

# Our church musical heritage

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May 2016**



Our local Parish church choir ceased to exist in 2008 when Martin Lee, our then Rector, left the Parish. Part of the reason was a lack of people with experience of singing, but another reason was difficulty in finding a dedicated person to direct the choir. This is a picture of our local Community Choir which was set up at the end of 2015. It is run as a self-sustaining local choir that is independent of the Parish. However, it does mean that our Parish can once again appreciate the joys of hearing a local choir sing in our local churches on special occasions.

Church music has been an integral part of the English Church for over a thousand years. It has enriched our worship immeasurably, but it has also enraged many who regard it as improper for music to detract from the central purpose of Church services. In some people's eyes this is simply to provide a proper framework for worshipping God. I have recently read a book by Andrew Gant entitled "O Sing to the Lord" that provides a comprehensive, and very entertaining, history of English church music. I have also re-viewed a TV series by David Starkey on "Music and Monarchy", which concentrates on the contribution that the monarchy has made to English music. A very considerable proportion of this royal contribution has been religious in nature.

I can only provide you with a summary of this history but before I start I want to mention an anecdote from my mother, and a little known fact about one of our most famous warrior kings. First, the anecdote: after my mother finished at university in the late 1920s she taught at a rural village school. In those days most people worked on the land were expected to be seen in church by the local landowner. She asked her class what they did in church on a Sunday. The answer from one of the children was "we sings 'oly 'ymns, miss". The experience of singing was clearly something that stood out as being part of their experience of religion. I think anyone who attends church services would concur with this.

Second, there is a little known fact about Henry V, the victor of Agincourt in 1415. He was a composer and encouraged the fashion for English monarchs taking their choirs on journeys with them when they travelled around the country. The first anecdote is important because it alludes to the end stage of a process in which the focus of church music moved from "priestly performance" to active involvement of the congregation in worship through the singing of hymns. The fact about Henry V is the start of a process in which English royalty became intimately involved with the way that church music developed, through the middle ages, into the Reformation and the Restoration, and finally, via the resurgence of religious observance in the Victorian era, to modern times.

Let's start at the beginning.





Published and Printed by the Parochial Church Council of  
The Parish of Three Saints

## Early church music

The early Celtic Church undoubtedly used chanted music in its early services but, following the Synod of Whitby in 664, the influence of the Roman Church predominated. This meant that plainsong based on the Gregorian chant became the usual mode of singing the Christian litany. Singing was restricted to monks in their monasteries, and in some monasteries a considerable period of their waking day was spent singing. The music was developed to a high degree of complexity culminating in what was known as the Use of Sarum (Old Sarum was the monastery just outside modern Salisbury). This consisted of the daily Office at which psalms and canticles were sung at set times during the day, and the Mass, which consisted of the Ordinary section (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei) and Proper texts that were sung on Saints days. The monks received specific training in their musical duties and achieved levels of musical skill that would have been beyond the layman, who could only listen. To some these chants were “a corner of heaven” but, as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> C others considered them to be “the vain pleasure of the ears” and that “sound should not be given precedence over meaning”. This was a portent of things to come.

## The medieval period

The major medieval musical innovation was polyphony. Plainsong was a single tune that all sang together. Harmony was now added by creating parts above and below the main melody, and these parts could be composed to suit a range of voices from bass to treble. Alternatively the melody could be sung as a “round” with different groups repeating the tune at a fixed interval. This style was developed on the continent but, by the 14<sup>th</sup> C, a specific English type of polyphony emerged in music sung in cathedrals. These were the bastions of church music, and half of these were monastic foundations. The larger town parish churches tried to emulate the cathedrals by setting up their own choirs. Private chapels were also built by wealthy land owners, who had their own professional choirs, but by far the most important of these private chapels was the Monarch’s Chapel Royal. Whilst this did have a physical base in London most of the time it was on the move with the Royal Court. Chantries were also important musically because they provided a means by which local professional musicians could be paid to sing masses for their patron, who was trying to shorten his spell in purgatory, the “waiting room” between death and heaven or hell. The laity were not able to participate, but, just as the church was adorned with images that illustrated the Bible stories, the sounds of services were an integral part of the common religious experience. Music was part of general religious observance and singing took place during a major festival such as Easter and on the Saint’s day processions that occurred regularly throughout the year.

