

REMINISCENCES OF THE RECTOR CHORI  
Paul Hale's Talk To The Guild 14 March 2016

Most of you know me best as the man who stands in front of the Minster Choir, so, having spent some time this afternoon wearing my other hat, as an organist, let's spend some time considering singing in choirs, and how things have changed over the twenty-seven years I've worked at Southwell. When I came here in 1989, most parish churches had choirs and most of them had boys in them.

Things have changed, and this is no longer the case. Why do choirs appear to be under threat these days? Indeed, why have so many parish choirs disappeared over the past twenty-five years or so? It's mainly to do with changes in society, Sunday trading (a hot potato again in recent days), increased affluence, lower church attendance and far less singing in schools. But you might also say, perhaps less seriously, well, look at us church musicians: we dress up in the strangest of garb, rehearse for hours, sing music no-one else takes seriously, take part in antique church rituals, declaiming ancient texts, and work on a Sunday – when all sensible folk are having fun.

Some of us are even called the strangest of titles – *Informator Choristarum* is a good one, and then there is my own, now unique to Southwell – *Rector Chori*.

Without doubt, we organists are regarded as quite the oddest lot of all. Sir Thomas Beecham had little time for us. On a visit to a Sussex churchyard he spotted a gravestone inscribed *Here lies a fine musician and a great organist*; Beecham remarked 'How on earth did they get them both in the same grave?'

**But we know, don't we, that there is something very special about singing;** something which gives the sort of pleasurable satisfaction obtained from nothing else. It engages your body, your intellect, your emotions, your sense of team work, your sense of striving for perfection, and ultimately **there's that warm glow of achievement.** And singers often agree that often they find a piece of music actually more rewarding to perform than merely to hear.

But do I mean hear or should I say listen? We all hear far too much music; background music has become an inescapable feature of modern life. At home, in the car, in the shops, in your study, at the work-place. The trouble

with all this hearing is that there is less listening. Music demands involvement on the part of the listener; involvement demands a readiness to let the music take one over. Only then does music really touch the soul and reveal all its beauties. Many a trained musician simply cannot work with background music going on; it stops him in his tracks because instinctively he listens. In our daily lives we should perhaps strive to hear less and listen more.

Such considerations would have been far from the minds of choristers of past centuries; indeed I wonder if many cathedral choristers had much inkling at all of the significance of their role. Probably not, judging by documentation of the Minster Choir here at Southwell. We read, for instance, that at the **Archbishop of York's Visitation of 1503** the choristers were severely criticised: *the Choristers' vestments are disgracefully torn, they don't dress properly, they rave and swear and disturb the priests, and want a good whipping.* Mind you, this was far from being the first time they had been chastised; for example, eight years earlier one John Bagnall had been **caught throwing stones at people's windows and was dismissed from the choir.** A far worse fate was to befall poor nine-year-old Thomas Bucklow, who on the 10th of July 1792, (and I quote): *in attempting to climb into the last window in the lower tier on the south side of the choir, the sole (a very ponderous piece of oaken timber), which he had taken hold upon, gave way, and falling with him to the pavement, killed him on the spot.*

The men in the choir prove to have been an even worse-behaved lot. Here is **a sample from Bishops' Visitations between 1475 and 1508:** *Ledenham a common frequenter of taverns; often drunk. John Bull since Christmas last, frequents Agnes Sayton; seen leaving her garden at first peal for Mattins. Bull has never been corrected for beating Gregory in the cemetery. Sledmyr keeps a school of dice and backgammon in his chamber. Bull slept at Mattins twice this week. Cartwright and Green suspended for striking one another - one with a dagger, the other with a club, in the churchyard. Gregory shirks Choir to attend wine sales, he says to buy for church purposes. Berkely has indecently long hair; sleeps at mattins. Sledmyr plays at ball during service time. Sledmyr often plays backgammon for money during service time. Webster haunts taverns. Peynketh hawks, hunts and catches moles during service time. Gregory spends more time in taverns than in Choir - warned a third time. Richard Peynketh often blows his nose in choir so violently that it bleeds, to the annoyance of his fellow singers, and he spits ... too far ... and sometimes into the face of the Rector Chori.*

**Let's draw a merciful veil over these misdemeanours.** Curiously, less is known about the behaviour of the Southwell organists over the ages, though we have a record of them from the fourteenth century. In 1635 a Southwell organist disgraced the name of our profession, as is recorded in the book *I lived in a village* by T Shipside. He writes 'In 1635 one canon complained to the Archbishop that the Organist is very negligent in his duties and especially in the management of the Choristers. Quote "He is a great lyer, as yr

*Lordship knows if you please to remember him – and a soon as he has made a boy fit for the quire, he sells him to some gentleman, and soe by this means the quire is impoverished”*”.

