

REPORT ON SOMERSET SRP PLAYING DAY 17TH OCTOBER 2015 WITH CHRIS BURGESS

We started the day's programme of mainly contemporary music with Marg Hall's suite of 5 pieces entitled "Arthropodia". We struggled a bit with the timing and the notes on the first run through of "Indian Moon Moth" but we did manage to finish together and we were complimented on the quality of the last chord! After a bit of work however, we were much improved. We were aiming for a delicate sound by using gentle tonguing, as moths are delicate creatures, and the whole piece needed to be flowing and smooth.

Next we tackled "Cricket". Here we were after a "delicate soft focus" on the staccato notes with the tune played legato in contrast. Chris demonstrated the 'Goldfish' technique which involves parting the lips to end a note rather than using the tongue and we practiced this and then tried to apply it to the staccato notes. I actually found this quite difficult. The staccato notes gave the piece a slightly 'jumpy' feel.

The third piece in the suite was "Green Birdwing" which I am pretty certain is another moth. This piece was in G minor and needed to be played very legato. Consequently it had a very different feel to the first two pieces. Chris gave those of us who were slouching (and that included me) some guidance on posture when playing the recorder pointing out that sitting correctly helps with breathing.

"Spider" came next. Although there were no sharps or flats in the key signature, there were plenty of accidentals including Gb and some lovely 'clashes such as D Sharp against C. There was also a change of time signature in the middle and tenors had some 'Goldfish' notes to contend with. The whole piece had a 'creepy-crawly' feel to it.

"Lacewing" was a faster piece in a dotted quaver-semiquaver rhythm which gave it a 'skippy' quality combined with a more flowing tune. This was an interesting and varied set of pieces which, once we had warmed up, we played reasonably well.

We then split into two choirs for Andrew Challenger's "A Flourish" which was written specially for Somerset SRP's 40th Anniversary Playing Day in 2013. Chris was to have conducted this but was unable to do so at the last minute so the composer himself took over the reins on the day.

There are parts for Great and Contra Bass – we had none of the former but two of the latter which did give the music some depth. Choir 2 in particular, had a lot of quavers grouped into fours to play. The articulation of these is very important – first 2 slurred, second two staccato but it is difficult to achieve this at speed when sight-reading and for this reason Chris suggested that we play only the first quaver of the group and, if possible, also the second and this seemed to work well. Choir 1 started with a different 'fanfare' like rhythm although it too had some quaver patterns similar to Choir 2's later on. We also practiced tuning a D major chord – 'brightening' the fifth and 'slightly dropping' the third to perfect the tuning. After working on various sections we played the whole piece through. It is a fairly difficult piece but we nevertheless made a good stab at it, once again getting to the end more or less in unison.

Either side of the break we worked on the five movements of Hans Ulrich Staeps "The Unicorn's Grace". All movements are scored SATB but there is some division of parts in

places. Each movement of this, on the whole gentle, piece concerns a characteristic of the Unicorn. We began with “Fortis” (Strength) where attention to the phrasing was particularly important, followed by “Mollis” (Gentleness) and “Fugax” (Flight). “Loquens” (Sweetness of Speech) was a slower movement and we had the opportunity to practice tuning a chord again. The final movement was “Laetificus” (Joyful – literally happy-making).

Next was the only ‘non-contemporary piece of the day, Tomas Luis de Victoria’s “Ave Maria” and it was not surprisingly very different from anything else we played. It is scored for two SATB choirs and has 4 minim beats to the bar, with a 3/2 section in the middle. Once we had adjusted to the time signature and got the feel of the minim beat we played this very well – managing the change in time signature relatively easily after some practice. This is a beautiful and uplifting piece and probably my favourite of the music we played today.

We finished off with a piece that came a close second however – Paul Clark’s “Irish Suite”. Quite a few of us had played this before but it is always a great pleasure to have the chance to play it again. The first movement was “The Goroum” (I googled this to see if I could find out what it meant but I’m none the wiser). This was taken at a lively pace with the Bass and second Tenor providing a drum beat accompaniment in places – another opportunity to put the ‘Goldfish’ technique into practice to get a proper drumming feel. This was followed by “The Suir” – a slow and very melodic piece which contrasts well with the other two movements. Finally the tempo was upped again for “Time of Day” in the slightly

Trickier time of 9/8. Great fun to finish off with.