

The 21st-century church musician

Huw Williams and Mervyn Hogg explore the essential skills and fresh approaches needed by the next generation of music leaders

Easter comes early this year and it will not be long before we hear the Exsultet's call:

Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!
O Universe, dance around God's throne!
Jesus Christ, our King, is risen!
Sound the victorious trumpet of salvation!

As a church musician, are you well prepared and ready to sing praise to God at Easter and every week?

Worship in our parish churches is the bedrock from which flow the fine traditions of good music, both classical and contemporary, in our cathedrals and major churches. How do we maintain and develop these traditions in the 21st century?

The Turning Tide

Musical life shines forth in those churches where committed musicians are found. For many others where leadership is inadequate, choirs and music groups have become sadly depleted. We all need to ensure that the church's music and traditions do not run the risk of being lost.

But the tide is turning favourably; numbers attending churches are increasing as people seek out spirituality. The Bishop of London's challenge to share the good news of Jesus Christ in the 21st century through 'supporting traditional ways of being church and encourage the highest standards of worship, witness and service' applies everywhere.

The programme run from Leeds Roman Catholic Cathedral in collaboration with local schools was described in CMQ (June 2007), and shows what is possible with committed musicians and a soundly financed plan. In some Anglican dioceses, including Birmingham, Exeter, Portsmouth, Rochester, and Sheffield, Diocesan Music Advisors have been appointed who act as conduits for education to parishes. The model and organization varies, as does the extent of the RSCM's involvement, but in every case the aim is to develop musicians' capabilities and the standard of music offered in worship.

We hope that all dioceses will invest in music in the liturgy and put in place plans, establish positions for music advisors and commit the finance to secure an effective music in worship programme. These plans, working with local RSCM areas, should include connecting parish musicians in networks, forums to stimulate and re-energize clergy and musicians alike and organizing training and collaborative musical events.

Every church must encourage people of all ages to give of their time and talents to contribute to music making for worship. If, for example, every PCC were to include an additional stream of funding, of at least £1000 per annum over and above the normal

music budget, this could generate the required impetus to encourage budding music leaders and enable training in specific skills such as accompaniment and liturgy.

We must aim to provide music that delivers human inspiration and points heavenwards. We must use the tide to advantage, to create the next generation of music leaders.

Mission and Musicians

*Mission-shaped Parish*¹ set out values that may also be applied to music. Our music should be for God the Trinity. It should be shaped by parish culture and use the community's musical talents to help people become God's disciples. Our relationships must be welcoming with clergy and laity alike and show a willingness to explore new ideas in liturgy, worship and music. Our congregations should be proud of the quality of worship and have the confidence to invite their friends to participate.

Transformation will require tact, tenacity and care, and you will only achieve it with the support of your clergy and PCC. Begin with a sure-fire winning activity that you can achieve in the next few months, and remember that lasting change is long haul and secured through incremental steps.

Managing Talent

Making music, singing and dancing all provide natural and intuitive ways of celebration; our *raison d'être* comes from our enjoyment in sharing talents and the ability to pass on enthusiasm and skills to others.

Your own talents include managing people, projects and finance and are as important as your musical skills – so check out your strengths and weaknesses. Choose a role that will play to your strengths and minimise the impact of your weaknesses. Make time through 'magic-days' and seek advice on how to improve your skills. Your skills development might be in singing, choir training, music software or simply getting together with others to consider publicity or recruiting tactics. Lessons in practising new music with minimum errors will repay dividends. Find a trustworthy person to listen and help you keep your service playing and singing inspiring to others.

Think of the musical talent in your church as like a football team. You don't just need soloists (or strikers) but people who are prepared to work together to produce results. Difficult, critical people will not help. Seek out those who are patient, optimistic and up for a challenge, and with encouragement they will amaze you with what can be achieved. Get volunteers on board for activities such as Sunday school teaching for young musicians, maintaining robes, fund raising and producing publicity. For a wealth of practical ideas on developing singers and musicians see books by John Bertalot.²

Involve adults and other musicians in training your singers. If you work for part of your rehearsals in small groups based on ability and experience, linked for example to Voice for Life standards and using music planned for services, you can increase the amount of individual attention and developmental stretch that is offered and accelerate everyone's learning.

Hold an annual review meeting with your singers and musicians of all ages. Use this to explore and develop goals for the next year: these can be about learning new repertoire, developing different skills, recruitment or away visits or indeed anything to lift and encourage the team to do more. Pre-planned questions to steer the way can generate a wealth of ideas quickly. Implement the best ideas and your team will want to do even more.

Take your choir or music group to hear others or arrange a day where musicians from surrounding churches can come together just for the pleasure of hearing each other and gaining fresh insights.

