

BROADCASTING CHORAL EVENSONG

“Radio 3. It’s 4 o’clock and time now for this week’s broadcast of Choral Evensong which comes live from Durham Cathedral.....” so began the broadcast on July 12th 2006. At this point I was installed in the BBC Outside Broadcasts van, parked adjacent to the Cathedral on Palace Green. What might not generally be known is that there had already been some six hours of meetings, the installation of technical equipment, taping all the microphone leads to the floor and a run-through and timing of both the spoken and sung parts of the service.



Control Van at Durham Cathedral

I was shadowing the broadcast of this Evensong at the invitation of Series Producer Revd Stephen Shipley; a lively correspondence from around the country had followed my editorial in last year’s magazine and I was here to see and learn more of the tradition of these weekly Choral Evensongs, now the longest-running outside broadcast in the BBC’s history, completing its 80th anniversary on 7th October 2006. Stephen can hardly be better qualified to have overall control of the series, being both a professional musician (he was organ scholar at University College, Durham) and an anglican priest, being for a time Precentor of Ely Cathedral. He follows previous notable producers James Whitbourn, who took over in 1989 from Barry Rose, who had held the responsibility for the previous twenty years.

The first broadcast was made from Westminster Abbey on October 7th 1926 (a Thursday: men only - Byrd Fauxbourdons and *O sing unto the Lord* by Boyce, directed by Sidney Nicholson). In 1936 the BBC broadcast from St Paul’s for the first time (a Tuesday - a day not favoured by the Abbey) and in September 1938 the first broadcast came from York Minster (Sir Edward Bairstow) and for a time the three cathedrals alternated, despite the then Director of Religious Programmes (Dr Iremonger) once expressing unhappiness with the standard at York, an opinion which much offended Bairstow.

I asked Stephen how it was that a choir first became ‘accepted’ - and could one equally be ‘demoted’?

“What is important to realise,” said Stephen, “is that the broadcast on Wednesdays at 4 o’clock on Radio 3 usually follows music of exceptional quality - a high profile orchestral piece, say, by the Berlin Philharmonic; it would not do for this to be followed by a Choral Evensong of less than the highest standard. Those choirs falling short are usually faced with an honest appraisal by the Producer and, on occasion, asked to ‘let us know when you feel you are on better times’. An offer to broadcast is sometimes suggested by (say) a Precentor; tapes/CDs are not really indicative of a true picture, and a choir is usually listened to *in situ* by one of the BBC Production staff incognito. As a result, a choir may be invited first to do a less demanding broadcast, with further appraisal after that.”

I remarked that when I was a student at Durham in the 60s, the Cathedral Choir under Conrad Eden broadcast Evensong on two successive Wednesdays, as did other cathedral choirs at the time, the incomparable Peterborough under Stanley Vann, for example.



Durham Cathedral

“The standard nowadays is so much higher nationwide,” replied Stephen, “that this is unnecessary. It would be gratifying to think that the weekly broadcasts have themselves contributed to this raising of standards - although there was a brief blip in 1970 when for three months, there was only one broadcast a month. 2500 letters of complaint were received (*including an impassioned protest from focca - Ed*) and the weekly Wednesday afternoon slot was restored. The first stereo transmission was from Gloucester Cathedral in 1971, and there was a period of five years from 1981-6 when we broadcast Evensong twice a week. Quite frankly, it didn’t work, because the second transmission was more often than not recorded, and particularly caused cathedrals a problem with their daily sung service; you’d do a live broadcast on a sunny June afternoon and then the following day, record one for the third week in Advent, often asking for a very different repertoire and feel to a service which would be transmitted in the penitential season approaching Christmas.

“More recently, there was a period when the Wednesday broadcast was repeated after midnight on Thursday night - but the audience was very small. However, we did get some appreciative comments from the odd insomniac and long-distance lorry driver!”

I asked whether the BBC often received such letters of appreciation (or castigation) after a broadcast. “Indeed we do,” said Stephen, “and sometimes the postbag is quite large. There is a Radio 3 ‘message-board’ on the Radio 3 website which generates a lot of comments, some of which can be quite opinionated.



Hi-tech connection to the outside listening world: phone line strung up in a nearby tree outside the cathedral!

I noted that the BBC van had arrived on the Tuesday evening, and engineers were at work early on the Wednesday laying the cables and lines necessary for the broadcast. Noting no satellite dish on the van, I wondered if the transmission were now by landline, since I remember being a lay-clerk at Guildford Cathedral and losing the entire Guildford broadcast through a faulty satellite link. The answer was evident when I was shown the state-of-the-art third millennium connection to the outside world - a BT landline 'installed' in a nearby tree!

