



CATHEDRAL MUSIC TRUST NATIONAL GATHERING BRECON 2024

AFTER DINNER SPEECH

I'm sure most of you are aware that last year, in 2023, Cathedrals, Churches and choirs across the country celebrated the 400th anniversary of the death of William Byrd, one of the finest British composers of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Slightly behind the times, having failed to get round to it in the actual anniversary year, I recently read Kerry McCarthy's biography of Byrd. Reading about his experiences as a chorister as a child and then his time in Lincoln made me reflect on how little has changed in the world of Cathedral music in 400 years.

Of course, there have been very significant and necessary changes, most notably the introduction of girl choristers and female lay-clerks, and of course female clergy, Deans and Bishops.

But in terms of the day to day life of choristers, adult choir members and Directors of Music or organists, has anything much changed at all? Other than the repertoire sung, which has obviously become broader and more varied, possibly the number of people involved and, of course, the amount of money being spent!

TIME AS A CHORISTER

It's clear that Byrd spent time as a chorister in a renowned ecclesiastical establishment, possibly following his 2 older brothers into the choir of St Paul's Cathedral or maybe as a chorister at the Chapel Royal under Tallis. We don't know for sure as the records for the relevant years are lost.

So how were boys selected and how would their experience have compared to the experience of choristers in the 21st Century?

15th century records at Kings College Cambridge specified that choristers should be "poor boys", "of strong constitution" and of "honest conversation". I'm not sure how many of today's Cathedral choristers would be appointed based on these criteria!



The prime years for training a treble voice were, and still are, also the prime years for educating a child and like today, much of a chorister's daily work had little to do with music!

A set of 16th Century instructions for choristers indicated that they should learn

- "The principles and grounds of Christian religion contained in the little Catechism"
- And only when they are older, should they learn "the art and knowledge of music"
- And once they are musically literate, they should do several hours a day of Latin grammar and other scholarly pursuits

I'm not convinced the Newport Choristers would respond terribly well to being made to do several hours of Latin grammar a day. Although to be fair, some might!

There were also lighter activities such as performing secular music on stage and learning to play the viol and other instruments. It's great to see that most Cathedrals today continue to support the wider musical development and education of their choristers, providing opportunities to sing in concerts and supporting them learning to play instruments.

Highly trained choristers in Byrd's time were in demand, as they are today, and there's evidence that cathedral choristers, especially those from the Chapel Royal, were sometimes practically kidnapped to be part of travelling theatre troupes. Extraordinarily, Queen Elizabeth I granted warrants to leading figures in the theatre world to (I quote) "take so many children as they shall think meet, in all cathedral, collegiate, parish churches, chapels, or any place or places as well within liberty or without". These children would be seized from around the country, scooped up and transported to London, handed a script and threatened with a beating if they didn't learn their lines! I'm not sure that today's Diocesan safeguarding teams would necessarily support this.

TIME AS DIRECTOR OF MUSIC AT LINCOLN

One of the biggest differences in the Cathedral music world, between Byrd's time and now, I would suggest, is the amount of money being spent, in fact, I'm not sure a 16th Century Dean would be able to get their head around the cost of Cathedral Music today. Despite, as we all acknowledge, being under funded and under resourced, the total spent by British Cathedrals on their music provision now exceeds £7 million a year, with the sum being spent in individual Cathedrals varying from considerably less than £50 000 to well over £250 000.

Let's compare that to the 16th Century...

When Byrd started at Lincoln as organist and master of the choristers, at the age of 23, his first real job, he had a "living wage", but like many cathedral musicians today, it was not enough to live on, and he had to supplement this with private teaching. It's documented at Gloucester Cathedral in 1515, that John Tucke was granted a salary of £6, a gown, two cartloads of fuel, two courses at dinner each night, and a loaf and a gallon of beer daily, for teaching the junior monks and 13 choir boys.



Not sure how many Cathedral Directors of music these days would agree to this package of remuneration... although it would help to keep the overall budget down!