## The Reformation

By the early 16<sup>th</sup> C the Catholic Church was decaying from within. In retrospect it is no surprise that the forces of Protestantism became so strong. Andrew Gant sums up the effect of the Reformation on church music:

“Music was never the main component of the intellectual case for reform. Rather, it was affected when the structures that supported it started to be dismantled. The Government did not demand the end of sacred music, but they did require an end to idolatory to the saints and it wanted the money which paid for the local monastery and its choir.....Music was collateral damage, as art often is in war.....there were also key changes to the liturgy and rules for the use of music in church.”

These changes started with Henry VIII and were intensified under the short reign of Edward VI. There was a brief reversion to Catholic forms of music under Mary, and then what can best be described as carefully crafted consolidation of the new Protestant forms of music under Elizabeth. The 16<sup>th</sup> C saw the rise of the English composer, but he had to be wary and keep on the right side of the spirit of the law. Some composers came close to losing their heads when they chose to support the “wrong side” openly. John Taverner was the first of the key Tudor composers and he managed to avoid the worst of the changes because he died in 1542 before the end of Henry’s reign. However, the two great composers of the era, Thomas Tallis and William Byrd, were Catholic sympathisers. They were both organist and choirmaster to the Chapel Royal and both wrote works in English and Latin to suit the changing needs of the times.

The importance of the individual and his/her relationship with God through the scriptures was a key component of the new Protestant faith. This resulted in translating the Bible into English so that people could understand and, if they were literate, read it. Psalms were now accessible as well and could be set to music. The first psalter was published in 1550 under Edward VI and was entitled *The Whole Book of Psalms Collected into English Metre* (Sternhold and Hopkins). The important point to realise in this context is that psalms were not easy to sing and



had to be translated in such a way that they could be sung to music. This first psalter was very popular and was reprinted 200 times up to 1640. It remained in use until the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> C.

## **17<sup>th</sup> C – The Stuart Monarchy and Puritanism**

The state of church music did not change radically with the accession of James I. Commissions for composers from the Chapel Royal were increasingly being used on ceremonial occasions such as coronations and deaths of members of the royal family. The last of the Tudor composers Orlando Gibbons was appointed to the Chapel Royal in 1603 at the age of twenty and held the post of organist until his premature death in 1625. Gibbons was not an innovator but one who, in the words of Andrew Gant: “inherited an existing style and polished it to perfection”. He wrote anthems and an early hymnal for congregational use.

As a result of Puritanical influences parish music was in significant decline, but the Catholic tastes of Charles and the influence of Archbishop Laud saw a resurgence of cathedral music. Again Gant provides a dramatic picture of the contrasts between the music of the Chapel Royal in Whitehall (singing by a choir in rich gowns and surplices to the sound of trumpets, hoboys, flutes and shawms) and the man in the street outside (heading off to hear a sermon at St Pauls and clutching a “penny” ballad-sheet copy of a psalm to sing with his friends). Battle lines were drawn! Church music effectively died after the civil war and all organs were taken out of churches. Music did not return until the Restoration of the monarchy.

In 1660 the Chapel Royal choir was re-founded by “Captain” Henry Cooke, so called because he had been a Captain in the Royalist army. He was joined by the Purcell brothers Henry and Thomas. Sadly Henry died in 1664 leaving his young five year old son, also called Henry, in the care of his brother Thomas. He became one of the youngest members of the Chapel Royal and was taught during his formative early years by Pelham Humphrey. These two men revolutionised English music through their compositions, many of them for the Church. Humphrey had been influenced by French music and had imported the use of large numbers of string instruments into his compositions. Purcell developed Humphrey’s ideas and is generally regarded as one of the best English composers of all time. Not only did he produce new settings of the liturgy but he also developed the short anthem to a new level of perfection. In musical terms he introduced symphonic music to the Church. As well as the sung word there were lengthy introductions and complete standalone orchestral compositions.