One Southwell organist and Rector Chori, Thomas Spofforth, was in post from 1764 until 1818, fifty-four years in all. For many years he seems to have run a good show. In 1789 this was observed by the Honorable John Byng (the Viscount Torrington), who in his Torrington Diaries relates a visit to Southwell.

**Byng tells us that having dined in the Saracen’s Head (an watering-hole not unknown to present-day Minster lay clerks) he went into Sunday Evensong. He writes: *Let me now express my astonishment of Pleasure at hearing this Service. The Organ was excellently played, and four singing men and eleven boys sang as carefully as if at the Ancient Concert! The Anthem of 3 parts, ‘Sing O Heavens’ by Mr Kent was capitally perform’d; and I was told that one of The Boys was reckon’d to have the finest voice in England, and that the men have been sent for to The Abbey-Musick. I wish that my Comrades had been with me; To have Charm’d the one, and converted the Other.***

**I love Byng’s final comment on Southwell: *Southwell is a well built, clean Town, Such a one as a quiet distressed Family ought to retire to: Coals, Provisions, and Religion to be had good and cheap.***

Well, poor old Spofforth was later to sink into terminal decline. Another observant visitor to Southwell was John Marsh, a talented musician and in his **time England’s most prolific composer of orchestral music. In his Journal of 1801 we read of a visit to Southwell, where he had relatives: *Having attended the choir service, which was perform’d in as bad a manner as I have ever heard, we went into the chapter house.....at four of the clock went to the afternoon service, when I went into the organ loft and played the chant and voluntary, the rest of the service being played in a slovenly manner by a boy, the apprentice of Mr Spofforth, the organist.***

Worse was to come. Writing in 1817, Marsh recounts: *I went twice to the Minster, where the singers were sadly over-powered by the organist, Mr Spofforth, an old, deaf man.* Spofforth was gone shortly after. He’s buried in the Minster precincts, as are several of my predecessors since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**Some Southwell organists didn’t stay so long. One of these was of Dr, now Sir David Lumsden, who was organist and *Rector Chori* here from 1956 to 1959. In the Choir during Lumsden’s time was a certain Mr Sims, a most reliable singer, who later went on to be senior Layclerk at York Minster. One day, David was accompanying the anthem at the organ (the choir, in common with most cathedral choirs in those days, sang uncondacted); as he**

turned a page, Mr Sims launched into two bars of extraordinary gibberish, before returning to the correct notes again. Startled, David decided to ask him later what had occurred. 'Mr Sims', he said, 'what happened at the top of page 5?'. 'Ah, well, Dr Lumsden', replied Simms, 'as I turned over the page there was a squashed spider on it; but I didn't see that it was a spider, so I sang it!'.

Now I know what to blame my mistakes on in future! Actually, most choirs blame the tenors, rather as orchestras make jokes about viola players. It was the organist and humorist, Gordon Reynolds who defined tenors thus '*Most choirs have either (a) none, or (b) too many. When wholly absent they leave an aching void. When too numerous they fill the void without removing the ache. Tenors*' he declared '*rarely sing words and during the mating season produce regional sensations rather than actual notes*'.

So, as we consider singing in churches through the ages, and ponder its significance somewhat more seriously, let three great men have the last word.

St Augustine inspired the early Church when he wrote:  
*He who sings, prays twice.*

Edwardian Poet Laureate Robert Bridges had rather more to say:  
*And if we consider and ask ourselves what sort of music we should wish to hear on entering a church, we should surely, in describing our ideal, say first of all that it must be something different from what is heard elsewhere; that it should be a sacred music, devoted to its purpose, a music whose peace should still passion, whose dignity should strengthen our faith, whose unquestioned beauty should find a home in our hearts, to cheer us in life and death; a music worthy of the fair temples in which we meet and of the holy words of our liturgy; a music whose expression of the mystery of things unseen never allowed any trifling motive to ruffle the sanctity of its reserve. What power for good such a music would have!*

Finally that supreme composer of choral music, William Byrd:  
*Since singing is so fine a thing, I would that all could learn to sing.*

Now there's a thought to take home today.

**Thank you.**