

# St. Faith's Church Choir

## NEWSLETTER

FRIDAY 15<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2020

**Welcome** to another edition of ramblings from the conductor! I hope you're continuing to keep well. Here's the usual mix of music information for this week. As ever, comments, improvements, suggestions welcome.

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### Online singing opportunities

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

<http://william-saunders.info/2020/03/24/hymn-practice-congo-live-on-saturday-mornings/>

... and Richard McVeigh continues to upload organ music and hymns to sing along with. I'm impressed how long manages to keep playing, his live video last Sunday lasted just over three hours!

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UckdRXZZXDmLJM6XBnUpIoog>

My usual nod in the direction of the Royal School of Church Music who have a huge amount of online resources to use:

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

As I mentioned last week, keep an eye and ear out for further resources for a Big Sing event, which is being scheduled for RSCM Music Sunday (14<sup>th</sup> June). I'll let you know more as soon as I receive any further information.

### Live streamed services

I hope you are able to enjoy services online! I'm going to focus on services and videos which had some music in them.

For my VE Day music choice, have a listen and sing along to the choir of Christ Church, Southgate (North London) singing "For the fallen" by Douglas Guest...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2X7nbbMijdg>

... and from Winchester Cathedral, the boy choristers put together a virtual video of "Panis angelicus":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WryABhBXJ2o>

I enjoyed hearing members of the choir from St. Michael and all Angels, Bassett (Southampton) singing a short anthem called "Blessed are the pure in heart" by Walford Davies ...

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

... and I'm continuing to enjoy the "Great Sacred Music" services from St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London (by Trafalgar Square). The latest one is about rivers in the Bible and within music and contained a lovely hymn called "like a mighty river flowing" which I hadn't heard for ages:

<https://www.facebook.com/173712669321008/videos/851159845389380/>

Not to be outdone, St. Stephen's church, Walbrook have relaunched their

"choral classics" series which normally takes place on a Monday lunchtime. This week, Rev. Stephen Baxter led music and readings based on the theme of "The Lord's my shepherd":

<https://www.facebook.com/161694014320553/videos/683881172402405/>

St. Stephen's church, Walbrook is right next to Mansion House in London and right next to Bank Tube station!

Last but certainly not least, I was blown away by this superb online Choral Evensong from the Church of St. James the Greater in Leicester. Please take time to watch this if you can, it is absolutely superb:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZF8ukh1ViA>

## **Anthem of the week**

The anthem for this Sunday would have been "If ye love me" by the 16<sup>th</sup> century composer Thomas Tallis, an anthem known at St. Faith's well, as I discovered when I had my audition with you all last August!

Rather than me tell you about the work, I'm going to point you in the direction of singer and conductor Ben England, who has been incredibly busy during the lockdown period uploading daily singing videos.

Ben is uploading a regular sacred sing on a Sunday and by coincidence, last Sunday's video included this anthem.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhD8laDNIs8>

The Tallis begins about 13 minutes in, but do have a look at the whole of the video; indeed, Ben's whole channel, a real wealth of singing opportunities of all styles and for all ages!

## Guest interview!



This week, my special guest is **Sachin Gunga** who has been Sub Organist of Portsmouth Anglican Cathedral and School Organist for the Portsmouth Grammar School since January 2018. Sachin's first Assistant Organist position was at Llandaff Cathedral in Cardiff, where he also made his first appearance as an organist on Songs of Praise. He spent ten months at Lincoln Cathedral as Acting Assistant Director of Music, before becoming Assistant Director of Music at Wakefield Cathedral in February 2015.

### ***Where did you study music?***

"I grew up in Derby, where I was a chorister and a student of violin, piano and organ. I didn't study music for undergrad, but I was involved in a lot of musical activities as a pastime. After that I took a postgrad course in music at the Birmingham Conservatoire, followed by organ scholarships at the cathedrals of Truro and then Wells."