Recruiting children

Recruitment and encouragement of children and young people must be a continuous process. So work at getting to know and building relationships with parents, local schools and your Sunday school, and provide interesting opportunities for children to explore and be part of the music. To build up a thriving children's section and you must aim to recruit around 25% new singers every year. Create opportunities for young musicians to perform; a Sunday afternoon concert given by them can be a wonderful advertisement and provide a win-win all round. Parents love to see their children perform and meet each other over tea, and you can take a collection for music funds or a charity.

Relationships

Avoid being defensive in your relationships or over the style of music. Narrow views such 'we have to sing Anglican chant psalms', 'plainsong is only for the high church', 'Prayer Book

services or I am off' are an anathema. The Oxford Movement viewed robed choirs and cathedral-style music as the 'right' way, but other ways are equally valid. The village gallery band exemplified in Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree* was a forerunner of the modern worship group. Listen critically, but be encouraging in what you say to create a good atmosphere in which people will flourish. Irrespective of the musical style, always strive for excellence.

Inappropriate placing of music can create tensions. Singing an anthem during the communion against the background clip-clop of shoes often feels like distracting muzak. A preacher would find such noise intolerable. Musical offerings in worship should be respected and well-placed. Immediately post-communion can work well without over-extending the service. Such music must inspire the congregation's thoughts heavenwards and not simply be an earth-bound performance.

The support of your clergy, and of influential members of the congregation, is vital. Plan together with them especially when introducing things. Often they will have a better feel for what the congregation will find helpful in worship. Thoughtful communication here is necessary just as in a good marriage. Differences will arise, but talk them through and listen to each other. Great advice from Ashridge on developing your 'influencing skills' can be found in a book by Fiona Dent.³

Organizing talent-rich time-poor resources

People are busier, families are widely dispersed, and business travel is commonplace – so the concept of choir practice and church, week in and week out, is often impracticable. Continuity is vital but provided there is a recognized leader, job-sharing rotas may offer the plus of a broader musical palette and the opportunity for new participants in a church's music-making. It will enable those who are 'off-duty' to explore music in other churches and refresh their ideas. At the home church for festivals, these shared resources could enable more demanding music to be pursued.



Huw Williams rehearsing the St Paul's Diocesan Choir before evensong

Consider also the following:

'Lapsed' singers and instrumentalists are a great opportunity for projects at Christmas, Lent and Easter. Try it: if it works well they will come back for more.

During holidays invite members of the congregation for a 30–40 minute practice before a service to prepare the hymns, songs and a simple setting. Offer generous encouragement and they may grow into 'regulars'.

Avoid teaching by rote, which consumes rehearsal time, inhibits development and is a turn-off for those with a modicum of skills. Build into your rehearsals training in how to read music, aural perception and sight-singing. This will repay dividends in terms of the speed and capability of your singers and instrumentalists to expand the repertoire.

Try to provide challenging repertoire from all centuries in the music programme to maintain a level of aspiration.

Start each practice with targeted warm-up exercises and you will be amazed at the transformation in confidence that can be realized in a few weeks.

Legal and Financial Matters

It is vital to pay attention to legal matters, especially concerning children and health and safety. Those of you who are music leaders have a similar duty of care as a manager in the business world, so share practice with others and agree simple sound policies with your clergy and churchwardens.

Remuneration is a common source of friction. Church musicians are not in the job to make huge amounts of money so this should not happen; but even Bach encountered issues here. Comparisons are often made with volunteer flower arrangers or others who do 'support activities' in the church. However musicians, just like other professions, have invested much time and money to develop their skills and they need to keep them up to the mark. By all means offer to play for free when you feel it is right, but do not accept demands to play for nothing; which amounts to disrespect and is nothing less than exploitation. Fees for weddings and funerals should be proposed by the music leader and reviewed annually with the clergy and churchwardens. Members of the RSCM can obtain the RSCM's booklet of Recommended Fees for Church Musicians.⁴

Finance should be business-like. A sensible budget set and agreed annually for the music programme ensures clarity of expectations. Securing a sound investment in music should be viewed as part of a church's worship offering to God.

Maintain a Work-Life Balance

It is too easy when doing music on top of a weekday job to find that you have no quality time left for your family as you rush from work to choir rehearsals, personal practice or an administrative meeting. We each only have 168 hours every week, and their wise use is down to personal choice. Put family first; then measure the time you put in and judge what activities you are prepared to give as your offering.

Coda

We feel passionately that music is a vital part of worship. It is up to everyone who is a musician in the church to create excellence in music in worship. It is up to us to develop the next generation of musicians and leaders to secure church music. Are you ready to play your part?

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¹ P Bayes & T Sledge, *Mission-shaped parish – traditional church in a changing context* (Church House Publishing, 2006)

² J Bertalot, John Bertalot's *immediately practical tips for choral directors* (Augsburg Fortress, 1994)

³ F Dent, *Influence and Succeed: How to win people over every time!* (David Grant Publishing, 2000).

⁴ Phone 01722 424848 or email enquiries@rscm.com to ask for a copy.



Advent at St Martin, Ruislip: two hours apart, two services, two styles of worship