

**‘What sweeter music’: issues in choral church  
music c.1960 to 2017, with special reference to  
the Christmas Eve carol service at King’s  
College Chapel, Cambridge, and its new  
commissions**

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## Abstract

During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the choir of King's College, Cambridge came to be seen as the epitome of English sacred choral singing. Its annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve, established in 1918 and broadcast since 1928, attracts a global audience. The carol was originally a popular genre which was not primarily intended for *liturgical* use, but which interacted with and commented on the sacred in an accessible way before becoming a fully accepted part of the church repertoire. The association between carols and King's therefore illustrates two contrasting approaches to music in worship: one concentrated on the pursuit of excellence, often perceived as elitist or exclusive, and a more 'utilitarian' approach focused on participation. Both these approaches will be examined using King's as a lens.

King's also illustrates the steady increase in standards and expectations of church music since the nineteenth century. Various factors in the evolution of the 'King's sound' will be examined, including the increased emphasis on professionalism in cathedral and collegiate choirs, the establishment of a choir school, cultural expectations surrounding the treble voice, and the availability of recordings and broadcasts as a benchmark to evaluate performance.

Every year since 1983, the service has included a commission from a leading composer, including several not necessarily normally associated with church music. The intention behind the commissions was to ensure that the established tradition of the carol service did not become fossilised, but remains in dialogue with the best of secular composition. It also demonstrates that interesting and innovative composers are willing to write for the Anglican liturgy, regardless of their own religious affiliation. This will entail a discussion of other recent commissioning initiatives in church music, such as the *Merton Choirbook* and *Choirbook for the Queen*. Finally, I shall examine the King's commissions and their contribution to the wider choral repertoire. If the most successful commissions are those which adhere closely to the carol format, there are implications for the debate about style and purpose in church music which King's epitomises.

## **List of Contents**

Abstract page 2

Table of Contents page 3

List of Musical Examples and note on pitch notation page 6

List of Sound Files (on separate CD) page 7

Acknowledgements page 8

Declaration page 9

**Introduction** page 10

**Chapter One:** The purpose of music in worship: some debates and issues

page 20

1.1 Music in worship: purpose and context

1.2 Sacred, liturgical or church music: some possible definitions

1.3 'Why is church music so bad?': excellence and elitism

1.4 Art versus vernacular music: utilitarianism and aesthetics

1.5 Stylistic conservatism and the King's commissions

**Chapter Two:** The development of the 'King's sound' and the professionalisation of church music

page 42

2.1 The origins of the King's sound

2.2 The treble voice and its cultural implications

2.3 Not 'all ooh wooh': alternative treble sounds

2.4 Sacred music and adult choral sound

- 2.5 The role of recording and broadcasting
- 2.6 Professionalisation and perfectionism in church music

**Chapter Three: The history of the carol and its use in worship**      page 67

- 3.1 What is a carol?
- 3.2 What is a carol service?
- 3.3 Truro and the origins of Nine Lessons and Carols
- 3.4 The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at King's
- 3.5 Carols from King's: an unattainable ideal?

**Chapter Four: Some issues in composing and commissioning new music for the church**      page 96

- 4.1 Composing for the liturgy: process, context and word-setting
- 4.2 James MacMillan: faith in composition
- 4.3 Choirbook for the Queen
- 4.4 The Merton Choirbook
- 4.5 Commissioning at York Minster since 2008

**Chapter Five: Continuing the tradition: the King's commissions since 1983**      page 120

- 5.1 The process of commissioning: intention and practicalities
- 5.2 Issues affecting absorption into the repertoire
- 5.3 After the first performance: what happens to commissions?
- 5.4 Carols for today

**Conclusion**      page 142

Appendix 1: The King's College Choir carol commissions 1983-2016	page 146
Appendix 2: Composers of King's commissions represented in <i>Choirbook for the Queen</i>	page 165
Appendix 3: Composers of King's commissions represented in <i>Merton Choirbook</i>	page 167
Appendix 4: Outline of mediaeval order of Matins	page 168
Bibliography	page 169

## List of Musical Examples

Fig. 1: *Te Deum*, HRH the Prince Consort, bars 21-24: page 29

Fig. 2: Mark-Anthony Turnage, *Misere' Nobis* (2006) , bars 22-25: page 40

Fig. 3: Descant to *O come all ye faithful*, bars 1-4: page 92

Fig. 4: Rautavaara, *Offerings they brought of gold* (2010), bars 4-7: page 130

Fig. 5: Rutti, organ part to *De Virgine Maria* (2014), bars 53-7: page 131

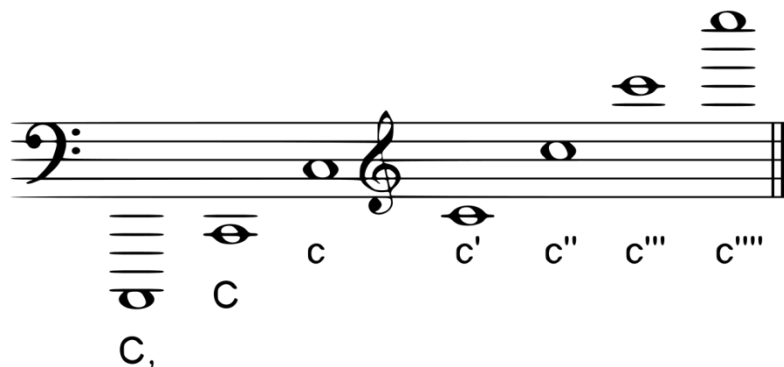
Fig. 6: Swayne, flute part to *Winter Solstice Carol* (1998), bar 46: page 131

Fig. 7: Holloway, *Christmas Carol* (2002), tenor solo, bars 91-3: page 132

Fig. 8: Dean, *Here comes the dawn* (2007), bars 28-32: page 134

Note: King's carol commissions are listed in the text with their year of first performance in brackets.

**Pitch notation** is given using the Helmholtz system (below):



## **List of Sound Files mentioned in the text (refer to enclosed CD)**

### **Chapter 2: The King's sound and the professionalisation of church music**

1. *Magnificat in G*, C.V. Stanford (King's College Choir/Ord 1955), solo treble Richard White
2. *Up good Christen folk* from *Christmas at St John's* (St John's College Choir/Guest 1974)
3. *Magnificat in C*, George Thalben-Ball (Temple Church Choir/Thalben-Ball 1961), solo treble Robin Lough (EMI *Treasury of English Church Music* volume 4)
4. *Collects from Even You Song*, Cheryl Frances-Hoad (Peterborough Cathedral Choir/Grahl 2016)
5. *Miserere*, Gregorio Allegri (Tallis Scholars/Phillips 1980), solo treble Alison Stamp

### **Chapter 3: The history of the carol**

6. *Once again O blessed time* (Truro Cathedral Choir/Gray 2015)
7. *O come all ye faithful* without descant (King's College Choir/ Ord 1954)
8. *O come all ye faithful*- transitional descant (King's College Choir/Willcocks 1958)
9. *O come all ye faithful*- complete descant (King's College Choir/Willcocks 1963)

### **Chapter 5: The King's commissions**

10. *Winter Solstice Carol*, Giles Swayne (King's College Choir/Cleobury, *On Christmas Day* CD 1 track 15)
11. *The Gleam*, Harrison Birtwistle (*On Christmas Day* CD 2 track 2)
12. *Carol of St Steven*, Alexander Goehr (*On Christmas Day* CD 1 track 13)
13. *Illuminare Jerusalem*, Judith Weir (*On Christmas Day* CD 1 track 11)
14. *The Flight*, Richard Causton (OUP *Choral Highlights* 2016 track 17)
15. *This Endernight*, Michael Berkeley (OUP *Christmas Choral Highlights* 2017 track 9)

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Rt. Revd. Dr David Walker, Bishop of Manchester



## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author.

This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University.

All sources are acknowledged as References.

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## Introduction

During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the choir of King's College, Cambridge came to be seen as the epitome of English choral singing. Its annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve, established in 1918 and broadcast annually on radio since 1928, attracts a global audience; the televised version, first broadcast in 1954 as a truncated version of the Christmas Eve service containing six out of the nine readings, takes a para-liturgical form including non-biblical readings and a slightly different selection of music.

Every serious treatment of English choral music references King's College Choir; either as a model to emulate, or as something to react against. Timothy Day begins his 2018 study of the influence of King's on English choral sound by asking 'why did they sing like that?'<sup>1</sup> Day goes on to explore how the sound of this one choir became the defining representative of English choral music as a whole, when it is actually not typical even of choirs whose main purpose is to sing the Anglican liturgy, let alone of the whole breadth of the choral repertoire. The development of the 'King's sound' and its elevation to exemplary status, despite the existence of several other possible models, help us to define and discuss a tradition which has developed in many directions beyond what that choir does.

This was initially intended as a study of the contribution which the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols has made to the repertoire of Anglican choral music, especially through the annual commissioning of a new carol from leading composers since 1983. It proved impossible to study the Festival in isolation from the rest of the tradition, both musical and liturgical, which gave rise to it. For it is not just the sound that is atypical: when the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols was devised, it was deliberately intended to be different from the

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<sup>1</sup> Day (2018), xviii.

Anglican liturgy then available. So we need not only to ask why and how the *sound* of King's College Choir has become emblematic of the whole of Anglican choral music: we also need to explore how this discrete annual act of worship is identified as the epitome of its work, instead of the day-in-day-out singing of the office in chapel for which it was formed. For this reason, after exploring the evolution of the sound, we shall go on to examine the development of the carol service as a contribution to the relationship between liturgy and music, before proceeding to an exploration of some other examples of contemporary commissioning of choral music for worship.

Because of its consistent catalogue of recordings and broadcasts, King's has had a unique opportunity to shape perceptions of what 'church music' should, and did, sound like. Furthermore, the King's carol service has done more than any other single liturgical event to shape expectations about standards and styles of choral performance, both within and beyond the liturgy. These expectations, however unrealistic, are still being worked through by other choirs, both sacred and secular: perceptions and assumptions about how Anglican choirs in particular should sound are formed in relationship to the 'sound of King's'; whether they emulate the King's soundworld, or consciously react against it, the dominant presence of King's across a range of media has contributed to the construction of an ideal against which other choirs are still measured.<sup>2</sup>

Yet to discuss the sound which is considered appropriate for music in the liturgy requires an initial discussion of the purpose of music in worship.<sup>3</sup> There is disagreement among scholars as to what constitutes 'church music', and

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<sup>2</sup> Day's full-length study (2018) on the evolution of the English choral sound as epitomised by King's was published after the original version of this thesis was submitted. I am grateful for the opportunity to take on board his argument, which has contributed a great deal to the final form of chapter 2 below.

<sup>3</sup> The debate about what kind of music is 'fitting' or 'unsuitable' for ecclesiastical use is first articulated in the Archbishops' Commission report of 1922. Subsequent reports, in 1948 and 1992, have modified the absolute judgements of 1922, but the debate still lingers on, often in the guise of discussions about taste and stylistic preference.

how it relates to the rest of the classical repertoire in terms of both stylistic and technical development. There is not space in the current study to do full justice to these questions, but some contrasting approaches, notably that of Martin Thomas, will be examined in chapter 1. Albeit problematic in a number of ways, notably his approach to issues of utility, style and taste in church music, Thomas' work raises the serious point that church musicians themselves may have contributed to the gradual marginalisation of their field through their adherence to stylistic conservatism. At the same time, standards in choral singing generally have risen over the last hundred years, and there is no doubt that the increased expectations created have had a considerable impact even on amateur choirs. Yet the pursuit of excellence, because it is also linked with issues of taste and perception, can also lead to accusations of an elitism which may be considered inappropriate for music which is intended for use in worship.

According to Routley, Parry and Stanford were the first composers since the Reformation to write music for the church which was of the same quality as what they wrote for the concert hall.<sup>4</sup> Until that point, church music was not considered a 'serious' branch of music, and looked backwards rather than forwards in its idioms. Perhaps this is one reason why church music as a genre has not received the same amount of serious attention from academic musicologists as other branches of the classical canon. Apart from Thomas, whose approach is somewhat controversial, this has resulted in a relative lack of recent academic scholarship from which to take an objective overview. Gant's popular history of church music, *O Sing unto the Lord* (2015) is both thorough and engaging, but it is not written for a specialist audience, and lacks exhaustive references to some of the material he cites. Before Gant, the most thorough overview of the subject was that of Long (1971). Despite a wide

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<sup>4</sup> Routley (1964), 18-19, criticises the 'cult of amateurism' in church music up to that point.

reach, some of his views and assumptions have not stood the test of time. In particular, he treats choral music and music for the liturgy as if they are coterminous: if this was ever true, it is certainly no longer.

Day's work, based on extensive knowledge of recorded music throughout the twentieth century, constitutes the most exhaustive recent examination of the Anglican choral tradition in general and King's in particular, and will be examined more thoroughly in chapter 2. It explores how King's became a paradigm of the Anglican choral tradition through the unusually wide dissemination of its sound via recordings and broadcasts, of which the *Nine Lessons and Carols* is the most popular. Day's work shows how King's became identified with the development of a 'pure', vibrato-less tone, most distinctively in the treble line, which was then adopted by other choirs. Not all of the commissions include solo writing, but of those that do, the majority are for treble. For that reason, the components of the King's sound, and the treble in particular, will be analysed in detail here as evidence for the wide influence of the *sound* of King's, before turning to an examination of its influence over the choral *repertoire*, particularly in the development of the carol genre.

Recordings made under successive Directors of Music throughout the last hundred years not only create an objective benchmark from which to evaluate performance standards. They also make it possible to acknowledge that although the 'King's sound' is recognised as a byword for a particular performance style, that sound has itself undergone various alterations over the years. Changes in tempi and diction, plus a vast increase in repertoire in languages other than English and a broader range of composers from beyond Anglicanism, can all be mapped through the availability of King's broadcast recordings over a very long period, and on a scale which few other choirs can match. Other factors, including increased rehearsal time, the establishment of a choir school, individual singing tuition for both boys and men, and the tendency

to recruit younger choral scholars in the back row in place of lay clerks, have all had an impact on ensemble which is now mirrored across the cathedral and collegiate sector, not merely at King's itself. These changes have not only improved performance standards across the sector: they have also resulted in an increased confidence in tackling more demanding music, which has in turn inspired less able choirs to broaden their own approach to repertoire. So the evolution of the Anglican choral tradition generally is observable in microcosm through recordings from King's over the last 60 years, and particularly in the carol service, which provides a largely consistent framework of material within which change and experiment can be safely attempted.

Musically, Whitbourn notes the recent transition of the carol at the hands of 'art' composers into a much more polished compositional form than its 'vernacular' origins, rooted in dance, would suggest.<sup>5</sup> The King's commissions exemplify this transition. Several of the commissions fall unambiguously into the category of art music, with little concession to the popular or utilitarian. Yet Drage's research on the 'West Gallery' tradition shows that although psalmody (defined by Temperley as 'music for a voluntary church choir without professional guidance') provides a clear contrast with the 'art music' choral context for which the King's commissions were composed, it is not necessarily devoid of skill or musical complexity.<sup>6</sup> The same applies to carols.

Sir David Willcocks (Director of Music at King's from 1957 to 1974), is indissolubly associated not only with increasingly high levels of performance and professionalism at King's itself, but also with the editorship of the *Carols for*

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<sup>5</sup> Whitbourn (1996), 55. As well as being a composer and writer on church music, Whitbourn is also the regular producer of the televised *Carols from King's* broadcasts. The division between 'art' and 'vernacular' music is derived from Temperley's 1979 study of music in English parish churches.

<sup>6</sup> Temperley (1979), vol. I, 438.

*Choirs* series, which brought many of the carol arrangements associated with and popularised by King's within the reach of ordinary parish choirs.<sup>7</sup>

In its earliest forms, the carol was sung by amateurs and not necessarily intended for a liturgical context, but interacted with and commented on the sacred in an accessible way. Percy Dearmer, in the preface to the *Oxford Book of Carols* (1928), points out that the vast majority of carols nonetheless have religious subjects, and many originate to mark religious feasts or seasons: what differentiates them from music sung in church at that point is their 'simple, hilarious, popular' style.<sup>8</sup> Chapter 3 will look in more detail at the history of the carol genre and its contested relationship with the liturgy, before moving on to an examination of the history of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols itself.

The Nine Lessons and Carols format actually originated not at King's, but in Truro Cathedral between 1878 and 1880, when the order of service settled into an order close to that still in use today. It was adapted for use at King's in 1918 by Eric Milner-White, Dean of King's and later Dean of York Minster, in the aftermath of World War I. Despite a few variations in running order, the basic shape of the service has remained largely unaltered since 1919, and has been widely adopted in cathedrals, colleges and parish churches all over the world.

Following the arrival of Stephen Cleobury as Director of Music at King's in 1982, in every subsequent year the college has commissioned a range of leading contemporary composers to write a new carol for performance on Christmas Eve: among them are Thomas Adès, Jonathan Dove, Einojuhani Rautavaara, Gabriel Jackson, Brett Dean, Mark-Anthony Turnage, Dominic

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<sup>7</sup> Technically, Willcocks returned to the college as Organist in 1957 while Ord was still in post, only becoming Director of Music the following year; but the *King's College Register* (2017) of members of the college does not make this distinction, listing him as Director from 1957.

<sup>8</sup> Dearmer (1928), v.

Muldowney, Harrison Birtwistle and Tansy Davies. Of these, only a handful contribute frequently or predominantly to *church* music, as opposed to other contemporary classical genres. This is a deliberate choice on Cleobury's part, undertaken precisely in order to ensure that 'there has been no shirking of music in new and challenging idioms'.<sup>9</sup> In commissioning composers whose musical inspiration and experience is not primarily liturgical, Cleobury's intention is explicitly to ensure that church music does not become a 'museum piece', stylistically isolated from developments elsewhere in the contemporary classical music tradition, but a legitimate contribution to it.<sup>10</sup> The extent to which Cleobury has achieved his aim can be summarised by the Radio 3 announcement of the 2017 service, which acknowledged the annual commission as a significant contribution not just to *liturgical* music, but to choral music as a whole. Yet his policy raises the question of the extent to which the King's commissions are, or could be, representative of wider developments in liturgical music throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Context, and practicalities such as cost and rehearsal time, need to be considered as well as the music itself.

The intention behind the King's carol commissions has always been to ensure that the established tradition of the carol service did not become fossilised, but remains in dialogue with the best of secular composition. As well as becoming something of a tradition in their own right, the King's commissions have added work by major contemporary composers to the repertoire of other cathedral and collegiate choirs. It is true that to date, only half a dozen of the commissions have penetrated into the mainstream repertoire. Many of the others would prove beyond the range of all but the most technically capable choirs, and even King's choir itself has performed some of them only once- but

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<sup>9</sup> Sleeve notes to *On Christmas Day: New Carols from King's* (EMI Classics 58070 2, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> *The Musical Times* vol. 129 (December 1988): 687 & 689. Cleobury's foreword to *Carols from King's* expresses determination that the carol service should not become 'a backwater disconnected from the mainstream'(Coghlan, 2016, ix).



frequency of performance is not the only measure of impact. They have also encouraged other choirs to commission, experiment, and work with composers in a range of innovative projects: recent examples include *Even You Song*, Peterborough Cathedral's collaboration with Cheryl Frances-Hoad (2017), and annual festivals of new music at Wells and Ripon, while several choirs have adopted the idea of a commissioned carol.

To place the King's commissions in the wider context of contemporary developments in music for use in church, I will first examine some other recent initiatives in commissioning for the liturgy, such as *Choirbook for the Queen* (2011) and the *Merton Choirbook* (2013), together with some examples of commissioning in English cathedrals. These will form the basis of chapter 4, before going on to a more detailed discussion of the King's commissions themselves in chapter 5.

Although various shorter articles have been published about the history of the King's carol service, there has yet to be an in-depth analysis of the music performed at the service, or of its impact on the wider church music repertoire. The analysis provided in Chapter 5 cannot be completely exhaustive, because not all the commissions have been published or are readily available.<sup>11</sup> Further, short of consulting every cathedral music list in the country, which would have been unrealistic within the time constraints of part-time study, there is no single source which can provide a systematic measure of the commissions' absorption or otherwise into the repertoire. Patton and Taylor's survey of music lists in cathedral and collegiate churches, published in 1998, provides an indication with respect to the first fifteen King's commissions and is therefore included in Appendix One as a source for the analysis of the commissions before that date; but it is necessarily incomplete,

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<sup>11</sup> It has proved impossible to source scores of Muldowney's *Mary* (2008), which is unpublished, and Birtwistle's *The Gleam* (2003), which is not available from the publishers as a single copy. The information I have included on these two carols is based on commercially available recordings.

and there has been no comparable study since which could be used to measure the frequency and spread of performance of the commissions since 1998 in a similar way.<sup>12</sup> Despite this obvious limitation, Patton and Taylor remains a useful source in respect of the earlier commissions, and for establishing the extent to which some of the more recently commissioned composers had previously written for liturgical performance.

By commissioning a new carol (among other works) every year since 1983, Cleobury has proven that it is not merely those identified as ‘church composers’ who will write church music, but that the best contemporary musicians will happily write for a world-class choir to perform in a liturgical setting.<sup>13</sup> They have inspired cathedrals, colleges and parishes to commission new work for their own contexts, and thus contributed to the development of English church music as a living genre *within* the Western choral canon, and not as an isolated tributary. The King’s commissions therefore provide a conscious challenge to the idea that church music is necessarily a ‘backwater... stagnant and weedy’ compared to the ‘far wider, faster-flowing stream’ of secular music.<sup>14</sup>

By examining the King’s commissions in their multiple contexts- as vehicles for the developing sound of a particular choir in a particular building; as exemplars of a whole tradition which simultaneously raises questions about how ‘church music’ or ‘liturgical music’ should sound; as examples of music written by predominantly non-church composers for a specific act of worship; as evidence for the expansion of a stylistically limited genre into something much less easily defined- I hope to show how King’s, and in particular the King’s carol

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<sup>12</sup> Patton and Taylor (2000).

<sup>13</sup> The Jewish composer Robert Saxton remarks that composing for the liturgy is ‘an enormous privilege’: Darlington and Kreider (2003), 62.

<sup>14</sup> Leonard Blake (ECM 21/4, October 1951, p.76), quoted in Thomas (2015), 98.

commissions since 1983, can be used to illustrate developments within the wider tradition of English choral music as a whole.

## **Chapter One: The purpose of music in worship: some debates and issues**

*When, in our music, God is glorified  
And adoration leaves no room for pride,  
It is as though the whole creation cried:  
Alleluia!*

*How often, making music, we have found  
a new dimension in the world of sound,  
as worship moved us to a more profound  
Alleluia!*

*So has the church, in liturgy and song,  
in faith and love, through centuries of wrong,  
borne witness to the truth in every tongue:  
Alleluia!<sup>15</sup>*

The choir of King's College can be used as an example in almost any argument about music in church. In particular, it exemplifies the tension between two contrasting approaches to church music over the last century: one concentrated on high performance standards, often referred to as 'art' music and perceived as elitist or exclusive; and a more utilitarian (or 'vernacular') approach, focused on wider participation.

The development of the carol service over the last century brings into focus several debates about the relationship between worship and music: liturgical or non-liturgical, participatory or passive, performance by a few versus

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<sup>15</sup> Fred Pratt Green: *Ancient and Modern: Hymns for Refreshing Worship* no. 821 (Tune: *Engelberg* by C.V. Stanford)

involvement of the whole assembly, art music versus vernacular music, and the conflicting demands of practicality and creativity.<sup>16</sup> I shall argue that an understanding of *purpose* is key to arriving at a working definition of the distinctions between liturgical music, sacred music performed in concert, and other forms of music in worship. Although there is not space here to treat this question as extensively as it deserves, some of the key issues will be explored.

### **1.1 Music in worship: purpose and context**

Howard Goodall comments that if music did not contribute something distinctive to worship, the faithful could just say prayers, rather than needing to sing them.<sup>17</sup> The commissions for the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols are pieces of music written for one choir, in one place, on one occasion, within the context of one discrete act of worship. What might they have to contribute to a discussion of the wider purpose of music in church?

The musicologist Wilfrid Mellers argues that ‘sacred music’ can include music which speaks to anyone who has ever wondered about the ‘big questions’ of human life: purpose, meaning or beauty.<sup>18</sup> Himself an agnostic, Mellers argues that for the believer, music helps to create an atmosphere in which God is made manifest through the engagement of the physical senses; the primary purpose of sacred music is to aid and enhance worship. It illustrates both the written text and the action of the liturgy. It can also contribute to a sense of awe, wonder and transcendence, among believers and unbelievers alike.<sup>19</sup>

The relationship between purpose and context is key to an understanding of music in worship. Whereas much twentieth-century music tended towards complete abstraction and ‘pure form’, without reference to cultural traditions,

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<sup>16</sup> See below, section 1.4, for a fuller discussion of the art/vernacular divide.

<sup>17</sup> Darlington and Kreider, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Mellers (2002), xii.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Pritchard, *Observer*, 8/4/2018, comments that even Richard Dawkins is moved by Evensong.

James MacMillan asserts that the task of contemporary composers for the liturgy is the exact opposite: their music exists precisely to make connections between the divine and our human context.<sup>20</sup> The distinctive purpose of liturgical music is to communicate something of the divine reality.

Furthermore, the use of music in worship affirms the role that human creativity plays in the divine purpose.<sup>21</sup> This begs the question of whether its composer has to be a believer. Stravinsky apparently thought that in order to write effectively for the liturgy, one must have a personal faith in what that liturgy was trying to communicate.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Parry, Howells, Vaughan Williams, Britten, and more recently Jonathan Harvey and Gabriel Jackson, all provide evidence to the contrary.

Mellers cites several works by composers who were not themselves people of faith as it might conventionally be described, but which nonetheless point to something beyond, something numinous or enhancing to the human spirit. He quotes Rautavaara, whose *Offerings they brought of gold* was a King's commission in 2010, as saying he inherited a 'taste for the infinite' from his Lutheran upbringing.<sup>23</sup> Sacred music, whether or not it is part of a liturgical event, is that which satisfies such a taste.

## **1.2 Sacred, liturgical or church music: some possible definitions**

The enduring popularity of sacred music performed *out* of its liturgical context, for example by groups such as The Sixteen or the Tallis Scholars (or indeed by King's choir itself), suggests that even if a piece was *written* for a specific context, the relationship between style, form and purpose is not necessarily fixed. Rebecca Frost's overview of music in broadcast worship before World War II suggests that 'while there is still a vital role for music in enhancing the

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<sup>20</sup> Darlington and Kreider, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Astley, Hone and Savage (eds.) (2000), 145.

<sup>22</sup> Ross (2007), 125-8.

<sup>23</sup> Mellers (2002), 310.

daily liturgy of the church, it has acquired a parallel secular context which is not necessarily linked to its origins.<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Arnold, a priest and academic who himself sang for a number of years with the Sixteen and the Tallis Scholars, examines this phenomenon at some length in conversation with a number of leading exponents of sacred music, including Harry Christophers and Peter Phillips.<sup>25</sup> He argues that the current popularity of sacred music as concert repertoire owes much to the huge increase in those identifying as ‘spiritual but not religious’. In his examination of the relationship between Pärt’s Orthodox faith and his music, Peter Bouteneff suggests that Pärt appeals to the same constituency through a ‘numinous’ quality in the sound; but also that this same quality is discernible whether or not the particular piece was intended for liturgical use.<sup>26</sup> Similar claims could be made for the music of Tavener, Gorecki, or more recently Lauridsen and Whitacre. Howard Goodall speaks of the power of sacred music to provide ‘solace and comfort’ even when sung ‘in a language you don’t speak’.<sup>27</sup>

This phenomenon requires a closer look at the definitions of sacred music, church music and liturgical music. As we have seen, sacred music may be composed to liturgical or scriptural texts, but performed in or out of the context of worship. In some cases, its form makes it unsuitable for liturgical performance: the *Requiems* of Verdi or Berlioz, Beethoven’s *Missa solennis*, Vivaldi’s *Gloria*. Bernstein’s *Mass* and Britten’s *War Requiem* distance the sacred text still further from liturgical application by placing it in a new context.

Bach had strong feelings about the need for a ‘well-regulated church music’, but his definition of ‘church music’ included any and all music performed in church, because its *purpose* overrides its *form*: instrumental music can be

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<sup>24</sup> Frost (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London), 10.

<sup>25</sup> Arnold (2014).

<sup>26</sup> Bouteneff (2015), 26-32.

<sup>27</sup> Darlington and Kreider, 28.

employed as effectively in the praise of God as music set to a sacred text.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the styles and idioms he employed in his liturgical music were not confined by that context, to the point that he was accused of impropriety. So Bach confounds easy distinctions between sacred and secular music, both in style and in purpose. As György Kurtág commented, Bach's music 'never stops praying', whether or not it was written for the liturgy.<sup>29</sup>

Mellers takes a similarly broad view: he defines 'religious' music as that which is 'good because it embraces the heights and depths of human consciousness'. The Jewish composer Robert Saxton responds similarly, suggesting that liturgical music does not have a monopoly on the sacred. He cites Beethoven's quartet Op. 132 as 'a wordless hymn of thanksgiving'.<sup>30</sup> Music which was not written for liturgical use or to a consciously sacred text may still be able to convey something of the sacred: some alternative forms of worship use rock music and nursery rhyme to connect to those who may be alienated by classical idioms.

'Church music' can be interpreted as music written from within a particular tradition or belief system, to aid the worship of that particular community. That does not make it easy to define. As Drage comments, 'The choice and function of church music has always been a subject for debate. As worship is reformed or reinterpreted to maintain its relevance, new texts and tunes are created, whereas others lose their resonance and are discarded.'<sup>31</sup>

Liturgical music may be defined as music set to liturgical texts, such as plainchant or Anglican chant, sections of the mass or the divine office. Worship songs and choruses, which overwhelmingly reflect a pop idiom, might resist the definition 'liturgical', because the forms of worship for which they are written

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<sup>28</sup> Letter to Georg Erdmann, 1730; quoted in Gardiner (2014), 288.

<sup>29</sup> Gardiner (2014), 154.

<sup>30</sup> Darlington and Kreider (2003), 56.

<sup>31</sup> Drage (2009), 5.



are less structured and more personal; but they are equally an expression of faith in musical form, without necessarily being a vehicle for doctrine in the way that 'liturgical' music tends to be.

