

## Musical Director's report – 2024-2025

For my last season with Wetherby Choral Society the music had been chosen, orchestras booked and soloists chosen before I took the decision to retire, and what season it proved to be!

In November we performed Handel's oratorio Saul. Handel suits the choir very well and is always full of good, singable tunes. There is a drama about his oratorio's that comes through the text and character of the arias in true operatic style. Robin Blaze, who had grown up in the area took the countertenor role of David with a wonderfully convincing performance, ably supported by Jane Burnell, James Savage-Hanford and Phil Wilcox.

Messiah was a near complete performance with Eleonore Cockerham as a clear voiced and agile soprano, Rachel Gilmore as alto, James Micklethwaite as a superb tenor and Terence Ayebare and a dramatic bass. The familiarity of the music made this another chance to start the Christmas season the right way.

Having only conducted Dvorak Stabat Mater once, it was a delight to tackle this splendid setting for a second time. Our solo team of Olivia Tringham, Anna Burford, Nick Watts and Charlie Murray – a late replacement for D'Arcy Bleiker – were again superb and the ease with which Charlie fitted in gave him an ideal occasion to be introduced to the Wetherby audience. The slightly larger orchestra were also on particularly good form and the choir confident throughout producing a moving and memorable final concert on home turf for me.

The final concert was, for me, a particular highlight. Joining with Ripon Choral Society proved to be an inspired move enabling a very large choir of 220 to sing Mendelssohn's Elijah in Ripon Cathedral. With Orchestra D'Amici, four highly experienced and top-quality soloists, Samantha Hay, Gaynor Keeble, Nicholas Madden and Mark Stone, and an audience of 400 plus we gave a performance worthy of any concert hall. The Baal choruses with goading by Mark Stone were brilliant, and the volume of the full choir apparently capable of drowning out the orchestra, Gaynor Keeble's dramatic mezzo singing, Nick Madden's lyrical beauty and Samantha Hay's sublime soprano made the evening one I shall not forget – a real treasure and memory – for which I thank you all.

My thanks to Heather, Kathy and Malcolm and the rest of the Committee for working so hard through this last season, particularly the many extra hours required to run the auditions process. My thanks, too, to William Campbell, who has proved to be a superb accompanist and supportive character to work alongside, and finally my thanks to all the members who have given me such pleasure and for whom I hope I have been able to create some lasting and good memories of rehearsals, performances, anecdotes, stories, and humour.

With all good wishes to Charlie and to you all in this next phase of the life of Wetherby Choral Society.

John Dunford

10 September 2025