

**THE CHAIR**

A choral comedy  
in three acts

by

Christopher Joby

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## CHARACTERS

John .....President of the Norwich Choral Society

Eileen .....Wife of the President

Oliver .....Conductor of the Society

Fiona .....Society Treasurer

Mark .....Society Secretary

Philip .....Voice representative and former President of the society

Sally .....Voice representative

Fern .....Society Librarian

## ACT 1

*(The scene is the drawing room of the house of the new President of the Norwich Choral Society, John Dow. It is a large room in a house facing Norwich Cathedral in the Close in the centre of Norwich. John is a recently retired solicitor and the drawing room reflects the wealth that he has acquired during his career. There are several bookcases along the back wall and several paintings including a portrait of John. Stage right there is a door leading into the hallway. In the wall stage right there is a fireplace. Stage left there is a sound system and next to this a drinks cabinet with glasses and a sherry decanter on top. As the curtain goes up, John is pacing from stage left to stage right).*

John: *(Stops downstage centre and declaims).* Hello, good evening and welcome. No. No. *(Walks on a little and turns, clears his throat, and repeats the phrase with a different stress pattern).* Hello, good evening and welcome. No. *(Starts to pace from stage right to stage left. He stops and declaims again with another stress pattern. As he does so, his wife, Eileen, enters carrying two chairs).* Hello, good evening and...

Eileen: *(Interrupting).* Welcome.

John: *(Surprised).* Yes. How did you guess?

Eileen: Hardly original, is it?

John: What do you mean?

Eileen: That's what David Frost used to say, wasn't it? Plagiarism if you ask me. Anyway, why are you saying it?

John: I'm practising my introductory speech. First meeting as President. I want to get off on the right foot.

Eileen: It's going a bit far, isn't it, even for Norwich Choral Society? *(Places the chairs stage right in order to start forming a semi-circle of chairs).* Anyway, will you come and get some of the chairs from the kitchen. It was your idea to use the less expensive ones for your guests.

John: In a moment, darling. I haven't quite got my introduction right yet. Very important, introductions. They can make or break a speech.

Eileen: *(Tuts loudly and exits).* Very well. Who's coming?

John: *(Calls out).* The committee.

Eileen: *(From offstage).* Yes, but who's on the committee?

John: *(Stands downstage centre and looks towards the audience. Clears his throat, then speaks)*. On behalf of my wife, Eileen, and I, or is it me, I would like to take this opportunity to...

Eileen: *(Re-entering with two more chairs)*. What are you doing now?

John: Trying a different approach.

Eileen: *(Places the two chairs stage left)*. There we go. Well, if you want the other chairs, you can get them yourself. I must admit it feels a bit like *The Chairs*.

John: *(Not really paying attention)*. Which chairs, darling?

Eileen: *(Annoyed)*. *The Chairs*, you know, by Ionescu.

John: *(Still not really paying attention)*. Unesco?

Eileen: *(Annoyed)*. No, I-onescu, the French playwright. It's just like his play, *The Chairs, Les Chaises*.

John: *(Finally pays attention)*. Oh, yes, yes of course. *(Shakes his head)*. How do you mean?

Eileen: Well, at the end, the old couple are bringing in lots of chairs for people who really aren't there.

John: Hm. I think some of our committee really aren't there, if you ask me. One quaver short of a full beat, some of them.

Eileen: *(Moves downstage centre)*. So, who's on the committee this year? You still haven't told me.

John: Well, there's Oliver.

Eileen: *(Thinks fondly of Oliver)*. Dear, dear Oliver.

John: And Philip, Philip Goodman. The *Ex-President*. Huh. *(Moves over to the door, chuckling to himself)*.

Eileen: Why is he still on the committee?

John: He's a voice rep. now, huh, a mere voice rep.

Eileen: Anyone else? *(John does not reply)*. Who's treasurer?

John: What is this? Twenty questions?

Eileen: Don't be short with me, darling. I'm just trying to show an interest.

John: Sorry. (*Pauses*). I think it's, er, Fiona.

Eileen: Fiona?

John: (*Tries to exit, but Eileen's questions prevent him from doing so*). Yes.

Eileen: Hang on, which Fiona?

John: Um, the teacher Fiona, at, er,...

Eileen: (*Interrupting*). What? Fiona Newell? Know-all as some people call her.

John: Yes, that Fiona. Why?

Eileen: (*Moves upstage right towards John*). You know perfectly well why. No wonder you were being so cagey. You've got a soft spot for her, haven't you?

John: I used to, but...

Eileen: What?

John: That was before I met you, darling. I only have eyes for you now. (*Gives Eileen a peck on the cheek*).

Eileen: Good and keep it that way. (*Looks at her watch*). Oh, is that the time? I'd better get going, otherwise mother will wonder where I am.

John: (*Moves towards the gap between the chairs*). I was wondering....

Eileen: What?

John: (*Points to the gap*). Do you think I should use the Queen Anne?

