Choir workshop

Colditz Silvester Festival, 2025

Songs for the old and new year (and for dancing!)

with Steve & Marion

The workshop

At the Colditz festival in 2019, we formed a workshop choir to perform three English traditional songs *a cappella* for dancing, which was fun. This year, given the dates of the festival, we thought that it would be interesting to sing pieces which share the theme of the changing of the year, and as there is just one workshop programmed this time, we've chosen only two songs. Both come from the English folk tradition: *The King* can be sung for dancing a Hanter dro and *Here we come a-wassailing* for a Scottish or an An dro. We have made three-voice arrangements of each song (two voices for women and one for men), and our aim, as in 2019, is to rehearse the songs and then to perform them for dancing.

Please note the following points:

1. The workshop is shown as **Marion + Steve 'Chor'** on the programme. Because timings of events can sometimes change, please check the **latest version** of the programme on the main noticeboard in the castle.

2. If you have time to **look at the words of the songs before the workshop**, this will make it much easier and more enjoyable for you, and it will also save us valuable time during the workshop.

3. Please **do not forget to bring your own copies of the music with you**, and also **a pencil** to note down any details about performance.

4. If you don't read music, **don't worry!** We shall aim to **learn the notes by ear** during the workshop. If some of us can read music, that will also help us as a group to learn the notes more quickly.

5. If you are singing a women's part and you already have some singing experience, please try out the **second voice** ('Women 2'), as it would be good to have roughly the same number of singers on each of the women's voice parts.

The songs

The King (Hanter dro)

This song, dating from the seventeenth century, was traditionally sung on 26th December, St Stephen's Day, by groups of 'mummers' - people dressed theatrically in masks and colourful

clothing to celebrate the changing of the year with various activities, including processions, music and plays - a tradition whose origin may date back to the Norse settlement of Britain over a thousand years ago. The song makes reference to themes relating to both Christmas and the coming of the new year. As the original version is only eight bars long, we've added a 'variation' (Verse 4) in order to reduce repetition. In the early twentieth century, interest in the mumming tradition declined and the song was little known until it was recorded as an a cappella version by the folk-rock band *Steeleye Span*, appearing on their album *Please to see the King*, released in 1971; the band was a pillar of the British folk-revival movement in the 1970s and since then the song has remained popular in the folk-music world. You can hear it (and also see a few vintage photos of the band) at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_4lhU6q46Y

Here we come a-wassailing (Scottish or An dro)

This song, dating from the eighteenth century, was one of a number of wassailing songs traditionally sung in England on New Year's Eve, and today remains (along with *Gloucestershire Wassail*, which we sung in 2019) probably the best known of its genre. The custom of 'wassailing', which survived into the second half of the nineteenth century, involved groups of men, usually young farm labourers, visiting their village farms and inns, or the homes of the more well-to-do, with their decorated 'wassailing bowl', and stopping outside to sing their wassailing song in the hope that they would be welcomed in and their bowl would be filled with beer, or, alternatively, they had with them a purse in the hope that their song would earn them donations of money. The tradition is similar to that of the singing of carols from door to door at Christmas, in the hope of receiving donations of food or money. As with many traditional songs, variations are found in the lyrics, the number of verses and sometimes even the melodies; it is usually sung with the verse in compound (6/8) time and the refrain *alla breve*, but in our arrangement we have maintained *alla breve* throughout, so that it can be danced more easily. You can hear an a cappella version of the song at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CeQBbUKgSI

We hope you will find these songs interesting and fun to sing, and we look forward to seeing you in the workshop.

Happy Christmas!

Steve & Marion