

St. Faith's Church Choir

NEWSLETTER

FRIDAY 1ST MAY 2020

Happy Mayday and welcome to another edition of ramblings from the organist! I hope these newsletters continue to find you safe and well... and I hope they aren't boring you. I'm enjoying putting them together, although they take significantly more work than taking a choir practice or playing for a service! Comments, improvements, suggestions always welcome.

Online singing opportunities

Quick reminders this week that William Saunders continues his hymn practices on Saturday mornings...

<https://www.facebook.com/musicianwilliam>

... and Richard McVeigh continues to upload organ music and hymns to sing along with. I really liked his virtual video of Jesu, joy of man's desiring:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsqSRJ1CvL8>

Lastly, a nod in the direction of the Royal School of Church Music who have a wealth of information on their website:

<https://www.rscm.org.uk/online-resources/>

Live streamed services

I'm continuing to enjoy virtually visiting church services!

The clergy at Portsmouth Cathedral seem to be taking it in turns to do a Sunday morning each. Last Sunday was the turn of Canon Kathryn, who you will recall came and took a service at St. Faith's back in March. This service had a lot of music making:

<https://www.facebook.com/115870688451908/videos/252767172535298>

Yesterday (Thursday) I tuned into the "Great Sacred Music" podcast from

St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London (by Trafalgar Square). Since 2013, the church has held this series every Thursday at 1pm. It explores through words and music some "Great Sacred Music". The latest one is about the significance of bread in the Bible and is led by the Rev Dr Sam Wells and his cat:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=570135086942143>

Editor's note: If you ever happen to be near Trafalgar Square (in "ordinary" time) on a Thursday lunchtime I highly recommend popping in for one of these. I've been to a handful of them and they've all been excellent. I'd love to do something similar at St. Faith's!

Heading back to Portsmouth, the Cathedral sub-organist has been busy putting together an excellent virtual video of the Easter anthem "Ye choirs of new Jerusalem" by Stanford:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaaHSazyjJE>

Lastly (and apologies that I forgot to mention this in the last episode), those of you who missed out on going to Walsingham last weekend might like to see the Easter Day service from St. Michael and all angels, Barnes (SW London):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oz8WGOXPQv4>

"Woolly" hymns and anthems

This Sunday's Gospel reading is about Jesus being the good shepherd (sorry Tom if that's a spoiler) and the set psalm is 23. The anthem for Sunday would have been a setting of psalm 23 to Brother James Air arranged by Alan Bullard (in NOEAB).

I haven't managed to find a decent version of this arrangement on YouTube, maybe we need to rectify that when we're back together. However, I did find this lovely version by the choristers of Canterbury Cathedral in an arrangement (I think) by Gordon Jacob:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rsw1gix1CvA>

I also liked this worship song version of psalm 23 by Stuart Townend:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yM1fcD2OyS8>

Lastly, there's this lovely anthem setting of psalm 23 by John Rutter:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f_ONgsWzfa

Editor's note: I'm generally a fan of Rutter, although he has composed some bad pieces... but then, hasn't everyone?!

New series!

In a new series, I have been in touch with various friends and colleagues who have been kind enough to be interviewed for our newsletters! First up is Colin Davey, who has been Director of Music at Wimborne Minster in Dorset since March 2019. Prior to this, Colin was Education Programmes Manager and a Chief Examiner for the Royal School of Church Music.

Where did you study music?

"I began learning in Southampton - my first organ teachers were Mike Shields-Milburn, and then Jeremy Blandford who was organist at St Mary's. I went on from Southampton to study in Sheffield, where I was organ scholar at the cathedral".

Who are your greatest musical inspirations?

"My first boss at Sheffield was Paul Brough, who is probably the most inspirational musician I've ever worked with. Of those I haven't, I remember Peter Hurford giving a recital at Turner Sims as part of the Bach tercentenary celebrations; a real turning point in my understanding of the music".