Byrd was given a formal contract at Lincoln, outlining the duties and benefits of the post. A copy of this survives, giving us insight into what was expected of a Director of Music at a busy Elizabethan Cathedral.

He actually had 2 separate jobs with two separate job specs and salaries.

The first was that of Song Master or Master of the choirboys, in which capacity he was required to “diligently instruct and teach the choristers in knowledge of the art of music”. Other sources suggest this wasn’t just training them as singers, but also teaching them music theory, composition and organ playing. Not so different, I’d suggest, from a contemporary Director of Music contract. Sources in Lincoln also indicate he was expected to recruit younger children when numbers ran low and there is evidence that he would make journeys around the East Midlands in search of new talent. This is something that I personally totally empathise with, and is an experience I would share, along with Byrd, as would anyone doing my job in a Cathedral today without a choir school – I regularly trawl the schools of Newport and currently we have 8 secondary schools and 12 primary schools represented by our choristers.

And the second part of his role at Lincoln was that of Organist, or “Joculator Organorum”. Quite a job title! He was required to attend the daily offices, giving the choir their starting notes, oversee the singing of the Psalms, accompany the choir as required, improvise, play more elaborate organ music and, possibly most importantly for the management, work within the restrictions imposed on him by an increasingly straitlaced, puritan Chapter.

A notable difference between the 16th and 21st Centuries: contracts were drawn up with long tenure in mind, and Byrd would have been invited to continue til (I quote) “the end and for the term of his natural life”. Job security in the 21st Century definitely isn’t so definite.

Like a 21st Century job contract, Byrd’s contract included provision for “sickness”, as you would expect, and also “febleness of mind or old age”. I’m not entirely sure what criteria they were using to define “feeble” in this context! And he was also given a lease on a nearby rectory for 41 years, which would have taken him to retirement, so they clearly hoped he would see out the rest of his career in Lincoln. It seems to me that increasingly Cathedrals these days are moving away from offering accommodation as part of the employment package. I guess that employment law, tax and HR regulations were a little easier to navigate in the 16th Century?

ELIZABETHAN ERA – GOLDEN AGE?



We tend to think of the Elizabethan era as a golden age of church music, but I think there's enough evidence to suggest that the reality was much less glamorous. Contemporary sources suggest that

- The supply of professional musicians was dangerously short
- Singers were living on fixed stipends that had not been raised, despite rampant inflation, since the time of Henry VIII
- One anonymous observer wrote on a manuscript "whereas in former times of popery divers benefactions have been given to singing men... the same is swallowed up by the deans and canons"
- And... "a contemporary singer's salary doth not answer the wages and entertainment that any of them giveth to his horse keeper"

Not so different from today? Directors of Music today still have to deal with the day-to-day worry of whether there are enough bodies standing in the back row to supply the alto, tenor and bass parts and still have to deal with singers complaining about fees. I'm not, of course, going to comment on money being "swallowed up by deans and canons" ...

We all know that the HR and personnel management side of the role of Cathedral Director of Music, in particular, the management of adult choir members can be tricky... and I'm not sure whether it's reassuring or dismaying to discover that 16th Century Cathedrals also struggled with this. A musical text book by Tallis, contains a satirical poem on the misbehaviour of singers and their bad habits in the choir:

"Janglers and japers,
sleepers, yawners and drawlers,
Mumblers, skippers, overrunners..."

Next time you're in a Cathedral Evensong, perhaps you could see if you can spot any of these characters described by Tallis. Not tomorrow obviously, the back rows of Brecon, Llandaff and Newport Cathedral choirs are all superbly behaved of course!

CONFLICTS

After some number of quiet years at Lincoln... Byrd began to run into trouble with the authorities. Who'd have thought it? A clash between clergy and musicians in a Cathedral? We can make a joke of this and laugh... but tragically this situation hasn't changed in 400 years and sadly, we hear stories of conflicts and disputes again and again in the Cathedral and Church Music world, most recently at Winchester Cathedral.

