



STEPHEN CLEOBURY  
1948 – 2019

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FELLOW AND DIRECTOR OF MUSIC



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Sir Stephen Cleobury Credit: Kevin Leighton / King's College Cambridge

## Stephen Cleobury

When Stephen took up his post as Director of Music at King's in 1982, both the sound of the choir and the repertoire that he inherited must have seemed to be so firmly rooted in tradition as to be unchangeable. But modifications could be made, and much influenced by his previous experiences, particularly at Westminster Cathedral, Stephen gradually set about making them. The changes that he brought about over the decades in so many areas of the musical life of King's and then transmitted to the outside world, can be traced through the extraordinary variety of the music that he recorded with the Chapel choir over nearly forty years, ranging from Gregorian chant to new compositions.

Stephen maintained a tremendous pace. In addition to preparing the music for the daily services, he presided over the newly-founded annual commission for a work for *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* and also instituted the Easter Festival, which greatly enriched not only the musical life of the College, but also that of the city and, through broadcasts, the country. Beginning in the 1990s, his long period as chief conductor of the BBC Singers brought new perspectives which benefitted the development of the choir and its repertoire, through engagement with recent compositions and the technical challenges of working with a chamber choir of adult voices.

While many of those who sang in the Chapel choir or served as organ scholars have gone on to follow careers in opera houses, cathedrals,

and concert halls throughout the world, so too have many others who participated in the College's rich musical life. The composer Thomas Adès recalls the characteristic opportunities offered by the 550th Anniversary Concert in the Chapel when, as an undergraduate, he played the piano solo of Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto* in the first half and the timpani in the second. It was thanks to Stephen's readiness to encourage all forms of serious music-making that the Dante Quartet, co-founded by the violinist Krysia Osostowicz (KC 1977), spent seven years as Quartet-in-Residence. Subsequently this model was extended to a similar arrangement with Andreas Scholl who spent three years attached to the College and who, alongside other world-class singers such as Bryn Terfel, Christopher Purves, and Gerald Finlay, regularly performed in the series 'Concerts at King's', yet another of Stephen's innovations.

Born in Bromley in Kent, Stephen grew up in an environment saturated with music. His father, a doctor and later psychologist by profession, had been dissuaded by his own father from pursuing an interest in it, but had no such qualms about encouraging Stephen and his younger brother Nicholas, who also went on to have a musical career as a conductor. After the family moved to Birmingham, both auditioned as trebles in the choir of Worcester Cathedral, then directed by Douglas Guest who had been an Organ Scholar at King's before the Second World War, a step 'that changed the course of our lives' Stephen later recalled. There he earned a certain amount of envy from his fellow choristers on account of his acute musical ear, already judged to be remarkable. At home piano duets, sometimes played with their father, were the staple musical entertainment for both boys, who also became keen students of the organ. At the

Cathedral they took lessons with Christopher Robinson, Organist and Master of the Choristers, and his assistant organist Harry Brama, whom Stephen conscripted decades later to teach harmony and counterpoint to first-year King's undergraduates.

If the Cathedral was at the centre of local musical life, the nature of much of what took place there was not always appreciated. 'Worcester is not a music-loving city', roared one dyspeptic correspondent writing to the local newspaper in the 1960s, 'it never has been. A city which only tardily commemorates Edward Elgar cannot claim to be so... As for the Festival, it has diminished much in character now, becoming more of a social whirl'. Social whirl or not, the musical reality was somewhat different. In rotation with the cathedrals of Gloucester and Hereford, Worcester hosted the Three Choirs Festival once every three years. The arrangement dated from the eighteenth century, and by the twentieth it placed a heavy emphasis on the music of English composers, particularly Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, and above all Elgar. This provided Stephen with his earliest experiences of some of the large-scale repertoire, in particular the three great Elgar oratorios to which he devoted so much care and attention later in life. Another influential feature surely was that the Festival also commissioned new works and promoted music by living composers. For the 1966 programme in Worcester, the works on offer included Michael Tippett's secular oratorio *A Child of Our Time* (the composer's response to the *Kristallnacht* pogroms), and another of his early pieces composed during the War, the *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*, conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. Established these may have been (*A Child of Our Time* made Tippett's reputation overnight when it was premièred in London in 1944) but they represent a particular strand

of modernism that was not performed live much outside London. The idea that Worcester was a musical backwater dominated by Anglican cathedral traditions and the music of its most famous musical son, does not bear serious scrutiny.

It was while still a pupil at the King's School in Worcester that Stephen became an Associate of the Royal College of Organists at the age of seventeen, and in the same year his ability on the instrument was recognised with election to an Organ Scholarship at St. John's College, Cambridge. There he quickly became acclimatised to the well-established routines and rhythms of the musical life of the Chapel choir, which had been directed for some years by George Guest, a flamboyant Welshman with strong attachments to the Welsh language, the Anglican choral tradition, a post-Evensong pint with the choral scholars in 'The Baron of Beef', and Chester Football Club. Although Guest was a tough task-master, Stephen found his natural musicianship to be an inspiration, despite its lack of scholarly rigour in selecting academically sanctioned editions, and the working relationship between the two prospered. George had visited Spain, where he had come to know the distinctive sound of Spanish cathedral choirs and in particular the motets and masses of Victoria and Cristobal Morales, then little-known in England. For his performances of these and even the more familiar music of Palestrina he now encouraged the choir to produce a sound far removed from the smooth politeness of the Anglican ideal. Characterised by an astringent even nasal quality, particularly evident in the treble line, it was much influenced by the approach of George Malcolm, who was severely critical of the characteristic sound of English cathedral and Oxbridge collegiate choirs, which he considered to be 'produced

by the exclusion – or at least the under-employment – of those resonating-agents whose function is to amplify the human voice, to colour it, and to give clarity and definition to its vowel-sound'. In its place Malcolm had introduced a 'continental' sound, as well as a repertory of Spanish Renaissance masses and motets, into the daily services of Westminster Cathedral, where it was combined with the regular performance of unaccompanied plainchant. These features were influential at St. John's, and by the time that Stephen was involved there the College was unique among Oxbridge collegiate choirs in singing an appreciable amount of chant on a regular basis. Further stimulation came from the example of the monks of the Benedictine Monastery of Solesmes Abbey, the acknowledged specialists in the scholarly performance of plainsong, whose work Guest knew and admired.

In addition to the main task of accompanying the choir and giving organ recitals, activities for which Stephen's experiences at Worcester had prepared him well, there were also fresh challenges which brought him into a more public presence. During his first term at St. John's Evensong was broadcast twice by the BBC, and at the end of the Easter term there were choir tours to the USA and Canada. Then there were recordings to be prepared. These included his first vinyl record of organ music, made in the college Chapel, but the most demanding of the projects with which he was involved was to record all six of Haydn's late masses. This ambitious scheme had been inaugurated by King's with a recording of the *Missa in Angustiis* (popularly known as the Nelson Mass) in 1962, with the choir accompanied by the London Symphony Orchestra under the direction of David Willcocks, but the project to record them all was then continued by St. John's,

who brought it to completion fifteen years later. Although modern instruments were used in all six, the approach of the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields under the direction Neville Marriner, who played in the last five discs, is distinctly different from Willcock's approach, and is far in advance of what later came to be known as 'the period instrument movement'. Stephen was responsible for the organ accompaniment in the 1969 recording of the *Paukenmesse*, with a star-studded assemblage of now legendary soloists including Robert Tear, April Cantelo, and Helen Watts.

In addition to these formal commitments, Stephen also threw himself with enthusiasm into undergraduate music-making both in the College Musical Society's Smoking Concerts, a late survival of a now defunct Victorian exercise in male sociability (St John's did not admit women undergraduates until 1982), in which conversation and argument, often over political questions, played out against a background of performed music. Then there was the Cambridge University Musical Society, founded in the middle of the nineteenth century, and considered to be a training ground for those aiming at a musical career. By tradition the Society's celebrated first orchestra was rehearsed and conducted by a professional (at this time it was under the baton of David Willcocks, then Director of Music at King's), but there were also opportunities for undergraduates of promise to try their hand. In one concert Stephen directed a performance of Handel's *St. John Passion*, while Mark Elder, with whom he shared the podium, conducted the first of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*. Both were to be heard of again.