### ***Who are your greatest musical inspirations?***

"Difficult to narrow down. I find inspiration in all sorts of people (and things). My two most inspirational organ teachers were: Dr Tom Corfield, my first teacher in Derby and the person who originally showed me how the organ could be both expressive and sensitive; and Henry Fairs, who was my main teacher in Birmingham, an incredibly knowledgeable and skilled mentor. I've been privileged to work with a number of particularly inspirational choral directors, including Christopher Gray in Truro, Aric Prentice in Lincoln and Adrian Partington in Cardiff. As someone who loves singing, I'm inspired by composers with a knack for writing good vocal lines, whether they're supposed to be sung or not. I think in many ways all music aspires to be sung (hence that wonderful direction "cantabile" that often appears on instrumental parts). Bach had a gift for this, as did Elgar, Howells, Vaughan Williams and many others, not forgetting the great songwriters from Gershwin to Stevie Wonder".

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

"Communication is definitely something I've learned to appreciate over time. It's certainly easy for us to do our own thing at the instruments and expect everyone else to respond appropriately, but it doesn't happen automatically. It's encouraging when I accompany a hymn and the congregation is audibly joining in, especially in a new place and/or without a choir. If they're on the beat and I detect some enthusiastic singing, I feel like we're communicating well. Of course, in that context I'm giving a lead to them. It's different when I'm playing at other times in the service; then it's just me putting something out there (often quite personal if it's improvised) and hoping they respond, knowing that I could be ignored, loudly talked over or even walked out on. Silence is a good thing if it means they're picking up on the mood I'm trying to communicate, or even talking in whispers. Of course, applause is always a bonus!"

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

"Yes, I always like to be involved in choir training where possible. At Portsmouth I'm fortunate enough to take chorister practices at least twice a week, plus directing the choir for a few

services each month. I like to include singing tips for the children in all my rehearsals, for breathing, vowel shape, posture, etc. I also believe strongly in singing at them wherever possible, to demonstrate various musical effects. Often it's the easiest way to show them what you want, and choristers learn a lot by imitation".

### ***Which choral pieces would you take to a desert island?***

"Well, I'd probably spend a lot of time singing bits of choral works to myself on the island anyway! There are so many possible candidates for this: Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *St John Passion*, Tippett's "*A Child of Our Time*" and the *Requiems* of Fauré, Duruflé and Howells. If I had to choose one, it's a piece which combines beautiful poetry, brilliant colourful orchestrations, luscious choral writing and music that ranges from tranquil to exuberant, from sombre to sparkling: Vaughan Williams' "*Serenade to Music*". I also happen to know that the accompaniment works well for organ and solo violin, two instruments that have personal significance to me (the violin was originally my first instrument). I also think a setting of the *Evening Canticles* would be worth bringing, and it would have to be Howells' *Collegium Regale*, with its sublime *Gloria* that makes me wish I could still sing treble."

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

"Here are a few things that I would suggest, in no particular order:

- The choir should be a community in itself, as well as being part of the church community. Meeting once a week to do a rehearsal followed by a service is very limiting. Having at least two (perhaps one just for rehearsal) will help the members get to know each other as well as helping them sing better together. Singing for more than one service a week, plus other occasions such as concerts, fetes, weddings and of course carol singing, all make the prospect of membership more appealing. It's also good if the choir can do other things together, whether musical or simply social (such as bowling).
- The repertoire should be varied and interesting. Don't be afraid to stretch the singers a bit. Keep the Stanfords and the Wesleys, but a bit of Rutter and Stopford can also be useful, even the occasional worship song. And why not sometimes a non-liturgical work for concerts? "*Holy Moses*" and "*Captain Noah*" are great fun, and they might even respond to a few songs from shows or films. If there are local musicians who might be willing to join in occasionally, e.g. a guitarist or flautist, it all helps the variety. I also recommend recording projects, even amateur ones, and uploading video clips on social media. Watch how many of the singers will turn round and say: "Wow, we sound really good!"
- Encouraging children to join the choir is very valuable, for them as much as for the choir itself. If you can keep them engaged and enjoying themselves, they'll make a massive contribution, hopefully over several years, and their families will become regular supporters. The RSCM awards are very good for helping structure their training.
- The director needs a lot of energy and enthusiasm! If the singers sense that the director really cares about the music, and if they feel suitably encouraged, they'll sing so much better. Audiences will pick up on it too. The director shouldn't be afraid to push the choir, but should always be ready to congratulate them on a job well done".

Many thanks to Sachin for his time in answering my questions.

Hopefully we can go and lead the singing again at the Cathedral some time soon...

That's all for this week! Stay safe and keep singing!

*Graham*