If 'sacred music' is that which can appeal to the 'spiritual but not religious' when heard *outside* the context of worship, however, the carol is perhaps the ideal musical form to create a bridge between the more broadly defined sacred music, and the more specific purposes of liturgical music. Just as music originally written for the liturgy (or to liturgical texts) can be performed in concert, so music for use in church might make use of forms and sources from outside the church; the carol is an obvious example of non-church music which has been adapted for liturgical use. Its ability to evoke nostalgia, lost innocence and tradition extends beyond those who hold to a confessional religious faith, towards a common human desire for order and simplicity in a changing world: but it also comments on a text which demands a response. Chapter 3 will describe several examples of this process.

Among the King's commissions, the text of Pärt's *Bogoroditse Dyevo* (1990) is liturgical, but drawn from the Orthodox rather than the Anglican tradition. A number of the other commissions have texts drawn from liturgical material (despite its name, Swayne's *Winter Solstice Carol* (1998) draws for part of its text on the Magnificat antiphons for Christmas Day) but taken out of their immediate liturgical context, or mixed with other texts for effect.

The majority of the commissions are settings of devotional but not explicitly liturgical texts, with a wider application than the Christmas season alone; Muldowney's *Mary* (2008) takes its text from a poem by Bertolt Brecht, in which both Jesus and Mary look back at the nativity from an adult perspective, while Szirtes' poem *The Flight* (2015) relates the plight of the Holy Family to the current refugee crisis. Others barely even qualify as 'sacred': from Lennox

Berkeley's *In Wintertime* (1983) to Richard Rodney Bennett's *On Christmas Day to my Heart* (1999) to Carl Vine's setting of Tennyson's *Ring out, wild bells* (2012), the definitions have been interpreted broadly.

Stevens comments that since carols, like other music, were subsidiary to the visual impact of liturgy and ritual, 'ceremonial' may be the best description of their purpose.<sup>32</sup> Thus it can be argued that the carol is indeed identifiable as liturgical music: it is for use in a particular *rite*, rather than a fixed location, and has a particular function to 'adorn' that rite. It is, however, possible to argue that carols are still not 'church music' in the narrow sense, because they do not belong to a particular worshipping community: their appeal and application is wider than the particular context for which they were written.

### **1.3 'Why is church music so bad?': excellence and elitism**

'Music may be an integral part of a service, a common experience in which all can participate, or it may be performed by a select group, who inspire or irritate congregations depending on their musical skill'.<sup>33</sup> Drage's comments illustrate a consistent tension in church music between the quest for excellence and accusations of elitism. The difficulty in resolving this dilemma means that church music has often been associated with poor quality, both in compositional style and performance. The question of what constitutes poor quality, and why particular music work (or not) in the context of particular acts of worship, has always been contentious, and is difficult to detach from questions of personal taste. The *Music in Worship* report of 1922 simultaneously deprecated 'trivial, tawdry, superficial, inherently poor, small-minded and cheaply sentimental' music in church, and objected to 'the idioms of the opera and the concert-room' being employed in worship; all of which

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<sup>32</sup> Stevens (1970), xiv. See also Harper (1991), 14.

<sup>33</sup> Drage (2009), 5.

suggests it had a fairly limited view of the kind of music which was appropriate.<sup>34</sup>

Further examination of King's College choir and its carol commissions may throw some light on the complex relationship which exists between music as a vital component of an act of worship, and as a virtuoso performance which may have very little connection with the glory of God. Nor is this debate restricted to the Anglican choral tradition: recent scholarship on praise music is now asking whether it is as elitist in its own way as robed choirs, since the increased emphasis on 'celebrity' solo performers detracts from a sense of communal participation which is seen by many to be key to worship.<sup>35</sup>

In his book *English Cathedral Music and Liturgy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Martin Thomas attracted criticism from scholars and church musicians alike for asserting that most new music commissioned by cathedrals during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was neither challenging nor innovative in style.<sup>36</sup> He also suggests that this perceived lack of innovation creates a separation between music written for the church, and the rest of contemporary classical composition. While in broad sympathy with Thomas' plea for more adventurous church music, Michael Nicholas points out, both in his 2015 article in *Laudate* and his very carefully-phrased foreword to Thomas' book, that there is no such thing as a universally agreed classical mainstream against which 'church music' can be identified and quantified: chamber music, opera, jazz, and song are not necessarily developing in the same ways, or at the same rate. Thomas' argument rests on seeing church music as a sub-genre of 'classical' music: but just as classical music does not consist of one homogenous genre or style, nor should church music be treated as if it were all the same. The Western classical canon did not undergo uniform stylistic developments which left

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<sup>34</sup> *Music in Worship* (1922), 7.

<sup>35</sup> cf. Page (2004).

<sup>36</sup> Thomas (2015).

church music struggling in its wake. As Jeremy Dibble points out, for example, Stanford's church music *assimilates* secular music: it does not develop along different technical or stylistic lines but employs the same idioms.<sup>37</sup> It is equally misleading to suggest that 'church music' is one unified genre with a single point of application to the liturgy.

Thomas' critique of Christian liturgical choral music is not new. In 1929, R.R. Terry wrote an article combatively titled 'Why is church music so bad?'<sup>38</sup> Like S.S. Wesley before him, Terry pointed to a lack of skill and inventiveness among church musicians, an emphasis on encouraging a culture of 'amateurism' which militated against high standards, and poor repertoire.<sup>39</sup> During his tenure at Westminster Cathedral, Terry not only introduced to English cathedrals a great wealth of European music, including new editions of Renaissance composers and the great French organist-composers like Duruflé, Langlais, Vierne and Messiaen; he also fought to raise standards in church music.

In many instances, critiques of church music were, and are, entirely justified. Scholes remarked in the first edition of the *Oxford Companion to Music* that 'the accepted idioms of currently composed church music are in general several generations behind those of serious secular music'.<sup>40</sup> The music performed at Westminster Abbey to celebrate Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887, written by Bridge and Stainer, is uniformly dull and unadventurous; even the inclusion of a *Te Deum* by the Prince Consort (himself a friend of Mendelssohn)<sup>41</sup> does not improve matters greatly:

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<sup>37</sup> Keynote speech to *Church Music and Worship* conference, University of Durham, April 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Terry (1929), 105-125.

<sup>39</sup> Wesley's 1849 diatribe against low standards in cathedral music will be discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>40</sup> Scholes (1938), 168.

<sup>41</sup> Gant (2015), 283, describes his *Te Deum* as 'quite good bad Mendelssohn'!

The image shows a musical score for a choral piece. It consists of five staves. The top four staves are for vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. Each vocal line begins with the lyrics 'We praise Thee, O God, we ac - know-ledge Thee to be the'. The music is written in a common time signature (C) and features a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo). The piano accompaniment is on the bottom two staves, starting with a *ff* dynamic marking. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and bar lines.

Fig. 1: *Te Deum* bars 21-24

Scholes comments that ‘mere sentimentality is in the church music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries very often allowed to masquerade as high devotional feeling’; ability to provoke a pious response does not justify poor quality, even (perhaps especially) in music intended for worship. Excellence in performance is held by many church musicians to glorify God, but others would argue that the praise of God is equally well served by the harmony of ordinary creatures singing together for that purpose.<sup>42</sup>

A similar argument applies to the texts used in liturgy. Cleobury argues passionately for the retention of the King James Version of the Bible for the readings of the Nine Lessons themselves. Together, text and music create an aesthetic based on excellence. Once again, this raises the spectre of elitism: the King James Bible, which dates from 1611, no longer reflects (if it ever did) how ordinary people think or speak, nor is it the most scholastically accurate rendition of the Hebrew and Greek texts; but it has a *cultural* value which other translations do not have. Utilitarianism and artistic integrity are not mutually exclusive: Cleobury’s argument is that the KJV contributes to the

<sup>42</sup> The arguments on both sides are well summarised in Whitbourn (1996).

success of the Nine Lessons and Carols because the beauty of its language makes it uniquely fit for purpose. Likewise, music in the context of worship needs to connect with people, but Cleobury argues that it is important not to ‘dumb down’ the musical contribution in order to make that connection.

To the Puritan sensibility, ‘church music’ should consist of simple tunes sung by all together, albeit not necessarily in unison:<sup>43</sup> in 1645 it was considered ‘the duty of Christians to praise God publicly (sic) by singing of Psalmes together in the congregation’.<sup>44</sup> Drage details how church choirs, initially formed to lead and encourage congregations in this style of singing, gradually became a separate elite and their music a performance.<sup>45</sup>

The suspicion that elitism is inherent to the choral tradition dies hard. Scholes contends that ‘good music is good music, in church or out of it’, but that whatever style of music is employed in church, it deserves ‘the highest possible... standard of performance’.<sup>46</sup> However, this view has been challenged as elitist, notably by those who place high importance on the experience of shared corporate worship.

Among recent scholarship, a vocal proponent of this view is June Boyce-Tillman. In a lecture given to launch her book on women’s contribution to liturgical music, Boyce-Tillman made the rather odd claim that the carol descants written by Sir David Willcocks for King’s are ‘elitist’, on the grounds that they are beyond the range of most parish choirs. This is easy enough to refute: in his memoirs, Willcocks makes it clear that the intention behind the arrangements which gave rise to the *Carols for Choirs* series, begun in 1961 by Willcocks and Reginald Jacques, was precisely the *opposite* of elitist: ‘it was well

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<sup>43</sup> Drage (2009), 56.

<sup>44</sup> Drage (2009), 43.

<sup>45</sup> Drage (2009), 45-55.

<sup>46</sup> Scholes (1938), 167.

within the range of the average parish church choir and wasn't designed for professional choirs'.<sup>47</sup>

In the same book, Boyce-Tillman quotes an American monk as saying that 'King's College Choir has done for church music what Barbie has done for women'.<sup>48</sup> However, this is not a genuine analogy. King's may represent an ideal, but it is not an *impossible* ideal in the way that Barbie is, anatomically speaking, an impossible woman: physiologists have argued that a real person with Barbie's proportions would be unable to stand up because her skeleton is malformed.<sup>49</sup> Yet King's College Choir is not different from other choirs in its essence: at times in its history there have been other choirs who have better fulfilled the particular ideals of which King's became the most famous, but not necessarily consistently the best, example.

Day's research into the social history of King's choir certainly highlights some areas in which charges of elitism might more accurately be levelled: not least that it is an all-male choir whose choristers attend an independent boarding school and whose senior members study at a Cambridge college. By contrast, the musical standard which King's represents does not rely solely on inhuman degrees of talent or a distortion of the norm, but *is* attainable to other choirs with hard work and practice.

Insofar as most parish choirs have neither the resources nor the will to sing the kind of work which is commissioned by King's, or indeed by other cathedral and collegiate choirs, King's does represent an elite. But this is not the whole of the story; for it has also showcased pieces which are accessible at every level. The Christmas carol tradition associated with the King's commissions has therefore entered the repertoire in two places; one, the

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<sup>47</sup> Owen (2008), p.141-2.

<sup>48</sup> Boyce-Tillman (2015), 236.

<sup>49</sup> In 2012 the artist Jason Feeny created 'Anatomical Barbie', a life-size model with the same proportions as a Barbie doll, to underline the physical impossibility of a real person emulating Barbie's shape.

‘popular’ repertoire accessible to parish choirs and amateur singers, exemplified by the Willcocks arrangements and descants popularised through *Carols for Choirs*; and the other, more demanding works which are not intended for congregational use but to be sung predominantly by cathedral and ‘greater church’ choirs.<sup>50</sup> The Cleobury commissions include examples of both.

#### **1.4 Art versus vernacular music: utilitarianism and aesthetics**

The claim that King’s represents a musical elitism can perhaps be understood as a conflict between competing aesthetics, represented by art and vernacular music. Art music focuses on awe, wonder, transcendence and the beauty of holiness; vernacular music on participation, involvement, experience, and storytelling. Both share a purpose: to glorify God in worship. The way they do so is profoundly different.

Thomas unashamedly champions ‘art’ music as part of a claim that music composed for the liturgy can make a serious contribution to the classical canon, while Boyce-Tillman’s concern is for community participation and the discovery of a shared voice in worship. Boyce-Tillman’s position on the purpose of liturgical music is based on an almost entirely utilitarian view that music for the liturgy should be music of and for the people. Both are trained musicians and ordained Anglican priests, but their views represent opposing extremes.

Thomas argues strongly against a merely utilitarian approach to church music, in which the music is seen merely as ‘handmaid’ or adjunct to the liturgy. It is interesting that none of the professional church musicians with whom I spoke in the course of this study had much sympathy for his views. As Darlington and Kreider note, ‘practical considerations shape the music that is written’; this is also true of how it is performed, even at the highest level. In chapter 5 we will

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<sup>50</sup> This argument is made by both Gant (2014) and Coghlan (2016).



consider some of the constraints attendant even on the King's commissions.<sup>51</sup> Such necessary practicalities include the cost of commissioning new material; the pragmatic limitations surrounding learning and rehearsing new repertoire, with a choir which may have to sing seven or eight services a week. Lack of rehearsal time was highlighted by every choir director, along with the rapid turnover in the back rows, now that many cathedrals are augmented by choral scholars. The fact that there are often two alternating treble lines as well means that in every voice part there will be someone to whom much of the repertoire is new *every time it occurs*.

At least one of the choral directors consulted for this study admitted that there is an extent to which the Christmas music he commissions for his choir 'plays safe' stylistically; but this is not because of some misguided nostalgic impulse which rules out anything more adventurous.<sup>52</sup> Rather, it is driven by the desire to reach a wider audience, and help them to engage both with the music itself and the purpose for which it was written. As Cleobury has demonstrated to such effect in the *Nine Lessons and Carols*, a balance between musical experimentation and congregational conservatism is achieved through a judicious mixture of old and new items; familiar favourites create a framework within which it becomes possible to introduce new and more challenging repertoire.

Thomas is certainly correct to note that that much of the *language* used about church music is utilitarian (for example, reviews of new choral music in *Choir and Organ*, which frequently describe pieces as 'useful'; the five-volume set of EMI recordings of *English Church Music* from the 1960s includes canticle settings described in the sleeve notes as 'workmanlike').<sup>53</sup> However, this is music for a

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<sup>51</sup> Darlington and Kreider (2003), 7.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Sharpe, personal communication 19/10/17

<sup>53</sup> Morehen, referring to Rootham in E minor: sleeve notes to EMI Classics, *The Treasury of English Church Music* (CD 5 tracks 14-15, sung by Wells Cathedral choir)

specific purpose, so it is not surprising if it is judged according to its ability to fulfil that purpose, as well as on its aesthetic merits.

As the views of both Terry and Thomas suggest, the debate about utilitarianism in church music is essentially an argument about taste, and about the relative importance of art and function in liturgical music. Yet the two do not have to be in binary opposition. By and large, for all sorts of reasons church musicians cannot afford *not* to make pragmatic choices about their repertoire; but that does not have to mean compromising on standards, either of composition or performance. If music is written for a specific purpose, in this case to enable and enhance worship, that does not have to change its intrinsic value; nor does it necessarily mean that it cannot be art. Scholes remarks, perhaps with a degree of tongue-in-cheek, that ‘it would appear that the first duty of the church musician is the acquirement [sic] of a standard of musical taste’.<sup>54</sup>

As one correspondent to King’s notes, too close a concern for popular taste can lead to a lack of innovation in any artistic medium.<sup>55</sup> Such restraint is not restricted to music; though Thomas is probably right to argue that cathedrals have been more willing to engage in controversial commissioning of visual art than of music, it is also true that such work stays in place for longer and thus has the potential to reach more people. Analysis of rates of repeat performance of the King’s commissions will show that, with relatively few exceptions, the commissions have largely *not* been absorbed into the repertoire. This may not, however, be a reflection of their quality as art, so much as a function of Cleobury’s determination to keep the tradition fluid by consciously choosing *not* to repeat them.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Scholes (1938), 166.

<sup>55</sup> ‘I am well aware how difficult it is to introduce new music, drama or any art to the general public’ (Letter from Friede Waite, 23/1/89, KCAR/8/3/21/13-)

<sup>56</sup> This point will be expanded in chapter 5.

There are valid reasons why ideas which appear creative on the page or in the studio do not work in performance, but which have nothing to do with stylistic conservatism. Not every adventurous composer has a natural grasp of the technical demands of writing effectively for voices: as Harper comments, ‘composers do not always have a grasp of rehearsal time or the limitations of voices’.<sup>57</sup> These and other practical aspects of commissioning will be examined in more detail in chapter 4.

### **1.5 Stylistic conservatism and the King’s commissions**

If church music is innately conservative in its idioms, this may be because the importance of function outweighs creativity of form in music whose purpose is to adorn and comment on the liturgy. In his history of twentieth century Western classical music, Ross argues that avant-garde music in the hands of Boulez (and to a lesser extent Messiaen and Schoenberg) was a deliberate response to the horrors of war; beauty itself was morally compromised.<sup>58</sup> If this is true, any attempt to express the beauty of holiness must *necessarily* sound stylistically conservative, because it relies on a set of aesthetic assumptions which musical modernism had deliberately rejected.

In his desire for more stylistically challenging liturgical music, Thomas pays scant attention to the fact that such music is bound to respond in some way to the needs of *worshippers*. Nor is it merely worshippers who may struggle with more ‘advanced’ music in worship. *In Tune With Heaven* suggests that neither congregations nor performers enjoy avant-garde music in worship.<sup>59</sup> Thomas is certainly right that practical considerations should not *of themselves* mitigate against creativity and innovation, but, as he comments of Elisabeth Lutyens’ *The country of the stars*, considering its ‘very difficult pitching and impossibly high

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<sup>57</sup> Darlington and Kreider, 158.

<sup>58</sup> Ross (2007), 388-396.

<sup>59</sup> *In Tune with Heaven* (1992), 160.

pianissimo', it is hard to imagine many choirs wanting to sing such a piece regularly, if at all.<sup>60</sup> A German guide to Anglican church music cites Lutyens' tone-row canticles for Coventry Cathedral, written in 1966, as an example of more stylistically demanding repertoire; but it had already fallen out of use even there by the 1980s.<sup>61</sup> As we shall see in chapter 4, choral directors and singers cannot ignore such practical considerations.

*In Tune with Heaven* does not mention any *living* composers on its list of those who had made serious contributions to 20<sup>th</sup>-century church music; Thomas sees the composition of the list itself as evidence of a stylistic conservatism concerning the definition of 'church music'.<sup>62</sup> The report appears to make a distinction between 'serious' composition in the middle of the century and more recent works intended for congregational use by composers such as Aston, Shephard and Rutter; the implication is that serious liturgical composition had entirely given way to a more accessible style.<sup>63</sup> The report thus reinforces Cleobury's two-fold rationale for commissioning new work from composers who are *not* considered 'church musicians': both to enrich the liturgy with the work of the best available professional musicians, so that 'church music' does not become stylistically static or old-fashioned, and to demonstrate that our best composers, secular or sacred, still consider Christian worship a context worth writing for. Many of those who have composed for the liturgy- for example Britten, Walton, Leighton, or Tippett in the twentieth century, or more recently MacMillan, Harvey or Dove- cannot be easily dismissed either as stylistic conservatives or as inaccessibly avant-

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas (2015), 112

<sup>61</sup> Krieg (2007), 140-1. His historical overview of Anglican music is thorough and interesting, but his view of 'typical' repertoire raises some questions, as this example illustrates.

<sup>62</sup> *In Tune with Heaven* (1992), 160-1.

<sup>63</sup> The only listed 'serious' composer who was still alive when the report was compiled was William Mathias, who died in the year it was published. By contrast, two of the four listed composers of accessible congregational settings, Shephard and Rutter, are still alive 26 years after the report's publication. The unintended implication, on which Thomas draws, is that younger composers do not write serious liturgical music.

garde. MacMillan, whose liturgical music is identifiably in the same voice as his secular output, points out that tradition is not *in itself* reactionary, but that you have to understand it in order to change it.<sup>64</sup>

The King's commissions suggest, however, that the carol does not necessarily have to conform to backward-looking or restrictive compositional norms; the same must be true for all forms of music in worship. While generally critical of twentieth-century cathedral music, Thomas refers approvingly to several individual King's commissions, among them Burrell's *Christo paremus cantica* (1993) and Weir's *Illuminare Jerusalem* (1985); but does not mention some of the most stylistically experimental, such as Goehr's *Carol of St Steven* (1989), or Birtwistle's *The Gleam* (2003).

Thomas' book also omits some significant developments elsewhere in contemporary church music. The annual St Pancras Festival of Contemporary Church Music gets only a fleeting reference, and the Edington Festival of Music in the Liturgy none at all. Although King's is collegiate and its commissions thus fall outside the literal scope of a book on *cathedral* music, Thomas might usefully have considered some significant attempts on the part of cathedrals to commission new repertoire; among them the annual New Music Wells festival initiated by Matthew Owens in 2008, which has even led to a dedicated 'commissions' page on the cathedral website to encourage sponsorship, and the *Choirbook for the Queen* (2011), specifically intended to produce new music for every cathedral in the country to sing for the Diamond Jubilee, which will be considered in further detail in chapter 4.<sup>65</sup> Like the King's commissions, the *Choirbook* was a deliberate attempt to encourage contemporary composers to write for the church. It contains examples from both established 'church'

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<sup>64</sup> Astley, Hone and Savage (2000), 15-17.

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.wellscathedral.org.uk/music-the-choir/new-music-wells/>

composers and those whose output is predominantly secular: but its purpose is clearly aligned towards liturgical use.

The *Merton Choirbook* (2013), curated by Ben Nicholas for the choir of Merton College, Oxford, has provided at least one anthem and one set of canticles now in wider use.<sup>66</sup> Since Thomas' focus is on cathedral music of the twentieth century, it is technically true that the *Merton Choirbook* and the Wells Festival fall outside his remit (it is less easy to justify the exclusion of *Choirbook for the Queen*, albeit a 21<sup>st</sup>-century publication, because of its cathedral focus).

However, not only have St Pancras and Edington been going for long enough to have made a significant contribution to the world of liturgical music: it is also the case that singers, organists and composers move regularly between institutions, influencing changes in repertoire as they do so. Thomas might usefully have improved the balance of his argument by acknowledging this.

In 1922, at the time of the first Archbishops' report, it would have been unthinkable to include aleatoric passages, shouting, clapping or stamping in music composed for the liturgy: Harrison Birtwistle's *The Gleam* (2003) employed all of them, while Causton's *The Flight* (2015) required trebles to sound like sirens. More recently Gabriel Jackson and Jonathan Harvey, among others, have proven that stylistic conservatism is not a *necessary* characteristic of church music. If King's are seen to be willing to introduce such techniques into the inherently 'traditional' atmosphere of a carol service, other choirs are inspired to investigate a broader range of possibilities for themselves. Some of the innovations King's has made are now so widespread that it is easy to forget they were not always there. One letter in the King's archive complains volubly about the 'perfect *rainstorm* of descants!' in the 1987 service, but it is now almost inconceivable to imagine the service as it was in 1954, with no descants

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<sup>66</sup> Dove's *Vast ocean of light*, Esenvalds' *Merton Service*.

at all.<sup>67</sup> Not everyone who sings along to the carols will wish to emulate them, but they have become an indissoluble part of the experience.

Carols have always provided a vehicle for choirs to experiment with style and technique. Although his King's commission, *Fix one star, at last* (1984) is simple in construction, Peter Maxwell Davies' work with his own school choir, for whom he wrote and arranged several carols, proved that very ordinary choirs can indeed sing complex music. John Joubert's popular carol, *Torches*, was composed in 1951 for a school choir directed by his wife Mary: it appears in *Carols for Choirs* and is performed by King's on the carol disc *On Christmas Night*, recorded in 1962. Britten also had a lasting fascination both for the carol form and for writing for children's voices, including for those who were not musically trained. So the combination of serious composers and the carol is not new, nor is it necessarily elitist.

There are undeniably some works among the recent Christmas commissions which were written not so much for the occasion (that is, for the liturgy) as for the particular strengths of the choir which commissioned them. In some cases the resulting music is too demanding for an average choir, and has therefore not made the transition to the popular repertoire in the way that the Willcocks descants did. This does not mean that they are elitist, nor indeed of limited utility. As communications in its archive make clear, the King's commissions have stimulated church musicians elsewhere to think about what they *could* do with their own choirs: 'those of us who are amateur singers or choral directors particularly appreciate hearing broadcasts of new or unfamiliar Christmas carol arrangements, and being able to seek out copies of those we like, for our own possible use'.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Letter to Stephen Cleobury 24/12/87, KCAR/8/3/21/13-

<sup>68</sup> KCAR/8/3/21/13: one of many letters to the BBC (1990) responding negatively to their decision not to print the details of that year's service in full in the *Radio Times*.

The state of contemporary church music is not static. As well as the innovations undertaken by cathedrals and festivals, there are developments at the parish and congregational level which meet the needs highlighted by Boyce-Tillman.<sup>69</sup> It is claiming too much to suggest that King's is *directly* responsible for these developments in the repertoire: but it is also true to say that the systematic policy of annual commissioning for the carol service, from composers whose output is not primarily liturgical, has been widely imitated by collegiate and cathedral choirs. Instead of placing an impossible burden on would-be imitators, King's has enriched the repertoire with Christmas music which is, in one way or another, within everyone's reach; but which also continues to expand the perception of what is possible in liturgical music.

Further, the existence of such a significant body of new music itself helps to refute arguments that church music is *intrinsically* unadventurous. One example will suffice here. Mark-Anthony Turnage is not predominantly a church composer, though he has composed operas and is therefore skilled in the technicalities of writing for voices.

The image shows a musical score for four voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "shed His blood, And al - so died He on the rood,". The score includes dynamic markings like "molto", "f", and "p". The music is in a minor key and features complex rhythmic patterns.

Fig. 2: *Misere' Nobis*, bars 23-27

<sup>69</sup> For example the diocese-wide InHarmony project in St Edmundsbury and Ipswich (2017), which aims to resource parish music in a variety of ways.



Turnage's *Misere' Nobis* (2006), originally a King's carol commission and also included in the *Choirbook*, is based on a text with the classic stanza-burden structure which identifies a true carol; but its frequent changes of time signature (complete with triplets and dotted rhythms), and complex harmonies requiring careful attention to tuning (e.g. the enharmonic seconds in several voice parts in bars 22- 25), confound the perception that carols are necessarily simple or vernacular music.

Unlike some of the commissions, Turnage does not include any solo passages, and the vocal range in each part is not demanding. The challenge, as with a number of the commissions, lies in the need for precision in dynamics, rhythm and harmony. *Misere' Nobis* is neither stylistically backward-looking, nor impossibly difficult. It therefore demonstrates that it is indeed possible to find a resolution to some of the issues in church music explored in this chapter.

## Chapter Two: The development of the ‘King’s sound’ and the professionalisation of church music

Timothy Day’s full-length study, published to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the Nine Lessons and Carols at King’s, maps the choir’s impact on an ‘English singing style’ which did not exist even in Cambridge prior to the early 20th century, but which has since expanded beyond the collegiate and cathedral choir to influence a whole generation of performers of early music, both sacred and secular.<sup>70</sup> The fact that King’s produced far more broadcasts and recordings than any other choir throughout the twentieth century helped to form expectations of an ‘ideal sound’, which Day identifies explicitly not only with King’s but with the boy treble whose solo verse of *Once in Royal David’s City* has begun every carol service since 1919 and thus popularised that particular sound: as Dyson remarked, the ‘essence’ of this choral style was the boy’s voice and the men were at their best when they blended with that clean white tone’.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, I shall pay detailed attention to the ‘King’s sound’, its evolution, and some of the alternatives which, for various reasons, did *not* come to epitomise the tradition in the way that King’s did. Day’s book, in line with some of his earlier work, makes the link between the King’s sound and the carol service: through broadcasting and recording, the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King’s almost singlehandedly changed the public’s expectation of what church music should sound like, and exposed them to new repertoire written for, informed by, or reacting against that sound.

Although it is instantly recognisable at any period, recordings demonstrate that the King’s sound itself is not static or unchanged. Stephen Cleobury commented in a television documentary of 1992 that he had not deliberately

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<sup>70</sup> Day (2018) expands on previous research on cathedral choirs, the treble sound and the impact of recording.

<sup>71</sup> Dyson (1952), 492.

set out to change the sound, but that nonetheless it *had* changed in tone and colour.<sup>72</sup>

Debates about style and taste concerning what is ‘fitting’ in church music have also had an impact on the way it sounds. The perception that there was an ‘English sound’ was to a large extent created, and then perpetuated, by the popularity of King’s recordings and broadcasts.<sup>73</sup> The development and popularisation of the ‘King’s sound’ throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century was greatly aided by the wider availability of broadcasts and recordings against which standards of performance and accuracy could be measured: both their own performance through the ages, and that of other choirs singing the same repertoire. Recordings from King’s under Ord, Willcocks, Ledger, and now Cleobury, have also been instrumental in building a level of expectation by which both performance practice and repertoire have been shaped.<sup>74</sup>

In their fidelity to a particular sound, and the methods required to produce it, King’s created a brand without necessarily knowing that is what they were doing. There are now a number of cathedral or collegiate choirs whose sound is characterised by the same vocal clarity, accuracy of attack, minimal vibrato and tonal purity which is associated with King’s. In turn, these choirs have continued to contribute members to professional choirs. All of these groups draw heavily on the training and the repertoire learnt in ecclesiastical settings, whether or not the repertoire they are singing is itself sacred or liturgical.

Aside from the cultural and sociological factors surrounding the emergence of an idealised choral sound, there have always been several alternative sounds associated with the sacred music repertoire: it is undeniably true that there is a real difference not only between a top line of trebles (of either gender) and

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<sup>72</sup> *King’s College Choir (Omnibus series 30 episode 14, BBC, 1992)*

<sup>73</sup> Timothy Day (2014), 82-90.

<sup>74</sup> Day (2000), 152. Because it is possible to edit out imperfections from recordings, false expectations are created about future performance.

one of adult sopranos, but also between treble sounds identified with the ‘English’ and ‘Continental’ styles of voice production and vocal colour, or between trained and untrained children’s voices. Even within the all-male choral tradition of which King’s is so often taken to be the epitome, there are, and always have been, other models which use a different technique and produce a different sound (for example Temple Church under George Thalben-Ball, or St John’s, Cambridge under George Guest).