Late sixties Cambridge also introduced Stephen to a less familiar side of student life, if only tangentially and at a considerable distance

from events in Paris and California. In the summer of 1968, as civil disorder punctuated by demonstrations, general strikes, and the occupation of universities raged throughout France and riots broke out on the Berkeley campus, the life of Cambridge continued on its traditional course, seemingly unaffected until interrupted by just one sign of sympathetic unrest. On 6 June, with examinations out of the way and the end of the Easter Term in sight, the elderly Lord Adrian, a former Master of Trinity and a distinguished Nobel Prize-winning scientist, was installed as Chancellor in the University Church of St. Mary the Great. The rituals had been designed to involve some music provided by the massed choirs of no fewer than five colleges accompanied by Stephen on the organ, but the arrival of the official procession, with the new Chancellor encased in heavily gold-trimmed robes, was the signal for sonic interventions of a different kind. A group of 'militant Cambridge undergraduates' (according to one local journalist) intervened 'shouting, chanting and singing' while calling for a free university. An attempted revolutionary declaration, which included condemnation of Lord Adrian's ceremonial attire ('your eighteenth-century dress has nothing to do with the twentieth century' shouted one protester), resulted in prompt ejection by the stewards. As an example of student agitation this was all pretty mild; it was not until the Garden House Hotel riot of two years later, when a much larger crowd, gathered in protest against the activities of the military junta then in power in Greece, threw stones, broke windows and attracted the attention of the police, that there was any disturbance in Cambridge even remotely comparable to the 'events of 68'.

By 1971 Stephen had completed his university studies with the award of the Mus.B. degree in the summer. During his four years

at St John's, he had firmly established a considerable presence on the cathedral organists' circuit, giving recitals in many parts of the country. Ever since his early days as an organ student at Worcester, he had developed an enthusiasm for the notoriously difficult music of the French composer Olivier Messiaen, resident organist in the Eglise de la Sainte-Trinité in Paris, and in Cambridge he became a dedicated advocate for his organ works, performing them frequently. Invited by David Willcocks (whom he found to be terrifying), to give a recital in King's Chapel on the rebuilt 'colour' organ of 1934 (ideal for Messiaen's highly-coloured pieces if not for Bach), he included three movements from *Les Corps Glorieux*; later, in St. John's Chapel, he undertook the whole of *La Nativité du Seigneur*. Years later Stephen was to maintain that Messiaen's music represented, together with the works of J. S. Bach, the pinnacle of the organ repertoire. His knowledge of Messiaen's scores gradually expanded at this time to encompass the composer's magisterial large-scale works (including the *Turangalila-Symphonie*, which he heard for the first time in a recording), and throughout his life Messiaen's music remained a constant and inspiring presence.

In many ways Cambridge musical life, much of it organised and presented by undergraduates, provided a wide range of new experiences. As the chorus master of the University Opera Society he was involved in drilling the chorus (which was split between the stage and the pit) in a performance of Paul Dessau's little-known opera *Die Verurteilung des Lukullus* with a socialist libretto based on a radio-play by Bertolt Brecht. Such rare engagements with continental modernism apart, English Baroque music was then much in fashion, and while there were plenty of musical resources in

Cambridge for the performance of small-scale works of the period, the architectural splendours of Italianate classical buildings in the university and the colleges also provided ideal environments. In the summer of 1970 John Blow's opera, *Venus and Adonis*, 'A Masque for the Entertainment of the King', originally written to be presented before the court of Charles II in Oxford, was given three times on the terrace of Downing College. Conducted by Hugh MacDonald (later to become a distinguished scholar and editor of the music of Berlioz), it was produced by Gábor Cossa, a Hungarian refugee who had famously danced with the Ballets Josse in the 1930s, with Stephen as chorus master. As a conductor in his own right he also worked with the Purcell Society, giving a performance of the composer's *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day*, and directed Handel's *Ariodante* from the harpsichord in the Senate House. All this provided excellent grounding for the future.

With his appointment as organist and Director of Music at St. Matthew's Northampton, Stephen was given, for the first time, sole responsibility for the musical activities of an institution with a highly-developed tradition. St. Matthew's, large by the standards of English parish churches, had in the course of the twentieth century developed an almost cathedral-like potential, particularly in relation to its provision of music and its sponsorship of contemporary painting and sculpture. The moving spirit behind this unusual development was the remarkable Walter Hussey, who had a passionate interest in the arts. Realising that they 'had become largely divorced from the Church', Hussey was determined to bring about a rapprochement by actively bridging the divide. This began in 1943, with Henry Moore's *Madonna and Child* and Benjamin Britten's cantata *Rejoice in the*

*Lamb* to a text based on a poem by the eighteenth-century eccentric poet Christopher Smart. Buoyed by the success of these early initiatives, which attracted both national and international attention, Hussey had gone on to commission other young artists, composers, and writers. By the time that Stephen arrived at St. Matthew's, Moore's sculpture had been joined by Graham Sutherland's large-scale painting of the *Crucifixion of Christ*, hung in the south transept as a counterpart on the other side of the nave, and new musical anthems by Lennox Berkeley, Gerald Finzi, Richard Rodney Bennett and Edmund Rubbra. At least one and sometimes two new works were given their first performances every year. This feature of the arrangements at St. Matthew's provided an influential model for Stephen at King's, where he later commissioned a new carol every year for the service of *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*. During his time in Northampton Stephen also taught music at the Grammar School and conducted the Northampton Choral Society which, conceived along the traditional lines of the great amateur choral unions of northern England, concentrated on the large-scale works of Bach, Handel and Verdi. All in all, it was a happy arrangement if a short-lived one, and soon the opportunity arose for Stephen to move to London and Westminster Abbey.

There the Organist and Master of the Choristers, Douglas Guest was familiar, having previously been in charge at Worcester Cathedral during Stephen's youth there as a chorister. As sub-organist for the next four years, Stephen now took command of the Grand Organ, installed for the coronation of George VI in 1937. Officially his main duties involved accompanying the music for daily services sung by a choir of twelve Lay Vicars (professional adult singers) and thirty boys

from the Abbey choir school in the Close, the inheritors of an all-male choral tradition dating from the late fourteenth century. As the site of important state occasions, during this time the Abbey witnessed a Service of Thanksgiving for the life of the composer and conductor Sir Arthur Bliss, Master of the Queen's Music, and a ceremony (attended by the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh) to mark the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Order of the Bath, both of which were broadcast by the BBC. A good deal of organ music, together with fanfares from the Royal Military School of Music, was required for the unveiling and dedication of memorials in Poets' Corner to Auden, Henry James, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Outside the Abbey Stephen continued to give organ recitals elsewhere, including his first experience of playing at Westminster Cathedral, which turned out to be the home of his next professional appointment. By the time that Stephen arrived there as Master of Music, the first Anglican to be appointed to the post since its establishment at the beginning of the century, the choir had achieved renown for its revival of the Latin repertoires of pre-Reformation England and plainchant. The tradition, originating with George Malcolm, would have been familiar from George Guest's enthusiasm at St John's in Cambridge. The cathedral choir had a distinguished early history of engagement with Tudor repertoires since its foundation by Cardinal Vaughan who had been impressed by hearing the fruits of Richard Terry's work with the choir at Downside Abbey. Terry, who had been a chorister in King's College Choir and had later converted to Catholicism, was a great advocate for the then largely forgotten traditions of English sixteenth-century sacred music, most of which had remained unperformed since

the Reformation. When not rehearsing and conducting the choir at Westminster, he was ensconced in the British Museum Library preparing modern editions of the music of Tallis, Byrd and Sheppard from original sources. Together with plainchant, these formed the backbone of the Westminster repertory.

It is difficult to overestimate the value of Terry's lasting legacy in resurrecting the music of the English Catholic past. Mass and Vespers were sung daily, but Pugin's arrangements for music were unusual since there was no separate quire and the choir was obscured from view behind the High Altar. Malcolm, Stephen's most distinguished predecessor, had trained the choir to produce a forthright, bright and full-throated tone (the boys were said to have 'voices like razors'), in which passion and expression were paramount. Critics were to claim that this was at the expense of precision, but supporters were fulsome in their praise of a choral sound that stood in sharp contrast to the ideals of Anglican practice. George Guest was among them, and so was Britten, who admired the choir's 'staggering brilliance and authority', and composed the *Missa Brevis* for it in 1959, the year that Malcolm retired.