Eileen: What, the family heirloom?

John: Yes.

Eileen: What for?

John: To chair the meeting of course.

Eileen: Why? Can't you use one of the kitchen chairs like the others?

John: Not really. You see I need to stamp my authority on the meeting. Show them who's boss. I've waited years for this, years. They kept on overlooking me, four times I stood for President, and I'm jolly well going to show them what they've been missing.

Eileen: And you think they'll realize what they've been missing when you use the Queen Anne, do you?

John: It'll show them who's in charge.

Eileen: Won't they know that already?

John: Well, just in case there's any doubt. I've heard Philip was a weak President, too much inclined to find consensus. If this society is to survive, it needs strong leadership, and that's what I intend to give it.

Eileen: With a chair?

John: It's not just a chair, is it? It's a symbol... a statement of intent.

Eileen: I don't know, darling. Seems a bit heavy-handed to me, but it's your decision. If you are going to use it, do be careful. Remember the insurance, won't you?

John: Yes, of course.

Eileen: Anyway, I really must be going. Mother will wonder where on earth I've got to. She worries terribly. Well, have a good meeting, then, and do be careful. *(Eileen kisses John).*

John: Yes, now off you go. And leave the outside door open, would you, for the committee.

Eileen: All right. Bye. *(Eileen exits).*

John: *(Looks at his watch. To himself).* One minute past seven. Late! Where are they? People are always late. That's the trouble with people these days. Late. *(At this point, John's mobile phone rings. He answers it and walks downstage right).* John Dow... Ah, Philip... On the A11? ... Half-past seven? Very well, thanks for letting me know... see you at 7.30 then, traffic permitting. Cheerio. *(Presses the disconnect button on his mobile)... (To himself)* Right, let's get those chairs. *(The doorbell rings. It makes the sound of the first few bars of the chorus of Handel's Zadok the Priest. John looks at his watch).* Ah, finally. *(Mark Thirkettle has arrived.)*

Mark: *(Offstage).* Where are you?

John: *(Turns and calls out).* In here.

Mark: *(Still offstage)*. Hello, anyone at home?

John: *(Louder)* In here.

Mark: Where's here?

John: *(Impatiently. Moves towards the door)*. Here, here, right hand door!  
*(Mark enters carrying a bag, which contains the minutes book and other documents)*.

Mark: Ah, there you are, John. Got here at last. *(Looks around)*. Oh, am I the first one here? Not early am I?

John: No, two minutes late actually, but the others are going to be even later. Most inconsiderate.

Mark: *(Looks around again and moves downstage right)*. Well, this is a lovely room, look at all those books. *(Looks out towards the audience)*. And what a view of the cathedral. Very nice, John, if I may say so.

John: *(Looking rather self-satisfied)*. Yes, Mark, you may say so. It's what comes of being a solicitor for over thirty years, you know. *(Goes over to the sherry cabinet and points to the decanter)*. Sherry?

Mark: Oh, go on then. A small one, sweet, if you've got it.

John: Sweet it is. *(John pours a glass of sherry and hands it to Mark. They both move to centre stage behind the gap in the chairs)*.

Mark: So, first meeting as President, John. Nervous?

John: No, not at all, not at all.

Mark: A tall what?

John: No, not at all. *(Spells out each word)*.

Mark: Oh, sorry, a bit deaf. Got something in my ear *(Mark tries to clear out his ear. John looks on in disgust)*.

John: *(Looks at his watch impatiently)*. I wonder where the others are. I promised Eileen we'd be finished by eight fifteen. She'll be coming back from her mother's then. She hates all this committee stuff.

Mark: Oh, I'm sure they'll be along soon.

John: *(Feeling uncomfortable making small talk with Mark)*. Mark, will you excuse me. I just need to go and fetch the other chairs from the kitchen. *(Points to the door. The doorbell rings again)*. Ah, that'll be some of the others. About time, too. I hate it when people are late *(Calls out)*. We're in here! On your right, first door.

*(Oliver Mead, the conductor of the society, and Fiona Newell, the treasurer, enter. Oliver is carrying a briefcase and Fiona is carrying an accounts book. John's eyes light up when he sees Fiona).*

Fiona, Oliver, welcome, welcome. Did you find somewhere to park?

Oliver: We walked. Well, I walked, I don't know about Fiona, I mean, well, we didn't come together, if that's what you're...

Fiona: *(Interrupting Oliver)*. I walked, too. It's not far to come and it's such a lovely evening, don't you think? *(Moves towards Mark)*. Oh hello, Mark, how are you?

Mark: Sorry?

Fiona: *(A little louder, now standing next to him)*. I said 'how are things?'

Mark: Fine thanks. I'm a little deaf.

John: *(Whispering)*. Tone deaf, more like.

Fiona: John, that's uncalled for.

John: *(Goes over to the drinks cabinet)*. Sherry? Let me guess, Oliver dry and Fiona sweet?