## 2.1 The origins of the King’s sound

The ‘heart-wrenching’ sound of a solo treble at 3pm on Christmas Eve is the real start of Christmas for many.<sup>75</sup> Although it has certainly evolved and changed over time, as recording and broadcasting makes clear, the same pure, ‘white’ vibrato-less treble is the consistently recognisable feature of the King’s sound.<sup>76</sup> In part this distinctive style is dictated by the acoustic; Willcocks observes that in the distinctive surroundings of the chapel, ‘audibility is best (and most beautiful) on a pure vowel’.<sup>77</sup> But how did this come to be *the* sound of English church music, when both Wesley and Mendelssohn explicitly preferred the richer sound made by adult women? Wesley’s view was characteristically forthright: ‘[Boys’ voices] are at best a poor substitute for the vastly superior quality and power of those of women’.<sup>78</sup> Mendelssohn remarked that boys sounded ‘like cats’ voices, shrill and screechy’.<sup>79</sup>

Although few would now agree with their view, it is true that King’s is both the quintessence of the cathedral sound, and different from that made by most cathedral choirs.<sup>80</sup> King’s was among the first to create a back line using the

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<sup>75</sup> Pritchard (2015), 7.

<sup>76</sup> Day (2000b), 125, points out that the description ‘white’ can be used both positively (implying purity and accuracy) and negatively (indicating a lack of colour or audible engagement) .

<sup>77</sup> *The Boast of King’s* DVD (Alto/Prometheus 1980).

<sup>78</sup> S. S. Wesley (1849), 73.

<sup>79</sup> Day (2014), 83.

<sup>80</sup> Day (2014), 82-90.

younger voices of undergraduate choral scholars instead of paid lay clerks. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an all-male choir whose choristers attend a residential choir school is now in a minority.

The abandonment of lay clerks in favour of choral scholars, the establishment of a choir school, and the appointment of an organist (Arthur 'Daddy' Mann) with a proper understanding of voice production, were all important markers in the development of the King's sound.<sup>81</sup> Day, Marston and Mould all comment on the fact that King's has not always been a benchmark of 'elite' level performance.<sup>82</sup> In 1843, indeed, King's choir was described as 'radically bad'. The then organist, John Pratt, had been in post for over 40 years and was also in charge of music at both Peterhouse and the University church, Great St Mary's, in consequence leaving most of the work to an ex-chorister who was not adequate for the role.<sup>83</sup>

Jeremy Filsell, an English organist now based at St Thomas' Fifth Avenue, comments that 'there is a tendency for many US organist-choir directors to want straight tone in the mistaken belief that British choirs with boys and male altos sound 'like this' (i.e. without vibrato).<sup>84</sup> Filsell points out that not only is vibrato natural to the voice (although it needs to be carefully controlled when singing in ensemble, so as not to compromise pitch; a point also made by Peter Phillips, who maintains that singing with vibrato means to be 'out of tune 50% of the time'!) but also that no *current* British choir made up of men and boys does sound 'like this'. While he acknowledges that this idealised sound was achieved by King's in the 1960s, from which it did become the yardstick for many, Filsell also underlines the fact that this has not consistently been the

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<sup>81</sup> Marston's essay on Mann in Massing and Zeeman (2014) notes that the last lay clerk departed in 1928, the year in which the King's carol service was first broadcast.

<sup>82</sup> Mould (2007, 139) cites Thomas Tudway, organist at King's 1671-1728, as having a poor opinion of prevailing standards.

<sup>83</sup> W.E. Dickson, quoted in Rainbow (2001), 207.

<sup>84</sup> Filsell, *Choir and Organ* May/June 2018, 69.

case: the difference between the Ord era and that of Willcocks is clearly discernible in their recordings.

- *Musical extract 1: C.V. Stanford, Magnificat in G (King's College Choir/Ord, 1955, solo treble Richard White).*

The sleeve notes to the Stanford recording point out that it was very unusual for Ord to allow a treble to develop his voice in such a distinctive way, rather than preserving the ensemble. White was very much an exception.<sup>85</sup> In this Ord was the complete opposite of George Guest at St John's, who fostered a 'star' treble in every generation and used them to good effect in recordings.

The unique acoustic of King's is one constant factor in the development of the King's sound.<sup>86</sup> In the nineteenth century, one commentator remarked that the King's acoustic was 'so flattering to the singers' that congregations forgave their general lack of musical competence.<sup>87</sup> Ledger has a slightly different view of the particular demands placed on the choir by the unusually resonant chapel acoustic: 'if you're singing well, the acoustic enhances it. If you're singing badly, the unfortunate sound you're making is perpetuated for longer!'<sup>88</sup>

John Potter comments that when singing in a distinctive environment, it is necessary to work with its particularities to the extent that you are 'singing the building'.<sup>89</sup> Daniel Hyde, appointed in 2018 as the successor to Stephen Cleobury, agrees: although he admits to some reservations about the 'traditional very polite English cathedral choir sound, where one is never louder than lovely, and it's all very nicely packaged, and the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed.... the building will tell me when I get there how the choir

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<sup>85</sup> Commentary booklet to *The Complete Argo Recordings* (Decca 2016), 70: a range of composers and performers comment on their experience of the acoustic.

<sup>86</sup> Massing and Zeeman (2014), 364-7.

<sup>87</sup> Webster (2000), 333

<sup>88</sup> *Boast of King's* DVD (1980).

<sup>89</sup> Potter (2000), 161.

is meant to sound'.<sup>90</sup> As Richard Causton (composer of the 2015 commission *The Flight*) remarks, 'this is a space into which sound must be *offered*, and in which it is *received*'.<sup>91</sup>

As Willcocks points out, there are particular technical difficulties in learning to adjust to a space in which the acoustic can vary by as much as five seconds when it is full of people, compared to the emptiness of rehearsal.<sup>92</sup> In order not to sound muddy, ensemble singing in such a space requires extremely high levels of accuracy and precision. Ledger comments that the resonant acoustic helps with Renaissance music, 'where you need clarity of parts and good tuning'.<sup>93</sup> A number of the recent King's commissions are strongly rhythmic in character and therefore play to that need for precision.

## **2.2 The treble voice and its cultural implications**

So why *did* the treble become the *sine qua non* of the sacred choral tradition epitomised by King's? The role of recordings in the dissemination of that sound, and the consequent vogue for a choral style of absolute tonal purity, without vibrato but with immense clarity of diction, enables a discussion of changes in performance practice and taste; through the availability of increasing numbers of high quality recordings, these stylistic preferences have become the norm for choral performance of sacred music in the secular as well as the liturgical context.<sup>94</sup>

The criteria for what was and was not 'fitting' for church music were often summed up in terms of 'nobility', 'restraint', and an avoidance of 'emotionalism'.<sup>95</sup> Thomas is dismissive of the continued argument among

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<sup>90</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 29/5/18.

<sup>91</sup> Massing and Zeeman (2014), 357.

<sup>92</sup> Conversation between Willcocks, Ledger and Cleobury: *Carols from King's* DVD (Opus Arte 2001)

<sup>93</sup> *Boast of King's* DVD (1980).

<sup>94</sup> See Arnold (2014, 65ff) on the popularity of what he identifies as 'sacred choral music' in concert performance.

<sup>95</sup> This language is explicitly employed in the 1948 Archbishops' Commission report.

church musicians, at least through the first half of the century, that there was a musical style which was ‘fitting’ for church composition. Thomas could helpfully have pursued the implications of this argument for *performance* style as well as compositional style. There is some justice to his argument that music for liturgical use deserves more than a mere reductionist appeal to the utilitarian, but he never seems to ask what *sounds* people want to hear in partnership with the liturgy.

Part of the success of the carol service is undoubtedly that the association of the treble with purity and childhood innocence combines in a particularly potent way with nostalgic feelings about Christmas in general.<sup>96</sup> Why there should be this connection between perceived purity of vocal tone and emotional response is the source of much debate. Ben Liberatore, whose research applies modern sociological theories of gender and sexuality to the world of cathedral music, links it with a sense of grief at the impermanence of the treble voice: once lost, it can never be recovered.<sup>97</sup> The same is true of idealised perceptions of Christmas.

Liberatore’s research into gendered perceptions of the treble voice leads him to suggest that ‘the discourse surrounding child choristers is not as much about the voice as it purports to be’. He argues that the use of descriptions such as “*more divine than human*” (Mould, 2007, p. 51), resembling the “*pure sound of the angels*” (p. 25), ‘*disembodied*’ (Wood, 2000, p. 206), “*sexless*” (Wood p. 30), “*innocence, purity, and vulnerability*” (Bridcut, 2001, ch. 9, para. 2) are all, in various ways, questioning whether trebles are ‘real boys’: the sound they make seems to transcend or subvert cultural expectations of masculinity, to the extent that recruitment videos for choir schools go out of their way to

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<sup>96</sup> The listener survey of the 1966 Christmas Eve broadcast (KCAR/8/3/21/13) includes comments from several listeners to the effect that ‘the purity of the youngest choristers’ voices was one of the most moving sounds they knew’.

<sup>97</sup> Liberatore (2016), 177-193. See also Nethsingha’s comment about the ‘fragility’ of the treble in Chapter 3.



stress the boys' normality through emphasis on sport and technology.<sup>98</sup> The voices of girls and women do not transcend gendered expectation in the same way- they are 'supposed' to be pure, in a way that boys and men are not, so it is not difficult to project assumptions of purity onto the sound they make.

Day examines the role of shifting perceptions of class, gender, education and prestige in the creation of the modern chorister, noting a change in the occupation of chorister parents through the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>99</sup>

Before the foundation of the choir school, King's choristers themselves were college servants, and lay clerks were jobbing singers who worked in a number of choirs; so the claims of social exclusivism implicit in critiques of the English choral tradition by Boyce-Tillman and others show a lack of awareness of history. Until relatively recently, the provision of music in church was either a trade, performed by individuals of low status, or the work of volunteers.<sup>100</sup>

Varley Roberts, the organist at Magdalen College Oxford at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote a manual for the training of parish choristers which includes some remarks about class and accent which would now be considered profoundly snobbish, but which were then probably indicative of the backgrounds from which his choristers came.<sup>101</sup> Ouseley was similarly pessimistic about the possibility of drawing beautiful sounds from 'mere rabble'; this was a large part of his desire to found a school to train choristers, not just musically but morally.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Liberatore (2018). Several chorister recruitment videos currently available on YouTube (including one for King's) support this argument. *Die Thomaner*, a documentary film about the choir of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, contains a lengthy sequence of a football match. Choristers are also shown playing computer games, and spending time with girlfriends: Liberatore comments that these efforts to establish the choristers as 'normal' boys paradoxically underline the assumption that singing is not a normal thing for boys to do.

<sup>99</sup> Day (2014), 85. Mould (2007, 152) makes the same point; choristers were 'typically recruited from the families of college servants or other poor homes'.

<sup>100</sup> Orlando Gibbons was a sizar (chorister-servant) at King's; although he was allowed to matriculate, his family background and education would not naturally have equipped him for undergraduate study and he left after a year: Massing and Zeeman (2014), 276.

<sup>101</sup> Varley Roberts (1902), 1: he is dismissive of 'vulgar' and 'rough' tone.

<sup>102</sup> Bland (2000), 49.

### 2.3 Not ‘all ooh wooh’: alternative treble sounds

Ashley’s research into factors which may inhibit boys from singing include a reluctance to make a sound they consider, rightly or wrongly, to be unmasculine.<sup>103</sup> Ashley’s research into the physiology and sociology of boys’ voices connects his finding that boys don’t want to sing church music (because they perceive it as being ‘all ooh wooh’), and especially not with the particular vocal style and quality associated with King’s. Unless they have been trained as choristers, adolescent boys are unlikely to identify this as a sound they want to make.<sup>104</sup>

Discomfort with the gender implications of the treble sound made by boy choristers is nothing new: Day points out similarly that during the Victorian era choral singing, and music in general, was not considered a sufficiently *manly* pursuit for those of more exalted social status to wish to undertake it.<sup>105</sup> Frederick Ouseley, founder of St Michael’s College Tenbury, had to struggle with the expectations of his aristocratic family before being allowed to study music.

The ‘Continental’ style, associated with Sir Richard Terry at Westminster Cathedral, and later with George Guest at St John’s College, Cambridge, is not only perceived as more masculine than the high ‘cathedral’ tone; it also establishes an alternative to the King’s sound.<sup>106</sup> Like Wesley and Mendelssohn, Terry, too, was dismissive of the sound made by boy trebles: ‘whenever and wherever boys are employed it is safe to say that the sound is raucous and horrible’; it is not perhaps unsurprising that even when working with boys, he encouraged them to develop a different kind of tone.<sup>107</sup> While Guest is

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<sup>103</sup> Ashley (2008, 50) describes boys’ unease when their singing is called ‘beautiful’.

<sup>104</sup> Ashley (2009), 149. In contrast to Ashley’s findings among British boys, early on in the *Thomaner* DVD the youngest probationers, aged 9, compete to see who can sing highest (the winning note is D’’’).

<sup>105</sup> Day (2014), 85.

<sup>106</sup> Ashley (2008), 6.

<sup>107</sup> Terry (1929), 105.

explicit about the fact that he wanted his trebles to inhabit a different soundworld from that of King's (a decision driven in part by the very different acoustic of St John's chapel), his autobiography acknowledges the impact of King's in establishing a norm for him to react against.

- *Musical extract 2: Up, good Christen folk, and listen from Christmas at St John's (St John's College Choir/Guest 1974)*

In this recording, the treble tone audibly contributes very differently to the balance of the ensemble. Individual voices can be heard within the texture, in a way which would not have been considered acceptable at King's. Guest wanted his boys to develop an 'oboe voice', with more vibrato and tremolo, along with the 'flute voice' he identified as more typical of King's, and which shapes popular expectation of the boy treble.<sup>108</sup> Guest's most recent successor, Andrew Nethsingha, draws a similar analogy when speaking about recording Vaughan Williams' sacred music with St John's choir in 2018: '[Vaughan Williams'] ear for orchestral colour in a choir is amazing... we can decide whether a solo top line should be an oboe, flute or violin, or whether tenors and basses should be horns or cellos'.<sup>109</sup> If trebles have perfected both kinds of voice, they can adjust their style to suit the repertoire.

Although Guest's personal preference is for 'tremolo and slow tempi', creating a very different sound from that of King's at the same period, he found Ord's choir 'awesome in its nearness to perfection'.<sup>110</sup> Yet he was not alone in wanting his choir to sing in a different, 'freer' way. George Malcolm at Westminster Cathedral described King's as having 'the emasculated quality of an angel on a Christmas card'.<sup>111</sup> Stephen Cleobury, who had been organ

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<sup>108</sup> Guest's approach to vocal training, tempi and tone colour is set out at length in his autobiography (1994), 141-150.

<sup>109</sup> Andrew Nethsingha, discussing the Signum Classics recording of Vaughan Williams' liturgical works (SIGCD 541, 2018) in *Choir and Organ*, May/June 2018, 40.

<sup>110</sup> Guest (1994), 16.

<sup>111</sup> Massing and Zeeman (2014), 361.

scholar at St John's under Guest before going on to Westminster Cathedral, was well versed in that soundworld before his arrival at King's, but he was also steeped in the English cathedral tradition, having been a chorister at Worcester. Day suggests that Cleobury has managed to combine 'the colour and vibrancy of the so-called Continental style with the blend and unanimity of the English' in a way which enables them to sound 'less floaty and more like earthlings'.<sup>112</sup>

There are numerous other examples of trained trebles singing the same repertoire as at King's, but with a different vocal quality. By the 1980s, the choir of Magdalen College, Oxford, which had sung with a King's-like cathedral tone under Bernard Rose, was producing a more embodied, masculine sound during the tenure of John Harper. Harper's recordings of the English Anthem from 1986 (Regis RRC 2031) demonstrate a variety of treble sound, depending on the age of the piece being sung. Throughout the series, however, Harper's trebles sound like *children*, not like disembodied angels, and male children at that: there is no possibility of mistaking this for a choir of girls, as can happen with cathedral choirs today despite the protestations of those who insist there is an audible difference.<sup>113</sup>

The choir of Temple Church in London will forever be associated with the first 'superstar' treble, Ernest Lough. His two recordings of *Hear my prayer* (1927 and 1928; the second became necessary because the first one was so popular that the wax impression wore out) brought the treble voice into prominence before King's had recorded anything. A generation later, Ernest's son Robin was singing in the same choir, alongside his father, with an equally rich, individual tone which could never be mistaken for a King's treble.

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<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, 361. The description 'earthlings' comes from John Rutter.

<sup>113</sup> Mould (2007), 269.

- *Musical extract 3: Magnificat in C by George Thalben-Ball (Temple Church/Thalben-Ball 1961), solo treble Robin Lough.*

Liberatore comments that the sound which has become ‘normative’ for English trebles can be produced equally well by boys or girls, if they have been given the same training from the same age. He points instead to a contrast in sound quality between trained and untrained treble voices. Contemporary experiments in choral outreach such as Peterborough Cathedral’s *Even You Song*, a 2016 collaboration between composer Cheryl Frances-Hoad, the cathedral choir and children from four local schools, illustrate the difference.

- *Musical extract 4: ‘Collects’ from Even You Song by Cheryl Frances-Hoad (Peterborough Cathedral Choir/Grahl, with children’s choir)*

The trained voices of the cathedral trebles are given parts with a higher tessitura than the children’s choir; they sing more legato and without breathiness. In a piece focused around a voyage to the moon, trained trebles are used to illustrate flight and detachment from the earth, until in the final movement they reach a pitch which is then extended yet further by the organ’s highest notes.<sup>114</sup> In this example, there is an audible contrast between the trained voices at the beginning of the track and the untrained schoolchildren who join in at around 2:01 (singing the part of a cat going into space). They sing with considerable energy, but lack precision in the intervals between high and low notes.

The contrast between untrained children’s voices and the unchildlike perfection of the trained treble has long been of interest to composers. Recordings made of the rehearsals for the first performance of Britten’s *War Requiem* in 1963 capture him telling the boys’ choir from Highgate School (which included a young John Rutter) ‘don’t make it sound *nice*; it’s horrid, it’s

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<sup>114</sup> *Even You Song* (First Hand Records 2017).

modern music!’<sup>115</sup> Yet the sleeve notes to the Decca recording which was issued of the same performance commented of the boys’ sound that it was ‘suspended in limbo: innocent and pure-sounding but totally divorced from breathing human passion’.<sup>116</sup> Palmer also comments that this ethereal quality is unusual for Britten, ‘whose children are generally very much of the down-to-earth and here-and-now’. Morehen asserts likewise that ‘Britten much preferred the more robust Continental style of voice production, which was [then] virtually unknown outside Westminster Cathedral’.<sup>117</sup>

The ‘remote’ sound of the boys in the *War Requiem* was deliberately achieved through positioning away from the main chorus and orchestra, and reflects the terrible contrasts between the reality of war and the beauty of the traditional liturgy (the same contrast which led Milner-White to adopt Truro’s carol service for use at King’s, to speak to a post-war generation disillusioned with conventional religion) but it also reinforces the association between the treble voice and disembodiment. The idealised treble is, as Liberatore comments, not a real person at all but a construct. Being able to sing inhumanly high notes is part of a complex web of expectations placed on trebles, that they in some sense transcend childhood and even humanity itself, replacing messiness and physicality with perfection.<sup>118</sup> Harper’s trebles and the children’s choirs as more normally deployed by Britten (for example in *Noye’s Fludde*) and Frances-Hoad give the lie to this projection, but the King’s trebles are seldom allowed to drop their mask: Birtwistle’s *The Gleam* (2003) was a rare opportunity for them to shout and stamp *in the context of the liturgy*.

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<sup>115</sup> Sound recording of rehearsal of the *War Requiem*, accessed via YouTube 30/4/18.

<sup>116</sup> Christopher Palmer, liner notes to *War Requiem* (Decca 414 383-2), 1963.

<sup>117</sup> *The Treasury of English Church Music* (EMI Classics, vol. 5, track 12) includes a 1967 recording of Britten’s *Hymn to the Virgin* with the choir of Westminster Abbey under Douglas Guest.

<sup>118</sup> Liberatore (2018).

## 2.4 'Sacred music' and adult choral sound

The quintessential 'white' or 'silvery' sound associated with King's is no longer its sole prerogative. David Wulstan's research into the kind of 'high, clear voice' required to sing Tudor repertoire proved hugely influential on vocal technique in the latter half of the twentieth century, and contributed to the formation of expectation about what singing 'should' sound like.<sup>119</sup> There is a clear correlation between the kind of pure, vibrato-less sound which was already associated with King's, and that which emerged from Wulstan's Oxford through groups like the Clerkes of Oxenford, the Tallis Scholars, and the Sixteen. All these choirs still sing in this style. While Filsell argues that 'mature voices will never sound like boys', Phillips remarks that 'the young and untrained sound [of undergraduate voices, which entered the world of choral singing through Mann's pioneering of choral scholarships in the 1920s] is the one which has now established itself in most people's minds as the ideal for polyphony'.<sup>120</sup>

Though these latter groups employed adult sopranos rather than child trebles, the Tallis Scholars' famous recording of the Allegri *Miserere* lists Alison Stamp as 'solo treble', because that more accurately describes the pitch and 'clean' vocal tone of this particular performance, which is very much in the English early music tradition.<sup>121</sup>

- *Musical extract 5: Allegri Miserere (Tallis Scholars/Phillips 1980), solo treble Alison Stamp*

What most clearly differentiates these choirs from King's, then, is not their tone, but the fact that the top line is produced not by boys but by adult

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<sup>119</sup> Wulstan (1985), chapter 8.

<sup>120</sup> Phillips (2005), 497.

<sup>121</sup> Phillips discusses at some length the implications of pitch for voice type and associated issues in performance practice. As he acknowledges, 'in the end I went for an ideal sound, and then looked for ways to construct it' (2005, 500).

women, who may also contribute to the alto line. In his comprehensive *Music of the English Church*, Long was able to remark as long ago as 1971 that recordings had made obsolete the ‘old type hooty, wordless cathedral alto’.<sup>122</sup> Long would have been horrified to imagine their place being taken by women: ‘we must never forget that church music was specifically designed for the impersonal and unemotional tone-colour of an all-male choir of boys and men singing in a large, echoing building.’<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, the rise of ‘sacred music’ outside the liturgical tradition has allowed women to sing this repertoire and produce a different sound- which may in turn have helped to break some of the taboos around gendered music *in church*, so that female choristers, lay clerks and even precentors are seen as valid heirs and interpreters of the tradition.

Phillips identifies three choral sounds which emerged during the 1970s. One was the all-male cathedral choir, whose older tenor and bass lay clerks perhaps did not (and do not) sing as ‘straight’ as the upper voices, ‘particularly at the extremes of their registers’. Secondly, there were the professional choirs such as the BBC Singers, who were likely to have had conservatoire training. The third sound was that of the ‘youthful... amateur’ undergraduate who sang in groups like the Clerkes of Oxenford. Perhaps surprisingly, it was this last sound which became the ‘blueprint’ for the concert performance of sacred music.<sup>124</sup> The King’s sound owes something to the fact that young choral scholars sing with a less developed tone than older lay clerks: but, as Phillips comments of Oxbridge choirs generally, the energy and freshness of younger voices is offset by a less mature sound lacking stamina and projection. The men’s voices are expected to sound with the same controlled ‘white’ tone as

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<sup>122</sup> Long (1971), 390.

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, 391.

<sup>124</sup> Phillips (2005), 497.



the trebles. This can sometimes militate against a sufficient depth and richness of sound in the lower registers.

## 2.5 The role of recording and broadcasting

One of the most obvious ways in which King's has contributed to the development of church music, both in terms of repertoire and in establishing a 'gold standard' of vocal performance, is through its commitment to broadcasts and recordings. The King's carol service has been broadcast since 1928, at first only in the UK but later worldwide, thus creating an 'ideal' sound to which other choirs aspire.<sup>125</sup>

King's were not the first choir to record extensively: that distinction belongs to the choir of St Andrew's, Wells Street, which produced 32 records in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>126</sup> It was the development of 'commercially viable microphones' in the 1920s which made the difference to recording quality- and, crucially, made it possible to record a choir *in situ* for the first time, complete with the resident organ and natural acoustic, rather than in a studio. It was perhaps the wartime broadcasts of Choral Evensong, many of which were from King's (albeit anonymously, for security reasons), which established that particular sound in people's minds; it has also been argued that these broadcasts, representing a tradition continuing in adversity, became a quintessential 'sound of Britishness'.<sup>127</sup> During the Second World War, when broadcast venues were not publicised for security reasons and only identified as 'somewhere in England', King's was one of a very small number of choirs

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<sup>125</sup> Day (2000a), 100, instances the 1962 King's/Willcocks recording of Haydn's 'Nelson' Mass): it had never been recorded before, so was not well known, but 'suddenly every choral society in the country wanted to do it'.

<sup>126</sup> Colin Brownlee, *Cathedral Music* 18/1, p. 11.

<sup>127</sup> Brownlee, *ibid.*, 12.

which were still regularly used, so that its sound also became (however subconsciously) associated with the war effort.<sup>128</sup>

As Day points out, 'the King's sound' is consistently recognisable; but recordings from different eras, under different Directors of Music, prove conclusively that there is not *one* single, static King's sound, but a gradual evolution.<sup>129</sup> Listening to recordings of the choir between 1954 and the present day reveal some consistent stylistic features (an absence of vibrato, extreme clarity of diction, precision and balance between the voice parts), but also some significant variations. The most obvious example is in the observance of tempi. The TV broadcast of the 1954 carol service demonstrates how very much slower were Ord's tempi than those usually used today; it is possible that the slower tempo may have felt more naturally reverent to the participants.<sup>130</sup> A commemorative set of CDs, released by Decca to mark David Willcocks' death and covering his entire tenure at King's, reveals a gradual increase in tempi through the 1960s and 1970s. Part of this may be due to improvements in recording techniques in the complex acoustic of King's chapel: in one or two of the earlier Decca carol recordings, there is a discernible lag between the choir, organ and congregation- in one case almost a beat and a half- as they pass in procession between microphones in different parts of the chapel. The body of recordings made throughout Willcocks' time show how diction, pronunciation and speed altered even within his own tenure: Willcocks himself attributes this shift to the requirements of singing with orchestral instruments as well as the organ.<sup>131</sup> Cleobury's tempi are faster still, yet without losing the clarity necessary to understanding the sung text.

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<sup>128</sup> 'Not even the Luftwaffe could silence Choral Evensong': Brownlee, *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>129</sup> Massing and Zeeman (2014), 352.

<sup>130</sup> *60 Years of King's* DVD.

<sup>131</sup> Day (2000b), 129.

Another major contribution King's has made has been in the performance and dissemination of new repertoire, and the use of different languages in addition to English. It is disconcerting to realise how recent is the influence of church music from the rest of Europe on the English cathedral and collegiate repertoire. King's was no exception.<sup>132</sup> The amount of European music sung at King's increased appreciably after Cleobury's arrival there, but that was not until the 1980s. While it would now be normal practice for cathedral and college choirs to sing in a range of languages, this was far from the norm in the 1960s.<sup>133</sup> Willcocks' recordings with King's through the decade include English-language versions of Bach's *St John Passion* and, famously, the *Allegrì Miserere* with Roy Goodman as treble soloist.

## **2.6 Professionalisation and perfectionism in church music**

At the same time, the existence of recordings created a pressure by setting an objectively observable standard which then had to be emulated every time.<sup>134</sup> This placed increased expectations not only on the best choirs, but also on the less exalted, that they too should be able to sing new music and set themselves more challenges. This in turn raised expectations on those choirs which had been accepted as setting the standard: if the grassroots standard is going up, the standards at the top also need to go up, and so on in a rising spiral. The excellence demanded of King's, and increasingly throughout the twentieth century of other cathedral and collegiate choirs, resulted in the emergence of a distinctive aesthetic of performance and rising skill levels, necessary to perform

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<sup>132</sup> The introduction of European sacred music into the repertoire of the cathedral and collegiate choirs is surprisingly recent. During his tenure at Westminster Cathedral, R.R. Terry was understandably concerned that a Catholic cathedral should sing Catholic music from across the whole breadth of the Church.

<sup>133</sup> James Lancelot, who became a chorister at St Paul's in 1961, remarks that even repertoire written in Latin (such as Palestrina and Byrd) was sung in English (*Church Music Quarterly*, December 2017), 11.

<sup>134</sup> Although Ernest Lough's initial recording of 'Hear my prayer' was so popular that he had to re-record it the following year (see above, p. 52), most recordings do not tend to be listened to over and over. With the exception of a few 'iconic' recordings such as the aforementioned *Allegrì Miserere* of 1961, most church music will have an even smaller circulation- but the *possibility* of being measured against a recording for accuracy, tone or interpretation remains.

the newer repertoire. The growing familiarity of the listening public with a wider range of sacred repertoire also had an impact, as they became more aware of what such pieces 'should' sound like. All of these factors have resulted in an increased pressure to approach church music in a more professional way.

Even the treble soloist who begins *Once in Royal David's City* is to some extent a professional musician: James Lancelot, former King's organ scholar and organist at Durham for 30 years, comments that choristers 'do an adult's job at a child's age'.<sup>135</sup> The consistent reputation for excellence which King's has been able to maintain since Ord's day is in large part due to the fact that the choristers can practice twice a day, and more intensively during school holidays. Both Ord and Willcocks brought their expertise in other genres of music to bear on the role of director of music at King's. They clearly did not feel that music for liturgical use in church should be written or performed to a lower standard than the rest of the repertoire. On the contrary, the excellence and professionalism they had developed in other spheres was applied to their work with King's, and from there reached other churches and cathedrals via broadcasts, recordings and published music.

As we have seen, Erik Routley traces the move to a more 'professional' style of church music to Parry and Stanford, in that they wrote in much the same idiom for the church as they would have for any other context and didn't 'dumb down' their style simply because they were writing for the liturgy. The fact that this was music for a specific purpose and context did not affect its stylistic complexity. On the contrary, Routley argues that, as established composers in

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<sup>135</sup> Lancelot, *Cathedral Music* 18/1, 6.

more than one genre, Parry and Stanford were consciously using the idioms of their day to make church music more interesting to other serious musicians.<sup>136</sup>

In fact, it is possible to argue that the roots of a more professional approach go back even further. It was S.S. Wesley who first attempted, in his *Few Words on Cathedral Music* (1849), to set out a measurable standard for the recruitment, training and rehearsal of cathedral musicians in order to improve the standard of musical performance. The heart of Wesley's argument was that 'only the best is good enough for God' and that Christian amateurism, however well-intentioned, too easily becomes an excuse for incompetence. Although some of his recommendations were unrealistic (for example, the suggestion that a cathedral organist should be selected by a panel of seven other organists), and few if any would now agree with his assessment of his father, Samuel Wesley, as the equal of Tallis, many of Wesley's other recommendations have proved to be visionary.<sup>137</sup>

The emergence of the RSCM (previously SECM), which aimed to develop and resource music in parish churches; and the parallel development of the Cathedral Organists' Association, founded in 1919 to improve the skills and standing of cathedral musicians, owes much to the vision of Sydney Nicholson. He saw cathedrals having something to offer not just to the rest of the church, but to each other; Nicholson's idea was that cathedral musicians should no longer be content to live in silos of isolated perfection, but to encourage each other and listen to what each other were doing, resourcing and encouraging the sharing of new ideas at all levels. In some ways this embodies Wesley's aspirations in his *Few Words* (a mere 70 years earlier!), but in a more practical and achievable form.