The distinctive Malcolm sound, and the concentration on Spanish repertories (and particularly the music of Victoria that went hand-in-hand with it), had been maintained by Stephen's immediate predecessor, but by the mid-1970s the situation of the choir was precarious. The existence of the choir school was threatened by financial pressures, and the changed liturgical practices which came in the wake of the Second Vatican Council made the fusion of tradition with the new requirements difficult to envisage. Moreover, the Grand



*Bach's Concerto for three harpsichords with Philip Ledger, Stephen Cleobury and David Willcocks (L-R) 1983. Credit: Mick Moore*

Organ with four manuals and eighty-nine stops, completed in 1932, which was considered to be one of the greatest achievements of Henry Willis III, one of the country's finest builders, was now in a sad state of deterioration. All this was to change with the appointment of Basil Hume as Archbishop of Westminster by Pope Paul VI in 1976, and his elevation to the cardinalate later in the same year. For the first time since the restoration of the English hierarchy in 1850, the post was now occupied by a monk. This turned out to be fortuitous, particularly for the continuance of the Cathedral's musical traditions. Previously Hume had been Abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Ampleforth, and although he lacked the administrative experience of running a diocese, the influence of his conception of community and commitment to the Rule of St. Benedict (he always saw himself as a Benedictine first and foremost), greatly improved the fortunes

of the Cathedral. Stephen's third year in post at the Cathedral, was momentous. For the visit of Pope John Paul II to Britain in May 1982, the first by a reigning Pope and a highly significant event for English Catholics, he was handed the responsibility for the music at the opening service in the Cathedral as well as at an open-air mass in Wembley Stadium attended by 80,000 people. Later that year, following a keenly-contested competition, Stephen was appointed Director of Music at King's.

From Philip Ledger, who immediately preceded him in the post, and particularly from David Willcocks who still lived in Cambridge and was the single most important influence on the creation of the choir's immediately recognisable sound, Stephen inherited a carefully maintained tradition. The legendary bright King's sound, characterised by a high degree of homogeneity, precise intonation, little deployment of vibrato, and scant use of variations in dynamics and tempo, had been carefully honed in a process of continuous transmission since the days of Boris Ord in the 1930s. In such a traditional setting consolidation and evolution rather than radical change were the watchwords, but nonetheless it was never a matter of merely keeping the show on the road. From the beginning, the incorporation of new music into both the Procession for Advent and *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* proceeded hand-in-hand with an expansion of the repertory sung during the daily services. When Stephen took up his post, the repertoire that he inherited largely consisted of the established corpus of Victorian and Edwardian Anglican cathedral music, combined with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic liturgical masses and motets with the English-texted music of William Byrd spanning the divide, much as had been the case in Westminster. The resulting mix,

not dissimilar to the practices of cathedral choirs throughout the land, was hard to dislodge, but modifications could be made, and Stephen gradually but cautiously set about making them. In this he was greatly encouraged by the Provost, Bernard Williams, whose enthusiasm for music and above all opera provided vital friendship and support. Stephen paid a moving tribute to their friendship by assembling the forces to perform Siegfried's *Trauermarsch* before a lecture that Bernard, already very ill, was about to give in the West Road Concert Hall. Encouragement also came from the Dean of Chapel, John Drury, whose initiatives in bringing about a rapprochement between the liturgy, good literature and fine music in the Chapel must have evoked resonances of the attitudes that Stephen had encountered in Northampton. In one year T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* were read over successive Sundays by four different readers (one of whom was George 'Dadie' Rylands), during Matins in place of sermons, and on another King's Voices sang Palestrina's setting of *Canticum Canticorum* ('The Song of Songs') on St. Valentine's Day. Founded in 1997, with Stephen's enthusiastic support, as a mixed-voice ensemble providing an opportunity for women undergraduates and postgraduates to participate in all aspects of the musical life of the College, King's Voices was initially directed by John Butt, then a Music Fellow and Director of Studies. Its members, now recruited from anywhere within the University, sing Evensong on Mondays during Term, make recordings, and travel to perform both within East Anglia and further afield.

To a greater extent than any previous holder of the post, and probably more than any choir director of a comparable institution, Stephen spent much of his time either on tour or in the recording studio, activities which extended the reputation of the choir and King's

internationally. At the choir school he built up strong relations with the parents of choristers, presiding over families who sent their children (and in some cases their grandchildren) to be choristers, some of whom later became choral scholars. Stephen established a firm base for donations to the choir, and is still remembered with great affection by parents and choristers alike. His wife Penny provided invaluable support in many ways, not least in keeping the choristers, who tended to become increasingly rumbustious when abroad, in order. The family home in Gough Way was the focus of many a Sunday lunch to which guests from various areas of contingent musical experience would be invited. It was also the scene of intense scribal activity when Penny and their two daughters, Suzannah and Laura, were pressed into service to mark up string parts before rehearsals.

From the beginning recordings were produced at pace, but from the early 1990s there was a distinct change of rhythm, with two or even three recordings being made every year. Most of Stephen's albums had been released by Decca, EMI or one of their subsidiaries such as Argo, but the demise of EMI in 2012 as a result of accumulated debts provided the impetus for a new venture, with one of the side chapels being adapted for use as a recording studio. As Stephen Johns, who for many years worked with Stephen as a record producer recalls, 'recording was an essential part of the diet of the choir, and this was crucial in the desire to set up the King's label when the major record companies retreated'. As time went on there was also a distinct broadening of both the recorded repertory and associated performance practices. Collaborations with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and the Britten Sinfonia became more frequent, but it was above all the presence of the Academy of Ancient Music, whose

activities were co-ordinated from its Cambridge office on the other side of King's Parade, that facilitated exploration of the possibilities of historically-informed performance. Although the Academy played on modern instruments, it was effectively a proto-period ensemble specialising in scaled-down performance of Baroque music using a minimum of vibrato, largely detached articulation, and minimal application of the 'expressive' techniques of variations in speed and dynamics. Once established as Stephen's chamber orchestra of preference, the Academy and the choir gave live performances and produced a number of recordings of Baroque classics including the Vivaldi *Gloria* and Handel's *Coronation Anthems*.

A significant feature in the process of gradual change which Stephen brought about was his interest in the music of living composers whose music is united by a minimalist approach to composition allied to strongly held religious beliefs. One of the earliest manifestations of this was the choice of the now universally acclaimed Estonian composer Arvo Pärt to write a new carol, *Bogoróditse Dyevo* for the Christmas Eve service in 1990. This was an inspired move; Pärt's music only began to attract public attention in the West from the middle of the 1980s when the first recordings began to appear, and the wave of enthusiasm that was to greet the success of *Cecilia, virgine romana* for chorus and orchestra, written for the Jubilee Year and given its première in Rome, was yet to come. Stephen continued to champion his music as well as that of John Tavener, who like Pärt had converted to the Eastern Orthodox church. Tavener's later style displays an interest in clear, transparent textures, achieved through the unashamed use of tonality and wide vocal registers to produce an austere effect that has been termed 'holy minimalism'. The approach

was shared by both composers not only in name, but also in the choice of simple harmonies and unadorned melodies often strongly influenced by the chant traditions of the Eastern Church. A similar journey, turning away from the radical modernism of serialism and extreme dissonance, had already been made by the Polish composer Henryk Górecki; this too aroused Stephen's curiosity and admiration as part of a newfound interest in the music of the Lutoslawski generation. These strands come together in *ikos*, a remarkable recording devoted to austere choral works by all three composers; it includes performances of Tavener's 'Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (Collegium Regale)', which King's had commissioned some years earlier, alongside pieces by Górecki interspersed with chants. It was a short step from these explorations of an East European repertory to the one work that is generally acclaimed as the climax of the great Russian Orthodox liturgical tradition, Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil*, usually known as the Rachmaninov *Vespers* after the first six of its fifteen movements. Premiered in Moscow in 1915, it had remained unrecorded and largely unknown outside Russia until the 1960s on account of the anti-religious policies adopted by the Soviet regime after the Revolution.

In March 1999 Mikhail Gorbachev was in Cambridge as the guest participant in a seminar on Russian politics, economics, society, and foreign and military affairs attended by a distinguished group of specialists. It was more than eight years since he had resigned as president, to be succeeded by Boris Yeltsin, but he was still much in demand as a speaker at international meetings. Realising the importance of the occasion, Stephen enquired of the organisers whether Gorbachev would like to hear the choir perform the



*Stephen rehearsing King's College Choir, 1989. Credit: Hanya Chlaola / ArenaPAL*

*All-Night Vigil* which he had recorded the previous summer. The response was positive and enthusiastic, and within a short space of time a concert performance of the work was arranged. It took place in the Antechapel with Gorbachev seated in the front row accompanied by the Provost, Patrick Bateson; at the end Gorbachev publicly thanked Stephen and shook hands with many of the boys and choral scholars. It was particularly touching that the applause for Stephen and the choir which followed rapidly turned into applause for Gorbachev himself; in Russia many blamed him for the collapse of the USSR, and warm receptions such as the one that he received in King's were far from common. As for the recording itself, it was very enthusiastically received by the professional critics, many of whom have argued that it is the finest choral release of Stephen's time in King's.