Fiona: Spot on.

Oliver: Yup, where's the crystal ball? *(Feigns to look around for an imaginary crystal ball)*.

John: Oh, just call it male intuition. *(Fiona smirks. John pours drinks for Fiona and Oliver and the four of them gather into a semi-circle in the centre of the room, in front of the chairs)*. Well, this is all very jolly, isn't it? I must admit I'm looking forward to chairing my first meeting as President of the society. *(Mark nods, but Oliver and Fiona look at each other with a slight expression of irritation)*.

Fiona: Where are the others, then?

John: *(Looking at his watch)*. Yes, it's five past now, where are they?

Oliver: It's not the first time that some of the choir has been late, you know. However much I wave my magic wand, some sections still come in a beat late.

Fiona: Oliver, that's unexpectedly indiscreet of you.

Oliver: I'm not saying which sections.

John: The tenors are always on time, aren't we, Mark? *(Mark does not respond, as his hearing is still slightly impaired. John shouts this time)*.

Mark, we're never late, are we?

Mark: (*Jumps slightly*). Late? No, no, I was on time, wasn't I?

John: (*John sighs*). What's the point? (*Fiona and Oliver smile weakly*). Oh yes, I should have said, Philip, our *ex-President*, phoned to say he was running late. Says he was being held up in the traffic... rather surprising at this time of night, don't you think?

Oliver: Perhaps it's the council.

John: How do you mean?

Oliver: Well, I was driving along the Riverside last week and the road works there had red lights at both ends. Caused no end of confusion.

John: Oh.

Fiona: What about Sally and Fern.

John: I don't know. Typical though, isn't it?

Fiona: What is?

John: Well, they both live here in the Close, don't they? It's always the ones who live nearest who arrive last. (*Tuts loudly*).

Fiona: (*Staring out*). Oh, here they are now.

John: Finally.

Fiona: Cooeee! (*Fiona gives them a little wave. John goes outside and collects two more chairs. Fiona makes an aside to Oliver*). Nice place isn't it - one of the perks of being a solicitor, I suppose.

Oliver: It will do, though how suitable it will be for a committee meeting, I don't know. (*Looks around*). No table by the looks of things. How are we meant to write things down? I don't see why we couldn't meet in the Chapter House. There's a table there. We've been meeting there for the last twenty years, nothing wrong with it at all. A bit chilly in winter perhaps.

*(Sally and Fern enter, ushered in by John, who is carrying two chairs. Fern is carrying a case containing documents. They are both chatting and laughing, in high spirits. They greet those already present, whilst John places the two chairs either side of the centre of the semi-circle. He leaves a space in the centre for another chair).*

John: (*Moves over to the rest of the committee*). Well, I think we can start. (*To Sally and Fern*) Philip, our *ex-President*, is joining us later. I just need to go and fetch my chair. Mark, could you get Sally and Fern a couple of

sheries.

Mark: Cherries?

John: (*Shouting*). Sherries!

Mark: Oh, sorry. Yes, I must do something about my ears.

John: I've been saying that for years. (*Fiona frowns. John exits to get his chair*).

Oliver (*In a low voice to Fiona, mimicking John*). Go and fetch my chair, hey? Must be a special sort of chair. (*Raises his eyebrows*).

Mark: (*Goes over to the drinks cabinet*). What can I get you ladies, sweet or dry?

Sally: A large sweet one for me, please.

Mark: Fern, what would you like?

Fern: (*Slightly embarrassed*). A small dry one, please, Mark. I'm only a little Fern, you know. (*Mark smiles at Fern, goes to fix the drinks and then hands them to Sally and Fern. He stands next to Fern and they chat*).

Oliver: Well, we'd best sit down then, whilst we wait for mein host.

Fiona: (*Surveys the chairs briefly*). Who's going to sit where? (*Fiona starts to sit in the chair stage left of the gap in the middle of the chairs. Just at that moment, John returns with a very fine looking wooden chair, which has a crest in the middle and beautifully carved arms and finials*).

John: Oh, not there, Fiona. I've got a special place for you. For all of you in fact.

Oliver: Oh, places now, eh. I must say you're taking this role of President very seriously John, aren't you?

John: Well, someone has to if... (*looks at Oliver and stops short*).

Oliver: If what?

John: No, it doesn't matter. (*Comes to stand in the middle of the others with his chair*). Anyway, this, everyone, is my Queen Anne chair, which you may have heard me talk about before, though given my innate modesty, I may not have mentioned it to some of you. (*Oliver and Fiona raise their eyebrows*). Rather splendid, isn't it? I hope you'll forgive me, but only I am allowed to sit in it. Well, Eileen can as well, but she doesn't dare. Insurance, you know.

Mark: (*Comes closer to inspect it*). Oh, I say, very nice. (*Gestures as if to touch*

*it*).

John: Please don't touch it, Mark.