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<sup>136</sup> Routley (1964), 20.

<sup>137</sup> Among his suggestions for ways to improve standards are a residential college for church musicians, which bore fruit (albeit in a slightly different form) through the eventual foundation of the RSCM, and a more systematic approach to the recruitment, training and deployment of cathedral organists, whose recommendations were taken up by the Cathedral Organists' Association, founded in 1919.

There was a further move towards professionalisation in the 1950s and 1960s. Serious secular composers like Walton, Tippett and Britten wrote serious music for the church despite their own struggles with, or even hostility towards, the claims of Christian faith.<sup>138</sup> At the same time, the Willcocks recordings mark a new era in church music, in that one choir was establishing itself and its sound as a benchmark for performance which was readily available to anyone without travelling to Cambridge to hear it *in situ*.

Like Ord's operatic experience, Willcocks' involvement with the Royal College and the Bach Choir (which he directed from 1960 while still at King's) gave him extensive experience of working with professional orchestras and choirs outside the potentially narrow world of church music. This ensured that there was an instant overlap between the worlds of church music and of secular art music. This in turn enabled the musical expectations and standards prevalent in the wider world to take root also in Willcocks' own performances and compositions for the church.

Timothy Hone, secretary of the Cathedral Organists' Association, suggests that a further process of professionalisation of standards in British cathedral and collegiate choirs took place in the 1980s.<sup>139</sup> It was under Cleobury that the tradition already established at King's by Ord, Willcocks and (comparatively briefly) Ledger, reached new heights of professionalism. He built up the choir's ability to deal with new challenges and thereby gave them the confidence to sing repertoire that few choirs could or would aspire to. It is at that point that it became routine to expect to include music in other languages in the repertoire, along with the rediscovery of much pre-Reformation music.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Morehen asserts that 'neither Britten nor Walton were particularly enamoured of writing for the church' (sleeve notes to *A Treasury of Church Music*, EMI Classics 2011, 18)

<sup>139</sup> Personal communication, 22/5/16.

<sup>140</sup> Lancelot comments that when he was a treble (at St Paul's) in the 1960s, European repertoire was unusual in English cathedrals (*Cathedral Music* 1/18, 6-9). The Willcocks recordings throughout the 60s and 70s suggest that when such works were performed, it was usually in English.

It is interesting to note that King's' recordings of music outside the repertoire which is most readily associated with their particular sound have not always received the same level of acclaim as those pieces that are more identified with the 'English cathedral' style.<sup>141</sup> This raises the possibility that there is also a role for the audience or congregation in *creating* the sound choirs make: once trained to expect a particular sound, that becomes the sound they will demand, and will criticise if performances deviate from it.

Hone argues further that the stylistic choices which need to be made in response to the preferred or expected sound have created a series of binary pairs, creating lines of division along which the tradition develops. We have already examined the different vocal sounds created by a division between English and Continental styles. In terms of sound alone, King's is undeniably and instantly identifiable as representative of the English choral tradition, but in terms of repertoire it was drawing on a mixture of influences much earlier than most choirs did.

Divisions between Protestant and Catholic musical soundworlds have been influential in shaping the English choral tradition for centuries, from the 'one syllable one note' compositional style associated with Merbecke to the developments at Westminster Cathedral under Terry, which were instrumental in reintroducing English Renaissance music to the choral repertoire. What effect did this broadening of repertoire have on the vocal sound of choirs who sang it? Mould questions whether it is either possible or appropriate to sing Messiaen, Poulenc, Janacek, Brahms, Mendelssohn with the same 'bloodless, white' sound as Byrd and Tallis.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> For example *Credo* (EMI 56439 2, 1997), a disc of music by Rachmaninov, Stravinsky, Penderecki and Panufnik, which was criticised in the press for its restraint and lack of variety in vocal colour.

<sup>142</sup> Mould (2007), 222.

Perhaps controversially, Hone suggests a third binary pair: between ‘emotional’ and ‘inhibited’ performance.<sup>143</sup> Attitudes to the role of emotion in performance have changed markedly over the last century: whereas the earliest recordings tend towards a more openly romantic style which appeals directly to the emotions, the fashion more recently has been for coolness and restraint. Day argues that this allows the listener to shape their own response, rather than have it dictated by performance style.<sup>144</sup> Ord did not come to King’s via the traditional route from the organ loft or choir stall, but from the opera house, where emotional engagement is *de rigueur*. However, in church he was unhappy about the risk of personal interpretation, to the extent that he actively discouraged choral scholars from taking singing lessons in case their more developed soloistic voices disturbed the blend.<sup>145</sup> A further marker of professionalisation in church music is that singing lessons are now routinely offered as part of a scholarship package in collegiate or cathedral choirs.

The King’s sound is definitely located at the restrained end of the spectrum. Whereas the treble tone associated with King’s can be described approvingly as clean, pure, otherworldly and ethereal, critics of the sound describe it as sterile, cold, lacking in passion, inexpressive, impersonal, barren and under-interpreted. Even supposedly neutral descriptions such as ‘mathematical’ and ‘meticulous’, in the context of something as innately personal and direct as the singing voice, have a pejorative edge.<sup>146</sup>

It can be argued that the more restrained style perfected at King’s is because the acoustics of the chapel *demand* a very precise sound, requiring high levels of control; Cleobury did not ask for that kind of restraint during his time at Westminster Cathedral, for example, nor could the sopranos of the BBC

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<sup>143</sup> Day (2000 and 2018) draws similar conclusions.

<sup>144</sup> Day (2000b), 151.

<sup>145</sup> Day (2014), 352.

<sup>146</sup> Day (2000b), 123.



Singers during his tenure be mistaken for trebles. But when working with the King's acoustic, Cleobury applies the same measures of perfection in performance to the European repertoire as he does to the English music which was indeed written to elicit that kind of sound: the same kind of perfection which arguably leaves little space for personal interpretation.

As we have seen, the elevation of King's to the epitome of the English choral tradition illustrates the steady increase in standards and expectations in church music more generally since the nineteenth century. As King's came to typify a more professional approach and a particular kind of vocal sound, however, it also had to bear a consistent expectation of almost unreal perfection, bordering on the inhuman. The demands made on quite young children to perform to a high level, under a great deal of pressure and public scrutiny, produce undeniable results- but it can also be argued that the sound of a King's treble is an artificially manufactured one.

If Guest's trebles were oboes, perhaps Cleobury's are organ flue stops. Although (unlike Willcocks) he was too young to have had the army training which was so influential on the discipline of generations of choirs, he did and does share the natural tendency of many organists towards perfectionism in every detail. Critics of the 'impersonal' tone associated with the King's sound have suggested that that the almost inhumanly high standards of which King's choir was capable in the 1980s and 1990s were due to an equally 'inhuman' style of direction, in which the choir director 'plays' the choir as if the individual voices were the keys and pedals of an organ; expected to respond in the same way every time, to the same level of machinelike accuracy. The choir knows exactly what sound it is to make on every note, exactly where to breathe and pause.<sup>147</sup> Although this may be something of an exaggeration,

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<sup>147</sup> If this sounds unduly critical, it is worth remembering that Britten was equally precise about the sound he wanted to achieve, and equally directive in ensuring his singers produced it.

Cleobury would certainly not be alone in thinking ‘instrumentally’ about the voice. While Guest and Nethsingha saw this in terms of vocal colour, James MacMillan has explored the possibilities of voice as instrument in more depth. In a lecture to composition students at the University of York, MacMillan spoke about the ‘voice as virtuoso’, detached from words or song. His exploration of extended vocal techniques such as singing with closed mouth, with high tessitura and extended range, has been informed by his experience of electronic and orchestral music.<sup>148</sup>

Commenting on his own experience as an organ scholar at King’s under Willcocks, James Lancelot remarks that ‘his ability to give the impression that the world would come to an end if the performance was not perfect could be a bit wearing’.<sup>149</sup> In an article describing his time as organ scholar at King’s in the mid-1980s, quite early in Cleobury’s tenure, Stephen Layton describes a similar pressure to perform with absolute accuracy of timing, tuning and ensemble, and the effect this had on his confidence. He makes the interesting observation that he did not feel under the same pressure as a conductor and choir director as he did when performing himself.<sup>150</sup> Layton’s reflection suggests that Cleobury inherited this approach to the music at King’s, though it is also fair to say that the reputation of King’s by this time was such that it probably created its own pressure through the sheer weight of expectation. Layton also claims that he felt the music was often performed ‘for the glory of man rather than the glory of God’. Cleobury would argue rather that the pursuit of perfection- offering to God the very best of which one is capable- is itself at the service of the worship; as is the music.

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<sup>148</sup> James MacMillan, lecture to the University of York, 21/2/17.

<sup>149</sup> Lancelot, *Cathedral Music* 1/18, 7. Members of Lancelot’s own choir at Durham might suggest that he had internalised Willcocks’ approach rather more fully than this remark suggests.

<sup>150</sup> Layton (2006), 77-88.

### Chapter Three: The history of the carol and its use in worship

For the vast majority of people who attend carol services, Christmas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is as much about tradition, security and familiarity, as it is about any explicitly religious purpose or meaning.<sup>151</sup> The balance between traditional and familiar items on the one hand, and the commissions on the other, needs to be carefully kept. Within the context of a service which taps into a deep popular desire for the traditional and nostalgic, as carol services undeniably do, new music can play a particularly important role. In this way, our understanding of what constitutes a carol is expanded, but so too is our understanding of liturgical music and its purpose.

The new music commissioned for King's is original, but its originality is in dialogue with the Christmas carol tradition reaching back to the Middle Ages and beyond.<sup>152</sup> Routley describes Milner-White's adaptation of the Truro service as 'a fruitful example of the use of ancient liturgical form in a new combination'; comparing it both to the Advent procession at King's and the now sadly defunct Epiphany carol service with procession at York Minster, where Milner-White served as Dean after King's. Routley identifies in their reintroduction of the concept of movement as integral to liturgy a reference to the origin of the carol in the mobility of dance.<sup>153</sup>

Now that the practice of singing hymns at funerals is beginning to die out, the carol is probably the only form of church music ever encountered by the non-regular-churchgoing population.<sup>154</sup> Levels of churchgoing at Christmas remain consistently higher than during the rest of the year.<sup>155</sup> Giles quotes statistics

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<sup>151</sup> Claudia Pritchard, *Independent on Sunday*, December 2015, p.7

<sup>152</sup> The earliest *printed* carol in English is the *Boar's Head Carol*, dating to 1521, and some (such as the *Coventry Carol*) originate with mystery plays from a century or more before that; but a number of the King's commissions (for example Nicholas Maw and James MacMillan) have drawn on even older texts.

<sup>153</sup> Routley (1958), 232.

<sup>154</sup> In his sleeve note to King's *On Christmas Day* CD, Cleobury makes the distinction between Christmas as 'holyday' and the secular 'holiday' associated with the winter solstice.

<sup>155</sup> Walker (unpublished PhD thesis, 2014): appendices 8, 9a and 9b.

that 36% of the British population will attend a Christmas service in church, and that those who do overwhelmingly wish it to be ‘traditional’.<sup>156</sup> In this way, although Giles’ statistics also show that less than half believe Christmas to have anything to do with the birth of Christ, even the most secular members of congregations stand at least some chance of encountering songs written to tell the story of the incarnation of Christ. This chapter will briefly examine the history of the carol, before looking in some detail at the background to the King’s Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, from its origins in Truro in 1880 to the global phenomenon of the present day.

As Pritchard notes, carols collapse the distinction between sacred and secular music.<sup>157</sup> Thomas recounts how the SECM, precursor to the RSCM, questioned the suitability for church use of those folk-originated hymn tunes collected by Vaughan Williams and others for the *English Hymnal* (published in 1906).<sup>158</sup> Even the most cursory examination of the history of the carol from the Middle Ages, and its subsequent return to liturgical use, calls their objection into question.

### **3.1 What is a carol?**

Although Gant and Routley have both provided extensive research into the cultural and musical history of the carol, it is difficult to reach a universally agreed definition of what a carol is, and what it is not. This point will be revisited in chapter 5 as part of the analysis of the King’s commissions. It is, however, generally acknowledged that the name ‘carol’ was not confined to music to be sung at Christmas, but referred to a song, usually with a burden-refrain structure, which could be sung together by any group of people. More

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<sup>156</sup> Giles, *Church Music Quarterly*, December 2017), 17

<sup>157</sup> Pritchard, *Independent on Sunday*, 6/12/15, p.7

<sup>158</sup> Thomas (2015); as he acknowledges, this may also have been a reaction against the perceived churchmanship of the volume.

recently, the carol format has become indissolubly linked with music for the Christmas season, especially that sung in churches or cathedrals.

Harper refers to carols as ‘sacred songs’ of non-liturgical origin, first adopted into the liturgy as a means of teaching the Christian faith in an accessible way.<sup>159</sup> The teaching function of carols demands a distinction between popular *origin* and popular *destination*: although they were used by mendicant friars as an accessible teaching tool, to have survived in manuscript form at all required someone literate to transcribe them, which implies that they could not be popular *in transmission*, whatever their source. Stevens identifies three categories of vernacular English carols of the fifteenth century, the first two being ‘improving’ carols to edify the congregation, and exercises in ‘instructed piety’ in which composers and singers give a voice to faith.<sup>160</sup> From the thirteenth century onwards, friars had a key role in combatting heresies which denied the true humanity of Christ, in which vernacular preaching and popular song both became vehicles for teaching. This may explain why so many carols focus on aspects of the Incarnation.<sup>161</sup> Since modern carol services are the most likely form of liturgy to attract non-regular churchgoers, but do not usually include a sermon, the carols still retain something of this instructive function.

Stevens’ third category is examples of ‘formalistic brilliance’, designed to show off technical ability. Critics of King’s might justifiably argue that the commissions have perhaps tended too much to fall into the latter category. Stevens uses the existence of this type of carol to argue against the assumption that carols are necessarily a ‘reflection of popular aspiration’; although his collection undoubtedly contains some simpler items, many are more complex in texture, harmonic structure or technical difficulty than is commonly

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<sup>159</sup> Harper (1991), 291.

<sup>160</sup> Stevens (1970), xiii

<sup>161</sup> Stevens (1970), xiv.

imagined.<sup>162</sup> Stevens also questions the idea that carols are fundamentally a secular folk art form. 'The polyphonic carol is found predominantly in manuscripts of church music and was, it is fair to presume, the exclusive preserve of learned, ecclesiastical musicians.' Nor is it true to say that monophonic carols are necessarily any more 'popular' in origin; several manuscripts of popular monophonic carols are from monastic sources and set to Latin text.<sup>163</sup>

However, their exact relationship to the liturgy is still subject to debate. Gant argues that the carol was initially a secular song form which *contrasted* with the music sung in church.<sup>164</sup> Harper acknowledges their ambiguity: 'some carols are found in sources alongside liturgical music and *may have been* used in the liturgy (to substitute for other items such as *Benedicamus*) *or else in the refectory*.'<sup>165</sup> This suggests at best a para-liturgical function, albeit within a monastic context. Yet a newly discovered 15<sup>th</sup>-century carol provides more evidence for the possible use of carols within the liturgy. *Parit virgo filium* was performed by Newcastle Cathedral Choir in 2018, after being recreated from a single surviving voice part with pitch notations found on a 15th century manuscript. The carol had been annotated to the bottom of a page of a service book, which was then used to bind another manuscript (acquired by Cambridge University Library in 1996). Professor Andrew Wathey of Northumbria University, who found and transcribed the carol, commented that it is not unknown to find polyphonic music written into service books (which were otherwise confined to plainsong and liturgical text) but 'this is the

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<sup>162</sup> Stevens (1970), xv.

<sup>163</sup> Stevens (1970), xiv.

<sup>164</sup> Gant (2014), 2.

<sup>165</sup> Harper (1991), 291, my italics.

only such instance involving a carol; it provides fascinating new evidence for the use of carols in the Christmas liturgy in the 15th century'.<sup>166</sup>

Scholes points out that Puritan emigrants to America, at the time of the official suppression of Christmas, for obvious reasons took no carols with them.<sup>167</sup>

English Puritanism, however, ironically ensured the survival of the carol by driving it out of church on to the streets: Routley connects the carol with the harnessing of ballad and folk song as a means of evangelism, for example by the Wesleys.<sup>168</sup> Similarly, the Victorian rediscovery of the carol was an attempt to re-appropriate popular musical forms for worship. Throughout its history, then, the carol has had a function in worship, but it has not always been the music of the church.

Gant suggests that true carols are part of the oral tradition and never appear in hymnbooks at all.<sup>169</sup> *In Tune with Heaven* points out that before the Reformation, congregational music in church was non-existent: hymns were a later development, and the carol or sacred song was, paradoxically, not for use in church but outside.<sup>170</sup> The fact that carols were usually associated with dancing made them unsuitable for liturgical performance.

Contrarily, it is sometimes claimed that the last genuine carol to have entered the repertoire is *While shepherds watched*, which has a church rather than a folk origin: it is a Protestant carol, a straight paraphrase of Scripture in metrical form.<sup>171</sup> However, the fact that it is still frequently sung in Yorkshire to the

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<sup>166</sup> <https://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/news-events/news/vc-carol/> accessed 17/1/19.

<sup>167</sup> Scholes, 139.

<sup>168</sup> Routley (1958), 85ff

<sup>169</sup> Gant (2014), 10.

<sup>170</sup> *In Tune With Heaven* (1992), 24.

<sup>171</sup> Its first appearance is in Tate and Brady (1696).

tune later associated with *On Ilkley Moor baht 'at* clearly illustrates its roots in the folk tradition.<sup>172</sup>

Drage and Holman have studied the carol extensively within the context of 'West Gallery' music (more properly 'psalmody'), which was gradually rendered obsolete by the growth of Anglican cathedral-style choirs from the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>173</sup> For Drage, carols are 'Christmas metrical texts which may have traditional roots'.<sup>174</sup> This definition does not specify form, origin or the location of performance, perhaps because all these are less fixed than might be supposed, but it may well reflect what they had become by the seventeenth century when the divide between 'vernacular' and 'art' performance in church really began to widen.<sup>175</sup>

To the average member of a carol service congregation, their definition of 'traditional carols' would include Victoriana such as *O little town of Bethlehem* or *Once in royal David's city*. Yet Victorian and later 'carols' are often more accurately described as hymns, having been written expressly to be sung during Christian worship in church.<sup>176</sup> However, in terms of their text, Victorian carols on both sides of the Atlantic were a new development, introducing 'unbiblical' imagery of winter, snow and firelight, before the rediscovery of mediaeval carols based (however loosely) on the Nativity.<sup>177</sup>

The publication of anthologies of what might be called genuinely traditional carols began in the mid-nineteenth century. Among others, William Sandys' collection of mediaeval texts, *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern* (1833)

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<sup>172</sup> cf. Peter Holman, liner notes to *While shepherds watched: Christmas Music from English Parish Churches and Chapels, 1740–1830* (Hyperion, 2008), which includes several different versions of this carol.

<sup>173</sup> See Drage (2009), 2, for an explanation of why 'psalmody' is to be preferred to 'west gallery' as a description of this genre

<sup>174</sup> Drage (2009), 4.

<sup>175</sup> Drage (2009), 3.

<sup>176</sup> The order of service at King's differentiates between hymns (sung by the choir and congregation) and carols (sung by the choir only).

<sup>177</sup> Routley (1958), 31.



became a major resource (not least of texts for 21<sup>st</sup>-century composers), and the rediscovery of material of European origin, such as the Scandinavian *Piae Cantiones*, further enriched the repertoire.<sup>178</sup> Twentieth century collections include the *Cowley Carol Book* (1916), the *Cambridge Carol Book* (1924), and the *Oxford Book of Carols* (1928).

At the same time, collections of exclusively newer material such as Bramley and Stainer's *Christmas Carols New and Old*, which provided the majority of the music for the first Nine Lessons and Carols service from Truro, slanted the definition of the carol towards a more liturgical and devotional format.<sup>179</sup>

Citing the existence of carol-singers of the kind associated with Hardy's Mellstock Quire, the introduction to Bramley and Stainer posits a need for 'some change of form' in order to tidy the carol up for church use.<sup>180</sup> The *Carols for Choirs* series, beginning in 1961, synthesised the best of these collections and provided new arrangements of both older and newer material. Almost sixty years on from the 'green book' now designated *Carols for Choirs* I, carol publishing accounts for a significant proportion of the musical output of OUP, Novello and Faber.

As a musical form, the Christmas carol is that which most readily bridges the gap between 'vernacular' and 'art' music, or music for congregational participation and music for specialist performance. Giles employs the word 'vernacular' in its literal sense to explore how macaronic carols- those which alternate Latin liturgical texts with translations or glosses in other languages (such as *In dulci jubilo* or Britten's *Hymn to the Virgin*)- have roots both inside

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<sup>178</sup> *Piae Cantiones* originated in Finland in 1582, and entered the English repertoire in 1910, after J.M. Neale was given a copy as a gift. It is the source of some of the best-loved Latin carols, among them *Personent hodie*, *In dulci jubilo*, and *Resonet in laudibus*.

<sup>179</sup> Bramley and Stainer (1871), reissued 1879.

<sup>180</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (London: Macmillan 1974)

and outside the church. The carol, in a sense, ‘speaks both languages’, both literally and culturally.<sup>181</sup>

Stevens’ seminal work on the mediaeval carol suggests that the burden-stanza form was fixed to the identity of the true carol by the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>182</sup> He links them to the French *virelai*, Italian *ballata* and *lauda*: as these names suggest, their deployment in processions and litanies retained the carol’s origins in forms of movement such as the dance. Shaw likewise underlines their origins in the dance, pointing out that ‘corolla’ or ‘caraula’ itself meant a ring-dance.<sup>183</sup> Other definitions point to simplicity, joyfulness, spontaneity and wonder.<sup>184</sup> In his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Carols*, Dearmer states that ‘the typical carol gives voice to common emotions in language that can be understood and music that can be shared by all’.<sup>185</sup>

If carols are, strictly speaking, ‘music that can be shared by all’, the more consciously populist approach of Rutter, Chilcott and Wilberg, following on from that of Willcocks, has inherited the mantle of the *true* carol, in a way which does not apply to the more demanding music of the King’s-style commission. Likewise, the *Carols for Choirs* collection deliberately arranged carols in such a way that they could be sung by congregations, rather than the ‘esoteric’ material in the *Oxford Book of Carols*. Newer collections such as Novello’s *Noel!* series have largely tended towards a kind of middle ground: the more accessible of the art-music kind of carol.

In chapter 1, we saw how King’s is deployed by opposing sides in the debates surrounding aesthetics, excellence and elitism in church music. It is certainly

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<sup>181</sup> Giles, *Church Music Quarterly* (December 2017), 14-17.

<sup>182</sup> Stevens (1970), xiii

<sup>183</sup> Shaw, (1923), 20-24; Dearmer argues that by the fourteenth century the word had shifted from the dance itself to the *tune* of the dance- to which words were then attached (Preface to the *Oxford Book of Carols*, vii).

<sup>184</sup> Coghlan (2016), 10, quotes the Victorian carol-collector W.W. Fyfe as saying that carols are ‘a song intended to mingle joy and wonder’.

<sup>185</sup> Dearmer (1928), xi.

arguable that through the popularity of *Carols for Choirs*, and especially the Willcocks descants, King's has been instrumental in taking them in an arguably slightly more specialised and certainly rather more polished, art-music direction than their origin would suggest. It can therefore be established that the divergence between 'church music' and 'other music' posited by Thomas is of very long standing, but that the carol is not the best illustration of that division. Since its appropriation by the church in the nineteenth century, in fact, the carol has largely swapped genre, its previous place as 'popular seasonal music' having been taken by secular songs from *Jingle Bells* to *Fairytale of New York*.<sup>186</sup>

The history of the carol has continued to develop. Along with the consistent use of familiar tunes to convey Christian words, thus enabling the story to be told and retained by succeeding generations, more recent innovations include the descant, decorating and building on that familiar tune in a way that stretches more able singers without putting off less confident voices. Gant observes that descants were invented by nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholics.<sup>187</sup> Yet it was the descendants of the same Anglo-Catholic tradition who produced the *Oxford Book of Carols* of 1928, which attempted to reclaim the carol from the 'synthetic' material specially written for Victorian or Edwardian sensibilities, as in Bramley and Stainer. It also returned to a wider definition of the carol as a seasonal song, not merely for Christmas. In 1928, the year of both the Oxford volume and the first King's radio broadcast, Walford Davies regretted the 'decline of the carol' and the 'inertia which prevents experimentation' with the form.<sup>188</sup> He need not have worried.

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<sup>186</sup> A point also made by Gant (2014) and Coghlan (2016).

<sup>187</sup> Gant (2014), 218.

<sup>188</sup> Coghlan (2016), 148.

### 3.2 What is a carol service?

The preface to the 1879 edition of Bramley and Stainer remarks that ‘the time-honoured and delightful custom of...celebrating the Birthday of the Holy Child seems, with some change of form, to be rapidly gaining ground’, including in cathedrals. Canterbury Cathedral held a Christmas Eve service in 1873, and Winchester had a carol service in 1890.<sup>189</sup> Newspaper accounts of the first Truro service stated that ‘a like service has been instituted in other cathedrals and large towns’, though without specifying what ‘like’ actually entailed.<sup>190</sup>

Gatens’ study of Victorian cathedral music refers to the ‘essential intimacy of the Anglican choral service’.<sup>191</sup> It was Milner-White’s explicit intention to turn that ‘intimacy’ or inwardness on its head: the Carol Service was to be a gift for the whole city, not just for members of the college in the way that the daily office was (though it can be argued that the distinction he intended has long since been lost, now that evensong at King’s is a tourist attraction in its own right). Part of the recent resurgence in popularity of choral evensong in cathedrals and colleges seems to be precisely that it does not demand active participation or a particular response; carol services have something of the same quality, while offering more opportunities to the congregation to sing, and less potential confusion regarding when to stand, sit or kneel.

The innate liturgical structure of the carol service is sufficiently clear and strong to contain even the least ostensibly carol-like of the commissions. At the same time, some of the commissions, especially those which have been repeated (either at King’s or elsewhere) have characteristics of the best liturgical music, creating a soundworld within which to explore the boundaries

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<sup>189</sup> Barrett (1993), 124-6.

<sup>190</sup> *West Briton Gazette*, December 1880. Similarly, W.J. Phillips (1922, vii) records how he established carol services at Westminster Abbey ‘which have been among the most largely attended of any special services’, suggesting that this was not a new phenomenon, but he does not describe their structure or content.

<sup>191</sup> Gatens (1986), 14.

of time and space: however simple, familiar or even banal the words, the sentiment they express is eternal and universal.

In the strict sense, if 'liturgy' is restricted to the order of the Mass or the divine office, carol services are not liturgy; but they do provide a simple liturgical structure, beginning with a bidding prayer and ending with a blessing, and centred around a recurrent pattern of readings alternating with musical items, both congregational and choral. These services are the liturgical form most likely to attract non-churchgoers; a certain predictability and familiarity in both structure and content is part of the appeal.

A.C. Benson's biography of his father states that the idea for a service at Truro including nine lessons interspersed with singing derives from 'ancient sources'.<sup>192</sup> Such sequences of lessons are clearly attested in the early church; although Egeria's account of worship in fourth-century Jerusalem does not mention such a sequence taking place at Epiphany, which was then more prominent in the calendar than Christmas itself, she does include references to sequences of lessons at *other* feasts.<sup>193</sup> In his survey of the Christian liturgical year, Pfatteicher states that 'the whole history of salvation is rehearsed in readings and song' at the Easter vigil: the resemblance to Milner-White's 'tale of the loving purposes of God' is inescapable.<sup>194</sup>

There is clear evidence for sequences of nine lessons at Matins on Sundays and major feast days in the mediaeval Church: John Harper refers to a Matins of Nine Lessons as 'one of the variant orders in secular Matins'.<sup>195</sup> Richard Hoppin outlines an order for Matins including nine lessons, set in three groups of three, each preceded by three psalms and followed by a responsory (see

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<sup>192</sup> Benson (1899), 471.

<sup>193</sup> <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/liturgy-in-4th-century-jerusalem-the-travels-of-egeria/> accessed 15/1/19. See also Jungmann (1959), chapter 21, on the development of Christmas as a distinct season.

<sup>194</sup> Pfatteicher (2014), 215ff.

<sup>195</sup> Harper (1991), 88.

Appendix 4).<sup>196</sup> The shape of Nine Lessons and Carols as originally conceived by Benson thus bears considerable resemblance to the overall structure identified by Hoppin: the responsories become the short benedictions which preceded each lesson until 1919, the psalms are replaced by hymns and carols. Both Hoppin's and Benson's orders culminate in a canticle, though the Te Deum proper to Matins becomes a Magnificat appropriate to an evening service before disappearing altogether from the Milner-White version in 1919. This again may have been due to a desire to make it less like a formal office, and more appropriate to the needs of the city.

Routley posits that the format of alternating lessons and music is based on the ancient service of Tenebrae, more usually connected with Holy Week, in which there were also nine lessons, 'interspersed with psalms and ending with the Benedictus'. He acknowledges that the musical and liturgical mood of the Christmas service is very different from that of Holy Week, but suggests that the alternating structure of music and lessons had already proven itself to be effective not only in telling a story, but also in creating a devotional atmosphere in which to contemplate it.<sup>197</sup>

What kind of music does a carol service require? A 1966 Audience Research project among listeners to that year's radio broadcast from King's revealed a divided response, which is still reflected more than 50 years later.<sup>198</sup> One or two of the respondents were apparently put off by a service they saw as 'traditional' and 'word-perfect' to the extent that 'it had ceased to have any deep meaning for them'; another group, by contrast, felt that 'the service seemed to be moving away from the usual pattern, and that the familiar, well-loved carols were being supplanted by modern ones which, in their opinion, were less joyful, and did not express the Christmas spirit nearly so well'. A

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<sup>196</sup> Hoppin (1978), 100, table 7.