Part of the impetus to explore new or unfamiliar music undoubtedly came from Stephen's time with the BBC Singers, which he directed as Chief Conductor from 1995 until 2007 (afterwards he was named as Conductor Laureate). The story is told of his first rehearsal with this seasoned body, ready to test the mettle of any new conductor, but perhaps particularly one who had arrived from the organ loft. Faced with a moment of uncertainty in the score a hand shot up (it belonged to the composer Judith Bingham), but before her question could even be formulated, Stephen had answered: 'It's an A natural'. The rapidity and accuracy with which he could identify mistakes, the sensitivity of his musical ear, and the sheer efficiency of his well-paced rehearsal technique was legendary. The composer Michael Zev Gordon, who worked with him on a number of occasions in relation to performances of his own compositions, has called him 'the perfect exemplum... of the craftsman-musician'. Importantly, the experience of working with a professional choir of adult singers expanded Stephen's repertorial horizons, and this fed into his work in Cambridge.

This also fits into a historical pattern of exploration. When Stephen took up his post at Westminster Cathedral in 1979, little in his previous experiences could have prepared him for the quite different demands of Catholic liturgy and ceremonial. Realising that his knowledge of Gregorian chant and its place in the liturgy was inadequate, Stephen applied himself to serious study of the repertory and its uses. By the time that he arrived at King's, his three years' exposure to Western chant traditions, practised under the benign gaze of Cardinal Basil Hume with whom he had a warm friendship, had grown into a genuine enthusiasm that he then put into practice.

In this he may have been helped by the advice of Mary Berry, an Augustinian Canoness Regular and authority on the performance of Gregorian chant, who lived in Cambridge, and whose vocal group Schola Cantorum sang in Stephen's 1995 recording of chant. The study and performance of chant in its liturgical context remains an important aspect of Stephen's musical legacy at King's, and there are probably few other church establishments in the Anglican world where the Propers of the Mass are still sung in Latin.

Equally important was Stephen's early decision to introduce new music into *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*. Most of the initiatives of his two immediate predecessors had been concentrated on arrangements of some of the best known carols and the addition of descants. If, as John Rutter has said, the publication of these 'changed the whole sound of Christmas for everybody who sings', Stephen went on to change it for the millions of listeners all over the world who tuned in to the live broadcast on Christmas Eve. Beginning with Lennox Berkeley in 1983, a new carol was now commissioned every year. Some of the composers approached were at the start of their careers, others were already well established, but all those who wrote responded to the challenge enthusiastically in a striking variety of different forms and styles, which made the service more open and oecumenical. In addition to new works by his Cambridge colleagues Alexander Goehr and Robin Holloway, and pieces by others prominent in British musical life such as Richard Rodney Bennett, Jonathan Harvey, Mark-Anthony Turnage, and Peter Maxwell Davies, Stephen commissioned newly-written carols by less familiar names: the American Stephen Paulus, the Swiss Carl Rütti, the Australians Brett Dean and Carl Vine, and the Finn Einojuhani Rautavaara. Two King's alumni, Judith Weir, and Thomas Adès,

accepted invitations to compose new pieces, Adès with the plaintive harmonies of his Fayrfax Carol, and Weir with her now well-known *Illuminare, Jerusalem*, whose gentle evocation of the simplicity of the nativity made it a favourite for frequent inclusion in the service. Through such commissions, sophisticated contemporary music was brought into the homes of the millions of listeners for whom the essence of the Christmas carol was its reassuringly familiar evocation of an arcadian, Dickensian, or boisterously rustic medieval past.

In 2003, Harrison Birtwistle contributed *The Gleam*, which requires the choristers to shout and stamp their feet. The reaction to such unexpected sounds was not always favourable. One caller to the BBC's *Feedback* programme trenchantly expressed the view that 'whoever was responsible for the choice of the new carol should be locked up in a dark room and never let out'. This was a piece of advice that the College was minded to ignore. It was also largely through the carol service that a number of other pieces achieved a wide currency, none more so than John Tavener's beautifully crafted unaccompanied setting of William Blake's poem 'The Lamb'. Written in just a single afternoon in 1982 for his nephew Simon's third birthday, its popularity was partly due not only to its eloquent simplicity but also to its frequent appearance on Christmas Eve. It certainly travelled widely, even as far as Paolo Sorrentino's Oscar-winning film *La grande bellezza* (2013), where it takes its place in the soundtrack alongside an eclectic assemblage of music by Péroton, Bizet, Poulenc, and Górecki. Stephen conducted his last Christmas Eve service in 2018, the centenary of the establishment of *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* by Eric Milner-White when Dean of King's. The new carol that year was by Judith Weir, one of the first

women to read for the Music Tripos in the College, then Master of the Queen's Music.

To the Procession for Advent and *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*, the two main set-piece occasions of the annual cycle, Stephen added the performance of one of the Bach Passions during Holy Week to create a new and ambitious Easter Festival with additional performances during the week, many of which were broadcast by the BBC. These included Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, written for the few available resources in the harsh conditions of the unheated barracks of a German prisoner-of-war camp during the winter of the second year of the Second World War. An even less well-known work, Frank Martin's monumental oratorio *Golgotha*, scored for five soloists, orchestra, organ, piano and mixed choir was given a performance, enthusiastically sanctioned by the composer's widow. Such choices exemplified a determination to bring works that were rarely heard in Cambridge, and which often required large forces, to the public attention. An equally spectacular example was a performance of Messiaen's *Trois petites liturgies de la présence divine*, given by local resources together with the country's only professional player of the *ondes martenot*. This was one of the high points of Stephen's long involvement not only with the Cambridge University Musical Society but also with his commitment to Messiaen's music, which had its origins in his earliest organ recitals as a schoolboy in Worcester. Others include the performances of Mahler's Symphony No. 8 in the Royal Albert Hall in 1999, and of the *War Requiem* by Benjamin Britten, given in Coventry Cathedral in 2000 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of its destruction by the Luftwaffe. In addition to his performances with many university and college ensembles he also

worked with, among others, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the Britten Sinfonia, the English Chamber Orchestra, the Brandenburg Consort, and the Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra. The BBC Concert Orchestra was a regular participant in the Easter Festival; it appeared under Stephen's baton for the last time on Good Friday 2019, in a memorable performance of Verdi's *Messa da Requiem*. The Easter Festival was organised together with his second wife Emma, who provided vital support for many aspects of the Festival including the design, editing, and sometimes the writing of the programme booklet. Emma as the first female chaplain to King's had worked alongside Stephen in the Chapel, and in 2004 they married following the dissolution of both their previous marriages.

The end of Stephen's life was marked by an unexpected drama that then quickly turned into tragedy. Returning from the choir school on a winter's evening, he was knocked to the ground by a cyclist and taken to Addenbrooke's Hospital. What at first seemed to be a swelling of the face caused by the impact of the fall was later diagnosed as a particularly virulent form of cancer. In preparation for his retirement in September 2019 the family had begun to re-locate to York where Frances, one of their two daughters (the other, Olivia, was still at school), had secured a place as a chorister at the Minster. It was in St. Leonard's Hospice in York, on 22 November, the feast day of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music and musicians, that Stephen finally gave up the unequal struggle. Among the concerns that occupied him during his final days was to complete the final edit of his last recording, devoted to a selection of Bruckner's motets and his Mass No. 2, accompanied as so often in the past, by the Academy of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields. Another was to listen to *Die*

*Götterdämmerung* (the complete recording was kept in his room in the hospice), something which he began but never completed. It was undoubtedly through the impact of his conversations years earlier with Bernard Williams, a committed Wagnerian, that he finally came to approach the entire cycle.

Meanwhile, messages of appreciation and solidarity arrived from every corner of the musical world. This was the support team in action, a formidable network of singers, orchestral players, conductors, composers, recording producers and engineers, librarians, and scholars that Stephen had gathered around him over the decades. Writing shortly afterwards, his Cambridge colleague and fellow choral-conductor Edward Wickham, Director of Music at St Catharine's College, noted that 'the intensity of relationships, forged in the heat of musical performance, the tenacity of impressions made by teacher upon pupil often from an early age, serve to create sodalities of composers and performers whose instincts are as entrained as they are subtle'. At King's that process begins in the choir school every morning, continues through the afternoon rehearsal, and comes to fruition in the afternoon service. This sequence of intense preparation, culminating in a daily public performance, critically depends upon the musicality, tenacity, and skill of a single individual, qualities which were so clearly in evidence during the thirty-seven years that Stephen occupied the post of Director of Music in King's. As Wickham went on to observe, the composers and performers that he nurtured in the course of this time coalesced into a distinctive approach, even perhaps constituting a 'school', that 'is surely amongst the most extensive in this or any other field of musical life'.

For Stephen all these various activities came together in the integrated objective of single-minded dedication to carefully prepared and meticulously rehearsed music-making, an objective now firmly embraced by his successor in King's (and former Organ Scholar) Daniel Hyde. From the Easter Festival to the recording studio this was pursued in a variety of different contexts, but ultimately it was invested in the daily routine of choral singing, which Stephen regarded as the best possible use of mind, heart and voice. Throughout his many-sided career as teacher and performer, he firmly believed in the sentiment of the memorable couplet prefaced to William Byrd's last publication, the *Psalms, Sonnets, and Songs* of 1611. Quoted by Stephen to generations of choristers, it epitomises the firmly held belief that 'since singing is so good a thing, I wish all men would learn to sing'. This was a tenet that had guided him throughout his career.