Byrd had conflicts with his nemesis, a puritanical Archdeacon (are there any Archdeacons present this evening?!) and the Dean (any Deans present?), both of whom supported the reformation movement, had little patience for lavish music, disapproved enormously of his choice of repertoire and his elaborate organ playing and were reluctant to support his pedagogical programme. I think many of us could sympathise with Byrd here: I personally



put vast amounts of time and effort into selecting the right music for any given service, and if I'm honest it can be a little frustrating or even demoralising if members of the congregation heckle you the minute you get off the organ bench to inform you that they didn't like the organ voluntary or that you "played the wrong tune" to a certain hymn... Luckily, I have always worked with clergy who, like me, prioritise the pedagogical role of the choir. I'm not sure how I would cope if, like Byrd, I was working in an environment where the musical, personal and spiritual development and education of the children in the music department wasn't close to the top of everyone's agenda.

But it wasn't just with ecclesiastical authorities that Byrd had problems. It's documented that he was involved in disputes of various sorts and legal action throughout his life, not just in matters relating to music. And it's clear from the sources his stubbornness was always evident... have you ever met a stubborn organist...? Maybe as a species we haven't changed so much in 400 years?!

FUTURE OF CHORISTERS

Of course, like today, not all Tudor choirboys went on to become professional musicians like Byrd. Like today, families sent their children to choir schools for a variety of reasons, not just for the musical education. In particular, in Tudor Britain, it would have been a valuable way for a child to gain social connections. In fact, Byrd's brothers, also trained as choristers, went on to make their way in the Elizabethan business world, not in the music world, working as merchants and shipowners trading with West Africa, Brazil and Cuba. And of course there are a lot celebrities who have, in recent years, attributed their success in a variety of different careers to their training as choristers, most notably for us gathered here tonight, CMT's ambassador and TV personality Alexander Armstrong, who as I'm sure we all know, was a chorister at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh.

ADVOCATE OF BENEFITS OF SINGING

Like today's Cathedral Musician's, it's clear that Byrd was a great advocate of the benefits of singing. You only need to type "health benefits of singing" into a web browser and you will find countless articles about the physical, mental health and emotional benefits of singing: articles published by The Times, Gramophone Magazine, the BBC and Bupa to name just a few. Byrd, of course, didn't have google at his disposal, but he used his connections in the publishing world to spread the word: his book "Psalms, sonnets and songs" published in 1588 included, as an introduction, a list of, I quote: "Reasons briefly set down by the author to persuade everyone to learn to sing". Notably, many of Byrd's reasons are non-musical: encouraging good health generally, strengthening the body, curing difficulties in speech,



cultivating correct pronunciation, leading to success in public speaking... all of which would have appealed to ambitious Elizabethans, and are no less relevant today. The number of schools singing outreach projects being run by Cathedrals nowadays demonstrates that we in the Cathedral world today care as passionately about promoting singing as Byrd did back in the 16th Century.

PASSION FOR MUSIC

And finally, Byrd's own introductions to his books of compositions and writings, constantly reiterate phrases such as "love of music" and the words "pleasure", "sweetness" and "delight". He demonstrates that he was an unapologetic advocate of musical beauty, which is self-evident in his music obviously. A note to the reader in a 1605 publication said: "Honor quidem Dei, voluptas autem vestra sit" – "Let the honour be God's, but the pleasure be yours."

I think the Cathedral musicians of this country show an equal passion for musical beauty and dedication to the education and development, musical, personal, spiritual and social, of young people and I hope William Byrd would be proud of us.

Although every-day life clearly looks very different now, I've found it fascinating, in preparing this talk, to note that my life as a Cathedral Director of Music isn't so different from the life of someone doing the same job 400 years ago. I hope you'll agree, this should give us hope for the future. Hope that Cathedral music will still be flourishing in another 400 years time. Obviously, life will look very different again and who knows what changes will have taken place by the year 2424, but I truly believe that generations of musicians, just as passionate and dedicated as Byrd, supported and encouraged by organisations such as the Cathedral Music Trust, will ensure that this wonderful and unique tradition will be preserved and that Cathedral Music will continue to flourish.

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