<sup>197</sup> Routley (1968), 147.

<sup>198</sup> Audience Research Report for the BBC on 1966 service: KCAR 8/3/21/13-)

third group appreciated the mixture of old and new, but the strong reaction of the 'traditionalist' group is worth noting- not least because the tradition they were defending was at that point less than half a century old.

As Cleobury acknowledges, the fact that the King's Carol Service is 'iconic' does *not* mean that it should become a museum piece untouched by changes in culture and taste. It is built on traditional bedrock, but with new growth expressly encouraged. The *Oxford Book of Carols* identifies five types of carol, representing different stages of assimilation into the tradition.<sup>199</sup> In his article on the carol service in the *Musical Times*, Cleobury looks at the repertoire of a typical service and gives examples of each type:

- 1) Traditional carols with their original tune (*Nowell sing we*)
- 2) Traditional carol tunes set to other old texts (*Angels from the realms of glory*)
- 3) Modern words written for, or adapted to, a traditional tune (*O little town of Bethlehem*)
- 4) Traditional words set to a modern tune (Ord's *Adam lay y-bounden*)
- 5) Modern words and music (George Mackay Brown's *Fix one star at last*, set by Peter Maxwell Davies as the 1984 commission).<sup>200</sup>

The King's commissions obviously do not fall into the first three categories, and they are sometimes difficult to categorise neatly within the final two. All the music is necessarily new, but not all the texts are either modern or 'traditional'; poetry and sermons make their appearance alongside liturgical and devotional texts from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Counting the liturgical portion of the text to Swayne's *Winter Solstice Carol* (1998), thirteen of the commissions qualify in the fourth category, including two

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<sup>199</sup> Dearmer (1928), xv. The five types correspond to the five sections into which the book is divided.

<sup>200</sup> Cleobury (1988), 689.

settings of the same mediaeval text: Ades' *Fayrfax Carol* (1997) and Berkeley's *This Endernight* (2016).

Cleobury's article was published in 1988, but perhaps surprisingly, only four further commissions to date qualify as unambiguously by 'modern writers and composers' to add to the Maxwell Davies, because their text is exactly contemporary with the musical setting:

- *The Angels* (1994): Harvey/Taylor
- *Winter Solstice Carol* (1998): Swayne (although some of the text is liturgical, it is interspersed with his own words)
- *Offerings they brought of gold* (2010): Rautavaara
- *The Flight* (2015): Causton/Szirtes

The word 'traditional' is almost certain to be mentioned in any discussion of a carol service; as Day recounts, it was being applied to the service at King's as early as the 1930s. The precise boundaries of what constitutes 'traditional' are somewhat blurred in the context of a service which is still only 100 years old. However, the service contains a number of different levels of 'tradition'. It is impossible to think of one which does not include at least one example of every generation of the evolution of the carol: from the mediaeval era of the mystery play, through the seventeenth-century English of the King James Bible in the readings, to the Victorian rediscovery (or reinvention) of Christmas, as represented by most of the congregational items; to those items written within living memory but whose addition to the repertoire was so seamless that they seem to have been around forever, such as the Willcocks descants; and the commissions and other contemporary works, to underline that this is very much a living tradition.



### 3.3 The history and impact of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols: Truro 1880

As is now well known, the Nine Lessons and Carols format was not invented at King's. It originated in Truro in 1880, in the wooden shed on the site of the newly designated cathedral, then still under construction. Myth has it that this was as a way of trying to keep people out of the pubs on Christmas Eve; the first service of Nine Lessons and Carols began at 10pm rather than 3pm as it does now.<sup>201</sup> However, those associated with Truro now point out that the men of the choir had traditionally sung carols in the town on Christmas Eve, but in private homes, rather than in pubs.<sup>202</sup> At any rate, this tradition of carol-singing was brought back into church from 1878 at the instigation of the cathedral Succentor, Somerset Walpole.

Although the phenomenon of carol services as such can be traced back before this, Truro was the first to adopt the Nine Lessons and Carols format which has proved so enduring.<sup>203</sup> As we have seen, carol services *per se* were not new; it was the addition of 'nine tiny lessons' by Bishop Benson which created a successful liturgical framework for the music.<sup>204</sup> Before each lesson was a short spoken 'benediction', which were retained in the first King's service of 1918 but were subsequently dropped in favour of the one-sentence summary of the content of each reading: for example 'God tells sinful Adam that by his seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed'.

Significantly, the Truro service was known as 'nine lessons *with* carols', which suggests that the Biblical readings were the centre of the service; although Stephen Cleobury still maintains that the lessons are at the heart of the service

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<sup>201</sup> Nash (2014), 324, and Routley (1958), both make reference to this.

<sup>202</sup> Jeremy Summerly, *The Story of Nine Lessons and Carols* DVD

<sup>203</sup> See Barrett (1993), for details of the musical and liturgical life of nineteenth-century cathedrals.

<sup>204</sup> Nash, 324. The phrase 'nine tiny lessons' is from Benson's son, A.C. Benson, whose friendship with Milner-White resulted in the service's transposition to King's.

and the music has to serve the text, Milner-White's renaming of the service as 'Nine Lessons *and* Carols' created an equality between word and music.<sup>205</sup>

However, the music for the inaugural Truro service comprised only four choir carols, three extracts from *Messiah*, and two congregational hymns: *Bethlehem of noblest cities* (now considered more suitable to Epiphany than Christmas) and *O come all ye faithful*, which appears after the seventh lesson, the Prologue to St John's Gospel, now usually read as the ninth and final lesson.

For the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Truro service in 2015, the Director of Music, Christopher Gray, attempted to recreate as closely as possible the original order of service, which he found in the Cornwall county archives and reproduced in facsimile to accompany the commemorative CD of the 2015 service, though some questions about the precise content still remain unanswered.<sup>206</sup> For example, no setting is specified for the *Magnificat* at the end: Gray made an informed decision that a congregational setting to Anglican chant was intended, but still had to make a choice from among the chants available.<sup>207</sup>

The total of ten sung items, of which only seven were for the choir alone, contrasts sharply with the twenty which now constitute the service at King's. Cleobury comments that while the word is still paramount to the modern service, the musical choices made each year need to contribute something to the sense of progression through the story, illuminating and enlarging on each reading through music.<sup>208</sup> This is not necessarily the first impression created by the service in its modern iteration.

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<sup>205</sup> Cleobury (1988), 687, quotes Milner-White's view that 'the scriptures, not the carols, are the backbone' and goes on to use the phrase which so annoys Martin Thomas: 'the music [is the] handmaid of the liturgy'. See below, chapter 4.1.

<sup>206</sup> Gray also comments 'we haven't sought to reproduce the authentic *standard*' of the singing from 1880: the clear implication is that standards have risen considerably, a point which will be revisited in detail in chapter 3.

<sup>207</sup> The chosen chant is by J.L. Hopkins. When the same order was adopted at King's in 1918, the *Magnificat* was sung to the *Collegium Regale* setting in F by Charles Wood.

<sup>208</sup> Coghlan (2016), ix.

Many of the carols sung at that first Truro service are still in use today, albeit in different arrangements; *In dulci jubilo*, for example, was sung to the arrangement by Thomas Helmore in Bramley and Stainer's *Christmas Carols New and Old*, rather than the Richard Pearsall arrangement which appeared in every King's service between 1983 and 2016.<sup>209</sup> Although the 1880 repertoire now looks unadventurous, the Bramley and Stainer collection was then barely a year old; it can therefore be argued that the inclusion of new material alongside the traditional has *always* been normal practice at carol services.

Many of Bramley and Stainer's carols have not survived to form part of the contemporary repertoire. The material chosen for the first Nine Lessons and Carols, however, is a different matter.<sup>210</sup> Apart from the benedictions, the only item from the initial Truro order which has *not* survived into common usage in some form in the 21st century is another Bramley and Stainer carol, Charles Hutchins' *Once again O blessed time*.

- *Musical extract 6: Once again O blessed time (Truro Cathedral Choir/Gray)*

According to Routley's *English Carol*, 'the general dispersion of this rite' beyond Truro took place when Benson became archbishop of Canterbury in 1883.<sup>211</sup> He was the last Archbishop to live at Addington Palace, later the home of the RSCM, and he took an adapted form of the Nine Lessons and Carols with him to Addington parish church; all the music was congregational, still from Bramley and Stainer. Routley gives a sample order; again, all but one of the carols (the once-popular 'Like silver lamps') are still in the repertoire today.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> The preface to Bramley and Stainer (1879 edn.) underlines the purpose of the collection: to create 'a single source, easily accessible'. To this end it contains carols which 'from their legendary, festive or otherwise less serious character, are unfit for use within the Church'.

<sup>210</sup> The Truro commemorative CD is not the only one to have recorded Bramley and Stainer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See also *The Victorian Carol*, Choir of Magdalen College, Oxford/Harper (Abbey Recordings 1990)

<sup>211</sup> Routley (1958), 230.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

### 3.4 The Nine Lessons and Carols at King's

The Anglican choral revival of the nineteenth century had rediscovered plainsong and polyphony, with the purpose of adorning the liturgy and creating a sense of the 'beauty of holiness'. Unlike the Nine Lessons and Carols, however, the intention behind the choral revival was not to *alter* the liturgy itself. The carol service as devised by Benson and Milner-White was a careful harnessing of tradition, but in order to create something new.

Until 1918, Christmas Eve at King's had been marked with Evensong followed by the singing of carols.<sup>213</sup> It was on his return to King's from service as an army chaplain that Eric Milner White, who had experienced the Truro service through his friendship with the son of Truro's bishop, Edward Benson, reached the conclusion that something different was needed. Milner-White was aware that existing liturgies did not meet the emotional need of a people whose every certainty had been shaken by the events of World War I. His intention was to reintroduce them to the story of the Incarnation of Christ in a simple and direct way through words and music. He wanted the service not only to communicate with undergraduates and fellows returning from the trenches, but also to serve as the college's gift to the city, many of whose population had also served and died. It was in this context that the Bidding Prayer, with its invocation of those who are now 'on another shore, and in a greater light', took shape. Although different forms of wording for the bidding prayer have been tried at various points in the service's history, the form currently in use has now reverted to that created for the 1918 service.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> The separation between the office and the carols corroborates Harper's speculation that in the mediaeval church carols might have been sung in place of the *Benedicamus Domino*, by way of a quasi-liturgical ending (1991, 291).

<sup>214</sup> For example, the formulation 'because this of all things would rejoice his heart' was omitted for a number of years in the 1990s, before being reinstated in 2005.

The order of service for the 1918 debut of the King's service is as follows:<sup>215</sup>

*Carol: Up, good Christen folk, and listen*

*Hymn: Once in royal David's city (in procession)*

*Bidding Prayer*

*Lord's Prayer*

*Hymn: A great and mighty wonder*

*Lesson 1 (Genesis 3: 8-15)*

*Carol: A virgin most pure*

*Lesson 2 (Genesis 22: 15-18)*

*Carol: Blessed be that Maid Marie*

*Lesson 3 (Isaiah 9: 2,6,7)*

*Carol: As up the wood I took my way*

*Lesson 4 (Micah 5: 2-4)*

*Hymn: While shepherds watched their flocks by night*

*Lesson 5 (Luke 1: 26-33, 38)*

*Carol: Unto us is born a son*

*Lesson 6 (John 1: 1-14)*

*Hymn: O come all ye faithful*

*Lesson 7 (Luke 2: 8-16)*

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<sup>215</sup> King's Archive CSV 103 contains a complete set of orders of service from 1919 onwards, with a photocopy of the order from 1918.

*Carol: O night peaceful and blest*

*Carol: Childing of a maiden bright*

*Lesson 8 (Matthew 1: 1-11)*

*Carol: In dulci jubilo (arr. Pearsall)*

*Lesson 9 (Galatians 4: 4-7)*

*Carol: The first Nowell*

*Magnificat (Charles Wood: metrical)*

*Salutation*

*Collect for Christmas Day*

*The Blessing*

*Recessional Hymn: Hark the herald angels sing*

As now, it contains a mixture of congregational hymns, choir carols, and readings from Scripture. The order of the carols has changed slightly, and the majority are from a single source, the *Cowley Carol Book*, while congregational items were taken from the *English Hymnal*.

From the beginning, the King's carol service has made use of the newest available publications as well as older material. In 1918 and 1919, material from the newly available *Cowley Carol Book* (1916) was already being performed. While the emphasis at Truro was on newly written material, King's has from the beginning maintained a balance between innovation and arrangements of older material which rooted the service in musical history. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is also habitual for the order of service to contain references to the musical inheritance of King's itself: 'Daddy' Mann's arrangement of *Once in Royal David's City*, Ord's *Adam lay y-bounden*, Ledger's *Sussex Carol* and *I saw three ships*,

arrangements and descants by Willcocks and Cleobury all recur while the commissions, for the most part, do not.

The order of several of the lessons has changed from that of 1918, as has the identity of those chosen to read them, but the sequence has remained unaltered since 1959. At Truro, John I was the seventh lesson; subsequent readings from Galatians 4 and I John 5 develop the sequence from a narrative account of the Nativity into reflections on 'sonship' and identity in Christ. When the service was adapted for King's in 1918, John I was the sixth lesson, followed by Luke's and Matthew's accounts of Christ's birth, and again culminating in Galatians 4. In 1919, however, John I became the 'supreme climax' of the service, for which the congregation stood.<sup>216</sup> It has remained in that position ever since, a change which was subsequently adopted by Truro as well as countless other imitators .

As at Truro, the 1918 service ended with the Magnificat, thus creating a bridge between the formal structure of evensong and that of the carol service. The *Magnificat* was dropped from 1919 onwards and 'will not be restored'.<sup>217</sup> Its removal raises the question of the liturgical status of carol services. The bidding prayer, readings, intercession and blessing ensure that the carol service has a clear liturgical *structure*, but without a canticle it is not a formal office: while Milner-White saw it as an 'occasional' service (that is, separate from the prescribed round of canonical worship, to which he hoped to add 'colour, warmth and delight'), it is now more readily identifiable as a Service of the Word.<sup>218</sup> Its derivation from the structure of the mediaeval monastic office is clear enough to connect it to the tradition.

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<sup>216</sup> Nash (2014), 337. Other changes to the readings are detailed by Nash on p.339. Routley (1958) also tracks these changes and contrasts them with the order adopted at Addington, then home to the RSCM, which preserved the original Truro order unaltered.

<sup>217</sup> Cleobury (1988), 689; though Andrew Carter's *Mary's Magnificat* has been sung at least once.

<sup>218</sup> Nash (2014), 333.

Routley comments that ‘of the carols sung in 1919, only one (*In dulci jubilo*) was sung in 1957’.<sup>219</sup> This change was implemented slowly, with one or two items a year being replaced. One immediately noticeable change is that the 1918 service did not begin with the solo verse of *Once in Royal David’s City*, which epitomises the entire Nine Lessons and Carols for many listeners. Every service since 1919 has begun with *Once in Royal*, though it took a few more years to introduce the solo verse.<sup>220</sup> Andrew Nethsingha, Director of Music at Truro from 1994-2002, suggests that the ‘fragility’ of the solo treble voice in this context represents the fragility of the Christ Child.<sup>221</sup> Following a war in which so many had died, the poignancy of the treble sound also represents not just the fragility of a single voice, but of an entire generation.<sup>222</sup>

It was arguably only when the service was first broadcast on radio at Christmas 1928 that the Nine Lessons and Carols from King’s began to realise its full potential as a symbol of, and resource for, English choral music. Day describes the process by which the King’s Nine Lessons became accepted, surprisingly rapidly, as a tradition; it was being so described in the press as early as 1932, when it had only previously been broadcast three times (there was no broadcast in 1930) and had only been performed at King’s for fourteen years.<sup>223</sup>

The advent of television developed that potential yet further. The first televised Nine Lessons and Carols took place in 1954, only three years before Willcocks’ return to King’s. It was not followed up for a number of years, and did not become an annual event until the 1990s, by which time it was an

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<sup>219</sup> Routley (1958), 231. Long (1971, 352) comments that Pearsall is regarded as a ‘one-work composer’, but that the one work in question is deserving of its place in the repertoire ‘wherever choirs are accomplished enough to sing it’.

<sup>220</sup> Chris Gray comments that he is ‘grateful to King’s’ for this innovation, which they have happily borrowed back. The 1880 Truro service did not begin with any musical item, but with the Our Father and the usual Evensong responses; the first carol was not sung until after the first lesson.

<sup>221</sup> ‘Truro Perspectives’ from *Story of Nine Lessons and Carols* DVD (2015).

<sup>222</sup> Ashley (2009), 27.

<sup>223</sup> Day (2018), 4.



entirely separate entity from the Christmas Eve service broadcast live on radio. The 1964 record of carols from King's under Willcocks, which utilises a slightly different set of Bible readings from those associated with the Christmas Eve service, perhaps represents the first real move towards the distinct *Carols from King's* format.<sup>224</sup>

In 1954, the choral repertoire for the Nine Lessons and Carols service was not particularly adventurous. They included extracts from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* and a seventeenth-century Italian hymn to the Virgin<sup>225</sup>, both sung in English; *In dulci jubilo* (arr. Pearsall) is sung to the macaronic text in Latin and English. Newer developments were represented by some arrangements and harmonisations by Ord, but Cornelius' *Three Kings* was the most modern choir item.

In the 1954 broadcast, the choir was not performing music beyond the reach of any good amateur choir; by contrast, some of the more recent commissions demand a professional or quasi-professional level of vocal and often instrumental competence.<sup>226</sup> The choir is already demonstrating the exceptional clarity of diction and articulation which has become so firmly associated with the 'King's sound', but the repertoire itself is not unduly demanding by modern standards.

The congregational carols were sung without choir descants, except for Alan Gray's to 'While shepherds watched', in verses 2 and 6, where the trebles 'become' angels: first telling the terrified shepherds not to fear, then singing to the glory of God in the final verse. Solo work was fairly limited: the service began with the now traditional treble solo in *Once in Royal David's City*, but the

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<sup>224</sup> CD 15 in the *Complete Argo Recordings* box set. It is entitled 'as sung in the chapel on Christmas Eve 1964', but the readings are completely different from those listed in the actual order of service (CSV 103).

<sup>225</sup> Listed in the order of service only as 'Anon., Italian, 1694).

<sup>226</sup> A point acknowledged by Willcocks: 'the music which we [Willcocks, Ledger and Cleobury] included in our services was much more difficult than the music which is on that DVD [of the 1954 broadcast]' (Owen, 2008, 145)

only further solos were the recitative (tenor) and the angel (treble again) in 'Break forth O beauteous heavenly light' from the *Christmas Oratorio*, and the baritone in Cornelius' *Three Kings*.<sup>227</sup>

The 1958 recording demonstrates few stylistic changes from the Ord recording of 1954, though the organ registration is notably lighter and the rhythms are crisper. Willcocks makes his own arrangements of the *Sussex Carol*, *God rest ye merry* and *Away in a manger* (with treble solo in verse 2), but otherwise the repertoire is largely the same as in 1954. The English-language version of the *Christmas Oratorio* is still being used, and no other foreign language carols are included on the recording apart from the Pearsall *In dulci jubilo*.

One obvious change in performance practice between 1954 and 1958, and one which is inextricably associated with King's, is the evolution of the carol descant. Although the service is now unimaginable without them, Sir David Willcocks revealed to the American musicologist William Owen that, when he took over as Director of Music at King's in 1957, 'there were no descants that I knew of for *O come all ye faithful* or *Hark! The herald-angels sing*'. Willcocks' perception that it was 'dull... always to have the hymns just sung in unison' was to change the carol service, and with it the whole flavour of Christmas choral music, for ever.<sup>228</sup>

Although successive directors of music at King's have since made their own arrangements and written their own descants, it is still the 'Willcocks descants', now almost 60 years old, which have become 'traditional' in their turn, not least in the USA where they are seen as 'the *proper* descants'.<sup>229</sup> In a

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<sup>227</sup> It is still true that there is less emphasis on solo work than there might be in a concert performance, but several of the commissions include extensive solos for one or more voice parts: see chapter 5.

<sup>228</sup> Owen (2008), 141.

<sup>229</sup> Quote from letter to Stephen Cleobury, following a carol service in which the choir had sung some descants of his own (KCAR/8/3/21/13-

conversation with David Willcocks and Stephen Cleobury about their respective experiences, Philip Ledger recounts how, having succeeded Willcocks as Director of Music in 1974, he presented the choir with some descants he had written for his first Christmas Eve, only to be met with a polite but firm ‘I’m sorry, sir, but we sing Mr Willcocks’ descants!’ Resolution was only achieved due to a quick-thinking senior chorister who persuaded the others that ‘every director of music writes his own descants!’; and this has, subsequently, proved to be the case.<sup>230</sup>

In the recording of the 1958 service, when Willcocks was still new in post, his own descants are clearly still in a transitional stage of development. *Once in royal David’s city* is sung without descant, but *Hark the herald-angels sing* is almost in the form made familiar through *Carols for Choirs* 1: the descant of 1958 includes a couple of bars of repeated quavers, whose effect is slightly fussy compared to the later version. Recordings from 1964 onwards have the fully developed descants in their final form. So these historical recordings provide evidence of a period of experimentation by Willcocks in the evolution of the choir descant.

*Musical extracts 7-9 compare successive versions of ‘Sing choirs of angels’, taken from the complete Argo recordings:*

- *Track 2 (1954), King’s College Choir/Ord, without descant*
- *Track 3 (1958), King’s College Choir/Willcocks, with ‘transitional’ descant, sung in Latin*
- *Track 4 (1964), King’s College Choir/Willcocks, with descant in its final ‘Carols for Choirs’ form*

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<sup>230</sup> *Carols from King’s* DVD (Argo 2000). In 2015, the year of Willcocks’ death, the carol service reverted to his *Carols for Choirs* descants in tribute.

The now iconic descant to *O come all ye faithful*, absent in 1954 under Ord, is sung in 1958 in Latin (*Gloria in excelsis Deo*), against the vernacular ‘Glory to God’ of the rest of the choir. The repeated ‘O come’ motif in the refrain has not yet been added- the trebles sing the melody of the first two lines of the refrain and only revert to the descant in the final line, again in Latin.

Philip Ledger recalls how this descant was written on a train returning from a Bach Choir rehearsal, quoting from the Gloria of *Ding dong merrily on high*. Willcocks’ explanation for this borrowing was to say ‘I thought to myself, what would angels be singing in heaven? They’d be singing ‘Gloria, hosanna in excelsis’.’<sup>231</sup> In 1938, Scholes began his entry on carols in the *Oxford Companion to Music* with a reference to ‘the first Christmas carol’, meaning the song of the angels. He went on: ‘its inspiring words (though not, alas! its tune) have been preserved’.<sup>232</sup> Perhaps Willcocks’ descant solves the mystery of what that ‘first carol’ really sounded like.

DESCANT

ALL OTHER VOICES

ORGAN

6. Sing, choirs of an - gels, Sing in ex - ul - ta - tion,

Gt. + Sw.

[Tuba or Solo reed]

Ped.

Fig. 3: Descant to ‘Sing choirs of angels’ from *Carols for Choirs I*.

<sup>231</sup> Owen (2008), 166.

<sup>232</sup> Scholes (1938), 139.

### 3.5 Carols from King's: an unattainable ideal?

King's first toured abroad (to Scandinavia) in 1936. Krieg's overview of Anglican church music for a German audience treats the Nine Lessons and Carols as 'a national event'<sup>233</sup>. For many years now, its reach has been not only national, but global. The King's commissions include work from Finland, Estonia, Australia and the United States, and the service is broadcast to over 300 radio stations in the US alone, as well as the BBC and the World Service.<sup>234</sup> As Pritchard comments: 'it can sometimes feel as though all roads lead back to King's'.<sup>235</sup> Any book or article about carols will mention it, and it is rare for any book or article about King's not to mention its carol service.<sup>236</sup>

When *Carols for Choirs* was published in 1961, edited by Willcocks with Reginald Jacques and then with John Rutter, it represented a change in the approach to carol music which has also helped to spread the reputation of King's, and in particular its association with carols. The traditional, folk-based carol repertoire was rejuvenated and given the gloss of a professional arrangement. Yet it also contained a typical running order for other choirs to emulate in their own churches; more importantly, it made available a much wider range of seasonal repertoire, in a form accessible even to choirs of very average ability, with the addition of descants and harmonies for the more adventurous.

Far from being the elitist gesture claimed by Boyce-Tillman, then, *Carols for Choirs* was an attempt to make the repertoire performed at King's and familiar to so many from the radio and TV broadcasts, available in written form *for other choirs to sing*. At the same time, Willcocks was writing descants and

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<sup>233</sup> Krieg (2007), 34.

<sup>234</sup> Statistics from <http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/events/chapel-services/nine-lessons.html> (accessed 25/6/18).

<sup>235</sup> Pritchard, *Independent on Sunday*, 6/12/2015.

<sup>236</sup> Interestingly, however, the DVD *The Boast of King's* (1980), which focuses on the choir under Philip Ledger and includes interviews with a young John Butt and Gerald Finley, makes no mention of the carol service.

making new arrangements in order to create more of a challenge for more able choirs out of the same repertoire, while remaining within the range of more modest performers.

In *Carols for Choirs*, Willcocks and his colleagues made available a vast new repertoire of carol arrangements which both satisfied the demands of professional musicians and musicologists, but remained within the reach of amateur choirs without a dilution of standards. In this way, too, King's became the benchmark for choirs which could never hope to equal its resources, but who were inspired by the availability of recordings and published music to extend their own repertoire.

The King's commissions are designed expressly for the choir to sing and *not* intended for congregational participation. Although this is true to the original structure of the service, which made relatively little concession to public participation, by this definition some of the King's commissions are not technically carols at all: Coghlan argues that many of the new commissions are less carols than 'Christmas anthems', art music designed to be sung by professional choirs in churches and cathedrals.<sup>237</sup> Length, elaborate setting of text, variation between solo and chorus passages, range of textures, descants, use of organ and/or other instruments, all extend the definition and the technical requirements beyond the origins of the carol genre. Cleobury claims that there is a correlation between those carols which have entered into the repertoire more widely and a classic carol structure (burden/refrain format and some connection to song, dance or lullaby)- and that their ability to bridge the perceived gap between 'art music' and populist taste is the reason for their success.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Coghlan (2016), 176. In fact, Richard Rodney Bennett's second commission, *On Christmas Day to my heart* (1999) is published by Novello as 'anthem for SATB'.

<sup>238</sup> Personal communication 23/6/17. See below, chapter 5.

Coghlan argues that the ‘underground’ carol of the Puritan era, sung on the streets and with little connection to the Nativity, is now better represented by *Fairytale of New York* than by the ‘art music’ carol associated with King’s. Mindful of MacMillan’s concern that liturgical music should never become escapist, however, the aim of the King’s commissions is to ensure that carols are not merely seen as a fundamentally backward-looking genre, concerned with nostalgia and comfort rather than challenge. It was precisely this which provoked Richard Causton’s decision in 2015 to write *The Flight*. His carol, which alternates a calm refrain (‘May those who travel light/Find shelter on the flight/May Bethlehem/Give peace to them’) with much more angular, anguished verses centring on Jesus as refugee in Egypt, sets a poem by another former refugee, George Szirtes, at the heart of the migration crisis in summer 2015, thus bringing the Biblical narrative into close relationship with the major story of 21<sup>st</sup> century life.<sup>239</sup>

The very nature of the carol means that it is probably the least likely of all musical genres to inspire innovative new techniques: carol services are almost deliberately designed around an appeal to nostalgia and familiarity. So the very fact that exciting new carol music is now being commissioned from the best contemporary composers, church-based or not, also means that it has transcended its origins and sits between tidy divisions.

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<sup>239</sup> *The Flight* (OUP X612, 2015).

## **Chapter Four: Issues in composing and commissioning new music for the Anglican choral tradition**

Bob Chilcott, a former King's chorister who is now among the most prolific composers of new carols, has remarked that 'amateurs and professionals alike are very open to new music'.<sup>240</sup> During the course of this study I have repeatedly encountered a desire among church musicians to develop the tradition, rather than preserve it in aspic: they share a determination that 'church music' must not become a musical blind alley, where developments taking place elsewhere do not penetrate. It was Cleobury's desire to ensure that 'church music' contributed to the maintenance of the highest possible standards, by engaging with the best available modern exponents of composition whether or not they were experienced in writing for the liturgy, which led to the custom of commissioning a new carol every year. Excellence in execution needed to be paired with excellence of material, and a facility with the best repertoire of the past was to be balanced with a readiness to push back any boundaries which would have enabled church music to exist in isolation from stylistic developments. It is to a consideration of commissioning for the church in general, and King's in particular, that we now turn.

This chapters will examine in more detail the process of commissioning and some of the factors which determine whether, and to what extent, a piece is absorbed into the repertoire. As we saw in chapter I, the commissioning policy at King's demonstrates that interesting and innovative composers are willing to write for the Anglican liturgy, regardless of their own religious affiliation or previous experience in writing for the church. In order to set the King's commissions in the context of other developments in church music since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, this chapter will explore some other high profile commissioning projects undertaken for cathedral and collegiate choirs.

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<sup>240</sup> Pritchard, *Independent on Sunday* 6/12/2015.



Reference will also be made to the experience of composers and performers of church music in responding to expectations about new repertoire.

It was not possible to employ precisely the same methodology in questioning all those who agreed to contribute to this study; every commissioning process is different, and responds to the needs of a particular choir, project or occasion. *Choirbook for the Queen* is an exception: it was not commissioned for one choir or one liturgical occasion, and the parameters of the commissioning process changed over time. In addition, although I was able to speak to more than one member of the editorial board for the *Choirbook*, I was asked to keep some of their responses confidential and unattributed. For this reason the research questions which applied to the other examples of commissioning needed to be handled differently in respect of the section of the thesis pertaining to the *Choirbook*. In each case, the date of the relevant correspondence or conversation is given for reference.