Mark: Sorry, John. Queen Anne, hey? Must have cost a few bob.

John: It's a family heirloom actually. A bit of family history in fact. Apparently one of Marlborough's lieutenants was in the family - fought at Blenheim and at Oudenarde. Earned him a bit of money and hey presto. (*Mark continues to look closely at the chair*). Mark, what is it?

Mark: Oh, nothing. It just looks a bit like one at my aunt's house.

John: (*Frowns*). Don't be silly, Mark.

Oliver: (*Distinctly non-plussed*). So, how much is it worth, then?

John: I'm glad you asked, Oliver, though one doesn't usually want to indulge in sordid little questions of money. We're having it re-valued shortly, so I'll know then. Whether I let on is another matter (*chortles to himself, tapping his nose*). Anyway, let's get on. (*John places the Queen Anne chair very purposefully in the middle of the other chairs*).

Fiona: Yes, tempus fugit.

John: Tempers what? (*Fiona chuckles to herself*).

Oliver: So, where do you want us to sit?

John: Good question. Oliver, you as our esteemed conductor can sit on my left.

Oliver: Your left what? (*John looks at Oliver with a mixture of surprise and annoyance, but does not rise to the bait. Oliver sits to John's left*).

John: Mark, as minutes secretary, you can sit *to* my right. (*Mark sits*). We'd better keep the chuckle sisters apart, so Fern would you sit next to Oliver and Sally next to Mark (*Fern and Sally sit*). We'll keep that one (*points to the chair on his far right*) for Elijah, or Philip, if he comes first. So Fiona, would you mind going there (*points to the chair on his far left*).

Fiona: Oh, but that's a long way from you John, isn't it? I hope your Presidential eye will be able to see me from there (*John smiles slightly. Fiona sits*).

Oliver: John, are you sure you should be sitting in that chair? Do you really think Queen Anne would have approved? (*Oliver looks round for support, but only finds the slightest of smiles from Fiona's face, and raises his eyebrows*).

John: So, let's make a start. (*Standing in front of his chair in the centre, John clears his throat and addresses those present*). On behalf of my wife, Eileen, and ...

Fiona: *(Interrupting)*. Where is Eileen tonight?

John: She's at her mother's.

Fiona: Oh.

John: She doesn't like all this committee business. Anyway, no more interruptions. *(Fiona is taken aback)*. Where was I? Ah, yes, I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you all to my house, and I am very much looking forward to working with you this year as your President.

Fiona: *(Applauds and says with irony)*. Very Presidential, John. Very Presidential.

John: *(Missing Fiona's irony)*. Thank you, thank you, Fiona. *(Sits)*. I wanted to set the right tone, as this is my first meeting as President.

Fiona: Well, you did that admirably, John. If I were Eileen, I'd be very proud of you.

John: Good. Well, on a more mundane note, could I just ask you to switch off any electronic equipment you have – mobiles, blackberries, strawberries, blueberries *(Chuckles to himself. The others smile weakly and get out their phones and turn them off)* - though not your pacemakers. I must say letting mobile phones go off during an important meeting like this really is beyond the pale. We don't want any twits tweeting in the meeting, either, do we? Well.... *(Turns to Mark)* Mr. Secretary, could we have the minutes from the last meeting. *(Mark gets some papers out from his bag and distributes them to those present)*.

Sally: Don't forget one for Philip.

John: Yes, it was his last meeting as President, wasn't it? He must miss it now, hmm *(laughs to himself)*... so first things first, do we accept the minutes of the last meeting as a true and fair record of what happened? I wasn't there, but I'm sure those of you who were there remember it well.

Sally: Oh, do we have an agenda for this meeting, John?

John: No, we don't need an agenda. Dreadful waste of trees. It's probably nearly always the same, anyway. If you think I've forgotten something, bring it up under A.O.B.

Oliver: I must say that isn't very democratic.

John: Democratic? Who said anything about democracy? Democracy isn't always the best system, anyway.

Oliver: It usually is.

John: Not always. Think of the choir. You couldn't conduct that on a democratic basis, could you Oliver? Oh, let's have a vote on what time signature we'll use or a vote on whether the sopranos are flat. (*Half laughs, but pulled up short by Sally's riposte*).

Sally: Oi, we're never flat! Well, only occasionally.

John: Very well, we'll have an agenda at the next meeting. (*Oliver looks non-plussed*). Now let's check the minutes of the last meeting.

Sally: Well, for a start you've missed my name off. (*Looks at John*).

John: Don't look at me...

Mark: Sorry, Sally, that's my fault. I didn't take a note of names at the meeting and compiled the list from memory...

Sally: I don't know how you could have forgotten me, Mark.

Oliver: (*To Fern*). No, nor do I (*Oliver chuckles, Fern is not sure whether to chuckle or not*).

Fiona: I think you'll find Philip has only one 'l'.

John: (*Tuts*) Does it really matter?

Fiona: I'm sure it would if you were Philip.