At a parish level psalm singing was re-introduced, and a new psalter was produced by Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady in 1696. This was entitled *New Versions of the Psalms of David in Metre* and officially replaced the Sternhold and Hopkins psalter of the Tudor period.

## **18<sup>th</sup> C – Classical church music and the rise of congregational singing**

The next composer to make his mark at the Chapel Royal was not an Englishman but a German, George Frederick Handel, who arrived with the new Hanoverian dynasty. His formal terms of engagement at the Chapel Royal were very different from his predecessors. They had to do duties as organist and choir master, and in the early days clothe and feed the choristers. His royal duties did not include any of these activities, and were limited to composing. Furthermore, the composing for church services was a relatively small part of his duties, which were more about composing for ceremonial occasions, for example *Zadok the Priest* for the coronation of George II. He was also a successful commercial composer who wrote Italian operas for the new merchant classes in London. When these became unpopular he turned to oratorios based on religious themes, and the most famous of these is, of course, the *Messiah*.

The world of the parish church was far removed from these musical developments. Nevertheless, congregations were becoming more educated and assertive. There were two key strands of development during the 18<sup>th</sup> C, the rise of congregational singing, and groups of local musicians who performed choral works from the West Gallery of the church.

The publication of Tate and Brady’s new book of psalms was an attempt to codify how psalms and canticles should be sung. Congregational singing had become notoriously unruly. Despite the efforts of the Parish clerk, who attempted to sing individual lines that were then repeated by the congregation (a process known as “lining out”), the individuals in the congregation sang tunes largely as they wished. Tate and Brady’s new approach caught on and the congregation began to join in the canticles like the *Te Deum* and the *Magnificat*. In the Anglican Church the psalms and canticles were often sung by a local choir that modelled itself on the cathedral choir. Some of



these choirs became quite professional and this approach was favoured by “high church” Anglicans such as Parson Woodforde, who liked to listen to his choir singing the liturgy and then go home to a good roast dinner! Another branch of the Church, generally known as Dissenters, preferred to sing as a congregation and their champion was Isaac Watts, who was “part of a long and noble line of English devotional writers who knew that the ideal is seriousness of thought combined with directness of expression”. This became known as the Evangelical approach, or “low church”. His legacy lives on and, when you sing O God, Our Help in Ages Past, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross and Jesus Shall Reign, you are singing hymns composed by Watts. His successors were the Wesley brothers, Charles and John, the founders of Methodism. Charles was the more prolific writer of hymns and produced more than six thousand in his long life.



A West Gallery choir

In larger parish churches the accompaniment to the choir was provided by an organ, but these were expensive and smaller, particularly rural, congregations could not afford this luxury. Instead local musicians banded together to set up musical groups that would perform choral pieces that were accompanied by between three and eight instruments ranging from the cello, violin, bassoon, flute to the oboe. The West Gallery musician movement was particularly strong in Dorset and Hardy was brought up in this tradition. He included the Mellstock Quire in Under the Greenwood Tree.

### **19<sup>th</sup> C – Anglo Catholicism, the Choir and the Victorian hymn tradition**

The early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> C saw a decline in church music standards. There were no new English composers and the cathedral choir went into decline. The Nonconformist Churches (Dissenters) were expanding rapidly and by the middle of the century comprised half of the church-going population. The standard bearers of the new hymn singing were the Welsh and many fine hymns were written and sung in the 19<sup>th</sup> C Welsh chapels, the best known being Cwm Rhondda – Guide me o Thou Great Redeemer. In the Anglican Church musical composition was rescued by two Germans, the composer Felix Mendelssohn and Victoria’s Consort, Prince Albert, who championed his work, but the Oxford Movement instigated by John Keble in 1833, had a more significant effect on what happened within the Anglican Church itself.

