

# The music of St Paul's



## Thoughts and reflections from an insider's perspective – by Liveryman John Scott

I have been privileged to work at St Paul's Cathedral for just over 23 years, since I left St John's College, Cambridge, in 1978. I was appointed sub-organist at Southwark and assistant organist at St Paul's, and enjoyed playing for services on three days of the week in each establishment for seven years before migrating to the full-time post of sub-organist in 1985, being appointed Organist and Director of Music in 1990.

Although my title is Organist, the first thing to say is that I rarely play the organ in the cathedral, for my priority is the training and the direction of the choir. I am ably supported by my colleagues Huw Williams and Mark Williams, who play for the services, and I usually play a voluntary on Sundays after evensong. But I do rather miss playing for services, especially accompanying the psalms, which seem to me to embody the greatest opportunity for creative and sensitive liturgical accompaniment.

Life at St Paul's seems unrelentingly busy. I often wonder why I spent four years studying music at an ancient university when so little of what I have to do, outside practices and services, actually requires any musical skill whatsoever. Indeed, there are times when I think that degrees in business studies and human resources would serve me rather better!

At St Paul's, evensong is sung every day of

the week – boys only on Mondays, men on Thursdays, full choir for the rest. There are three services on Sundays, making a total of nine choral services each week.

The choristers rehearse for an hour from 7.50am every morning except Thursdays. (It's sometimes difficult to be cheerful at that hour, but we do our best!) Then the boys have their full school day, returning to the cathedral at 4pm for evensong at 5pm, and being joined by the gentlemen for a full rehearsal at 4.30pm. At weekends we enjoy a slightly later start, with a more informal approach on Saturday mornings, when the boys "dress down".

These, then, are the purely musical activities of my week. I am usually free of cathedral duties on Wednesdays, when my sub-organist takes the choir, and I am grateful for some respite from the schedule.

On a typical working day, much time is taken up with administration. There is no such thing as a routine week at St Paul's, and the many extra events – special services, concerts and recordings – require planning and dove-tailing if the choir is not to be overstretched; as indeed does the choice of music to be sung at each service. In addition, there are auditions to slot in for prospective deputies for the Vicars Choral; informal voice trials for prospective choristers (I'm always happy to hear of interested children, whose parents need guidance); and auditions, and re-auditions, for the 120-strong Cathedral Chorus, which is involved in two or three concerts a year.

With my attendance required at seven or eight planning meetings each week, there are few days when I am able to have uninterrupted time at my desk, catching up with correspondence and e-mails.

So, the role of Organist is vastly different in 2001 than in previous centuries. In the past, he might have been a servant of deans and chapters, supplementing a pitiful salary by teaching and copying out music. Some had more colourful sidelines: the Organist of

Chester Cathedral, for instance, for many years held the additional post of Dean's Barber – a subtlety of temptation of which even the Devil might have been proud.

However, the greatest successes these days are in those establishments where all concerned with music work as a closely integrated team – the Organist and his associates, the headmaster of the cathedral school, and the clergy. Where this condition exists, cathedral music is of high quality and an inspiration to all who share and experience its particular beauty.

Throughout its long history, the choral services of the cathedral tradition have been criticised for their extravagance and exclusiveness. But the tradition has survived, against all manner of changing attitudes and fleeting fashions.

In a world in which we are bombarded with the mundane and the commonplace, not to say the downright mediocre, the need to aspire to standards of excellence becomes of paramount importance. There is no merit in uniform mediocrity; as Arthur Conan Doyle said, "mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself".

We are fortunate to be enjoying, in 2001, something of a Golden Age in the Anglican choral tradition. Gone are the days when Matthew Locke could complain of there being "not one lad capable of singing his part readily" or Pepys report that the anthem was "so ill sung" that it "made the King laugh".

Tune in to *Choral Evensong* on Radio 3 on a Wednesday afternoon and you will hear foundation after foundation offering the highest standards of sacred music. Similarly, tour the choir schools and you will find that, in school after school, an appropriate balance has been established between musical demands, academic standards, exercise and leisure and the arts.

You will also find them to be happy and purposeful places, with their 16-30 choristers cheerful and fulfilled and receiving a quality of musical training and general education that

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