Nietzsche famously remarked that 'without music, life would be a mistake'. More expansively Plato, whose views on many things (though not this) Nietzsche rejected, had claimed that 'music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm and gaiety to life and to everything'. Stephen, whose own was so brutally terminated, was a passionate believer in the enhancing power of music, and would have agreed with them. Through his performances and broadcasts all of us have been the beneficiaries, and through his recordings his legacy endures.

RIGHT King's College Chapel, 2016 Credit: Kevin Leighton / King's College Cambridge



## Acknowledgements

In preparing this memoir of Stephen Cleobury I have been fortunate in the willingness of many people to help and make useful comments and suggestions for improvement. Special thanks are due to Christopher Robinson, who taught Stephen as a schoolboy in Worcester and who then followed his career until the end; his power of recall of events stretching over some sixty years has supplied many details and nuances which otherwise would have been lost. Members of the Cleobury family, including Nicholas, Penny, and Emma, have all made valuable contributions through conversation and reminiscence, as have Edward Blakeman of the BBC, Sarah Chambre, David McKitterick and Edward Wickham in Cambridge, and Jonathan Wainwright in York. The memories of a number of Stephen's colleagues, friends, and former pupils occupy a separate section at the end of this publication. Closer to home I have benefitted from the knowledge of Patricia McGuire and Gareth Burgess in the College Library, and Caroline Walker and Margaret Hebden in the Office of the Director of Music. Cristina Travieso-Blanch and Victoria Zeitlyn in the Development Office have smoothed the path with enthusiasm. An early draft of the text was read and commented on by Peter Jones, Robin Osborne, Michael Proctor, and Patricia Williams. Despite the best efforts of all who have contributed in their different ways, errors and omissions inevitably remain, for which I am solely responsible.

Iain Fenlon



## Testimonials

I've been a lover of Herbert Howells all of my adult life since I first heard one of his canticle settings as a first year undergraduate in the beautiful and resonant Chapel of Keble College, Oxford. But it is only in recent months that I have discovered quite how much of my understanding and appreciation of Howells stems from Stephen, whose particular and exceptional interpretations of Howells' catalogue I now realise I have listened to time after time again over the years.

I say interpretations. Because after one of the most memorable evenings of my life, I have come to see what a great partnership Howells and Cleobury have sustained since they first sat together in the Westminster Abbey organ loft in the late 1970s, the revered composer critiquing the young assistant organist's interpretation of his works.

Following a radio programme in which I spoke about Howells on the BBC earlier in the year, Stephen emailed me to tell me about his youthful tutorials with Herbert and to invite me to visit him at King's to learn more. I met him in the lodge with his wife Emma and two of his former organ scholars, Ashley Grote and his successor Daniel Hyde. Before dinner, we went up to the organ loft and Stephen played for us some of the Howells preludes and rhapsodies he had recorded in his July valedictory recording.

I say played, because he continuously broke off to explain to me what he was reading from the score and how he was choosing to interpret what he believed was in Howells' mind when he first set

down the composition – how to phrase the notes, to make seemingly unplayable combinations possible, which stops to use, the dynamics of the sound – little of which was written down on the score, most of it for the organist to interpret. He was brimming over with the joy of teaching and his enthusiasm and love for the place and the music. As Howells would have been, I'm sure, hearing the young Stephen play his compositions all those years ago.

It was a magical hour seeing Stephen bring the scores to life with such feeling and dexterity and love for the music. I discovered later that this was the very last time he was to play the King's College organ. What a lucky chance for me to have had such a special opportunity. What a privilege it was to be there with him and those so close to him and truly to see a master at work.

*Ed Balls*

*Former Labour Cabinet Minister, 2005 - 2015*

I had the great privilege of working with Stephen on three new pieces for the Choir, including a carol for the *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* in 2015.

Stephen's establishment of an annual commission at the heart of the Christmas Eve service became such a fixture that one might underestimate the courage and nerve it must have taken to present a new piece each year in a live broadcast to millions of people. In the case of my own carol, *The Flight*, I can imagine that potential stress levels might have been higher than usual: I had set to music a poem

by George Szirtes which linked the Flight into Egypt to the Syrian refugee crisis which had been in the headlines for much of 2015. George (who had first come to Britain as a refugee in 1956) wrote a text in which verses graphically describing the journey of a child are juxtaposed with refrains calling for peace. The musical demands of the piece were as considerable as those of its subject matter. I sent the carol to Stephen in October, half expecting it to be rejected. However, to my surprise, he replied immediately with a message full of warmth and encouragement; and from then onwards, his calm positivity and belief in the project carried everyone through.

I will never forget watching him in rehearsal on 23rd December. The focus and concentration with which he worked were remarkable, and yet his economy of gesture meant that he never seemed to be doing very much: a word here or there was sufficient to convey with absolute precision what needed to be said. He was supportive of the choir, yet in complete command of all that was going on; and thus, able to make brilliantly efficient use of the limited rehearsal time.

The following day, I understood that what I had heard in rehearsal was only a pale foretaste of what Stephen and the choir were capable of. The intensity and power of the rendition – most especially the chilling sound of the treble top B cutting into the silence of the Chapel – were nothing short of remarkable. It was perhaps the most committed performance that any piece of mine has had, and I will always owe a great debt to Stephen for his courage, vision and skill in making it happen.

*Richard Causton*

*Professor of Composition. Fellow*

My first encounter with Stephen was in 1989 when I came for a 'voice test' as part of the appointment process as Chaplain. I was confident that it wouldn't go well and felt extraordinarily exposed and vulnerable – not having engaged with singing in a serious way at all since leaving the local church choir when my voice broke (as we then described it). Indeed, it didn't go well, but my anxious astonishment at being offered the job turned to delight when I received a handwritten congratulatory note from Stephen, which proposed that I immediately begin a set of singing lessons at the College's expense.

It was a steep learning curve. Less than a month after I started the Sunday morning Eucharist was broadcast live. This meant that my sessions with the organ scholar Peter Barley to nudge my singing at Evensong towards acceptability were augmented by a few sessions with James Gilchrist, the challenge being to strengthen the singing voice for Radio 3. The day came and I did the best I could through the lengthy sung Preface. Stephen did have a comment afterwards – a question actually, 'Did you know you were almost a semi-tone flat by the time you got to the Sanctus?' I really had no idea. My focus had simply been on getting there.

When I returned as Dean it was clear to both of us that I would probably be here beyond his retirement, and I felt there was within the dynamic of the Director of Music and Dean relationship an element of *entrusting*. What neither of us knew or expected was that his final few years would be so dominated by sickness, pain and uncertainty: wretchedly uncomfortable companions to his extraordinary ambition to get things done.

My final encounter with Stephen was when I concluded my visit to him in the hospice in York with a short service of Holy Communion. I read Psalm 139 as he had once told me it was his favourite. 'O Lord, thou hast searched me out and known me.' And on the first anniversary of his death, I interred his ashes in the vault below the Chapel he so often filled with music.

*Stephen Cherry*  
*Dean and Fellow*

I was lucky enough to be commissioned by Stephen for his *Easter at King's* festival in 2007, for which I wrote *This Night* for choir and solo cello. I vividly recall attending one of Stephen's regular rehearsals with the boy choristers at 8am on a crisp March morning, and being amazed by his musical precision, as well as wry humour, even at that hour. It is a personal image of his remarkable level of unstinting craftsmanship, which, I think, had much to do with underpinning the quietly intense expressivity which he put into whatever kind of music he conducted. On another occasion, he performed my work about Middle Eastern exile, *Red Sea*, with the BBC Singers. There, I learnt so much in seeing how his steady, unwavering focus acted as a vital counter-balance to the highly charged outbursts in my musical settings of Hebrew and Arabic. Stephen's music-making was an inspiring model of balance. I feel deeply privileged to have known him.

*Michael Gordon*  
*KC 1982. Professor of Composition, University of Birmingham*

I have the fondest memories of King's as a chorister and later organ scholar. Thanks to Stephen Cleobury those two experiences formed the foundation of my musical, and later professional lives. As a chorister I was able to enter the choir a year early as older boys' voices had changed, and enjoyed four incomparable years of the greatest musical training imaginable. Stephen was extremely caring but to an extent also treated us as professionals, and taught us early about the demands that were there. One Sunday morning he opened the rehearsal with 'I have here a list of the boys involved in last night's pillow fight'. No further punishment was necessary beyond the mortification of having disappointed him, although in fact he didn't bear grudges.