Oliver: Imagine if you spelt Sally with an 'i' instead of an 'a'. That would matter. (*Chortles to himself*).

Sally: Or Oliver without an 'r'. (*Looks to Oliver*). Touché!

John: Very well. Let's ask him when he arrives - or perhaps we could be democratic and take a vote on it (*Mark laughs, but the others do not, so he stops*). Well, if there's nothing else of a more substantive nature, I suggest we accept the minutes. I'll propose them. Who will second them? (*Looks intently at Mark*).

Oliver: Hang on a minute, we haven't read them through yet.

John: (*Gets up and starts to pace around*). This is an extravagant waste of meeting time. When Philip gets here, he'll wonder what we've been doing.

Fiona: I suggest Mark emails us the minutes before the meeting in future. That will save time. Can you do that Mark?

Mark: (*In a reverie*). Sorry?

John: (*Moves to stand directly behind Mark. Shouting*) Email them to us.

Mark: Email what?

John: The minutes, you... (*Stops short*).

Mark: All right, no need to shout. I think my ears are back to normal now.

John: Good. Let's hope they stay that way! (*Trying to calm himself down*).

Fiona: John, do you think you could sit down. You might be making people nervous.

John: (*Stands behind his chair*). Sit down? This is my house. I'll sit or stand as I please.

Fiona: What about your chair, your lovely chair. Don't you want to sit in that?

John: (*Caught in two minds*). Oh, very well. (*To Fiona*). But, it's my decision, you know. (*Fiona smirks slightly. John sits in his chair*). Now, where were we? Ah yes, the minutes, Mark. You're going to email them to us.

Mark: Is everyone on email?

Fern: Yes, but I don't like it. I'm a right techno, techno...what is it?

John: (*Shouts*). Phobe. Technophobe.

Fern: (*Cowers slightly*). Yes, one of those.

John: Right, now can we please accept the minutes. I proposed them a moment ago, though it seems like an age. Mark, can you second me.

Mark: Seconded.

John: Good, right, finally we're getting somewhere. Onto item two. The programme for the autumn season. Now what I've been thinking is...

Oliver: Hang on, hang on. It's the conductor who presents his ideas on the music to everyone for comment.

John: With respect, Oliver. I have been giving this a good deal of thought and...

Oliver: (*Interrupting John*). With an equal if not greater amount of respect, John, so have I. I have to conduct you lot so I need to choose the music. That's certainly how we've done things in the past including under your predecessor as President, Philip.

John: Well, tradition can be a hoary old thing, Oliver. We need to keep up with the times.

Oliver: What do you mean?

John: *(Gets up again and starts to walk around. Clears his throat for dramatic effect).* I went to see Norwich a cappella consort last week...

Sally: Traitor!

John: Sally, it was purely for the purposes of research. We need to see what the competition is up to. And, well, they've certainly raised their game since I last saw them, so it's time for us to raise ours. We need fresh ideas and innovative programmes to bring people in.

Sally: Bums on seats! Here, here. *(All except John and Oliver laugh).*

John: Look, Oliver. I hear what you are saying, so why don't you present your ideas, then I'll present mine and we can see whose ideas people prefer. It's quite within the constitution.

Oliver: Constitution, what constitution? I didn't even know we had a constitution.

Sally: Me neither *(All shakes their heads).*

John: *(Stands behind his chair, with his hands on the back of the chair).* Yes, of course we have. I, as a solicitor, was asked to write it when the choir was set up. The fact that you don't know of its existence is neither here nor there - it exists and I am acting quite within its rules. So, Oliver, do tell us your ideas for next term's programme.

Oliver: Well, I must confess this is all news to me, but... very well... *(Gets out a sheet of paper from his briefcase. As he is doing so, a car can be heard to pull up in front of the house. Fern, who up to this point has been almost asleep, suddenly wakes up and sees that Philip has arrived).*

Fern: Oh, it's Philip.

John: Yes, we can all see that *(looks at his watch).* Oh, earlier than expected. Mark, show him in. *(Mark goes over to the door to show Philip in. John meanwhile goes over to the drinks cabinet to pour a sherry for Philip and for himself.)*

Sally: *(Gets up and goes over to the drinks cabinet).* I could do with a re-fill, John.

John: It's not cheap stuff, you know.

Sally: John really, don't be a scrooge. *(John reluctantly fills Sally's glass up. She takes a quick swig and returns to her seat).*

Philip: *(Philip enters followed by Mark).* Hello everyone. Sorry I'm late. Held up on the A11, terrible traffic. *(Goes over to sit in John's chair in the middle).*

John: Not that one, old chap. It's Queen Anne. You can have the chair at the end there, next to the lovely Sally. (*Chortles*). More Queen Elizabeth than Queen Anne, but fit for an ex-President.

Philip: If you insist. I hope yours doesn't turn out to be electric.

