

Amicable Society (this time on modern instruments), and luminous soloists Natasha Page and Michael Hickman.

The final concert of the year took us to the sound world of twentieth-century France, performing two very different but nevertheless complimentary pieces: **Louis Vierne's** grand ***Messe solennelle***, and **Francis Poulenc's** witty ***Gloria***. We finished the concert with choral fireworks in **Marcel Dupré**'s motet ***Laudate Dominum***. The Poulenc is originally for full orchestral accompaniment, but it works remarkably well played on the organ from the piano score (the Vierne and Dupré are already for organ accompaniment); however you need an exceptionally virtuosic organist! I was delighted that my former colleague Martin Baker accepted the challenge; Martin is a freelance organist and conductor these days, but has held posts at St Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and was for nearly twenty years Master of Music at Westminster Cathedral, where I worked with him for two years as Organ Scholar. Martin is also one of the finest improvisers on the organ on the planet, and we were treated to an *Offertoire* between movements of the Vierne. We were also joined by the fantastic soprano Harriet Gregory for the Poulenc, who also performed **Lili Boulanger's** haunting setting of ***Pie Jesu***.

A choir, and indeed a conductor, is only as good as their accompanist, and we have been extremely fortunate to have Peter Shepherd accompanying the choir since January (2025). I have known Peter since we both attended student organ courses in our school days, so it is lovely to be musically reunited with him, and he is a formidable accompanist. I must also extend my thanks to Andrew Cummings, who accompanied the choir so ably for my first term in charge.

The choir has risen admirably to the not inconsiderable musical challenges I have thrown their way in my first season, and it has been wonderful to see how far they have come in that time. It bodes extremely well for the future, and I look forward to many more performances together.

Jonathan Allsopp
January 2026