For an organ scholar the expectation was that we could more or less already do the job upon arrival, and that any shortcomings had to be sorted out urgently. This made for a particularly challenging first year, but with time pieces of music would be repeated and the process became easier. I cannot imagine a more efficient or effective training than the one Stephen offered at King's. Alongside the demands he stood up for his organ scholars on numerous occasions and made sure we were surviving. He did so in a way that was discreet, understated perhaps, but that you could feel. Since I left I've lost count of the number of times I've wanted to seek his advice or share some good news, and again and again he is missed.

Stephen's respect for King's and his uncompromising leadership made him a formidable personality whose acknowledgment was craved and anger feared. But there were still moments of amusement that I remember fondly, and his dry character was crucial to that. On one tour he was describing the curtain calls that would take place and

announced in his famously deadpan voice that he would be receiving the same bouquet of flowers as the previous night, almost challenging us not to crack up. One Sunday a visiting preacher spoke on the topic of Wonder, and Stephen quizzed the choristers to ask which word had been used most often in the sermon. A boy piped up and suggested 'the', and while Stephen must have been quick to dismiss a silly suggestion he was still amused to recount the story to the back row at the next Wednesday evensong with something of a twinkle in his eye.

Stephen was taken from us before his time but, knowing how much his influence has stayed with me, I am absolutely sure that it will be present in the life and work of his youngest probationers at least until the end of this century. He is greatly missed but in so many ways remains with us as a defining influence on this country's musical life.

*Richard Gowers*

*Chorister 2003–8, KC 2014. Organ Scholar*

I had the privilege both of singing under Stephen as a boy chorister and subsequently playing the organ under his direction when I returned to King's as an organ scholar. It is no exaggeration to say that what I learnt from Stephen in those formative years shaped my entire musical development. I shall be forever grateful to him, conscious that I would not be where I am now without his influence.

My impressions of Stephen inevitably evolved as I grew up. It is fair to say that, as boy choristers, we were somewhat in awe of Mr Cleobury. Even amongst children, he didn't suffer fools and his

expectations of us were clear. He demanded the same exacting standards of his choristers as he did from himself: lining up after Evensong to apologise for mistakes made was not something any boy relished. At the same time, we knew that he was as dedicated to us as he expected us to be to him. Beneath the demanding exterior he was a kind man, with an amusing wit that entertained most choristers, and went over the heads of others.

As an organ scholar I saw Stephen in a different light. We were his right-hand men, not only playing the organ but helping out with the training of the boys and standing in to direct Evensong when he was absent. The dedication, hard work and commitment we invested as organ scholars was recognised by Stephen who in return was nurturing and loyal, eager to give us opportunities and prepare us for the wider world of professional music.

Stephen was tremendously proud of all his King's choir alumni and he continued to nurture and support so many singers and organists right through their careers. Our relationship, that had started out as chorister and choirmaster, became one of colleagues and it was truly humbling on the occasions when he contacted me for help or advice, or to ascertain my thoughts on the first edit of a King's recording. I last worked with Stephen in July 2018, just as he was retiring from King's, playing the organ for a BBC Singers recording in the Chapel of music by David Willcocks. There was a palpable sense amongst all the performers that this was a special, bittersweet moment: the distinctive and unique combination of the architecture, the organ, the music, the combined legacies of both, with the obvious realisation that his illness was advanced and his days few.

For those of us who knew him, it is impossible to visit the Chapel now without thinking of Stephen, remembering him standing between the choir stalls that he inhabited during thirty-seven years of dedicated service. May he rest in peace.

*Ashley Grote*

*KC 2001. Organ Scholar. Master of Music, Norwich Cathedral*

For composers outside the charmed circle of “Quires and places where they sing”, Stephen Cleobury was unusual – unique? – in his embrace of wider idioms, technically challenging, not always offering immediate rewards (sometimes none whatever), pushing his choristers to their limits (sometimes beyond); his congregations too. Service-lists of what he put on in chapel during his time at King's are impressive: moreover, a good proportion of this repertoire was specially commissioned from some of the most distinguished British composers of the day, most of them sounding unfamiliar waters and surprising themselves with the result.

The same goes on the wider stage of the University Chorus and Orchestra. Alongside the staples, from Bach and Handel, via Classic masses of Romantic oratorios, hence *Gerontius*, *Belshazzar*, *War Requiem*, Stephen programmed difficult new works of scope and size, and had them performed with conviction as well as commitment – again, some of these pieces were specially commissioned. I recall performances of music by Robert Saxton, Judith Weir, George Benjamin: and with particular gratitude my own *Spacious Firmament* (written originally for the baptism of the new Symphony Hall in Birmingham, but deferred

owing to “a weakness of the royal bladder”: no such withholding when grandly given in King’s!). Most moving of all, Alexander Goehr’s wonderful *Death of Moses*, not quite coming off at its première, growing into full vindication under Stephen with C.U.M.S. (and later recorded by them on CD).

Our contacts became closer in his last year at Cambridge, then in his all-too-brief retirement to the hospitable house in York where I once stayed, making the acquaintance of the fascinating cat. We spoke of music way out of his professional repertoire that he was now beginning to explore for the first time: above all, Tchaikovsky; I urged him on to Wagner – too late: Maybe in Heaven?

*Robin Holloway*

*KC 1961. Emeritus Professor of Musical Composition*

Whilst I could recount any number of amusing anecdotes and stories of Stephen, I find myself remembering him almost daily through constant interaction with his unmistakable handwriting.

My first contact with Stephen was as a teenager, cautiously writing to express my interest in the organ scholarship and requesting the possibility of an informal audition. I probably agonised for days over the exact wording of my enquiry, but remember clearly his handwritten response, by return. The small envelope landed in my school pigeon hole, franked by the old King’s College mail machine; inside, what I later came to know as a carefully written and typically eloquent response, expressing great interest in my ambitions and

happily suggesting a ‘mutually convenient’ time to meet. I had no idea this was to be the first of many years of contact with Stephen. Given his aversion to computers and most new technology, he clung to the handwritten note and the secretarial magic of the typewriter and subsequent word-processor, before taking his time with email, and was always more likely to be found with a pen or pencil in hand.

So it is his pencil markings throughout the King’s College Choir library which continue to give me a sense of his ongoing presence and his critical mind. Some of the older sets of music show clear markings from Philip Ledger, David Willcocks and, in a few cases, Boris Ord. Yet the lion’s share of the library is heavily worked on by Stephen. His ability to re-arrange scores – almost to re-orchestrate a choral texture – to suit the forces available to him provides an encyclopaedic insight into how his musical mind worked. He would never wish to waste a minute of anyone’s time, and so much was done ahead of any rehearsal. I am convinced that this forensic approach to the score was one of the reasons why he was so particularly successful in constantly commissioning and performing new music.

It is that attention to detail, more than anything else, that he impressed on those of us fortunate enough to pass through his tutelage. He would always say that a failure to prepare was obviously a preparation for failure, and his many annotations in a single piece of music reveal his fastidious – perhaps sometimes obsessive – approach to preparation. And now, I always hesitate when inevitably I might wish to change something; I reach for the eraser and think twice before stamping my own mark on a score.

His very particular hand was not only for marking scores, and when I found myself convalescing following invasive surgery I remember very clearly the handwritten note – not a shop bought ‘get well’ card – but just two sentences wishing me well and hoping to see me back in Chapel before too long. And signed simply ‘S’. Stephen was a deeply caring and kind man, both in public and behind the scenes, and he knew the value and connection which his thoughtful and hand-written style brought about; I miss him and regret that he is not here to enjoy his retirement in the place where he was made a Life Fellow, but am thankful to sense him here day by day in what he left behind, most clearly, in the choir library.

*Daniel Hyde*

*KC 2000. Organ Scholar 2000-3, Director of Music, King’s College*

Stephen Cleobury was as meticulous in the studio as in all other areas of his music making; precision of tone, blend, phrasing, attack and ensemble. But at the same time he insisted on an expressive approach, not allowing the energy of a performance to succumb to the repetitive nature of recording. He liked clear direction from the producers and engineers, and often remarked that this input amplified all that he would be telling the choristers and choral scholars through the year. He was sure that recording was an essential part of the diet of the choir, and this was crucial in the desire to set up the King’s label when the major record companies retreated. When a first or subsequent edit was sent on, he would send on a fair number of comments, keen for the recording to be as technically clean and clear as possible. He often involved his organ

scholars in this activity, and they tended to be even more exacting – aware perhaps of Stephen’s eye over their shoulder. What is most remarkable is the range of music recorded, from Rachmaninov to Rutter, Byrd to Birtwistle. Stephen was wary of the acoustic, and one particular recording I recall is of Handel’s ‘Zadok the Priest’, the first movement of which he initially took at a slow tempo, not wishing details to be lost. We encouraged him to trust the recording of the choir and orchestra in the acoustic, and the result is a buoyant and exhilarating performance.