Although the questions put to correspondents varied depending on circumstance, they included some or all of the following:

- *What brief did you/do you give to composers? What limitations, if any, do you place on them?*
- *Are they involved in any way in the rehearsal process, and what do you do if revision is needed?*
- *Who is on your wish list for a commission? Is there anyone you would not ask (and if so, why)?*
- *Which of the commissions have become part of your ongoing repertoire? Are you aware of any which have entered the mainstream repertoire beyond your particular choir? What do you think are the factors which affect that process?*

#### 4.1 Composing for the liturgy: process, context and text

Michael Nicholas, formerly organist at St Matthew's Northampton and then Norwich Cathedral, has a long history as a champion of new music in church. His unease with some aspects of Thomas' anti-utilitarian approach to new music is balanced by a desire, shared with Cleobury and other directors of music in cathedrals and colleges, to ensure that music for the liturgy is both composed and performed to the highest possible standard.<sup>241</sup>

Nicholas is clear that the context for which a piece is written should not make a difference to the craft and skill which goes into its composition, but it may well affect the process of composition in other ways; for example stipulations about length, range, an emphasis on ensemble rather than on individual virtuosity, or in the choice and use of appropriate text. In the case of carol services, with the possible exception of the King's Nine Lessons, Nicholas is particularly aware that 'most of those attending don't come for the music', which means that introducing new material can be problematic. At the same time, he is keen to demonstrate that liturgical music can stretch people and change attitudes. He comments that for the majority of non-specialists, perceptions of what is 'new' or 'modern' in church music are no different to those towards other branches of the classical canon- if, as he suggests, the majority still see *Rite of Spring* as an example of advanced modernity, then it is unrealistic to expect church music to adopt more experimental forms!

Nicholas has always been keen to challenge this view: his experience with both a parish and then a cathedral choir (which for a number of years hosted a festival of new music for the liturgy, until a more cautious chapter became uncomfortable with its direction), was that it is possible to build a choir in which performing difficult music becomes part of the atmosphere. This then attracts others to hear what is being written and learn from it, both as

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<sup>241</sup> Personal communication 17/8/16.

composers, performers and congregation, so that the tradition is renewed from within.

Nicholas likens the *process* of commissioning to ‘visiting a bespoke tailor’. In his experience, the composer might wish to visit the building and hear the choir *in situ* before writing for it. Cleobury and Zeeman’s article ‘The Sound of the Chapel’ brings together a number of composers, performers and clergy who have negotiated the particular challenges of responding to the King’s acoustic.<sup>242</sup> Vocal precision, clearly enunciated consonants and disciplined intonation are all consistently required: if they are neglected, or the balance or placing within the building is mismanaged, the result will be, as Judith Weir memorably describes it, ‘aural porridge’.<sup>243</sup> The King’s commissions overwhelmingly reflect this, with the majority demonstrating a strong emphasis on rhythmic precision.

Choice of text may be a matter for discussion: Nicholas remarks that composers (particularly but not exclusively those with no personal faith) may not be happy to set the particular text which a choir director has in mind, but may be willing to negotiate or offer an alternative. Cleobury agrees with Nicholas that the ability of the music to illustrate and bring out the text is central to the process of carol composition, as it is in any form of choral writing. In the context of the King’s service, there are obvious limits to the degree of freedom over choice of text, because they do have to be suitable for a very specific liturgical moment, and complement or illustrate a given series of Biblical texts.<sup>244</sup>

Bouteneff’s reflection on Arvo Pärt’s music contains an interesting section on text-setting and the relationship between text and music.<sup>245</sup> The majority of

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<sup>242</sup> Massing and Zeeman (2014), 364-7.

<sup>243</sup> Weir, *ibid.*, 364. See below, chapter 4.2, for Roxanna Panufnik’s similar response to Westminster Cathedral.

<sup>244</sup> Cleobury (1988).

<sup>245</sup> Bouteneff (2015), 57ff.

Pärt's works are set to text, and the majority of those texts are sacred: yet his wordless music (for example *Spiegel im Spiegel* or *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*) has proven as evocative of the spirit as his more overtly religious work: Bouteneff quotes one listener as saying 'I am not a religious person, but I have always said that if anything could possibly make me so, it would be Pärt's music'.<sup>246</sup>

The way in which the music interacts with the nine Scripture readings is central to planning the repertoire for the Nine Lessons and Carols service. In his memorandum on the history of the service, Milner-White was clear that the readings were integral to the structure: 'their liturgical order and pattern is the strength of the service and prevents it from becoming a recital of carols rather than an act of worship', while the carols offer an opportunity for the congregation to respond to their message.<sup>247</sup> While it is the music which attracts most attention, the readings are for Milner-White the 'backbone' of the service, a *cantus firmus* to which the carols offered a counterpoint; without them, the carols on their own risked descending to the status of a concert.<sup>248</sup> The carols enlarge and comment on aspects of the unfolding story (for example, the way in which *Adam lay y-bounden*, often but not exclusively presented in Boris Ord's version, reflects theologically on the consequences of human sinfulness in Genesis). For this reason, mention will be made of the position in the service given to each of the new commissions (see Appendix I: for the readings themselves see p.85). A placement after the eighth reading (Matthew 2: 1-12, 'the wise men are led by a star to Jesus'; the last one to recount part of the story of the Incarnation, before the climactic 'unfolding of the mystery' in John 1) may free the composer to take a more general approach, rather than concentrating on one aspect of the Christmas narrative;

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>247</sup> Milner-White, KCA, Cambridge.coll/21/1 (1952), 2.

<sup>248</sup> Routley (1958, 250), quotes an explanatory statement by Milner-White on the development of the King's service.

this may have made it easier for composers who are not themselves Christian or churchgoing to engage with the process of composing for this context.<sup>249</sup>

This point will be expanded in chapter 5.

In a letter preserved in the King's archive, Peter Sculthorpe comments on the difficulty of expressing the whole meaning of the text in a short setting. His commission *The birthday of thy King* (1988) is based on a text by Henry Vaughan, but Sculthorpe needed to cut some of the words in order not to exceed the required length of 'two-and-a-half or three minutes': nevertheless he feels that he has 'been able to keep the sense and the drama of the Vaughan poem' while honouring the time constraints.<sup>250</sup>

Carl Vine comments that in setting the text for his commissioned carol, *Ring Out, Wild Bells* (2012), he felt a need to move away from previous settings of the same text which 'generally squeezed the text into repetitive bouncing triplet rhythms. That isn't how I read the words'.<sup>251</sup> However, he does not allow the text to confine him: the emphasis is on rhythm, but 'without the repetitive verse structure' associated with the carol.

In his exuberant *Christmas Carol* (2002), Robin Holloway acknowledges that 'seeking out unhackneyed texts, I found such attractive material in the byways that I couldn't resist weaving together from it a composite tapestry, then setting the lot!'<sup>252</sup> He ended up with a rich mixture of liturgical, biblical and poetic references, which are reflected by equally numerous musical quotations.

Many carol texts lend themselves to atmospheric word-painting: one of the most effective is Chilcott's *Shepherd's Carol* (commissioned for *BBC Carols from*

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<sup>249</sup> It is interesting to note that there are very few, if any, musical treatments of the ninth lesson, John 1: 1-14, 'St John unfolds the mystery of the Incarnation'. The beauty of the prose would lend itself to a musical setting, but it is arguably too theologically complex to be easily expressed in carol form.

<sup>250</sup> Letter to Stephen Cleobury in the King's archive (24/6/88) KCAR 8/3/21/13-

<sup>251</sup> Carl Vine, programme note to *Ring Out, Wild Bells* (Faber 2012)

<sup>252</sup> Composer's note to *Christmas Carol* (Boosey and Hawkes 2002).

King's, 2000) which speaks of 'a silence more lovely than music': the text at that point fades into humming, followed by a quaver rest of silence across all the voice parts. Causton's *The Flight* (2015) deliberately uses the perceived impersonal quality of the English treble tone- marked 'cold' for extra emphasis- to illustrate the detachment of border guards and the dehumanising effect of forced migration.

In the context of a carol service, because many of those attending or listening will not be regular worshippers, there may be a more strongly felt need for music which will help them understand the Biblical narrative and their own response to it. In a number of Victorian carols, the theology is questionable at best: 'Christian children all must be/mild, obedient, good as he' bears very little resemblance to the sole glimpse of Jesus' childhood in the Gospels (the twelve-year-old Jesus, arguing with his parents when they fail to understand why he stayed behind in the Temple in Jerusalem, is far more plausibly human).

Similarly, the infamous assertion 'No crying he makes' is a denial of Jesus' humanity which is contrary to the whole message of Christmas- that in the Incarnation, God became fully and completely human without compromising his divinity. Warlock's *Bethlehem Down*, despite being written in profoundly secular circumstances, manages to convey some equally profound theological truths in its exploration of the interplay between Christ's humble birth, the manner of his death, and his kingship. The melody is in a wistful minor, echoing the lullaby mentioned in the text, but also foretelling the sleep of death following the crucifixion. Rubbra's *Dormi Jesu* creates the same wistful effect, but without the gathering menace implicit in Warlock's carol.

The King's commissions vary in their approach to text-setting. Almost none are directly biblical, and a few are only peripherally related to the nativity, if at all- but the theology they espouse is almost always more demanding than that of the congregational items, providing opportunities to engage at different

levels with the narrative. Some invite the listener to participate in or observe the events described: Dove's *Three kings* (2000) provides a king for every age group to identify with, matched by a gradual slowing of the pace of the music in each successive verse, almost as if to mark the ageing process. In Paulus' *Pilgrim Jesus* (1996), the listener is invited to participate much more actively, by recreating the events of the first Christmas in their own life ('in the manger of my body'). The same effect is sought in Judith Bingham's *God would be born in thee* (2004).

Two of the commissions - Ades' *Fayrfax Carol* (1997) and Michael Berkeley's *This Endernight* (2016) set different versions of the same text, but treat it in completely different ways. Berkeley's is a textbook carol, a lullaby with a clear burden-refrain structure, a steady rhythm and a clear tonal centre; Ades' is virtuosic, chromatic and rhythmically complex. This is certainly not a new phenomenon. Older texts are no longer in copyright and can be adapted or rearranged at will. For example, the standard carol repertoire includes two quite different settings of Rossetti's poem *In the bleak midwinter*, by Darke and Holst. The *Choirbook for the Queen* adds a third, by John Casken, which is different again: each use the text in different ways to produce colour and mood. *Tomorrow shall be my dancing day* has also produced two contrasting settings: the Willcocks version (*Carols for Choirs* I, 203ff) is clearly a dance tune in 6/8, whereas John Gardner's version has more complex, staccato rhythms which would be difficult to dance to. At the same time, the Willcocks version demands divisi in all parts and adopts some more complex rhythms itself in verse 3, where the basses have the melody and the other parts sing decoration to the syllable 'ah' over the top, including a b'' in the treble part which would put it outside the competence of many amateur choirs.

## 4.2 James MacMillan: faith in composition

All the choral directors whom I approached for this study are themselves people of faith, so the relationship between music and liturgy is of key significance for them. However, they all agree that compositions commissioned expressly for liturgical use do not necessarily have to be written by composers with a personal faith; what matters is that they are written with a sensitivity for context.

James MacMillan is a composer whose personal commitment to the liturgy is well known, yet he has usually avoided being categorised primarily as a 'religious' composer, still less as a composer of 'church music' in the narrow sense. The Christian themes which are intrinsic to his music are not restricted to those pieces for liturgical use, nor do they limit their appeal to those who share his faith. MacMillan asserts that 'music is spiritual because it deals with truth'.<sup>253</sup> However, he is also concerned to ensure that, while his sources of inspiration are audible, they should not predominate in such a way as to alienate those who do not resonate with the liturgical tradition which informs his music. Even those pieces whose genesis is in chant, sacred themes and texts may be envisioned more as sacred concert music than for liturgical performance. Ben Nicholas, director of Merton College Choir, cites MacMillan's settings of the *Passions* as examples of this.

In the case of MacMillan's instrumental music, the distinction between sacred and secular is even more blurred.<sup>254</sup> Sacred themes and quotes from plainsong or other liturgical music appear in new forms, for example in his trumpet concerto which is given the name *Epiclesis* (Greek for the invocation of the Holy Spirit), or his percussion concerto, *Veni, veni Emmanuel*. Musical material

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<sup>253</sup> Lecture to University of York music department, 21/2/17.

<sup>254</sup> As discussed in chapter 1 above, Arnold (2014), Phillips (2005) and Mellers (2002) all acknowledge the difficulty of making this distinction, from a range of faith and musical perspectives.



with strong church associations is reimagined by being heard out of its original context; but it cannot reasonably be suggested that the quality of MacMillan's music suffers because of the source of his inspiration.

MacMillan's music is on a continuum of difficulty, from congregational (he himself directs a parish choir in Glasgow, and his congregational *St Anne's Mass* was written for them) to extremely challenging: his *Mass for John Henry Newman*, composed for the papal visit in 2010 to coincide with Newman's beatification, was criticised as trite, which is not a description anyone would apply to his opera scores.<sup>255</sup> Damian Thompson argues that the stylistic conservatism of MacMillan's introit for the same occasion, *Tu es Petrus*, earned him the disapproval of a liberal hierarchy because it equated to theological conservatism.<sup>256</sup> It is true that MacMillan's mass setting is more consciously accessible than the majority of his concert music: despite some characteristic semiquaver grace notes in the vocal line, he marks them as optional so as not to deter less dexterous voices.

More than twenty years later, MacMillan's response to being asked to compose for King's in 1995 is still one of pleasure and privilege. The only stipulations he was given were length (the finished carol is about seven minutes long), range (Treble I and Tenor I are consistently on a high tessitura, with frequent g's and a's), and divisi, specifically in the tenor part which he divides into three, plus a tenor solo towards the end. As a composer of faith he was instinctively able to engage with the liturgical and spiritual resonances of the service, without compromising his distinctive compositional voice.

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<sup>255</sup> The papal mass was described by one commentator as 'too consciously accessible: a folksong modality meeting tonality in a form similar to some of Vaughan Williams' more popular writing'; despite MacMillan's standing as a composer, this particular work was perhaps given less serious consideration than others of his works because of the specific context for which it was written.

<sup>256</sup> *Spectator*, 2010. Thompson's own conservatism is so deliberately contentious that it would be unwise to take this assessment entirely at face value.

Roxanna Panufnik, like MacMillan a practising Catholic, reflects on the experience of composing a Mass for Westminster Cathedral. For obvious reasons, a mass setting allows no flexibility in terms of the actual text, but it is one which has for her a profound meaning and resonance. She was able to use the opportunity to explore the liturgical text as ‘a great word-painting exercise’ and an opportunity to experiment with the limits and opportunities of sound in a building whose acoustic does not lend itself to complexity.<sup>257</sup>

Arvo Pärt, himself profoundly influenced by Orthodox spirituality although by no means all his music is written for sacred or liturgical settings, seems to suggest that the composer is a vessel for some external form of inspiration when he comments: ‘A composer is a musical instrument, and at the same time a performer on that instrument’.<sup>258</sup>

MacMillan, Panufnik and Pärt all respond to the compositional process both from a place of committed Christian faith and an understanding of the liturgical setting of the music. Jonathan Harvey, whose own beliefs were more akin to Buddhism than Christianity, was nonetheless able to set Christian texts, including liturgical texts, with sensitivity and imagination. The fact that Robert Saxton, whose background is Jewish, is happy to write for Christian liturgy (including the *Choirbook for the Queen*) demonstrates similarly that the ‘contract’ which exists between choir and congregation, as described by Arnold, need not necessarily include a shared faith.<sup>259</sup> The same could be said of the contract between composer, commissioner and performer. In both cases, however, it does have to include a sensitivity to context.

In Harvey’s case, the training he received as a chorister at St Michael’s Tenbury instilled in him a profound understanding of the relationship between music,

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<sup>257</sup> Darlington and Kreider (2003), 77.

<sup>258</sup> From Pärt’s diaries: quoted in Bouteneff (2015), 223.

<sup>259</sup> Arnold (2014), xiv.

liturgy and worship. His response to the task of composition was deeply spiritual, if not that of a doctrinally orthodox Christian: in a series of lectures on music as creative process, Harvey describes music as ‘an explanation of the divine universe’, whose beauty, symmetry and structure speak of ‘God’s creative mind’.<sup>260</sup> Composition, for Harvey, is *inherently* spiritual: ‘I guide the music, and it guides me. This double process defines the religion of a composer... it is always a quest, for music and through music.’<sup>261</sup>

### 4.3 Choirbook for the Queen

Other recent patterns in commissioning in church music represent the same desire as at King’s to utilise the best available composers, regardless of background, and thus to refresh and expand the tradition. Interesting parallels can be drawn between the King’s commissions, now in their 36<sup>th</sup> year and thus a *longitudinal* project in renewing music for the liturgy, and two shorter-term projects: the *Choirbook for the Queen* (2011), which was centred on music to celebrate a particular *event*, and the *Merton Choirbook* (2013), which focused on music for use in a given *place*. Each of these will be considered in turn.

Produced to mark the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee in 2012, the commissioning process for *Choirbook for the Queen* began by identifying composers representative of a wider musical scene, not all of whom had experience of writing for the church or for voices. The Foreword to the *Choirbook*, by Peter Maxwell Davies, highlights the intention of the project that they should ‘celebrate the present day ‘renaissance’ of choral music in the Church’ and ‘represent the best church music being written in this country’.<sup>262</sup>

The *Choirbook* project was curated by committee over several years, and funded by the Friends of Cathedral Music alongside their other Jubilee project,

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<sup>260</sup> Harvey (1999), xiv.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>262</sup> Maxwell Davies, Foreword to *Choirbook for the Queen* (2011), vii.

the Diamond Choristerships which subsidise one chorister place at each cathedral; both were intended to draw attention to cathedral music as a *living* tradition fit for the twenty-first century.<sup>263</sup> The intention behind the *Choirbook* commissions was to use specifically Christian (though not necessarily liturgical) texts, in order to differentiate it clearly from other areas of contemporary music: the foreword is clear that the collection was for cathedral and collegiate choirs to sing.<sup>264</sup>

Eleven of the 44 pieces were commissioned specially, while other composers and their publishers were asked if they had work suitable for inclusion. Publishers were initially asked to select pieces for inclusion in the *Choirbook* out of previously unpublished work, though not all the pieces eventually included fitted that brief. The original idea was to create a series of concerts to show off the new work, with one big centrepiece by Peter Maxwell Davies as Master of the Queen's Music, plus other pieces using the local commissioning links that individual choirs already had. In the event, this never took place, but every cathedral in the country received copies of the book, and was asked to perform at least two of the 44 anthems during the Diamond Jubilee year. Given these intentions, it was therefore not unreasonable to expect the finished works to be suitable not just for choirs of mixed voices, including children's voices, and to be usable in liturgical performance. Whether the *Choirbook* succeeded in that is debatable.

The fact that the *Choirbook for the Queen* consists of pieces which were not composed with a particular building in mind in fact limits their practical application, precisely because the soundworlds they create will not be suited to every acoustic or every available set of vocal forces. Furthermore, many of the works included in the *Choirbook* are extremely demanding in terms of

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<sup>263</sup> See successive issues of *Cathedral Music*, the FCM magazine.

<sup>264</sup> *Choirbook for the Queen* (2011), vii.

range, technique and texture. Contrary to Maxwell Davies' assertion that the commissions are 'satisfyingly within the capability of good amateur choirs as well as professionals', the overall impression left by the *Choirbook for the Queen* is of a collection of virtuoso pieces which would be difficult, if not impossible, for most ordinary choirs to attempt, and even cathedrals have not adopted the majority of them.<sup>265</sup> This underlines the extent to which church music has transformed itself into a professional undertaking, as described in the previous chapter.

As mentioned above, one honourable exception is Dove's *Vast ocean of light*, which has already achieved a steady place in the cathedral repertoire.

However, Dove's commission was not included on the accompanying CD which features thirteen of the pieces from the *Choirbook*.<sup>266</sup> Despite the fact that the project was aimed at cathedral and collegiate choirs, the CD was recorded by the BBC Singers, directed by Stephen Cleobury, therefore utilising professional adult voices on every part, and sopranos rather than trebles. While the same is true in reverse of many choirs who have taken up the King's commissions for use elsewhere (Thea Musgrave's *Hear the Voice of the Bard* (2013) is the only commission to be listed specifically for TrATB rather than SATB), Cleobury's involvement in the project at every level (as a member of the editorial group, advisory group, and the Choirbook Trust which oversaw the governance of the project) creates a ground for direct comparison between the reception of the *Choirbook* and the King's commissions.

#### **4.4 The Merton Choirbook**

The *Merton Choirbook* was curated by a priest (Simon Jones) and musician (Ben Nicholas), to mark the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Merton College, Oxford, in 2013. Like the *Choirbook for the Queen*, the Merton project was also a conscious

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>266</sup> *Choirbook for the Queen*, Priory PRCD 1097 (BBC Singers/Cleobury, 2013)

homage to the *Eton Choirbook*. The Eton collection, at a mere 500, was 250 years younger than Merton but was intended to form a similar body of music for performance within a specific environment. As part of the community of an Oxford college, Jones and Nicholas worked together to produce a body of new music to be performed by the newly-reformed chapel choir of that community. This detailed awareness of context and available forces has more in common with King's than *Choirbook for the Queen*, and gives the project a different kind of focus.<sup>267</sup> The fact that the top line is sung by sopranos rather than trebles is an important difference, but the collegiate context and the age of the back line is commensurate with the situation at King's.

Although the *Choirbook for the Queen* was intended as an active contribution to an ongoing repertoire in every cathedral, very few of the collected pieces have actually fulfilled that expectation. Some of them employ advanced techniques and adventurous harmonies, but few have made it into the mainstream repertoire because of their technical difficulty, or are unsuitable for liturgical use due to their length or choice of text. As suggested in Chapter I, there is much material in the *Choirbook* both to support and challenge Martin Thomas' contention that church music is unduly conservative in style.

More broadly envisaged than the *Choirbook*, which restricts itself to anthems, the Merton commissions are explicitly intended as *liturgical* pieces (for example a set of evening canticles by Eriks Esenvalds, and a complete set of the Advent antiphons from several different composers). The *Merton Choirbook* thus creating a slightly more focused brief for the composers than was the case with *Choirbook for the Queen*. Unlike the King's carol service, the celebration of the college's anniversary gave composers an opportunity to respond to different points in the liturgical year. While *Choirbook for the Queen* drew on British

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<sup>267</sup> I am indebted to Ben Nicholas for his assistance with research for this section (personal communication 25/1/18).

composers, Esenvalds and some of the other composers represented in the *Merton Choirbook* come from a Slavic or Baltic background. Their music is obviously not rooted in *Anglican* liturgical practice, but comes out of a strong indigenous choral tradition, so they bring to their compositions an understanding of how voices work and what they can be asked to produce.

Nicholas did not wish to stifle the voices of the composers by making their brief too specific, but the result needed to be within the capacity of the choir. The key criterion specified to composers for Merton was range.

Nicholas was keen to set realistic expectations for a group of singers who, as at King's, are still students, and whose voices are still developing; as he acknowledges, basses in particular may not yet be secure in the lowest part of their voice. This is presumably why Cleobury usually gives a relatively conservative estimate of range to commissioned composers: not because his singers are *individually* incapable of singing higher or lower, but that sustaining a consistently high or low tessitura over the course of ninety minutes is harder for non-professionals. The Willcocks descants are skilfully written to sound more acrobatically demanding than they are: nonetheless, the a" in the final carol, *Hark the Herald-Angels Sing*, has to be achieved cleanly at the end of a long service.

Writing for younger, less experienced voices therefore demands sensitivity: a composer who is too concerned to show off what he or she can do may be less focused on the technical abilities or limitations of the singers for whom the piece is written. Phillips makes a similar point about the difficulty of achieving a *consistent* sound from younger voices: over an entire concert, or by extension throughout the length of a carol service, less developed voices will begin to struggle with singing at the top or bottom ends of their respective ranges.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Phillips (2005), 499-500.

Nicholas found that some composers, especially those who are instrumental performers at a high level and imagine vocal colour or sound in instrumental terms, may need advice as to how to write realistically for the voice. He commented that ‘Harrison Birtwistle writes like a clarinettist’, for example expecting singers to accent semiquavers on the final beat of the bar, or to be able to pitch sudden entries ‘from nowhere’. It can be argued that Tippett’s *St John Service* (1961) also requires this skill, not least of the treble soloist in the *Nunc Dimittis*; but Nicholas remarks that a treble experienced enough to be asked to sing that particular solo will have enough familiarity with the soundworld and the range of their own voice to *understand* where their part is pitched even if they do not have ‘perfect pitch’.

At the stage of commissioning for the *Choirbook*, the choir at Merton had only been together as an ensemble for five years, and some of its members for much less; further, for the reasons just explored, even good undergraduate voices are unlikely to have reached their full capacity. Nicholas therefore suggested to composers that *divisi* writing would be permissible for sopranos and basses, but that altos and tenors should be left to sing together. This may also be a reason why almost none of the King’s commissions contain an alto solo, though Ades’ *Fayrfax carol* (1997), with its multiple divisions, at one point asks for three alto soloists, in a choir which only has four altogether. Michael Berkeley’s *This Endernight* (2016) includes a relatively undemanding solo for each voice part in turn, but the majority of solo work in the King’s commissions is left to the trebles.

Rehearsal time was also a major constraint. One or two of the commissions initially needed to be reworked before they could be performed because they were simply too technically demanding for a student choir. Nicholas points out that another constraint with a choir made up of students, as is also the case at King’s, is the frequency of change within the choir, so that at least a quarter of



them will be different every year; repertoire which was commissioned in 2013 may well be new to every singer five years later.

Cleobury has said on a number of occasions that he is lucky never to have been turned down by a composer. Nicholas was slightly less fortunate: Julian Anderson was unable to accept a commission for the *Merton Choirbook* because of the timescale for delivery, though he did contribute to *Choirbook for the Queen*. Of those who might have been asked to contribute to Merton, Nicholas most regrets not having had the opportunity to commission Thomas Adès; as with the King's commissions, his concern was to approach the best *composers*, not merely those with the best reputation in church music. He echoes both his father, Michael Nicholas, and Martin Thomas, in saying that the church should be able to make use of the best in art wherever it originates: 'there is no excuse for bad music in church'. Such an attitude resonates with Terry's article of many decades earlier.

In the case of the Nine Lessons and Carols format, there is a significant amount of material which repeats every year so that it remains in the memory; the two *Choirbooks* are much more varied collections which do not necessarily lend themselves to regular recurrence, so that they easily become unfamiliar within a short time. This has meant that with the exception of the Esenvalds evening canticle settings, Matthew Martin's responses and perhaps Gabriel Jackson's *Passion*, few of the Merton commissions have yet become well known.

The composers who have written for both Merton and King's are Birtwistle, Chilcott, Dove, Jackson, MacMillan, Tavener and Weir; all of whom, with the exception of Birtwistle, are also represented in the *Choirbook for the Queen*. The Merton collection also includes some well-known choral composers who have not (yet!) written for King's, such as Rihards Dubra, Ola Gjeilo, Kerry

Andrew, Matthew Martin, Cecilia McDowall, Francis Pott, Robert Saxton and Howard Skempton.<sup>269</sup>

#### **4.5 Commissioning policy in York Minster since 2008**

A different approach to commissioning for a particular choir, in a particular building and within a particular liturgical context, is provided by Robert Sharpe, director of music at York Minster since 2008. Like many other cathedrals, York has adopted the Nine Lessons and Carols format for its own use: Eric Milner-White was Dean of York from 1941-1963 following his career at King's, and the two institutions also share a book of anthems arranged chronologically by composer, though each book also contains a localised appendix. Before arriving at York, Sharpe was Director of Music at Truro, where he instigated a similar tradition of annual Christmas commissioning for their own Nine Lessons service. The practice has since been continued there by Chris Gray. Sharpe brought the tradition to York on his appointment in 2008, with the agreement of Chapter.<sup>270</sup> By bringing the idea of an annual commission to York from Truro, Sharpe relates the Nine Lessons service both to its original home, and to the newer but now firmly established tradition of an annual commission as begun at King's; he relocates it in a cathedral with two treble lines and a mixed back line combining professional lay clerks and student choral scholars. This mixture of old and new brings the tradition full circle, and illustrates the broader changes in church music examined in this study.

The fee for a York commission is £500, which Sharpe believes is the same as that paid at King's.<sup>271</sup> This does not sound like a large amount, but it comes

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<sup>269</sup> See below p.127 for further discussion of this point.

<sup>270</sup> Personal communication 19/10/17

<sup>271</sup> This was clearly not always the case. A letter from Cleobury to Peter Sculthorpe (24/6/88) remarks that 'although we have no funds available for commissioning, composers have found that the publicity attendant upon the Service has resulted in good sales' (KCAR/8/3/21/13-). The fact that the commissions are all recorded by King's (and that the most recent now also appear in podcasts) must also add to their financial

with a guarantee of two live performances to a total of around 5000 people at the two Nine Lessons and Carols services in the week before Christmas at York.<sup>272</sup> At King's, the guarantee is extended to worldwide broadcast to tens of millions of people, publication and probable recording; York too made a CD of recent commissions in 2018.<sup>273</sup>

Occasional commissions are also given to composers whose fee is higher: for example the Judith Bingham *York Service*, premiered in 2017 and broadcast on Radio 3 in 2018, cost £3000 and was paid for by the Friends of York Minster, as was the earlier *Missa Brevis* by David Briggs. James MacMillan's fee for a *Short Service* to be premiered at the Cathedral Organists' Association centenary (to be held in York in 2019) is £8000; the fact that it is being commissioned specifically for the COA anniversary suggests that it might be expected to have an interesting organ part, whereas Sharpe usually suggests to composers that the carol commissions should be unaccompanied.<sup>274</sup> Many of the King's commissions are also written for a *cappella* performance, though the majority include optional keyboard parts for rehearsal, and some, such as Weir's *Illuminare Jerusalem* (1985) or Rutti's *De Virgine Maria* (2014), go so far as to specify organ registration.

Sharpe's preference for unaccompanied pieces is explained by the vagaries of the York acoustic: the way the organ speaks into the Quire is currently very different from its sound in the nave, although it is hoped to redress this somewhat in a forthcoming restoration. Writing for the acoustic, as at King's, is a major part of the brief which Sharpe gives to the composer; in both buildings, the resonance demands clarity, and Sharpe adds that at York 'a lot of energy and a big texture' are also required, if the sound is to come through

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potential, but this correspondence suggests that in 1988 the commercial possibilities of the service had not yet been fully realised.