During lunch on the Wednesday, Stephen Shipley was involved in discussions with the Precentor and with Director of Music James Lancelot and the various rehearsals began in the cathedral at 1.35, starting with the reading and timing of the lessons and prayers. Stephen already showed concern at the length (over 5 minutes) of the first lesson (Nehemiah 6 v1 - 7 v4) relating the building of the wall of Jerusalem. Most lessons set from the standard lectionary are part of the daily continuance of the reading of the bible, but in the context of a weekly broadcast Evensong this element of continuance is easily lost, and I asked Stephen what parts of the service could be shortened if an over-run seemed likely.



Testing voice-levels for lesson reading

“It is important to use the one-hour ‘slot’ constructively, and over-runs are not ideal. In practice, the last sacrifice would be a psalm; more usually, a hymn or a lengthy reading could be shortened. The shape of the service is important, and the psalms for the day are an integral part of the *opus dei*; it would be expected that the choir would sing the one(s) set (especially the 15th evening!). Some cathedrals are following the Common Worship Lectionary which offers alternative psalms, and then of course there are often ‘special’ psalms for an occasion or saint’s day, but, to my mind, the psalms and prayers are the core of evensong. I do not approve when the former are sacrificed to a long anthem, and I like the latter to reflect the tone of the service and to have space in

them for silence. This is also, I feel, what listeners appreciate. Sometimes there is a special poignancy to a service; on the first anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attack on America, Choral Evensong came live (at 11 am East Coast time) from Trinity Church, Wall Street, the nearest church to ground zero, and in June 2004, for the sixtieth anniversary of the D-Day invasion in the Second World War, Choral Evensong was at the Abbaye aux Hommes in Caen.”

•2.00 pm, and Keith Wright plays through the organ voluntary (*Festival Fanfare* by Kenneth Leighton) for timing purposes - six minutes ten seconds: this will mean the service

must end at 4.53. During the play-through the lay-clerks and choral scholars arrive in the stalls, followed by the boy choristers.



The choir rehearses

•2.15: the *preces* and *responses* (Bernard Rose) are rehearsed, after which the Precentor leaves.

•2.30: work begins on balancing the psalms (65-67). James Lancelot encourages the trebles to enunciate the words clearer and discusses with Keith Wright how to manage the opening chord so that the boys can hear the top note of the chord when the mixture is on. More advice is offered to the choir in Ps 66: “More drama, please in verses five and six ‘*he turneth the sea into dry land*’, an occurrence stated so often in the psalms that it is almost taken as a normal event; this is an astonishing miracle! Heads up, please, so that the sound comes out...”

•2.45: Stephen and James Lancelot work in collusion with the timing of the canticles (Howells: *The St Paul’s Service*). James is insistent on balanced ensemble and clarity: “boys, on page 26 you must make sure that you are completely watertight here, and generally, for all of us, a bright, incisive tone is what is needed - not just singing very loud. Can we try that section again?”



James Lancelot and Stephen Shipley confer

•3.10: the anthem is practised (Leighton - *Let all the world in every corner sing*), dealing in particular with the balance on radio of the organ chords with the low SATB ensemble. Adjustments to the microphone positioning are made throughout by the engineers.

•3.20: the hymns are sung through (*O strength and stay* as the Office Hymn and Michael Fleming's *Palace Green* for the final hymn *Sing praise to God who reigns above*).

•3.30: the introit (*Ley-A prayer of Henry VI*) is practised, together with attention to the 'red light' which would indicate that the broadcast was 'on the air'. And so the rehearsal finished; Stephen checked all the timings, and there were decisions to be made: the Evensong would over-run by nearly five minutes. After discussion with the Precentor and James Lancelot, it was agreed to shorten the closing hymn by two verses and conclude the first lesson at a natural point about half-way through.

•3.40: the congregation was admitted to the Quire and Stephen explained the changes to the hymn - which then had to be relayed to Keith Wright and to the other clergy attending.

•3.45: the choir assembled in their vestry, then processed into the cathedral, ready to be sitting in their stalls five minutes before the broadcast would start.