John: Very drôle, I'm sure. I must tell you the story sometime of how I came to own such a splendid chair. (*Philip rolls his eyes. John goes over to Philip and hands him the glass of sherry*). Sherry?

Philip: Thank you. (*Takes the sherry from John*). On second thoughts, I'd better not, I'm driving.

Sally: (*Finishes her previous glass of sherry and puts it down*). Oh, Philip, you kill-joy. I'll have it if you won't. (*Philip hands her the sherry*).

John: (*Frowns at Sally's remark, sits down and takes a sip from his sherry*). So, Philip, we're on item two of our agenda.

Philip: (*Looks puzzled*) What agenda? Where's my copy?

Sally: It's in John's head.

Mark: (*Whispers to John*) One '1' or two?

John: One '1' or two? Oh yes, Philip, before we continue, we have a very important question to ask you. Does your name have one '1' or two?

Philip: One. Well, that's how I've always spelt it. Why?

John: It's for the minutes of the last meeting. We weren't sure, or rather Mark wasn't sure.

Fiona: (*Jumping to Mark's defence*). No one was sure, Philip, including John. That's why we asked.

John: (*Annoyed*). Well, let's get on. Music, Oliver, over to you...

Oliver: I'm not best pleased about this.

Philip: What's the matter, Oliver?

John: (*Interrupting*) Nothing, Philip, nothing. (*Philip looks surprised*). Oliver.

Oliver: (*Reluctantly*). Very well. I thought we could do a programme of twentieth-century English choral music. Start with Britten's *Hymn to St. Cecilia*, then...

John: Britten? This is just what I mean. Let me guess, we're going to have some Vaughan Williams after that.

Oliver: Yes, why not, he wrote some lovely choral works.

John: But, this is precisely it. We need to be more innovative. We did Britten last autumn.

Fiona: Well, I like Britten, and Vaughan Williams for that matter too.

Fern: And it's easy to get hold of copies of their music.

John: Yes, well that's not the point, is it? We can get The Beatles' music easily enough but that doesn't mean...

Sally: (*Interrupting John*). Fern, take no notice of him. I do see John's point though. Our programmes are getting, well...

Mark: Predictable?

Sally: (*Looks surprised*). Yes.

John: Good, well now that's established, have you got anything else to say, Oliver?

Oliver: (*Clearly very annoyed*) Yes, but it's not repeatable in present company.

John: About music, I mean.

Oliver: No, not for the moment. Let's hear your ideas, John.

John: Thank you, Oliver. As I say, I'm proposing a rather innovative programme, which I'm sure you'll warm to.

Philip: Hang on a minute. When I was President...

John: (*Interrupting him*). But you're not now. You're an ex-President, you have ceased to be...

Philip: (*Starts to get up*). Now look here, John.

Fiona: Relax, Philip. John is just mis-quoting Monty Python.

Philip: Yes, of course, I knew that. (*Slightly embarrassed. Tries to collect himself*) Anyway, when I was President, we always went with what the conductor suggested... give or take.

John: Well, Philip, things are changing now, new broom and all that. As I was telling the others before you arrived, I'm acting perfectly within the constitution.

Philip: Constitution? What constitution?

Sally: Exactly what we said.

John: The society's constitution. (*Philip looks astonished but is too surprised to speak. John gets up, goes behind his chair and begins to walk back and forth*). So, as I was saying, I've been doing some market research, or um, 'spying' you might say, and I see that other local choirs, Norwich a *cappella* consort, Norwich Mixed Voices, Wymondham and Area Harmony Singers et al. have been going back to the likes of Purcell and Blow, even Byrd and Tallis to freshen up their repertoires. The audiences are loving it. And let's face it, our audience is steadily, well, how can I put it, diminishing.

Fiona: Dying, you mean?

John: Yes, I didn't want to put it so crudely, but yes. (*Turns to Fiona*). I mean, Fiona, how much did we take on ticket sales for the last concert?

Fiona: Off the top of my head, £800, £200 down on last time.

John: Do you see my point? (*All nod in resigned agreement*).

Philip: And did your 'market research' tell you that this was purely down to the programme?

John: Yes.

Philip: How can you be sure?

John: Trust me.

Philip: (*Under his breath*). Not likely. (*Sally catches this and bursts into a guffaw*).

John: What was that?

Philip: Oh nothing, John. So Mr. Newly-elected (*under his breath mutters 'but I'm not quite sure how'*) President, what new ideas have you got for brightening up our programme?

John: (*Pauses behind his chair*). Well, I've always had a soft spot for Purcell, the English Orpheus. I was listening to him earlier this evening before you arrived, actually. Wonderful.

Oliver: But, if everyone else is doing Purcell to death, then it's hardly very original is it?

John: (*Continues to pace back and forth*). It's what the audiences want and furthermore there's a twist - we can make it a themed concert based on his coronation music - music for Kings and Queens. Yes, I can see it now (*stops behind his chair, looks up and with a gesture as if writing the words on a billboard*). 'Music fit for a King'.