Stephen was justifiably proud of all the recordings he made, but one that gave him particular pleasure was the collection of Christmas carols that he had commissioned. This in itself was a labour of love; it was not feasible to learn and record all the carols for one set of sessions, and so we decided to attach additional sessions to a longer series of planned recordings, allowing us to build up the complete double CD over a number of years. The variety is astonishing. Arvo Pärt’s *Bogoróditse Djévo* remarkable for its fleetness and brevity; carols by composers who began their studies at King’s, including Judith Weir, Thomas Adès and Bob Chilcott. Recording Sir Harrison Birtwistle’s *The Gleam* was a particular memory. Birtwistle called for the trebles to clap and stamp at the climax of the work, which they did with particular relish, especially on repeated takes to ensure perfect ensemble.

*Stephen Johns*

*Artistic Director, Royal College of Music*

I greatly regret that I never asked Stephen what he considered to be the most important element of his work as Director of Music at King's. I suspect that one of his highest priorities would have been the crucial importance of the maintenance of standards. This was something that was evident at every rehearsal and every service that I can remember. The choir may have been singing whatever anthem or canticle setting appointed for that evening for the one hundredth time, but there would certainly have been members of the congregation hearing it for the first time in a setting that they had never experienced before. Such an experience was potentially for them an integral part of their worship; but even if they were there principally for the spectacle, it consequently laid a considerable weight of responsibility of musical excellence on Stephen's shoulders.

Such attention to detail demanded an infinite amount of preparation and support, and in this he was immensely fortunate to have the help and commitment from the staff in the office, together with the immeasurable support and assistance he got from Penny and Emma and members of the school staff. There were also the members of the Chapel staff who made sure that all was ready for services and concerts. And, of course, the choir, the choristers, the choral scholars and the organ scholars. A considerable team effort.

Inevitably there were tensions and moments of stress. Maintaining its reputation as one of the very finest chapel choirs in the world and in a setting that is unrivalled comes with a considerable price-tag. Of all the high-profile services, the annual Advent Procession was the one that caused me more sleepless nights than any other with

its apparently uncomplicated, but precise choreography, involving a lot of extra acolytes and a lot of extra naked candle flames moving around the Chapel. And that was before the music was taken into account. But having walked the course through with Stephen the day before, ensuring that we were both satisfied that it would work with the extra student volunteers and the choir's movements, it all became infinitely less stressful and, so far as I could see, went without a hitch. His attention to detail was infinite and his many years of experience in that Chapel were of great value.

It is true of any artist that one never really knows how one's offerings, be they musical, theatrical, literary or in the world of painting or sculpture will be received by those who experience them. Negative reactions are more usually voiced than positive ones. But for decades Stephen's life was committed to presenting sacred music to worshippers and audiences in churches, chapels, cathedrals and abbeys, without knowing, for the most part, that the music he offered will have profoundly enriched their lives. And that is more than a gift, it is a ministry for which I, for one, will be eternally grateful.

*Richard Lloyd-Morgan*  
*Chaplain 2003–2015*

I got to know Stephen Cleobury though presenting a series of concerts which were part of the festival that he created: *Easter at King's*. I didn't go to university in Cambridge so everything about these events was a privilege: simply being present in that utterly extraordinary, somehow transcendent space, gazing up at the impossible ceiling;

being taken up on to the roof of King's College Chapel, and on that occasion, coming down from that exalted location to find that my guide and myself were the only people in the Chapel to hear the choir rehearse, under Stephen's direction, the Allegri *Miserere* prior to the Good Friday service. That ranks as one of the most astonishing musical experiences of my life.

On these Easter Festival occasions, hearing Stephen rehearse the choir and instrumentalists in whatever music they were preparing, I tried to sit as far forward as I could, eavesdropping on what he was saying to the performers. What I was struck by, whether he was dealing with the youngest of the choristers at King's or the most seasoned of the professionals of the BBC Concert Orchestra or the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, or eminent soloists, was the combination of precision and courtesy. He was truly "a veray, parfit, gentil knyght" and musician. One was always aware, with any event Stephen directed, of being in the presence of music-making at the highest level, totally devoid of ego. But that didn't make him, in any way a slave of tradition. There was an almost anarchic side: the scarlet beneath the monastic surplice of white beneath which Stephen really kicked over the hornet's nest with his commissioning of pieces by Harrison Birtwistle and other contemporary composers, to make people really think about the music they were hearing in that ancient, seductively beautiful space.

*Donald Macleod*  
*Radio Presenter*

I first met Stephen in 1998 whilst on a gap year at King's College School, working with the choristers in King's College Choir. What became evident to me then was as apparent working with him during a period as his agent a decade later, and more recently as producer of the BBC Singers: preparation and attention to detail was everything. Whether it was Evensong on a wet February afternoon, a BBC Prom at the Royal Albert Hall or *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*, no performance or liturgical service was any more important than the other.

Stephen had the ability to manage and engage musicians of all abilities – children, students, amateurs or professionals – with the same expectation of the highest possible standards. That's why he was so respected in all the musical circles in which he worked. Every rehearsal and recording session was meticulously planned well in advance, with nothing left to chance.

During my year at King's College School, I witnessed his ability to command respect rather than demand it. After the filming of 'Carols from King's' for the BBC, Stephen ate supper with the choristers in the choir school. Talk amongst the choristers turned towards an upcoming football match at which I was to referee – an unpopular decision for a particular chorister who on multiple occasions had been the victim of my lack of knowledge of the rules of association football, and was vocal in his disapproval. Stephen clearly was not impressed by the tone of the chorister to a master, albeit a junior one. "That's all very well, but I bet Mr Manners knows how many quavers there are in a dotted minim".

Stephen expected the same level of professionalism from his colleagues that he demonstrated himself, no matter what the occasion. I once

conducted a choir at a wedding where Stephen was playing the organ. It was a relaxed informal affair with no great expectation of the singers who made up what could loosely be described as a choir. Despite the modest musical ambition, after the service I found Stephen waiting for me in the vestry of the church, with a humble apology for an uncharacteristic wrong note on the organ. It was a mistake no one would have noticed, but an example of his absolute dedication to the highest standards, no matter what the occasion.

Before Stephen's final Christmas at King's, I asked if I might record an interview with him in the Chapel about the 100th *Nine Lessons and Carols*. It was to be broadcast during the interval of a BBC Singers Concert, and despite his frailty due to the cruel illness, Stephen agreed. When others would have drawn a line and politely declined, the dedication to duty which personified his character was more apparent than ever. Just days before the carol service we recorded the interview in the choir stalls at King's. As we finished, Stephen asked if I had what I needed, before adding "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've promised to record some pieces on the organ tomorrow and need to do some practice".

Our final BBC Singers project with Stephen was in July in King's Chapel, for a programme marking the 100th anniversary of the birth of Sir David Willcocks. Stephen's same forensic approach to preparation was evident, despite the familiarity of all the music and his declining health. Stephen was keen we should record *Sing!*, Willcocks' choral arrangement of Widor's *Toccata*. I was reluctant, purely based on the seasonal nature of the radio programme, but on the day of the recording Stephen mentioned it again, somewhat persistently. We ended up finishing the session with the piece, and for posterity filmed

it from the organ loft at King's. It was a fitting end to Stephen's work with the BBC Singers, with Stephen's appreciation visibly evident as the choir and organ faded up into the magnificent fanned-vaulting of King's Chapel, the words almost valedictory at the end of a career which enriched a tradition and the musical lives of people who he worked with and audiences around the world: "All our voices raise and sing to God a joyous hymn of praise. Sing praise. Hallelujah".

*Jonathan Manners*

*BBC Singers*

The brilliance of Stephen Cleobury as a musician is well known and documented. In many ways, he was one of the old school of cathedral organists who valued tradition and aimed at consistency of performance. Consistency of performance he certainly achieved and he considered his, and his choir's, performance at an almost unattended weekday Evensong in the depth of winter as important as the most prestigious occasion or a live broadcast. On the other hand, he thought 'out of the box' and was one of the most imaginative and most innovative people I have known. He was always thinking up, or open to, new ideas which resulted in new concert series and the commissioning of new music from a wide variety of composers. He was a wonderful mentor to the young and an inspiration to everyone who were lucky enough to know him.