Whilst Hayden and Mozart had visited England in the 1770s their influence on English church music was negligible. During the 1830’s and 40’s Mendelssohn visited England numerous times and played the organ regularly at St Paul’s cathedral. Whilst he did not formally compose music for the church his influence was significant and his oratorios such as Elijah became very popular. He is best remembered nowadays for the tune to which we sing Hark the Herald Angels and the march from the incidental music to a Midsummer Night’s Dream that has accompanied many a bride up the aisle. His relationship with the Royal Family was important and he encouraged Albert to promote the cause of music in the country at large. Part of Albert’s legacy was the founding of the Royal College of Music, which had an enormous influence on English composition in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The Oxford Movement was primarily about Church liturgy, but music played a significant part in the way that the liturgy was presented. The main thrust of the Movement was a return to Catholic values. Ceremony was re-introduced and the emphasis switched from scripture to the litany. The altar returned as a focus for worship and incense was used again. Musical style took a step backwards in time and Tallis and Gibbons became fashionable again. Whilst the movement began in Oxford the key developments took place in a few London parish churches at which choirs were set up to sing the new musical forms of the liturgy. Rather than sing from the Gallery the choristers faced each other on either side of the chancel. This was a reversion to the medieval framework of worship with the difference being that the parishioners were not excluded by the rood screen. These new practices aroused significant antagonism and in December 1850 the Prime Minister Lord John Russell published an open



letter deploring them. Two weeks later the “patriotic poor” of Pimlico rioted and occupied their parish church, an event that caused consternation in the Oxford Movement.

St Barnabas  
Church, Pimlico



However, this did not slow developments and congregational hymns were the next target. J M Neal, a classical scholar at Cambridge, translated numerous Latin and Greek texts and, with people like Mrs C F Alexander, wrote new hymns. In 1861 a hymnal was produced whose name typified the Movement’s approach, Hymns Ancient and Modern. This was a runaway success, and created many of the hymns that we know and love today. The final effect of the Movement was the rebirth of cathedral choral music. In the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> C this had declined significantly and by early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> C was virtually moribund. However, by the end of the century it had been revitalised and was one of the glories of the Anglican Church.

To achieve this end there had to be composers, and the two most famous were Hubert Parry and Charles Villiers Stanford. As a composer Parry is best known for the choral song "Jerusalem", the coronation anthem "I was glad", and the hymn tune "Repton", which is set to the words "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind". However, his contribution to church music was limited. By contrast Stanford wrote a significant number of canticles and anthems, and his settings of the Te Deum and Stabat Mater, a 13th-century Catholic hymn to Mary, are particularly notable contributions.

## 20<sup>th</sup> C – Expanding horizons

Both Stanford and Parry held prominent positions in the Royal College of Music and were able to influence the new generation of composers in the 20<sup>th</sup> C. This generation was initially dominated by Vaughan Williams, and his music was influenced by a combination of old English folk songs and the Tudor music of composers such as Tallis. His most significant choral music was a Mass in G Minor that he wrote for the Catholic Church. However, he will be remembered best for the hymn tunes he wrote, which included Come Down O Love Divine and For All the Saints. Gustav Holst was also a formative influence. He wrote a limited amount of original church music but contributed a number of arrangements of carols that are still popular today (In the Bleak Midwinter and Tomorrow Shall be my Dancing Day). The most prolific composer of music for the Anglican litany was Herbert Howells. He worked as a cathedral organist and was inspired by Vaughan Williams’ compositions that drew on Tudor roots. The texts for his work were drawn largely from canticles in the Book of Common Prayer and psalms.