Sally: And a Queen!

John: Yes, and a Queen (*smiles weakly*).

Oliver: What did you have in mind?

John: Well, there's 'My heart is inditing'.

Oliver: Tricky, with eight parts.

Fiona: What are you saying, Oliver? Do you think some parts aren't up to it?

Oliver: (*Hesitates*) Well...

John: He probably means the Sharp sisters at first alto and the foghorns down at second bass.

Philip: So, you and the rest of the tenors are always pitch perfect, then, are you John?

Fiona: Look. I don't think we should get into a discussion about who's better than whom. We'll be here all night.

Oliver: I'm not sure about that piece, to tell you the truth, John.

Mark: Did you say you'd been listening to some Purcell, John?

John: Yes. I know. Let me play 'My heart is inditing' now. That should convince the skeptics.

Oliver: I think we all know how it sounds.

Sally: Oh, go on, John. I fancy a bit of Purcell.  
*(John obliges and goes to the music system to put on 'My heart is inditing'. They listen for about a minute. Oliver has a resigned, annoyed expression. John stands behind his chair and mimes as if being a conductor. Sally goes to fix herself another sherry, much to John's annoyance. John eventually turns the music off).*  
Makes you proud to be British, doesn't it?

Oliver: (*Resignedly*). Well, we did do 'My heart is inditing' about ten years ago, I suppose, or was it eleven? You'll remember, won't you, Philip.

Philip: Yes, the concert we did at Wicklewood village hall.

Oliver: That's right. It was very good actually, come to think of it. (*Starts to get lost in the memory of the concert, looking upwards as he reminisces. John walks back to his chair and sits as Oliver talks*). The audience loved it, one of our best yet. My word, ten years ago, was it? I got a bouquet at the end. Lovely evening all round. Very nice people. We must go back there some time.

John: *(Interrupting their reminiscences)*. So, it's agreed then.

Oliver: I suppose so.

Fern: Er.

John: Fern, you want to say something? Keep it brief.

Fern: Well, only that Purcell's music is not easy to get hold of.

John: That may well be, but it shouldn't stop us from doing it.

Fiona: Fern has a point, though.

John: Yes, but we have to get the music. We can't tell people 'we're doing Britten, again, because his music is easier to get hold of than Purcell's', can we?

Sally: Fair point.

John: Yes, it is, but don't minute it, Mark. *(At that moment, John's mobile phone rings)*. Excuse me everybody.

Oliver: *(Oliver tuts and turns to Fern)* What was that about mobile phones? *(Fern titters to herself, not sure if she should laugh)*.

John: *(Gives an annoyed look to Oliver as he answers his phone)*. John Dow. Ah, Eileen, hi, look ... present? ... Too big? ... the car? Look, hang on Eileen, I'll take this in the other room. *(To those present)* Sorry everyone, it's Eileen, sounds rather urgent - carry on without me, if you can. I'll be back in a couple of minutes. *(John exits)*.

Philip: *(In an ironic tone)* Can we carry on without him?

Fiona: *(Gets up and walks round to stand behind the Queen Anne chair)*. Look, Mark don't minute this, cover your ears if necessary. But I can't help thinking there is a problem with the chair.

Fern: The Queen Anne?

Fiona: No, the chairman, person, or whatever. I think the role of President has gone to his head.

Philip: Chairman Dow, you mean.

Fiona: Yes, Chairman Dow.

Philip: Well, I didn't vote for him.

Fiona: No, I'm not sure who did.

Sally: I did. Let's face it, he'd tried four times, hadn't he, and poor old Dick Burke was never going to offer any serious resistance, was he?

Burke was never going to offer any serious resistance, was he?

Fiona: True, but I think this power thing is just feeding John's ego. (*Returns to her seat as Oliver talks*).

Oliver: Look, I don't usually get involved in the politics but he does seem to be taking all the power for himself, including the choice of music, and strictly between you, me and the bedpost, (*looks around to check John has not yet returned*) he occasionally sings in the wrong key. (*All show great surprise*).

Philip: Well, I suggest that we at least ask him to show us this constitution, which we apparently have and consider any changes that are necessary. I also propose that we each take it in turns to chair the meeting. That way, we can make sure there are some checks and balances. Better not to come from me, though. May look like sour grapes. Fiona, you ask. (*At that moment, John returns looking rather flustered*).

John: Sorry about that everyone. Chair's prerogative (*sits down*). My wife wants me to go and pick something up from her mother's at eight fifteen, so we'll have to finish the meeting earlier than planned. Well, how did you get on without me?

Oliver: Oh, were you away, John. We didn't notice, did we? (*They all shake their heads*).

John: Very amusing, Oliver.

Philip: Are you turning your mobile phone off now, John? We don't want any more interruptions, do we?

John: Oh, I need to keep mine on, I'm afraid.

Philip: In the constitution, is it?