•3.55: Stephen arrived back in the Outside Broadcast van and we waited for the preceding broadcast of a classical music concert to finish. The TV monitors in the van were live, and at 4.00 came the studio introduction; the red light blinked intermittently during the opening announcement and the choir stood, awaiting James Lancelot to start the service with the introit. Then the red light remained on full: we were on the air!

Although I have stood in front of the red light many times as a lay clerk, it was quite a different and even more nervous experience witnessing the live broadcast from the BBC van. I wondered what gremlins could possibly attack us now. There was an occasion in 1974 when the red light failed to work and the organist simply kept on playing. You could then hear creeping feet, and the conductor saying 'Is it on?' and then the whole choir standing. The creeping feet belonged to Barry Rose, who had run up all the way up the aisle in his socks! On another occasion, the organist finished his introduction with a clean chord for the Responses, but the Precentor took the wrong note: half the choir, with perfect pitch, went with the organ; the others, who were just listening to the Precentor, started in a different key. They kept going in two keys until it petered out, the organist gave a new note, and the whole thing re-started!



Durham Cathedral Cloisters (rotate 90° right!)

Fortunately, today was trouble-free, and during the final hymn there was a phone call to the van from Radio 3 Continuity in Broadcasting House, London, asking about likely final timings. Stephen was confident enough to state that the organ voluntary should finish at 4.59.00, allowing the continuity studio to make the closing

announcement (written by Stephen and all part of the time allowance) and for the news to begin on time at 5 o'clock. We looked at each other as Keith Wright brought Leighton's *Festival Fanfare* to a majestic close. The echo died away. It was 4.59 precisely!

I wondered how many readers would have heard this broadcast. The live programme retains its loyal audience of some quarter of a million but what is little known is that it is very nearly the most popular programme on the Radio 3 website (bbc.co.uk/radio3/choralevensong), regularly sustaining over 40,000 'hits' during the week on the 'listen again' page, second only to Andy Kershaw on Sunday evenings. Now that there are no longer 'repeats', there is a small additional fee (determined by the ISM) to cover use via the website.



On the air!

Later, Stephen and I talked about the response to my editorial. Dr Higginbottom (New College, Oxford) had made the very salient point that if the psalms for the day were relatively short and my favoured canticles (Gibbons' *Short*) followed, the Evensong would need an extremely long introit and anthem (and organ voluntary) to reach 60 minutes. It was not unknown for some chapel evensongs to finish below 45 minutes. On the 'anything you can do, we can do louder' feeling, I asked Stephen how long in advance choir directors would know the date of their

broadcast and indeed who decides the final choice of music?



Phil Booth at the controls as the choir sings the introit

“Around six months,” he replied, “although some cathedral Directors of Music make a special request for a specific date (a cathedral anniversary or suchlike). We usually offer St Paul’s Cathedral a January date, when there are fewer crowds milling around, and it is close to the date of the Conversion of St Paul. We might also suggest music suitable for (say) a

special day, such as the eve of Corpus Christi, but the final choice is left to the Director of Music and arrived at by mutual agreement. We do keep a 'clash' book listing contents of Evensongs leading up to a choir's selection, and we would flag up any problems here. In fact, James Lancelot's first choice of anthem was Stanford's *For lo, I raise up* - but this was recently broadcast by Peterborough Cathedral and so the Leighton choice was made."

I wondered if there were any kind of 'favoured selection' of some choirs - but this seems definitely not to be the case. During normal terms a rotational cycle of some 53 choirs feature, and since the BBC moved its operations to Manchester, the following cathedrals/churches/collegiate foundations have featured five times or more: All Saints Margaret Street, Birmingham, Blackburn, Bristol, Brompton Oratory, Canterbury, Chelmsford, Chichester, Christ Church Oxford, Clare College Cambridge, Durham, Ely, Exeter, Gloucester, Gonville and Caius College Cambridge, Guildford, Hereford, King's College Cambridge, Lichfield, Lincoln, Liverpool Anglican, Liverpool Metropolitan, Magdalen College Oxford, Manchester, New College Oxford, Norwich, Peterborough, Portsmouth, Ripon, Rochester, St Alban's, St Edmundsbury, St George's Windsor, St John's Cambridge, St Mary's Edinburgh (always August - Festival), St Paul's (usually January), Salisbury, Sheffield, Southwark, Trinity College Cambridge, Truro, Wakefield, Wells, Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral, Winchester, Worcester, York.