The major English composers of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> C century Britten, Walton and Tippett all wrote church music but much of it was commissioned and not written out of religious conviction. In fact, most of the 20<sup>th</sup> C church music was written by agnostics, and, in the case of Tippett, a militant atheist. This trend towards secularism has continued and Karl Jenkins probably typifies one of the modern approaches to “spiritual music” that is built around an eclectic approach to religion and music. His roots were in pop music but his compositions, the Armed Man and Requiem are performed regularly in cathedrals around the world. Before leaving composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> C we ought also to mention Tavener and Rutter. , John Tavener began composing avant garde music with the Beatles and later became a convert to the Eastern Orthodox Church. His music is not to everyone’s taste but his composition Song for Athenae was sung at Lady Diana’s funeral. By contrast the music of John Rutter is more conventional and has achieved greater popularity. He studied at Clare College, Cambridge and became the musical director of their choir. He has composed numerous carols and also canticles in the Anglican tradition. To some his style



is sentimental and saccharine, but he is unapologetic about this and states that he prefers to write accessible music that appeals to people rather than compositions that are critically acclaimed.

For the congregation the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> C produced further hymnals. Dearmer and Vaughan Williams compiled and wrote new hymns for the English Hymnal published in 1906. This was considered by many to be too Anglo-Catholic in its selections and, for this reason, was actually banned in one diocese. As a result the Church of England commissioned another hymnal that was intended to appeal to a wider audience, Songs of Praise (1925). Vaughan Williams was also involved in editing the music for this and one of his intentions was to open up hymn singing to a younger generation. He succeeded in this and many education authorities adopted it as their hymnal. In the second half of the century a significant number of new hymns and new tunes to old hymns have been introduced into hymnals such as Common Praise. As far as musical accompaniment is concerned the organ had come to be accepted as the standard musical instrument for use in churches, but this is large and can be expensive to maintain. Whilst it is still expected that parish churches should have organs the folk revival of the 1950s and 60s ensured that other instruments began to be accepted for use in services, particularly in evangelical churches. It is now commonplace for hymns to receive the full “pop” treatment with small groups of musicians, and electronic advances ensure that an amplified keyboard is often all that is required.

### **Afterthoughts and a personal reflection**

In summarising Andrew Gant’s book I have tried to show that church music in England has been influenced by many factors during the past thousand years or so. Amongst the most important are contemporary religious doctrines, royal patronage and general social factors. Currently religion is in decline and social factors are not supporting structured worship in church. Will this decline continue, and is there anything we can do about it?

Perhaps the first response to this should be that *music in churches* is not in decline. Many churches, particularly cathedrals, hold regular concerts, and the music played is often based on religious themes. At a religious level parish church music may be in decline but the cathedrals, through their choirs, maintain the tradition of the sung liturgy. Further, whilst it may be true that many traditional Anglican parish churches do not have sufficient strength in numbers to support good congregational singing, Evangelical congregations tend to do much better. Their forms of worship songs may not be to everyone’s taste, but their music is vigorously performed and clearly supports their worship.

Finally, I would like to draw on my past personal experience at school and make a few points about local choirs and congregational singing. I was fortunate to go to a school that had built a strong musical tradition through the efforts of the senior music master. In the late 50s and early 60s the school choir was well known and was invited to sing on BBC programmes and even concerts in Europe. The music master was a strict disciplinarian and his rule stretched beyond the choir. I can still remember the preservice sessions we had on Sundays when he would rehearse psalm singing and new hymn tunes before the morning service itself. If we didn’t do things right there would be a sharp rap as his baton hit the choir stall, and we would have to start again. Somehow he would chivvy us into shape. I suspect that this sort of method would not be approved nowadays, but it certainly produced results and the quality of congregational singing was improved. We enjoyed it, and we also appreciated the choir when they sang anthems at special services. So I return to my first paragraph and our local community choir. I cannot quite see us doing the community hymn practice before services, but let us hope that they can enliven our worship on special occasions and lead us when we sing our own ‘oly ‘ymns.

Sources:

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Music and Monarchy – David Starkey – *BBC video of TV series*

