

St. Mary's Witney, Choir - COVID RISK ASSESSMENT

All relevant guidance and advice has been followed, including but not limited to that given by the

- Church of England: "COVID-19 Advice on the Conduct of Public Worship, Version 2.3, 19 August 2020";
- Royal School of Church Music (RSCM: "COVID-19: Guidance for Safely Resuming Group Music-making in Church"
- Association of British Choral Directors (ABCD: "Getting your choir back – some practical considerations following the revised Government guidance published by the DCMS on 14 August"
- Declan Costello's scientific research into the risks of singing, published on 21 August 2020.

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SUMMARY

- A limited number of people can sing; there is enough room in the choir stalls for 8–10 singers to socially distance.
- The amount of singing in the service will be limited; any rehearsal or recording will be limited to 60 mins.
- The choir will not robe for the time being.
- The handling of sheet music will be kept to a minimum, normally limited to choir members only handling their own copies, and where possible copies will be brought from home.
- Masks to be worn outside the chancel area.

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CHOIRS MAY NOW SING

The latest Church of England guidance has permitted 'small groups' of professional and non-professional singers to participate in worship since 15 August 2020. The number of people in a 'small group' has not been defined, only that social distancing must be maintained.

The RSCM guidance says:

Stalls should only be used if the choir can be appropriately distanced; choirs should aim to sing in a wide semi-circle if at all possible, and certainly to avoid singing directly face-to-face.

The chancel containing choir stalls is a separate space, at a considerable distance from the rest of the church, and will be closed to congregation and the public. We are blessed with two sides of choir stalls, and we are able to spread out checkerboard-style with four to five singers on each side, and maintain well over the 2m social distancing guidelines. Whilst the two sides singing directly at each other is a factor and the front rows are obviously closer than any other, singers can be staggered on the two sides so that front row singers are not opposite each other. A limited subset of singers that agree to follow these guidelines, and are not shielding or at high risk from COVID, will therefore be allowed to sing for services, recordings and rehearsals.

VENTILATION

Ventilation has been cited as a factor in ensuring the spread of droplets and aerosols is distributed as much as possible. In a service we will not be singing for more than 10-15 mins (slightly longer at Choral Evensong); the volume of air in the church is very large. The Association of British Choral Directors (ABCD) advise considering shortening rehearsal time or having longer breaks to allow ventilation to occur. Choir practice or recording will consequently be limited to a maximum of 60 mins. I believe these to be acceptable risks without needing to enhance ventilation more than has already been implemented in the church. The much-awaited research by Declan Costello indicates that singing poses no greater risk than loud speaking, especially if at a moderate volume.

HOW MUCH CAN WE SING?

We need to be careful not to lengthen the service unduly and to avoid singing anything that would tempt the congregation to join in. I propose we sing the following items in each of the following services.

- **Eucharist** - said Gloria, Creed may be said, or optionally sung on special occasions, choir sing Sanctus and/or Agnus Dei, and a Choir Anthem during communion.
- **Choral Evensong** – there is normally a small congregation, and singing won't lengthen the service much. Psalm, Office Hymn, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis, Anthem (no closing hymns).

Singers should sing no louder than *mf* to reduce any risk associated with loud singing.

CLOTHES, ROBING and PROCESSING

Singers will not use the North Transept for robing or music until further notice. Considering the difficulty of bringing robes from home, or of safely accessing the robe cupboard, cross-contamination of robes, etc, the choir will not robe for the time being, and will not process. Choir members will take their places in the stalls five minutes before the service starts. All coats, umbrellas etc to be stored under / adjacent to the allocated seat.

MUSIC

Music will not be shared. Each member either has their own numbered copies of all music, or will bring copies from home. Music will be electronically distributed where possible. If physical copies need to be distributed the choir leader, having sanitized hands, will personally distribute copies from the library or choir pigeonholes to each member's seat in advance of any service or rehearsal. Any collected music will be placed in a single pile afterwards and left for 72 hours before filing. Choir members should therefore have no reason to crowd around the choir cupboards.

ACCESS AND CLEANING

Hand sanitiser must be used by choir members upon entry by the North Door. It is not considered necessary for choir stalls to be cleaned after each usage, as at least 72 hours will be allowed to elapse between each usage, and no one else will use the chancel.

MASKS

Masks are not required to be worn by people 'leading the service' or while singing, but in line with the Church of England guidance, masks will be worn when entering and leaving the church, and will remain worn at all times when choir members are outside the chancel area. Choir members may choose to wear masks in the chancel when not singing, but this will not be enforced.

REGISTER and ILLNESS

A register will be kept of each singer at any choir event, and any enquiries as to who has been present can be made directly to the choir master. We will ensure social distancing is maintained at all times, and that any social interaction is limited.

If any choir member or the choirmaster shows symptoms of having contracted COVID-19, tests positive, or believes they may have been exposed to it, then they must not attend. In the event of a singer or choirmaster subsequently being found to be infected with Covid-19, others will be expected to comply with National Track and Trace guidance and regulations.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND LACK OF COERCION

Considering that individual singers are in very different situations with regard to age, health and attitude to risk, it will be a matter of individual decision and responsibility as to whether to sing. If local or community transmission rates increase markedly, then we will limit our activities. No choir member will be forced to sing if they do not feel comfortable. All singers will be sent this risk assessment, and will either agree to abide by its terms or not sing.

ORGAN AND ORGANISTS

The organ is normally played by very few people. The organist and choirmaster is the regular organist and currently is the only person playing the instrument. More normally, and as activities resume, other organists may deputise from time to time. Organists must sanitize their hands immediately before and after playing, avoid hand to face contact, and avoid sneezing or coughing on the console. A register will be placed clearly on the back of the organ indicating who has played the organ and when. This should be completed by each person that has played the instrument. A period of 72 hours will be allowed to elapse between different organists, and organists should check the list before opening the console to ensure that this is the case.

Dr Francis Rumsey
Organist and Choirmaster, St Mary's, Witney
7th September 2020