

Don Valley Festival Champions - written December 2009

Two things have happened since the adjudicator.

First, he's not been invited back. Some choristers took his feedback personally. Others felt our musical director had been undermined. Those who enjoyed it and wanted more were in the minority.

Second, we won The Don Valley Festival, a week-long annual music and arts shindig near Barnsley. A large audience, a big cup, a slightly less big cheque and a massive barrel of Eastwood's bitter. It is just the best way of getting feedback: we sounded great, for one performance at least.

Where do we go from here? We don't have a set of targets, which is a relief. We have a hard working committee and a charity mission statement that says something about promoting choral music in the community. A prior informal understanding that we didn't do competitions has now gone. As a mixed ability choir, our auditions assess basic skills only. Selection could be one way forward, though not without its problems. My pal Big Dave, twenty stone bass with Cadenza, an Edinburgh Choir, tells me their MD holds strict auditions. She specifically looks for balance, thus excluding, heaven forbid, the rogue distinctive single voice. The confident and consistent outfit we have become is very good for new members, but the new guys do change the balance until they are bedded in.

We are a strong team headed by a first rate musical director and pianist. Over sixty singers attend a two hour rehearsal once weekly, with extra sectionals once a month. Most turn out for our annual away weekend, currently held in Scarborough. Voice coaching remains a gap. Gordon Shepherd, Ark Occupational Health, tells me that he and some of his Barber Shop pals go for professional residential singing lessons; expensive but excellent value. Learning occurs in formal sessions and during the afterglow in the bar. Their sections also submit CD recordings to the MD and voice coaches within the choir. Gordon is okay with this, but he admits it is softly, softly at the moment.

In addition to that one performance, what is the evidence for improvement? We are still being invited to appear with other musical ensembles, CD sales are steady, bums on seats at our own concerts are satisfactory to good, small profits are being made and newspaper reviews are favourable. Having great guests is a good tip. Since the adjudicator we've had Aled Jones and Morrision Male Orpheus. Our normal fan base of wives, partners and friends was boosted. The reviews got rosier too.

Can individuals make a difference? Voice coaching is an anatomy lecture, a demonstration, and practice, practice, practice. So the answer is yes. But it needs paying for and you get feedback a plenty: good and bad. The evidence for keeping up or getting better? The top choirs have a regular voice test and very few singers look forward to it.

The adjudicator left some bruised egos and a crumb of confidence. We can only get better.