"I do try very hard to balance the broadcasts against each other," said Stephen, "but of course there may be some variety in the summer period when cathedral choirs are on holiday. These dates are usually filled with festival evensongs from (for example) the Eton Choral Course, the Edington Festival, the Edinburgh Festival, the Three Choirs Festival, the Exon Singers and the Charles Wood Summer School at St Patrick's Armagh."

I suggested that my criticism in last year's editorial could be open to a charge of selectivity, and of not embracing the wider contribution to worship in these weekly broadcasts.

"The broadcasts have indeed widened their orbit; we have broadcast from St George's Capetown in 1998, 2000 and 2005, from Christ Church Montreal in 2004, Danilov Monastery in Moscow in 2005 and occasionally from St Thomas' New York. Other special broadcasts during the 80th anniversary series included Westminster Abbey, when the music reflected a whole range of styles and riches in the Anglican tradition by William Smith, Purcell, Stanford, Walton and Francis Pott; Vespers came from the Spanish monastery of Montserrat; an Evensong was broadcast as part of the 175th anniversary celebrations of the University of Durham from Durham Cathedral with the BBC Philharmonic and an Evensong is planned featuring the music of Handel from St George's Hanover Square. In 2006 a Jazz Evensong on Radio 3 from the University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, composed entirely by the renowned baritone Roderick Williams, prompted a broadcast of Matins on Radio 4 in similar vein, and it is hoped to return to Russia for another Orthodox Vespers this year. Several vintage broadcasts were also transmitted during the year from the 1950s and 70s including Christ Church Oxford under Simon Preston, King's College Cambridge under Boris Ord, Peterborough Cathedral under Stanley Vann and St Michael's Tenbury Wells under Lucian Nethsingha. Radio 3's *The Choir* programme devoted a whole edition on Sunday September 24th 2006 to celebrating Choral Evensong's anniversary, including some glories from past broadcasts as well as reminiscences from many who have taken part over the years. We hope that every broadcast, in its own way, will bring its own meditative aura to a widening audience.

“On the 75th Anniversary, an article in *The Times* described the special quality of Evensong: ‘The music is beautiful but so are the words in the paradoxical contrast between the sinewy intricacy of 16th century language and the simplicity of the thoughts it expresses - prayers for courage, prayers for grace, for protection from the dark, for a good death. These are things to which our minds have particularly turned in the aftermath of recent terrible events, but they were there all the time in the psalms and collects of Evensong. For almost 500 years the same words have been repeated by people in times of trouble or triumph. The presence of that cloud of unseen witnesses lends an intangible quality to Evensong. You could call it calm of spirituality. You could call it holiness. But it’s very precious.’”

Readers may well be relieved to think that, with the recent re-scheduling of Radio 3 programmes, that intangible quality of *Choral Evensong* is still to be experienced live, weekly, albeit on Sunday afternoons at 4 o’clock, a change decided by the Controller, Radio 3, not by the Choral Evensong team. It is hoped that the new timing will allow the service to reach a larger audience. We wait to see if it will supplant Andy Kershaw in the ‘listen again’ hits!

For me, the saddest loss will be the incomparable sequence of weekday psalms expressing penitence, prayer, praise and history: no more Ps 6-8, 22-23, 126-131, 147-150, and who holds the prize of having broadcast the last 15th Evening? The cynic in me fears that we shall gradually see a return to the alternative definition of ‘live’ - i.e. ‘live when recorded’, and we shall see some Sunday broadcasts pre-recorded on a Thursday or Friday (or even a Wednesday!): more convenient for some cathedrals who would not want to rearrange their major Sunday service times in the face of a *fait accompli*, and less expensive for a budget-conscious BBC by avoiding regular Sunday working! Time will tell....

Acknowledgements



Stephen Shipley is pleased with the timing - 4.59.00 precisely!

I am very grateful to Stephen Shipley for his considerable help in guiding me through the day of the broadcast and for much additional information. Further material has been incorporated from Simon Scott Plummer’s article *In the still of the afternoon* published in *The Tablet* on 19 February 2005, and from Pat Ashworth’s article *A series that’s dearly beloved* printed in *The Church Times* on 18th February 2000.

Last, but not least, my thanks go to the BBC crew of Phil Booth (senior sound supervisor), and his two colleagues Pete Shaw (rigger and driver) and Celia Hutchison (sound supervisor) for allowing me to be under their feet all day. If any reader has a general comment or opinion about a specific Radio 3 broadcast *Choral Evensong*, Revd Stephen Shipley would be glad to hear from you at New Broadcasting House, PO Box 27, Oxford Road, Manchester M60 1SJ.