<sup>272</sup> These sums contrast with the budget of £100,000 for the *Merton Choirbook*.

<sup>273</sup> *Beatam* (Regent Records 2019).

<sup>274</sup> The completed commission (Boosey and Hawkes 2019) is for SATB a *cappella* with optional organ.

to best advantage. The King's carol service archive contains an article written by a sound engineer on the technicalities of broadcasting from the chapel, which remarks on the difference to the acoustic when a congregation is present. Composers who write to the six-second echo when the chapel is empty need to be aware that the reverberations are significantly altered when the space contains approximately 1500 people.<sup>275</sup>

Sharpe and Cleobury give similar stipulations as to length: although Sculthorpe seems to have been given a very tight 2 ½ to 3 minutes in 1988, four to five minutes is generally preferred. Some composers for both choirs have considerably exceeded that: notably Ben Rowarth (York 2015), whose extraordinary *Hymn of the Nativity* for SATB choir and extended tenor solo lasted almost twelve minutes, creating a striking centrepiece at the heart of the service, and Alexander Goehr's *Carol of St Steven* (King's 1987), based on a mediaeval text which appears in Sandys' 1833 collection *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern*, and which runs to nearly eight minutes. At the other end of the scale is Pärt's *Bogoroditse Dyevo* (King's 1990), at around fifty-nine seconds; but it is so beautifully crafted and energetic that it does not feel as short as it is.<sup>276</sup>

Like Cleobury, Sharpe will sometimes suggest texts if a composer asks for guidance: the text may determine where in the service the commission will appear, or conversely there may be a clear need for the carol commission to sit in a particular place in the service, and thus that it should illuminate a given text. Sharpe points out that a careful choice of text can ensure that the piece is usable at other points in the liturgical year, rather than limiting it to the Christmas season: this takes the pressure off rehearsal time, and gives added

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<sup>275</sup> KCAR/8/3/21/13-

<sup>276</sup> Allegedly, although it was not possible to corroborate the suggestion, the short duration is connected to the fee available for commissioning at King's, suggesting that Pärt was working to a rate per minute of music, rather than a rate per piece.

value for money in the case of an expensive commission! He cites the example of Marian texts (such as the *Ave Maria*, set by James Cave in 2016, or *Ave maris stella*, set by Francis Grier in 2017), which can be used on Marian feasts and at any point in the year to reflect on the Incarnation of Christ, rather than only at Christmas.

Sharpe admits that he takes a deliberately more utilitarian approach than that pursued at King's: he needs to consider pragmatically how a particular commission might be used in future. Such decisions are not driven *solely* by a need to justify the expense of commission or time spent on rehearsal; but there is a realism in this approach which Cleobury can afford to set aside. Though not entirely unsympathetic to Thomas' repeated criticism of a 'utilitarian' approach to commissioning in cathedrals, Sharpe points out that realism does limit his choices. For example, the choir school at York is not a boarding school; so that although both he and Cleobury will begin work on their respective carol services immediately after their Advent Processions, he has considerably less rehearsal time than at King's in which to introduce the new commission. Sharpe is pragmatic about the constraints of rehearsal time: when a significant proportion of the choir will be new every Christmas and there is a very large amount of repertoire to learn in between a heavy schedule of extra services and concerts, it is unrealistic to need to devote disproportionate amounts of time to a single piece.

Sharpe admits that in his choice of composers, and in the brief he gives to them, he is more 'risk-averse' than Cleobury. Although he is committed to encouraging contemporary composers, and ensures that there is always 'at least one piece by a living composer' in every monthly music scheme, Sharpe's Christmas commissions have tended to go to composers who are already known for writing choral music in a liturgical context. He also points out that while composers in other fields would probably be sufficiently flattered to

accept a King's commission on the basis of its global reputation, York's appeal is more limited to existing enthusiasts of church music.<sup>277</sup>

The first York commission was by Richard Shephard. This was an astute choice. Shephard was for many years head of the Minster School, and his music is much more stylistically conservative than some of the subsequent commissions. Choosing Shephard to compose the first Christmas commission gave Sharpe an opportunity to begin the series with a work which would not only have more general appeal, but which explicitly linked with York's past. In this way, he was able to build gently on Shephard's commission to introduce the concept of an *annual* commission. Sharpe has since gone on to commission some major composers- notably David Briggs, Matthew Martin and Francis Grier- who cannot fairly be accused of stylistic conservatism, as well as some whose work is more immediately accessible.<sup>278</sup>

Despite the numerous difficulties with his overall argument, Martin Thomas is, nonetheless, right to point out that the necessary constraints of writing for voices do not have to result in boring or predictable music. Both Cleobury and Sharpe acknowledge that the music they commission and direct is intended to enable a congregation to *worship*: their respective carol services are liturgy, not concerts. Both choirs do perform seasonal concerts in December as well, but a distinction is made in the way the events are marketed and structured, and the material in the concerts is limited to the more traditional, less musically demanding repertoire. It could be argued that the televised version of the King's Nine Lessons, with its non-biblical readings on a chosen theme, represents a mid-point between liturgical and concert performance: the annual commission is not given an outing until the afternoon of Christmas Eve, but

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<sup>277</sup> The reaction of some composers to being asked to write for King's seems to bear this out: see chapter 5.

<sup>278</sup> The York commissions to date: Richard Shephard (2008), Paul Comeau (2009), Andrew Carter (2010), Stephen Jackson (2011), David Briggs (2012), Grayston Ives (2013), Matthew Martin (2014), Ben Rowarth (2015), James Cave (2016) and Francis Grier (2017).

items can be commissioned for the televised service as well, such as Chilcott's *Shepherd's Carol* (2000).<sup>279</sup>

New material in the carol service in any given year is not restricted to the 'official' commission. Other carols which were premiered at King's, often by composers with a strong connection to the college, include:

- *Good day* (Michael Ball, 1988)
- *A Christmas Poem* (Hugh Wood, 1990)
- *Dormi Jesu* (John Rutter, written for the TV *Carols from King's* in 1998 and performed in the following year's Nine Lessons)
- *The Shepherd's Carol* (Bob Chilcott, written for TV in 2000 and performed on Christmas Eve in 2001)
- *A spotless rose* (Philip Ledger, 2002)
- *Starry night o'er Bethlehem* (David Willcocks, 2004)
- *All bells in paradise* (John Rutter, written for a double CD of carols including several of the commissions, 2012)

In addition, organ voluntaries were commissioned in 2006 and 2007, at the instigation of the then organ scholar.

All the commissioning projects examined in this chapter illustrate the need to balance artistic and stylistic preference with attention to both form, context and purpose. Cleobury suggests that the most successful of the King's commissions have been those which build on a traditional format, but extend our understanding of the limits of that format. The following chapter will therefore look in more detail at the King's commissions, the factors affecting their ongoing performance, and the contribution they have made to the wider repertoire.

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<sup>279</sup> Coghlan (2015), 178-9, rightly identifies this as a model of contemporary carol writing for its 'folk simplicity'.

## Chapter Five: Continuing the tradition: the King's commissions since 1983

The carol commissions have been described as the 'defining characteristic' of Stephen Cleobury's tenure at King's.<sup>280</sup> As we have seen, Cleobury began to commission new carols for the King's College Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols as an attempt to widen the perspective of church music beyond the safe, familiar and stylistically undemanding. Over the last 35 years, the commissions have proved that music for liturgical use continues to form part of the living tradition of serious contemporary art music, and is not isolated from it.

This has meant that some of the commissions have moved a very long way from the definition of a carol with which this study began. For example, Giles Swayne's *Winter Solstice Carol* (1998) begins with an extensive, virtuosic flute solo, which alters its character significantly from that of the average choir carol and places it firmly in the category of art music. As Coghlan remarks, 'it is all but impossible to see the kinship between Swayne's exquisite but inscrutable carol... and the homespun directness of *While Shepherds Watched*.'<sup>281</sup>

- *Musical extract 10: Winter Solstice Carol, Giles Swayne (King's College Choir/Cleobury, On Christmas Day CD 1 track 15)*

Commissions like Swayne's therefore force a re-evaluation of the question with which we began: what is a carol, and what kind of music should it have? To enter the mainstream repertoire, or even the narrower cathedral repertoire, a piece needs to be attractive, relatively easy to learn for less proficient singers or those with limited rehearsal time, and to reflect the text in a way which makes sense both theologically and musically. These

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<sup>280</sup> Coghlan (2016), 174ff, includes an examination of several of the commissions.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.



requirements hold particularly true of a carol setting, because of the context in which it will be sung; the congregation for a carol service anywhere is likely to contain many people who are not regular churchgoers and may have no familiarity with the liturgy, but who may have a particular expectation of what a carol should sound like.<sup>282</sup>

It is impossible to examine every single commission in detail within the scope of the present study. Instead I shall begin by exploring the process by which King's commissions are chosen, before going on to look at some broader themes affecting the question of how and where a particular carol might be received into the repertoire, using examples from a number of the commissions to illustrate these.

It has already been acknowledged that Patton and Taylor's compilation of cathedral music lists between 1898 and 1998 can be of only limited use in the present study, which extends twenty years after the last data it recorded. However, it remains a useful methodological tool for the analysis of the first fifteen years of the commissions in terms of their absorption into the repertoire. Within those date constraints, Patton and Taylor can also establish how much a given composer has written for use in a liturgical context; this in turn gives an indication of the extent to which the commissions at King's, and their composers, relate to the wider context of music for the church.

Clearly, this methodology is limited and partial. Nevertheless, a good number of the commissioned composers are indeed represented in Patton and Taylor: Weir, Rutter, Bingham, Dove (whose own commission came later than 1998) and Tavener appear multiple times, and a number of others for a single piece.

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<sup>282</sup> Walker (2014), appendix 9a, examines patterns of attendance at the Nine Lessons and Carols service in a rural cathedral. He establishes that demographics of attendance at such services are significantly younger than on an average Sunday, and that many of those who attend have little or no attachment to church otherwise. His questionnaire asking people to give their reasons for attending did not include reference to the music, but to issues such as comfort, reassurance and familiarity.

Younger composers such as Gabriel Jackson would certainly have appeared in a more recent edition if one existed; but the fact that only five of the commissioned composers have a track record as *liturgical* composers corroborates Cleobury's claim to be 'nourishing' the tradition with influences from outside it.

The 1992 Archbishops' Council report on church music comments that 'some first performances [of a commission] also prove to be the last'.<sup>283</sup> In order to evaluate how often the King's commissions have (or have not) been repeated within the specific context for which they were written, I have examined the orders of service for every King's carol service since 1982. The frequency with which the commissions have recurred in later services suggests a deliberate shift in policy towards 'single use' performance as far as King's itself is concerned: no commission since Pärt's *Bogoroditse Dyevo* (1990) has been repeated in any subsequent Nine Lessons service. However, the fact that several of the commissions also appear in published compilations- such as Novello's *Christmas at King's College* (2009)- or on recordings, either by King's or other choirs, gives them a presence within the repertoire which is not restricted to the choir for which they were composed.

Chapter I showed that, despite their flaws, both Thomas and Boyce-Tillman raise some serious questions about how the purpose of church music is understood and communicated through compositional style. The fact that choral liturgical music has always been at the forefront of writing for voices means that it does not always have to *respond* to developments elsewhere in the classical canon. Rather, its familiarity with questions of vocal range and technique gives it a platform to *drive* developments in understanding of what voices can do; and thus to explore in new ways how voices can be employed in

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<sup>283</sup> *In Tune with Heaven*, 161.

the worship of God. The King's commissions demonstrate these processes in action.

## 5.1 The process of commissioning: intention and practicalities

Stephen Cleobury has written extensively about the rationale behind the annual commissions, including in the sleeve notes for the CD *On Christmas Night*, the foreword to Coghlan's *Carols from King's* (2016), and in his article for the *Musical Times* (1988). However, he has not spoken in so much detail about the *process* of commissioning, or the particular brief he gives to commissioned composers. I am therefore indebted to him for his willingness to expand on the process and criteria he applies to commissioning each year's new carol.<sup>284</sup>

For the most part, Cleobury does not go about planning the commissions in a systematic way, with a particular composer or particular style in mind for the coming year.<sup>285</sup> Several are by Cambridge-based composers (Rutter, Goehr, Holloway, Causton) or those with an existing King's connection (Weir, Ades). The opportunity to commission a particular composer has sometimes arisen from a random encounter: for example, he first met Judith Weir (1985 and 2018) at a party in Cambridge and immediately asked if she would consider composing for King's. Other approaches have been made to composers Cleobury already knew well, like Thomas Adès (1997), who had only recently been a student at the college but whose prodigious gifts were already evident. Harrison Birtwistle (2003) was conducting a concert in London at which King's were singing, and Cleobury asked 'on spec' if he would be interested in writing for them; the response was extremely positive, and the result is one of the

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<sup>284</sup> Material in this section is taken with permission from a personal communication with Stephen Cleobury on 23/6/17. Examples of his writing about the rationale behind the commissions which were particularly helpful for this study include the sleeve notes for the CD *On Christmas Night*, the foreword to Coghlan's *Carols from King's* (2016), and his article for the *Musical Times* (1988).

<sup>285</sup> Significant anniversaries (e.g. of a composer's birth or death) tend to be an exception. In 2015, the year of David Willcocks' death, almost the entire service was shaped around his arrangements and descants.

most stylistically interesting of the commissions, though Coghlan's description of it as a 'curdled lullaby... more primitive wail than soothing song' offers no comfort to those who want the Nine Lessons and Carols to remain 'in a state of nostalgic suspension'.<sup>286</sup>

- *Musical extract 11: The Gleam, Harrison Birtwistle (On Christmas Day CD 2 track 2)*

Perhaps inevitably, in the light of this, Cleobury has no clear picture of a compositional style he wishes to promote; or, for that matter, which he would reject. Instead, he looks for 'composers who will challenge us but we would be able to do it well'. While he is willing to take more risks than Robert Sharpe can with his choir at York, Cleobury does admit: 'I wouldn't ask anyone who is 'too avant-garde', because that isn't what we do'.

Carl Vine, commissioned in 2012, comments in the programme note at the front of the published score that 'a commission to compose a carol for King's College Choir [is] one of the most prized opportunities available to my profession'.<sup>287</sup> The text he chose to set, Tennyson's *Ring out, wild bells*, is, as he acknowledges, not about the Nativity as such but touches on fundamental Christian values. Such an approach to text makes it possible for composers to set with integrity words which may not reflect their own beliefs. Cleobury is clearly sensitive to this possibility: his wife Emma keeps a bank of suitable texts which can be offered as inspiration. In this way King's can still approach composers who are not religious and would struggle to set a liturgical or conventionally religious text with integrity, but whose musical voices nonetheless have something exciting to offer the liturgy. Older texts or more poetic, non-Scriptural reflections can enable such composers to write in their

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<sup>286</sup> Coghlan (2016), 183.

<sup>287</sup> Vine, *Ring out, wild bells* (Faber 2012)

own voice, while contributing something new to the genre and the Nine Lessons and Carols format.<sup>288</sup>

Composers sometimes set their own words (Swayne, 2002; Rautavaara, 2010), find others to write a text specifically for the occasion (Causton, 2015), or choose their own text. There are examples in the archive of Cleobury turning down offers, including one or two from quite well known composers, to set texts which he does not consider suitable for the carol service.<sup>289</sup> Despite Thomas' reservations, Cleobury is as resolute as Milner-White could have wished that 'the music needs to know its place' and that the text should predominate.

In terms of the specific information Cleobury gives to composers: 'three or four minutes is the usual length, but not everyone sticks to that brief.' In fact, a significant number of the commissions are well over that length. Appendix I includes the duration of each carol, demonstrating that eleven of the commissions are five minutes or longer in duration (the longest being James MacMillan's *Seinte Marie Moder Milde* (1995), at seven and a half. Only two are less than two minutes long: *Bogoroditse Dyevo* (1990), as described in the previous chapter, and the first of Richard Rodney Bennett's two carols, *Nowel Nowel Holly Dark* (1986). The average length is just over four minutes; but as several of the commissions have demonstrated, four minutes is enough to create a significant impact.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Cleobury made reference in this respect to John Woolrich, whose *Spring in Winter* (2001) sets a text by the visionary poet Christopher Smart, also famously responsible for the text of Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb*. Although the text is clearly Christian, Woolrich's approach to word-setting manages to make it clear that he is not: in the lower voices, Smart's last line, 'Of the very world He made' is truncated into 'of the very world made', which gives a completely different theological perspective.

<sup>289</sup> KCAR 8/3/21/13- contains at least two examples of Cleobury's replies to such approaches; unfortunately, neither of them make it clear what the rejected texts were

<sup>290</sup> Not always a positive impact, however: one response to the extended tonality of Diana Burrell's *Christo paremus cantica* (1993) was an outraged 'Annus horribilis! How could you do such a thing?' (quoted in Coghlan, 2016, 128).

Cleobury comments that, like Ben Nicholas at Merton, 'I sometimes give them advice about vocal range'.<sup>291</sup> He will also offer advice as to whether there are voices in any given part who would be suitable for a solo, or whether it would be better to write *tutti* parts. The commissions between them contain every possible variation of response to this; some include punishingly high tessitura or *divisi*, and a good number include solos, of varying complexity. Cleobury's advice to one composer was 'normally SATB with some *divisi* if he likes, and perhaps a solo part, though this is by no means necessary'.<sup>292</sup>

The increasing use of more extended vocal techniques can be tracked throughout the 35 years of the commissions: while earlier carols were relatively simple, more recent commissions suggest an acute awareness of the potential of this occasion for advertising the range and skill of a composer, as well as that of the choir. In his sleeve notes to the centenary CD *100 Years of Nine Lessons and Carols*, Day comments that today's choir is undoubtedly more skilled and professional than the choir of 1918.<sup>293</sup> It might not be fair to say that the same is true of the composers; but they are perhaps less reticent about tempering their skill to the context of the liturgy, or less convinced of the need to do so, than would have been the case in 1918, and still even at the time of the first commissions in the 1980s.

An examination of the orders of service since 1983 reveals that it is not only the featured commissions which represent King's' ongoing commitment to contemporary repertoire. Mathias, Birtwistle, Sculthorpe, Carter, Bullard, Sandström, Joubert, Tavener, Panufnik, Grier, Rütli and Manz were all represented during their lifetime, though several of them have since died. John Scott was honoured after his untimely death in 2015 by a performance of *Nova*,

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<sup>291</sup> A letter to Peter Sculthorpe concerning the brief for *The Birthday of thy King* (1988) includes a chart with the vocal range in all four voice parts; the treble range is given as 'middle C to top A flat'. (KCAR 8/3/21/13-, dated 24/6/88)

<sup>292</sup> Letter to Peter Sculthorpe's publisher, October 1988.

<sup>293</sup> *100 Years of Nine Lessons and Carols* (KGS 0033, 2018)

*nova*, alongside several arrangements by Willcocks who had died the same year aged 95. In this way a continuing link is ensured both with the ‘mainstream’ of classical composition and with the latest developments in composition for the context of worship.

The list of composers *not* yet commissioned to write for King’s contains some surprising omissions: based on their previous output, and the commissions they have received from other high-profile liturgical choirs, Nico Muhly,<sup>294</sup> Tarik O’Regan, Matthew Martin, Kerry Andrew, Eriks Esenvalds and Julian Anderson might all reasonably be asked to contribute. As discussed in chapter 4, many of these were indeed commissioned for the *Merton Choirbook*; and though he was not commissioned by Merton, O’Regan contributed to the *Choirbook for the Queen*. Cleobury has said that if he were not retiring in 2019, he would have liked to approach John Adams for a commission.<sup>295</sup>

Although Cleobury’s only negative stipulation was to avoid the avant-garde, on the basis of those whom he has approached it is also possible to speculate that he is unlikely to commission from those at the opposite end of the spectrum either. Eric Whitacre and Morten Lauridsen, although they would be popular with American audiences, are possibly too populist in style to present enough challenge for King’s: among British composers, the same may possibly apply to composers such as Will Todd or Richard Shephard. While there were excellent reasons for commissioning Shephard at York, Martin Thomas is fairly scathing about Shephard’s music in his overview of modern composers writing within the ‘church music’ idiom. Although his pastiche style and reliance on

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<sup>294</sup> In 2018 Muhly collaborated with King’s College Choir and the King’s Singers on *To Stand in this House*, a commission to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King’s Singers. Along with a new work by Francis Grier, *lit by holy fire*, Muhly’s piece has been made available in digital format only. Both are expressly marketed as evidence of King’s’ ongoing commitment to new music. <http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/news/2018/kings-record-label-supports-new-music> (accessed 27/6/18)

<sup>295</sup> Interview with Alison Karlin on *Bachtrack* website, <https://bachtrack.com/interview-stephen-cleobury-kings-college-cambridge-choral-month-march-2019> (accessed 28/03/19)

folk tunes is true to the origins of the carol genre, it does not push stylistic boundaries in the way Thomas wishes to encourage.<sup>296</sup>

## **5.2 Issues affecting absorption into the repertoire**

There are numerous factors affecting whether a particular carol is or is not absorbed into the repertoire after first performance; both in terms of the technical challenge they present, and wider questions about preserving balance in programming. It is also true to say that there are two possible measures of 'success' in terms of absorption into the repertoire. If the success, or otherwise, of a particular carol is equated with frequency of repetition, then few of them can be regarded as successful on a big scale. Some of the commissions have been repeated at King's alone; others more widely. However, Cleobury's desire that the tradition should be constantly refreshed has made him less and less likely to schedule any of the commissions more than once, and only a tiny handful (mostly from earlier in the series) have been repeated more frequently. The fact that a carol is not repeated more than once at King's itself does not make it bad music, though some of them certainly raise questions about accessibility to either congregation or performers. Using both the service sheets for every carol service at King's between 1983 and 2016, and for the earlier commissions Patton and Taylor's lists of music performed in cathedrals before 1998, provides some indicators of how the 'success' of a particular commission might be measured, both at King's itself and beyond it.<sup>297</sup>

However, there is another layer to the question of absorption into the repertoire. Chapters 2 and 3 explored how the status of King's as an exemplar of a particular choral style, perpetuated through broadcasts and recordings,

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<sup>296</sup> Thomas singles out Shephard's 'O for a thousand tongues' (1987) as an example of the 'antiquated' style he wishes to critique (2015), 168-174.

<sup>297</sup> Patton and Taylor (2000).



generated interest not only in their sound but in the material they performed in it. Appendix I will set out in table form some of the factors which might have an impact on whether or not a commission is absorbed into the repertoire: for example length, vocal forces and instrumental accompaniment (if any).

The commissions have not only enriched the carol service at King's itself; they have also encouraged other colleges, churches and cathedrals to perform the works which began at King's *and* to embark on commissions of their own. In this way, King's has clearly proved an effective agent in encouraging composition for the church- both by composers who were still too young to appear in Patton and Taylor (e.g. Gabriel Jackson, Tansy Davies, Richard Causton), and by more established composers for whom writing for the church was a new or relatively unusual development (Woolrich, Birtwistle). Either way, the King's commissions clearly represent a breaking down of the perceived barriers between 'church music' and 'serious art music', and thus present an important challenge to Thomas' argument that music for the liturgy is stylistically backward and isolated.

Among the features most likely to affect whether or not a carol passes into the repertoire, the most obvious is demanding vocal range and use of vocal forces. A number of the commissions are scored for double choir, or include several divisions: Vine (2012), Holloway (2002) and Adès (1997) require as many as ten separate voice parts. Others include extensive scoring for one or more solo treble, solo male voices, or a varied male line, to which many parish choirs do not have access. Goehr's *Carol of St Steven*, with its complex and extensive solo writing in two different voice parts, is a good example.

- *Musical extract 12: Carol of St Steven, Alexander Goehr (On Christmas Day CD 1 track 13)*

Many of the King's commissions are intended to be sung unaccompanied; voices are, by definition, the most universally accessible instrument of all. But the technical demands which can be made on the trained voices of King's choir may not be met so successfully by less competent groups. MacMillan's characteristic 'Scotch snap' decoration, Goehr's portamento, Rautavaara's extremely high tessitura, and Dean's frequent changes in dynamic and time signature, all transform the carol from Dearmer's 'simple and hilarious' folk song into professional art music. Rautavaara requires treble I to sing a c" in the second bar of their first entry:

The musical score consists of five staves. The top four staves are for vocal parts: Soprano (Soprano I), Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The bottom staff is for piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "they brought frank - in-cense and myrrh, myrrh, they brought frank - in-cense and myrrh, but who can tell who gave the gift that's myrrh, but who can tell who gave the gift that's myrrh, but who can tell who gave the gift that's". Dynamics include *mf* and *p*. A "Vozou" marking is present above the first vocal staff.

Fig. 4: Rautavaara, Offerings they brought of gold (2010, bars 4-7)

Some of the commissions have organ parts of varying complexity, including some with quite specific registration marks. The most extensive organ part in any of the commissions is probably Rutti's (2014): Fig. 5 below does not show the most technically demanding passage, but one indicating the need for extreme rhythmic precision and accuracy which pervades the whole piece.



Fig. 5: Organ part from Rutti, *De Virgine Maria* (2014), bars 53-7

The inclusion of other instruments (such as flute or strings) is arguably more true to the popular and extra-ecclesiastical origin of the carol than a piano or organ part, especially a virtuosic one. Cleobury comments ‘we usually don’t have much room for instruments, because the chapel is so full’: the flautist in Swayne’s *Winter Solstice Carol* performed from the organ loft. However, in a climate in which competence in a musical instrument is becoming restricted to an ever smaller elite, a carol with any instrumental parts is no longer as universally accessible as it would once have been.<sup>298</sup>

Faster [♩ = 84]

46

Tables (all) *f* But now the old—

Alto *f* But now the old—

Tenor *f* But now the old—

Bass *f* But now the old—

Flute *ff*

10 6

Fig. 6: flute part from Swayne, *Winter Solstice Carol* (1998), bar 46-7

<sup>298</sup> The *InHarmony* report (2017, 56) found that music groups in churches included a range of instruments from the guitar (64 churches) to the mouth organ, accordion and tenor horn (1 church each).

In the case of Swayne’s carol, the technical ability required for the flute accompaniment make it less accessible still to the majority of choirs.

A carol, strictly speaking, is not meant to be an anthem.<sup>299</sup> Cleobury acknowledges that some of the commissions have perhaps ‘gone too far in that direction’. Alexander Goehr’s *Carol of St Steven* (1989), and Robin Holloway’s *Christmas Carol* (2002) are both more like miniature cantatas than a true carol and include extended solo parts.<sup>300</sup> In Goehr’s carol, a treble (Steven) and a bass (Herod) dialogue with each other for several bars in a series of chromatic quavers, before the treble is left with the last word. In Holloway’s, the solo tenor has to negotiate complex dotted rhythms at a high tessitura for three pages, over an equally complex accompaniment.

Fig. 7: Holloway, *Christmas Carol* (2002); tenor solo, bars 91-3

Choirs with limited rehearsal time may be discouraged from performing carols set in other languages, such as Huw Watkins’ *Carol Eliseus* (2017), the first ever commission in Welsh. However, that does not seem to have inhibited the

<sup>299</sup> Gant (2014) and Coghlan (2016) both comment on the emergence of the ‘carol-anthem’ among the King’s commissions.

<sup>300</sup> The description ‘mini-cantata’ comes from Holloway’s own composer’s note in the cover of his carol, but it applies equally well to Goehr’s. Both are among the longest of the commissions, at almost seven minutes.

popularity of Pärt's *Bogoroditse Dyevo* (1990), with text in Church Slavonic, or Weir's *Illuminare Jerusalem* (1985), which is one of several carols in which some or all of the text is in Latin.

Challenging tonality, harmonic structure, and frequent shifts in time signature is a feature of several of the commissions: while some have a clear key signature to which they remain anchored throughout, Sculthorpe's description of his *Birthday of thy King* (1988) ('it begins in a kind of C minor, with boys' voices singing loudly in 5ths... and ends loudly in a kind of F major') is not untypical.<sup>301</sup> Holloway's *Christmas Carol* (2002) changes time signature in every section. The rhythmic accuracy and precision demanded by the acoustic is reflected in the preponderance of dotted rhythms and staccato in many of the commissions.

Although there is not space here to analyse any of the commissions in real depth, Brett Dean's *Here comes the dawn* (2007) manages to demonstrate several of these features within the space of a few bars:

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<sup>301</sup> A letter from Sculthorpe to his publisher on delivery of the carol, 19/10/88.

(2+2+3)

28 *mf*

Tr. crea - tures that fly — fly and crawl; And Man, and Man, that last im-per - i - al

A. crea - tures that fly — fly and crawl; And Man, and Man, that last im-per - i - al

T. crea - tures that fly — and crawl; And Man, that last, im-per - i - al

B. crea - tures that fly — fly and crawl, crea - tures And Man, that last, im-per - i - al

crea - tures that fly — fly and crawl, crea - tures And Man, that last, im-per - i - al

Fig. 8: Brett Dean, *Here comes the dawn* (2007), bars 28-32

### 5.3 After the first performance: what happens to commissions?

Michael Nicholas states that even commissions composed for a specific occasion are not *merely* for that one performance, but for the repertoire as a whole.<sup>302</sup> Although many commissions, at King's and elsewhere, have a relatively short shelf-life, the more successful commissions are 'world-making', in that they create a sound world which, once heard, cannot be unimagined. Judith Weir's *Illuminare Jerusalem* (1985), for example, is utterly distinctive and surprising on first hearing, but has become a small classic: it is not accidental

<sup>302</sup> Nicholas, personal communication 17/8/2016.

that it is one of the most enduringly popular of the King's commissions, and one of the most frequently repeated.

Although only four or five of the King's commissions since 1983 have achieved a high level of penetration into the general repertoire of cathedrals and collegiate choirs, Cleobury considers his 'strike rate' to be quite successful; those four or five (roughly one in seven) certainly represent a far higher percentage than the *Choirbook for the Queen* or even the *Merton Choirbook*.<sup>303</sup> However, that may reflect the fact that the King's commissions have been around for longer and as yet have a higher profile than other commissioning projects; this may also explain why it is the earlier commissions which tend to be the best known, suggesting that the rate of absorption into the repertoire is not rapid.

Cleobury acknowledges that most of the commissions are not repeated often within the Nine Lessons service itself; as we have seen, this is because he believes it is important to balance old and new within the overall structure of the service. Some are never performed again apart from recordings: 'perhaps they should be, but we don't want to keep repeating them every year or they would replace the real 'folk' items which have been part of the Nine Lessons format since the beginning'.