As organists, we're often hidden away from sight! Are you still able to feel a sense of communication with the congregation?



"There's a model of musical semiotics that's very close to the old 'fire triangle' warning posters - but instead of oxygen, heat and fuel you have composers, performers and listeners. While our sense of those roles often gets blurred (as organists, for example, we're often called on to improvise, and the 'composition' process becomes part of the performance), I think that there's a very real sense in which what we're doing only really becomes musical when we have a sense of audience or purpose. Often, of course, congregation are also performers with us, and there's a real sense of dialogue there that the distance makes it much trickier, but that just means that the gestures we use become larger - like the difference between actors on stage and on television. When I was organist at St Katharine's, Southbourne I had a couple of

congregation members who were particularly interested in the 'silent film' aspects of my post-Gospel improvisations. The answer to 'could I hear ... ?' was always 'yes!' - even if I hadn't consciously put in a particular programmatic device or reference, it's the listener who creates meaning. You could hear it even if I didn't put it in"!

As a director of music, are you still able to play the organ for services or are you always conducting and choir training?

"I buy in an organist for 'big' (either liturgically or musically) services but generally I'm a one-man band. As such, I prefer to be conducting but a lot of the Minster's current repertoire calls for organ so I do more of that than is ideal. At the same time, if I had an organist I wouldn't get to play as much, so I'm glad of the chance to keep that aspect up! I play as little as I can in rehearsal - I find it takes valuable concentration, and I'm a much better choir trainer when I don't play. It also helps the choir learn not to rely on the accompaniment for their entries. Until my late 20s I

definitely saw myself as an organist who directs choirs, but now the situation is somewhat reversed..."

Which choral pieces would you take to a desert island?

"Bach B minor mass, Duruflé Requiem, Howells Hymnus Paradisi, Gesualdo Tenebrae responsories, Haydn Creation, Reich The desert music, Janáček Glagolitic Mass, Lassus Missa Bell' Amfitrit' altera. Ask me tomorrow and it'll be different... To be honest, though, one of the things I enjoy most is discovering new music - so I'd be happy with a sack full of new discoveries!"

How can we encourage people to join a church choir and maintain membership?

"I suspect this is going to be a massive existential question when we finally emerge from the current situation. I think the vast majority of people I've asked the question joined a church choir because of a friend - so we can't underestimate the role our membership have to play in recruitment.

When I ran a successful junior choir in my first stint as Director of Music at St Michael and All Angels, Bassett, we hit the happy stage where the singers themselves were doing all of my recruitment for me! Once new members are in, they need to feel part of the group straight away, and that's everybody's responsibility too - choirs can be unwittingly cliquey groups...



Once we get singers in, keeping them is the next challenge, and we always walk a fine line here. If it's too easy, it can be boring, or people can start opting in and out and, even if the headline membership figure's good, the day to day picture may not be. Too hard and people become disillusioned. I always ask myself whether it was worth each member of the choir coming to the last rehearsal, and if the answer isn't yes I'm doing something wrong. I often think it's like the gym - with regular attendance, people start to notice an improvement, but there's also that little stick that they know they'll feel it next time if they miss a week!

Repertoire is another balancing act. Unless you're a specialist group, you can't stick to any one style, period or composer. The trick is to keep moving. Kenny Everett once talked about this in the context of comedy sketch shows on television; keep everything tight and pacy, and if the audience (or in this case our singers) don't like it, there's always something different around the corner. In that respect it can actually be easier for church choirs - we don't rehearse a single programme for months, so we can turn over a staggering range of music in a relatively short period of time".

Many thanks to Colin for his time in answering my questions. Maybe we can go and lead the singing for a service at Wimborne Minster some time...

Next week, my special guest is a Cathedral organist, but from which Cathedral?

That's all folks!

That's all for this week, except to remind you to tune in to Tom and Clare for Sunday worship from the rectory (Tom says it's a rectory and he's always right).

Stay safe and keep singing! *Graham*