John: (*Not hearing Philip properly*). Sorry, Philip?

Philip: I was just wondering whether it's the constitution, which allows you to use a mobile during a meeting, but not other members of the committee.

John: Oh, I see. No, no, the constitution was written before they were invented. (*Trying to change the subject quickly. Philip looks annoyed and unconvinced*). Now, where were we? Are yes, Purcell. Fern, you were nervous about the music.

Fern: Oh, I'm sure we'll manage. We always do.

John: Good. Well, that's the music sorted. I'll give you a list of the pieces I think we should sing, run it past Oliver and then we're ready to start rehearsing. Hmm, we're onto aob already. I am efficient, aren't I?

Philip: Hang on a minute. Don't we get a say?

John: Look Philip, you're a voice rep. now.

Sally: Nothing wrong with being a voice rep. I'm a voice rep.

John: I didn't say there was, Sally. It's just that I am President now, so I have to make certain decisions, that's all. Now, any other business?

Philip: *(Looking at Fiona, speaks in a low voice)*. Fiona. *(Fiona makes a shooining gesture to indicate 'later'. John sees this)*.

John: Hang on. Has there been some plotting going on, whilst I was out of the room?

Fiona: Really, John, whatever gave you that idea.

Philip: If we were going to stab you, we'd do it from the front, John.

John: Would 'we'?

Fiona: Don't worry, John. If there's a palace coup, you'll be amongst the first to know.

John: Relieved, I'm sure. You wouldn't want to act against the democratic wishes of the society, would you? *(Tries to compose himself)*. Right, so, no other business, then. *(Stands up)*. Well, that was jolly good, wasn't it? I suggest we close the meeting there and meet again here in four weeks' time. Mark, minute that and remember to send a copy of the minutes to everyone before the next meeting.

Mark: Minuted. *(The others get up looking rather unhappy and cast concerned glances at one another. John goes over to the door, opens it, and shows everyone out, exchanging 'good nights'. As Mark leaves, he allows Fern to go in front of him and they talk animatedly as they leave. Fiona remains)*.

John: *(He sees Fiona tarrying and takes the initiative)*. Well, good night then Fiona. Trusty ally with the numbers!

Fiona: *(Clears throat)* John, thank you very much for leading the meeting so well.

John: That's why I'm President.

Fiona: Yes, you make such a good President, don't you? I adore the way you stamped your authority on the meeting. Using your chair to show the committee who's in charge, that was a masterstroke. *(Looks at the chair)*. And what a chair!

John: *(Clearly flattered)*. Oh, thank you.

Fiona: I was wondering, though... *(She moves over to the Queen Anne chair and gives it a gentle pat)*.

John: Fiona, for goodness sake don't touch it. It's priceless.

Fiona: *(Removes her hand from the chair, but remains unperturbed)*. Yes, sorry. *(Addresses the chair and pretends to pat it)*. There, there. *(To John)*. I was wondering, though, if we might not take it in turns to be Chair.

John: Whatever for? You've just said yourself that I make a good President.

Fiona: Yes, and you do. But it's an onerous task and I wonder if we could help you by taking it in turns to chair the meeting, to support you as you carry out your Presidential duties.

John: Well, there's no precedent for that *(chuckles)*. I mean I doubt it's happened before and I'm sure it's not in the constitution.

Fiona: Oh yes, the constitution. I don't have a copy. Could I have one? I must admit I didn't know there was one, which, given that I'm treasurer is rather strange, don't you think?

John: What are you suggesting?

Fiona: Nothing. I haven't seen it, that's all.

John: Well, there is one if that's what you're implying and I, as a solicitor, albeit recently retired, am all too aware of its contents.

Fiona: Where is it?

John: Upstairs, in my desk.

Fiona: *(Suggestively)*. Shall we go upstairs and have a look at it, John?

John: *(Looks at his watch. Clearly tempted by the idea but resists it)*. Er, er, next time.

Fiona: No one need know, John. Eileen's not here, is she?

John: *(Nervously)*. Eileen, Eileen, I need to go and fetch her, now. It's getting late.

Fiona: What a disappointment. Shall we see it at the next meeting, then? I could come early if you like. You don't want to give the impression you've got something to hide, do you, John?

John: *(Tuts)*. Oh, very well.

Fiona: Good. Well, I'll be off then. (*They both go to the door and stand facing each other. John leans forward slightly as if to give Fiona a peck on the cheek, but Fiona quickly extends her hand and John then responds likewise*). Good night then, Mr. Presidente.

John: G-good night, Fiona. (*Fiona exits. John returns to the sherry cabinet and pours himself a sherry. His mobile phone rings. He looks at the display and sees it is Eileen calling him. Curtly*). Yes, what is it?... What tone? (*Softens his tone.*) Yes, I'll bring the Volvo Estate, it's bigger, I know.... Love you, bye. (*John goes over to the door, turns out the lights and departs*).

## END OF ACT ONE