Analysis suggests that so far, although there is no source equivalent to Patton and Taylor to quantify this precisely, few of the post-1998 commissions have been absorbed into the wider repertoire elsewhere either: the most successful of the last 20 years has probably been Dove's *The three kings* (2000), which has become a staple of the repertoire in cathedrals. Although this is one of the handful of King's commissions to have been widely taken up by other choirs, and is also recognisably a carol (in lullaby form, with its deliberately archaic

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<sup>303</sup> See chapter 4 for comparative statistics.

refrain *O balow, balow la lay*), Cleobury has not chosen to revisit it in the context for which it was originally written.

Yet the music of Willcocks is not the only example of music commissioned or written for the Nine Lessons and Carols at King's which has since entered the mainstream choral repertoire. Going back to the early days of the King's commissions, Rutter's *What sweeter music?* (1987) has become a mainstay of the Christmas repertoire at amateur as well as professional levels. It is listed by its publishers, Oxford, as 'easy' and thus within the range of most school or parish choirs. Its beautifully crafted use of the carol's typical 'strophic dance' form make it attractive to sing: amateur choirs may at first glance be daunted by its key signature of G flat major, but it is not technically demanding. It has been performed again at King's four times, and appears in Patton and Taylor in the repertoire of ten choirs: it must by now have far exceeded that number.

Another of the early commissions, Judith Weir's *Illuminare Jerusalem* (1985) offers a more challenging, but still very singable, option which has been taken up by a number of cathedral choirs and is now considered part of the mainstream repertoire of more competent ensembles.<sup>304</sup> Weir takes the stanza-burden form and mediaeval text of the classic carol format, but clothes it in new harmonic structures so that when the refrain 'Illuminare Jerusalem' recurs, it does not do so predictably, but in a way which creates and builds anticipation. She also writes with close attention to the rhythmic precision demanded by the building and its acoustic; though she also acknowledges that knowing the acoustic well may not be an advantage: 'if you write for a particular situation, it may not happen that way'. Speaking in an *Omnibus* documentary on the choir in 1992, Weir remarked that *Illuminare Jerusalem* was 'inspired by the height of the chapel' in relation to its length: the building,

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<sup>304</sup> Rutter collaborated with Willcocks as editor on several volumes of the seminal *Carols for Choirs* series. Although Rutter's reputation as a composer is not uncontroversial, he has inherited Willcocks' mantle, at least in popular perception, as greatest living exponent of the Christmas carol genre.



which she knew well from her own time as an undergraduate, seemed to call for a 'light, bright sound', with very high sounds for the boys and very low sounds for the basses and organ. A chorister interviewed in the same programme commented that the 'discordant' quality of Weir's music made it 'interesting' to sing.<sup>305</sup> Weir's carol *O mercy divine*, with a cello part played by former King's chorister Guy Johnston, was commissioned in 2018 for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the service.

*Illuminare Jerusalem* is another exception to Cleobury's preference not to repeat commissions. It has received repeat performances in ten subsequent Christmas Eve services, more than any other of the commissions. It also appears in Patton and Taylor (2000) as part of the repertoire of six cathedral/collegiate choirs, one of which must be King's itself: again, the number now would be much higher.

- *Musical extract 13: Illuminare Jerusalem, Judith Weir (On Christmas Day CD 1 track 11)*

Although it was written for the choir at King's, Tavener's *The Lamb* (1982) predates Cleobury's appointment as Director of Music, so it was not a commission in the same way as the post-1983 carols. Since it was composed specifically for King's, however, it therefore demonstrates an *existing* desire on the part of the choir to work with contemporary composers before Cleobury's arrival, so it offers an interesting comparison to the intentional commissions. *The Lamb* is among the most frequently performed Christmas items among those which were originally written for King's: it has also appeared in the King's service on ten subsequent occasions, and is listed by Patton and Taylor in the repertoire of 21 choirs.

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<sup>305</sup> Judith Weir and Michael Pearce, interviewed in *King's College Choir* (Omnibus series 30 episode 14, BBC, 1992)

Other commissions to have been repeated by King's itself are Maxwell Davies' *One star, at last* (1984), which has been sung again three times at subsequent King's services, but according to Patton and Taylor did not appear anywhere else *except* at King's; Rutter's *What sweeter music* (1987), repeated five times at King's and in the repertoire of nine other choirs by 1998; and Pärt's *Bogoroditse Dyevo* (1990), repeated six times at King's. Perhaps surprisingly, at the time Patton and Taylor was published, *Bogoroditse Dyevo* was only listed in the repertoire of a single choir, presumably King's itself. It too is now considerably more widely performed, but it is worth remembering that at the time of the commission in 1990, Pärt was nowhere near as well known in the West as he is now. A letter in the King's archives, complaining at the absence of detailed listings for the service in that year's *Radio Times* which would have given information on the commission, admits disarmingly that its author had enjoyed Pärt's piece but was unsure of how to spell his name.<sup>306</sup>

Were a survey similar to Patton and Taylor to be attempted now, it would probably show very different patterns of adoption by other choirs, not just for the older commissions but also some of the newer ones, not least those which appear in published carol compilations. However, the information available in Patton and Taylor was already demonstrating by 1998 that patterns of repetition within the King's service itself were not necessarily reflected in what happened to the commissions elsewhere.

#### **5.4 Carols for today**

All but one of the commissions are published, and all but the most recent have been recorded: so there should not be issues preventing choirs who wish to sing any of the commissions from accessing them in order to do so. The exception is Muldowney's *Mary* (2008): it remains unpublished, making it

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<sup>306</sup> KCAR 8/3/21/13-

unlikely that other choirs will perform it, although it has been recorded. Some appear in multiple places, including anthologies specifically designed as resources for liturgical performance such as *Christmas at King's: Carols, Hymns and Seasonal Anthems for Mixed Voices* (Novello 2009), which has given new exposure to some of the less well-known commissions, such as the first of the series, Lennox Berkeley's *In Wintertime* (1983).

Successive visits to music shops which stock Christmas choral repertoire revealed that the only commissions which were readily available to buy off the shelf, even in December, were Dove's *Three Kings*, Rutter's *What sweeter music?* and the Novello compilation books (*Noel 1-3*) containing a number of the most recent commissions. By contrast, they had several different arrangements of other carols by Rutter, Chilcott, and Wilberg, whose only contribution to the King's repertoire so far has been his arrangement of *Ding dong! merrily on high*, with its organ part suggestive of an ascending and descending peal of bells.

Cleobury is certainly aware of the popular appeal of more accessible Christmas music, and is not averse to harnessing that appeal at least in the televised *Carols for King's* if not so readily in the *Nine Lessons and Carols* itself. He responds to Thomas' allegations that music written specifically for the liturgy is of a lower and less demanding quality by remarking 'I'm not knocking the Chilcotts and the Rutters'. These two composers have both made something of a specialism of writing carols, and indeed both have written for King's, but their work is regarded with disdain by some musicians because of its deliberately accessible quality. The debates over taste in church music with which this study began are alive and well in the world of the carol.

Coghlan suggests that the association between carols and nostalgic escapism has only ever been part of the story. Alongside the cosy images of Christmas

sit the darker realities of violence and grief, as referenced centuries ago in the *Coventry Carol*. Through the means of the carol, the less palatable aspects of humanity are also brought into contact with the mystery of the Incarnation.<sup>307</sup> This process continues to be reflected in the King's commissions. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Richard Causton's *The Flight* (2015) was a deliberate attempt to bring the most pressing themes of the twenty-first century into dialogue with the Biblical narrative. Written with George Szirtes, who was himself a refugee from Hungary and had witnessed the desperation of migrants trying to cross Europe against a backdrop of panicky border closures and rising xenophobia in the summer of 2015, his carol is both very much related to the precise moment of its composition, and a timeless reflection on the universal meaning of the Incarnation. Its technical demands (including two repeated treble solos with a very high tessitura, sustaining a#"/b" for up to fourteen beats, over a SATB texture with further divisi), may limit its penetration into the repertoire at the amateur level, but for a capable choir it would make a valuable addition to a liturgy which wishes to demonstrate cultural relevance.

- *Musical extract 14: The Flight, Richard Causton (OUP Choral Highlights 2016 track 17)*

Cleobury comments that the commissions which have achieved the highest levels of popularity and penetration into the repertoire are those which correspond most closely to carol form: with the possible exception of *Bogoroditse Dyevo*, that seems to be borne out by observable patterns of repetition both at and beyond King's. However, that recognition has not resulted in a lessening of the quality of successive commissions. Even the simpler (or perhaps just more immediately accessible) of the King's commissions represent some of the best choral writing there is. Cleobury

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<sup>307</sup> Coghlan (2016), 183.

remains clear that the aim of the King's commissions has been more to encourage composers who are *not* associated (primarily or at all) with church music to consider writing for the liturgy. If a carol is a folk item, or words set to a dance tune, some of the commissions have indeed travelled a very long way from those origins. The fact that the ones that have penetrated the wider repertoire are those which correspond more closely to the popular idea of the carol does not in any way invalidate the quality of those which do not.

One recent commission which clearly does conform closely to the classic carol format is Berkeley's *This Endernight* (2016). Alternating between a lilting 4/4 verse and a refrain in 6/4, between solo and *tutti* and between unison and harmony, Berkeley's is not one of the more challenging commissions. Its moderate tessitura and easily memorised melody place it within the grasp of amateur as well as professional choirs.

- *Musical extract 15: This Endernight, Michael Berkeley (OUP Christmas Choral Highlights 2017 track 9)*

In contrast to Martin Thomas' fears that church music must necessarily be stylistically limited, the continued willingness of composers of international stature to accept commissions from King's demonstrates not only that skilled 'mainstream' musicians are still willing to write for the church and for choirs, but that they do so in richly varied ways which neither dumb down their skill nor blunt their natural voice. Gabriel Jackson, commissioned in 2009, said of the experience: 'While writing the piece I was thinking all the time about the wondrous space that is the King's Chapel, the special atmosphere of the service, the acoustic of the building, and the unique sound of the King's choir in that building. Now that it is finished I cannot wait for Christmas Eve, to be

there in the Chapel at King's and to hear my piece quietly take its place in the age-old rite, as Stephen and his choir work their magic once again.'<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> <http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/events/chapel-services/archive/nine-lessons> , accessed 25/06/18

## Conclusion

Liturgical music is not primarily intended for entertainment, in the sense of requiring no active engagement from the listener.<sup>309</sup> Nor is it primarily intended to provide comfort, or to bolster existing preferences. Music written for a church context is intended for use *in worship*, which is different from secular performance. It works with and illustrates the story of the faith; as such, it can be used (in both form and content) to stretch, to educate and to inform: it can provoke a sense of wonder and push back our boundaries of the possible. Although liturgical music should not be *entirely* utilitarian, in the sense that it needs to maintain some artistic integrity, the necessarily close relationship between music and context is what makes liturgical music distinctive from other classical genres.

Music written for performance during the Christmas season, especially carol music, may be likely to have a larger audience than church music generally might. It therefore gives composers an opportunity to say something which is musically interesting, as well as theologically and liturgically, to a broader range of people than might buy a classical CD or attend a church service at another time of year. Composers of commissioned carols are therefore given an opportunity to speak to an audience who might not naturally choose to listen to new music. Christmas music is easily co-opted into a sentimentalised easy-listening model, rather than the challenge – whether moral or stylistic- implied by pieces like Causton's *The Flight*, or Birtwistle's *The Gleam*. The King's commissions represent a refusal to fall into that trap, by ensuring that both text and music engage in some way with the reality of the present-day context. It could even be argued that liturgical music for Christmas demands a more

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<sup>309</sup> Arnold (2014), xiv: Evensong is not a concert but 'a sort of contract between priest, reader, musician, listener, worshipper and God'.

challenging musical form in order to convey the shockingly unexpected mystery of the Incarnation.

At the same time, if that theological reality is to be effectively communicated, the musical vehicle for the message must be one to which congregations can relate in worship. What makes for a good recording is not necessarily the same as what will work in the context of the liturgy. Nonetheless, the carol commissions at King's and elsewhere have demonstrated that new musical forms and developments are still emerging without doing violence to either the message or its liturgical purpose.

Church music is not an unchanging tradition. The recent reconstruction of Truro's 1880 service almost certainly did not *sound* like the original, however faithful the order of service; fashions in vocal training have changed, and so has the age of the average member of the back row. The standard of music performed by collegiate and cathedral choirs for use in church has risen enormously, and continues to improve, so that there are now far more choirs capable of singing difficult music than there would have been when the Nine Lessons and Carols service began. Church music in the later 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century does demand higher performance standards; more exploration of the physical limits of the voice as a vehicle for both music and text; more solos and descant and decoration; more use of specialised skills like pitched speech and aleatoric passages. All of this implies a move away from the understanding of the carol as a 'vernacular' form; yet the fact remains that those commissions which have most readily found a regular home in the repertoire beyond King's are those which conform to the stanza-burden format of the true carol.

Despite the gloomy view of Martin Thomas, there is quite clearly a deliberate attempt in many places, including King's, to enlarge the repertoire by imaginative commissioning, thereby challenging the perception that church



music is isolated from the rest of serious music in a cul-de-sac of low standards and minimal creativity. The writing of Gabriel Jackson and Jonathan Harvey, for example, suggests that *composing* for the church can be just as exciting and challenging as writing for other contexts. In recent years the *Merton Choirbook* and *Choirbook for the Queen* have seen deliberate attempts to attract interesting new music for a church context. Longer-standing links between new music and the liturgy of the church have been maintained over a number of years by the Edington Festival, and the Festival of Contemporary Music which is now hosted at St Pancras, having begun at Norwich Cathedral under Michael Nicholas. The annual New Music Wells festival, and Ripon Cathedral's New Music Week, are other examples of active collaboration between cathedrals and composers. Collegiate choirs and choral foundations in the 'greater churches' also commission new music. When the works are published, all of these avenues gives choirs anywhere a supply of new material to work with. The public profile of King's means that it has more opportunities than many choirs to share its new music with the world, but it is by no means alone in ensuring that music for the liturgy remains a lively and evolving genre.

The carol, and the evolution of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from its beginnings in Truro, amply illustrate the role of King's in beginning to open up the whole genre of liturgical and devotional music as an appropriate arena for musical innovation. Nearly everything we now associate with the traditions of the Nine Lessons and Carols, save for the lessons themselves, has changed since Sir David Willcocks' return to King's in 1957. His carol descants and the publication of *Carols for Choirs I* marked the beginning of an entirely fresh approach to the Christmas repertoire, in which the oldest of stories could be retold in new ways and with deliberately contemporary resonances. Sixty years after his appointment as director of music at King's, that legacy is still being developed. He was not the first to think of the Nine Lessons and Carols

format, nor did he have the final word in innovation, but the Willcocks era was the one in which church music proved that it could collaborate effectively with both the people's music in the form of the carol, and the skill-set of the professional classical musician.

The King's carol commissions contribute to the renewal of church music in several ways: through the redefinition and extension of the expected limits of the carol format, through the attainment of increasingly high performance standards which stretch awareness of what the human voice is capable of, and through the attraction of some of the most innovative composers to write music in a genre they might not otherwise have considered. They provide a bridge between the serious art music of the concert hall and the popular music which the church appropriated in the first place to create the *Christian* carol, and thus defy the artificial distinction others would make between 'church music' and 'the rest of music'. They challenge perceptions as to what can and should be sung in the context of worship. They revivify ancient texts through their application to the most pressing of contemporary social issues.

King's College Choir did not set out to establish a choral gold standard, but nonetheless came not only to create but to embody one. Through its catalogue of broadcasts and recordings, plus a century of increasingly professional approaches to daily rehearsal and performance under successive Directors of Music, King's has shaped expectations for choral sound, even among choirs with different vocal forces, or who perform predominantly outside the liturgical context. The carol commissions since 1983 are by no means the only examples of commitment to new music in our collegiate and cathedral choirs, but they form a measurable contribution to the repertoire of music written specifically for the liturgy of the church, which stands comparison with the best innovations elsewhere in the classical world.

## Appendix I: Detailed analysis of the King's commissions and their place in the repertoire

1982*	<b>The Lamb</b>
Before	Words: William Blake
Stephen	Music: John Tavener
Cleobury's	
tenure so	Publisher: Chester Music
not part of	Unaccompanied SATB
the 'annual	Duration: 3 minutes 20
commission',	
policy, but	Appears in Patton and Taylor (2000) as part of the repertoire of
included for	21 choirs
comparison	Subsequently sung at King's in the Nine Lessons and Carols
	services in 1983, 1984, 1986, 1988, 1993, 2001, 2003, 2011, 2013,
	2017

1983

**In Wintertime**

Words: Betty Askwith

Music: Lennox Berkeley

Publisher: Chester Music

SAATB with optional organ

Duration: 2 minutes 45

Place in service: after 8<sup>th</sup> lesson

Not listed in Patton and Taylor, though other compositions by Berkeley are included

Not sung again in 9L+C but published as part of the *Christmas at King's College* compilation (Novello 2009)

1984 **One Star, at Last**

Words: George Mackay Brown

Music: Peter Maxwell Davies

Publisher: Chester Music SATB unaccompanied

Duration: 3 minutes

Place in service: after 4<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: I choir

Sung again: 1985, 2009, 2014

1985 **Illuminare Jerusalem**

Words: adapted from the *Bannatyne Manuscript*

Music: Judith Weir

Publisher: Novello

SATB with divisi and organ

Duration: 2 minutes 30

Place in service: after 4<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 6 choirs

Sung again: 1986, 1989, 1993, 1996, 2001, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2013,  
2017

1986      **Nowel, Nowel, Holly Dark**

Words: Walter de la Mare

Music: Richard Rodney Bennett

Publisher: Novello

SAATTBB a cappella.

Duration: 1 minute 40

Place in service: after 8<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 0, but other works by Bennett are listed

Sung again: no.

1987      **What Sweeter Music**

Words: Robert Herrick

Music: John Rutter

Publisher: OUP

SSATBB and organ

Duration: 5 minutes

Place in service: after 8<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 10 choirs

Sung again: 1991, 2005, 2008, 2015

Also appears in Novello compilation

1988     **The Birthday of thy King**

Words: after Henry Vaughan

Music: Peter Sculthorpe

Publisher: Faber

Unaccompanied SSATBB, no solo.

Duration: 3 minutes

Place in service: before 1<sup>st</sup> lesson

A cappella with rehearsal piano part.

Patton and Taylor: 0 (no mention of other works by Sculthorpe)

Not sung again in 9L+C but appears in Novello compilation

1989     **Carol of St. Steven**

Words: Adapted from W. Sandys' *Christmas Carols* (1833)

Music: Alexander Goehr

Publisher: Schott

SATB with soli

Duration: 4 minutes

Place in service: after 8<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 0

Sung again: no

1990      **Богородице Дево, радуйся**  
**(Rejoice, O Virgin Mary)**

Words: Orthodox Liturgy

Music: Arvo Pärt

Publisher; Universal Editions

Duration: 1 minute

SATB, doubled to SSAATTBB bars 23-25. Unaccompanied.

Place in service: before 6<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 1 choir

Sung again: 1991, 1997, 1998, 2002, 2007, 2011

Also appears in Novello compilation

1991      **A Gathering**

Words: Lancelot Andrewes, Sermon XVI

Music: John Casken

Publisher: Schott                      Unaccompanied SATB with divisi

Duration: 5 minutes 30

Place in service: after 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 0

Sung again: no



1992

**Swetë Jesu**

Words: Anonymous, 13th century (Middle English)

Music: Nicholas Maw

Place in service: after 4<sup>th</sup> lesson

Publisher: Faber

Duration: 5 minutes

Unaccompanied SATB (treble divisi last 4 bars)

Patton and Taylor: 0

but other works by Maw listed

Sung again: no

1993

**Christo Paremus Cantica**

Words: Anonymous, 15th century

Music: Diana Burrell

Publisher: none given                      Unaccompanied SATB with divisi

Duration: 3 minutes 20

Place in service: after 6<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 0 but other works by Burrell listed

Sung again: no

Appears in Novello compilation

1994      **The Angels**

Words: John V. Taylor

Music: Jonathan Harvey

Publisher: Faber

For unaccompanied chorus (2 choirs of SATB plus divisi, so requires a total of 10 parts)

Duration: 5 minutes

Place in service: after 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 0 but other works by Harvey listed

Sung again: no

1995      **Seinte Marie Moder Milde**

Words: 13<sup>th</sup> century

Music: James MacMillan

Publisher: Boosey and Hawkes

SATB (with divisi) and organ

Duration: 7 minutes 30

Place in service: before 6<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 0 but other works by MacMillan listed

Sung again: no

1996

**Pilgrim Jesus**

Words: Kevin Crossley-Holland

Music: Stephen Paulus

SSAATTBB with organ

Duration: 5 minutes

Publisher: European-American Music Corporation

Place in service: after 6<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 0

Sung again: no

1997

**The Fayrfax Carol**

Words: Anonymous, 16<sup>th</sup> century

Music: Thomas Adès

Publisher: Faber Duration c.5 minutes

SATB with divisions: optional organ

Max divisi SSSAATTTTBB

Duration: 5 minutes

Place in service: after 7<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 0

Sung again: no

1998      **Winter Solstice Carol**

English words and music: Giles Swayne: refrain based on the Latin Magnificat antiphon for Christmas Day

Publisher: Novello

SATB with divisi and flute

Duration: 4 minutes 30

Place in service: before 7<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: 0 but other works by Swayne listed, the most frequent being his Canticles

Sung again: no

1999      **On Christmas Day to My Heart**

Words: Clement Paman

Music: Richard Rodney Bennett

Anthem for SATB

Duration: 4 minutes

Publisher: Novello

Place in service: before 8<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: other works by Bennett listed, including the carol *Susanni*

Sung again: no

2000      **The Three Kings**

Words: Dorothy L. Sayers

Music: Jonathan Dove

Publisher: Peters

2 solo trebles plus SATB double choir *a cappella*

Duration: 4 minutes

Place in service: before 9<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor: lists other works by Dove

Has not been performed again at King's, but is certainly in the repertoire of a number of other choirs including York Minster

2001      **Spring in Winter**

Words: Christopher Smart

Music: John Woolrich

SATB *a cappella*

Publisher: Faber

Duration: 3 mins

Place in service: after 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2002      **Christmas Carol: The Angel Gabriel Descended to a Virgin**

Words: 15th–17th century

Music: Robin Holloway

SATB (with divisi) and organ

Max divisi SSSSAATTBB

Duration: 6 minutes

Publisher: Boosey and Hawkes

Place in service: after 5<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2003      **The Gleam**

Words: Stephen Plaice

Music: Harrison Birtwistle

Publisher: Boosey and Hawkes

SATB choir

Duration: 6 minutes

Place in service: after 6<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2004    **God would be born in thee**

Words: Angelus Silesius

Music: Judith Bingham

SATB and organ

Publisher: Maecenas Music

Duration: 4 minutes 30

Place in service: after 3<sup>rd</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor lists a number of other liturgical works by Bingham, including a set of canticles also written for King's

Sung again: no

2005    **Away in a Manger**

Words: 19th century

Music: John Tavener

Publisher: Chester Music

SSATBB

Duration: 3 minutes

Place in service: after 7<sup>th</sup> lesson

Patton and Taylor lists numerous works by Tavener

Sung again: no

2006 **Misere' nobis**

Words: from a medieval English carol

Music: Mark-Anthony Turnage

SATB with divisi

Publisher: Boosey and Hawkes

Duration: 2 min 45 sec

Place in service: before 7<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

Also appears in *Choirbook for the Queen*

2007 **Noël (Now comes the dawn)**

Words: Richard Watson Gilder

Music: Brett Dean

For mixed chorus SSATB/TrTrATB

Duration: 3 minutes 30

Publisher: Boosey and Hawkes

Place in service: after 3<sup>rd</sup> lesson

Sung again: no



2008 **Mary**

Words: Bertolt Brecht, trans. Michael Hamburger

Music: Dominic Muldowney

Duration: 4 minutes 30

Place in service: after 5<sup>th</sup> lesson

Unpublished: it has therefore not been possible to locate a copy of the score

Sung again: no

2009 **The Christ Child**

Words: G.K. Chesterton

Music: Gabriel Jackson

Publisher: OUP X514 Duration: 3 minutes 30

SATB with divisions.

Place in service: after 7<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2010 **Offerings they brought of gold (*Kultaa, pyhää savua ja mirhamia*)**

Words and Music: Einojuhani Rautavaara

Publisher: Boosey and Hawkes

SSAATTBB *a cappella*

Duration: 4 minutes 30

Place in service: after 8<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2011 **Christmas hath a darkness (Christmas Eve)**

Words: Christina Rossetti

Music: Tansy Davies

Publisher: Faber

SATB Unaccompanied

Duration: 6 minutes

Place in service: after 6<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2012      **Ring Out, Wild Bells**

Words: Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Music: Carl Vine

For large choir SSAATTB

Publisher: Faber

Duration: 4 minutes

Place in service: before 5<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2013      **Hear the voice of the Bard**

Words: William Blake

Music: Thea Musgrave

TrATB Unaccompanied

Publisher: Novello

Duration: 3 minutes

Place in service: before 2<sup>nd</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2014 **De Virgine Maria**

Words: 12<sup>th</sup> century Latin, trans. Ronald Knox

Music: Carl Rütli

SATB (with divisions) and organ

Duration: 3 minutes 30

Publisher: Novello NOV 295020

Place in service: after 8<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2015 **The Flight**

Words: George Szirtes

Music: Richard Causton

SATB (with divisions) unaccompanied

Publisher: OUP X612

Duration: 6 minutes

Place in service: after 8<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2016      **This Endernight**

Words: Anonymous, 15<sup>th</sup> century

Music: Michael Berkeley

SATB and organ

Publisher: OUP X672

Duration: 4 minutes 30

Place in service: after 6<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: no

2017      **Pwy sy'n gorwedd yn y Preseb? (*Who is it that lies in the manger?*)**

Words: Carol Eliseus (Elisha's Carol): T. C. Davies

Music: Huw Watkins

SATB chorus

Publisher: Schott

Duration: 2 minutes

Place in service: after 6<sup>th</sup> lesson

Sung again: not applicable

## Appendix 2

### Composers of King's commissions also represented in *Choirbook for the Queen*:

Richard Rodney Bennett: *Nowel* (1986) and *On Christmas Day to my Heart* (1999)/ *These Three*

Judith Bingham: *God would be born in thee* (2004)/*Corpus Christi Carol*

Diana Burrell: *Christo paremus cantica* (1993)/*O Joyful Light*

John Casken: *A Gathering* (1991)/*In the Bleak Midwinter*

Richard Causton: *The Flight* (2015)/*Cradle Song*

Peter Maxwell Davies: *One Star, at Last* (1984) /*Advent Calendar*

Jonathan Dove: *The Three Kings* (2000)/*Vast Ocean of Light*

Alexander Goehr: *Carol of St Steven* (1989)/*Cities and Thrones and Powers*

Jonathan Harvey: *The Angels* (1994)/*The Royal Banners Forward Go*

Robin Holloway: *Christmas Carol* (2002)/*Psalm 121*

Gabriel Jackson: *The Christ Child* (2009)/*To Morning*

James MacMillan: *Seinte Marie moder milde* (1995)/*The Canticle of Zachariah*

John Rutter: *What sweeter music* (1987)/*Il my Best-Beloved's Am*

Giles Swayne: *Winter solstice carol* (1998)/*Ave Verum Corpus*

John Tavener: *Away in a manger* (2005)/*Take Him Earth for Cherishing*

Mark-Anthony Turnage: *Misere' Nobis* (2006- the same work in both)

Judith Weir: *Illuminare Jerusalem* (1985)/*a blue true dream of sky*

John Woolrich: *Spring in Winter (2001)/Earth Grown Old*

Summary: 18 of the Choirbook's 44 anthems came from composers of King's commissions, and one is the same work

## **Appendix 3**

### **Composers of King's Commissions also represented in the *Merton Choirbook*:**

Harrison Birtwistle: *Chorale Preludes (for unaccompanied choir)*

Jonathan Dove: *Te Deum*

Gabriel Jackson: four pieces, including *Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du verbrochen* and *The Passion of the Lord*

James MacMillan: *I will take you from the nations*

John Tavener: *O Adonai*

Judith Weir: *Ave Regina Coelorum*

Summary: ten of 55 pieces came from composers of King's commissions



## Appendix 4: Outline of mediaeval order of Matins<sup>310</sup>

Invitatory with Psalm 94 (95)

Hymn

First Nocturn

Three Psalms with Antiphons

**Three Lessons** each followed by a responsory

Second Nocturn

Three Psalms with Antiphons

**Three Lessons** each followed by a responsory

Third Nocturn

Three Psalms with Antiphons

**Three Lessons** each followed by a responsory

Te Deum (on Sundays and Feasts)

Versicle

Prayer

Benedicamus Domino

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<sup>310</sup> Reproduced from Hoppin (1978), 100, table 7

## **Bibliography and list of resources:**

### **Online**

The Nine Lessons and Carols website

<http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/events/chapel-services/nine-lessons.html>, which provides a history of the service, gives details of carol commissions between 2007 and 2013 (including a podcast of the 2007 commission by Brett Dean), and complete orders of service between 1997 and 2013.

<http://www.recordedchurchmusic.org> (formerly <http://www.inquiresandplaces.com/>): an online archive of recorded music from cathedrals and collegiate choirs. Also has its own YouTube channel, [youtube.com/c/archiveofrecordedchurchmusic](https://www.youtube.com/c/archiveofrecordedchurchmusic)

<http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com> archive of historic hymn and carol texts transcribed from hymnbooks and written collections, with midi files of tunes.

<https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/liturgy-in-4th-century-jerusalem-the-travels-of-egeria/> A translation of the account of liturgical practice in fourth century Jerusalem by the Galician nun Egeria (or Aetheria)

### **Archive material**

King's College Archive Centre holds significant collections of material relating to the history of the chapel, the choir and the carol service. All files were accessed at the Archive Centre on 11/12/2017. Particularly useful files included:

KCA CSV/103- contains a complete set of orders of service for the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from 1919-2015.

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*Vox Clara: Music of Gabriel Jackson* (Choir of Truro Cathedral/Gray, 2016)

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### **Scores**

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Individual scores of the King's commissions are listed in Appendix I, where available. Two (Muldowney's *Mary* and Birtwistle's *The Gleam*) proved impossible to locate.