I first began to know Stephen well when he became Sub-Organist of Westminster Abbey. I had been a chorister there and was Organist of St Bartholomew-the-Great, not far away from the Abbey. We thought of each other as colleagues; he was 13 days younger than me. Our

friendship lasted over almost 50 years and grow it certainly did. For the last 30 years of our friendship, Stephen was the one person who would always be there for me in a time of difficulty or crisis. This was so important to me that I once told Stephen's father that, with a friend like Stephen, I was not in need of other friends. He was a workaholic, yes, but people in his life were just as important to him as his work. His courtesy and care for others, as well as his musical brilliance, are features of Stephen which I miss greatly and shall never forget.

*Andrew Morris*

*Master of Music, Bedford School*

Recently I have been reacquainting myself with two works of art, both of which put me in mind of Stephen. One is the *Great Service* of William Byrd, a piece I discovered under Stephen's direction as an Organ Scholar at King's between 1995 and '98. The other is the 1979 television adaptation of John le Carré's novel *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, the central character of which is the owlish spy George Smiley, played memorably by Alec Guinness in that unsurpassed piece of screen drama. Why, and how, do these masterpieces evoke Stephen?

Stephen, like Smiley, kept his counsel; he was by default laconic, at least in his communication with students. More particularly, like Smiley he had something of the confessor about him, and not just in the sense that we were expected to account for our sins after the service (finger-slips, poor ensemble, inapt registration; for the choral scholars a wrong note, sour intonation, an inharmonious vowel; the list of potential infractions was long and exhaustive). No, it was that Stephen

seemed to embody something which had moral force. It embraced local tradition – the famous King's attention to detail, the crystalline accuracy and consistency of performance from day to day – but also transcended it, becoming something of wider relevance. It was a way of addressing one's work that was profoundly serious, and (he would have winced at the *leggiere* convenience of this) seriously profound. At nearly three decades' distance (and realising with a start that when I matriculated Stephen was 46, my age at the time of writing), I can see that the father confessor's admonishment assumed that, with effort, I could actually achieve what was expected of me.

A particular memory of Byrd's *Great Service* reminds me that, perhaps more often than I realised at the time, Stephen did descend the mountain and reveal himself. He and I must have been talking about the piece, perhaps on our regular morning walk from school to college, and I suppose I must have said how much I liked it. Yes, said Stephen, it is very fine; and it's a dream of mine to be able to perform the whole piece in a single day, across Matins, the Eucharist, and finally Evensong – to experience the 'Gloria Patri' of the 'Nunc dimittis' as the summing up of the whole remarkable sequence. Looking back – with the clarity enabled by the intervening years, and, sadly, by his absence from the world – it is clear that making music, *working at* music, was indeed a dream for Stephen; a desired state of being, a *raison d'être*. His death, which surely came before he or anyone else was ready, leaves a space in a great number of lives; but it is a space that can be filled, partly, with the grateful music of those whom he educated.

*Robert Quinney*

*KC 1995. Organist of New College, Oxford*

During my student days in the 1970s, writing choral music played no part in the plans of progressive young composers. Musical modernism was itself an uneasy arena for choirs, whether religious or not. Stephen changed all that, in his legendarily unassuming way, with his groundbreaking yearly series of newly composed Christmas carols, sung unapologetically to King's Choir's worldwide radio audience. Unusually even amongst new music specialists, he made a point of repeating this repertoire throughout the following decades, and explored larger-scale contemporary music as widely as possible, given the age range of his choir.

I used to marvel at the collegial atmosphere of his rehearsals, with everyone present regarded as a fellow professional, even if only ten years old. My favourite section of King's Chapel services, as I often mentioned to him, was the psalm, always so sensitively and creatively coloured under his direction, but as ever, unassuming and subtle. I also have many memories of Stephen directing much bigger events, from which his legendary calm and unexcitable disposition (thanks to perfect preparation) has been a model for me during stressful musical occasions. How congenial he was, always ready to converse in rehearsal breaks, and standing in front of the Screen greeting anyone he knew before any performance, however dangerously complicated it was about to be. I learned a huge amount from him, and miss his inquisitive spirit.

*Judith Weir*

*KC 1973. Master of the King's Music, 2014-2024*



*Photographed at King's College, Cambridge on Saturday 22 September 2012  
Credit: Ben Ealovega / King's College Cambridge*

## Discography of Stephen Cleobury and the King's College Choir 1984–2019

### 1984

Allegrì: *Miserere*; Nanino, Marenzio, Frescobaldi, Ugolini. (EMI)

Mozart: *Krönungsmesse* ('Coronation Mass'), K317; *Missa solennis*, K337. English Chamber Orchestra. (Decca)

Palestrina: Mass & motet, 'Tu es Petrus'; Victoria: Mass and Motet 'O quam gloriosum'. (Decca)

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### 1985

Rossini: *Petite messe solennelle*; *Stabat Mater*. (Decca)

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### 1986

Holy, Holy, Holy ('Favourite Hymns'). (Decca)

Vivaldi: *Dixit Dominus*; *Beatus vir*. English Chamber Orchestra. (Decca)

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### 1987

Byrd: *The Great Service*. (EMI)

Giovanni Gabrieli: *The Glory of Venice*. Philip Jones Brass Ensemble. (Decca)

### 1988

Handel: *Dixit Dominus*; *Laudate pueri Dominum*. English Chamber Orchestra. (Decca)

Kodály: *Missa brevis*; Janáček: *Mass in E flat*; *Otčenáš* ('The Lord's Prayer'). (EMI)

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### 1989

Fauré & Duruflé: *Requiems*. English Chamber Orchestra. (EMI)

Mozart: *Vesperae de Dominica*, K321; *Vesperae solennes de confessore*, K339; 'Ave verum corpus'. The Hilliard Ensemble. (EMI)

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### 1990

Berlioz: *L'enfance du Christ*. Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. (EMI)

Tallis: 'Spem in alium'; *Lamentations of Jeremiah*. (Decca)

Verdi: *Quattro pezzi sacri*. London Philharmonic Orchestra, Cambridge University Musical Society Chorus. (Decca)

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### 1991

Britten: *A Ceremony of Carols*; *Rejoice in the Lamb*; *A Boy was Born*. (Decca)

Mozart: *Waisenhaus-Messe*, K139; *Credo-Messe*, K257. English Chamber Orchestra. (Decca)

Philips and Dering: *Motets*. (EMI)

Bernstein: *Chichester Psalms*; Copland: *In the Beginning*. (EMI)

Choral Evensong Live from King's College, Cambridge. (EMI)

**1992**

Maxwell Davies: *Solstice of Light*. (Decca)

A Celebration of Herbert Howells. (Decca)

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**1993**

English Anthems. (EMI)

Mendelssohn, Brahms: 'Hear my prayer'. (Decca)

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**1994**

Bach: *Matthäus-Passion*, BWV 244, Brandenburg Consort.  
(Columns Classics)

Christmas Carols from King's. (EMI)

Handel: *Messiah*. Brandenburg Consort. (Decca)

Ikos: Górecki, Tavener, Pärt. (EMI)

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**1995**

Gregorian Chant: The Ceremony of the Shepherds and Midnight  
Mass. Choristers only plus Schola Gregoriana of Cambridge.  
(Herald)

Bach: *Johannes-Passion*, BWV 245. Brandenburg Consort.  
(Columns Classics)

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**1996**

Lassus: *Missa vinum bonum; Missa Triste départ; Missa Quand'io  
pens'al martire*. (Decca)

**1997**

Credo. [Works by Panufnik, Stravinsky, Penderecki, Rachmaninov].  
(EMI)

Evensong & Vespers at King's: Vespers for the Feast of the Blessed  
Virgin Mary; Evensong for Advent. (EMI)

Stanford: Evening Services in C & G; Three Motets; Latin  
Magnificat; Two Bible Songs; Anthems. (EMI)

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**1998**

The King's Collection [Motets]. (EMI)

Adès: Living Toys. (EMI)

Rutter: *Requiem*. (EMI)

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**1999**

A Festival of Nine Lessons & Carols. (EMI)

Rachmaninov: *Vespers*. (EMI)

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**2000**

Bach: *Magnificat*. (EMI)

Handel: *Israel in Egypt*. The Brandenburg Consort. (Decca)

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**2001**

Best Loved Hymns. (EMI)

Handel: *Coronation Anthems*. The Academy of Ancient Music. (EMI)

**2002**

Vivaldi: *Gloria; Magnificat; Dixit Dominus*. The Academy of Ancient Music. (EMI)

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**2003**

Domenico Scarlatti: *Stabat Mater*. (EMI)

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**2004**

Heavenly Voices (Choristers only). (EMI)

Rachmaninov: *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*. (EMI)

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**2005**

Gregorian Chant. (EMI)

On Christmas Day: New Carols from King's. (EMI)

Rutter: *Gloria; Magnificat; Psalm 150*. Gonville and Caius Choir, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. (EMI)

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**2006**

Brahms: *Ein deutsches Requiem*. (EMI)

Purcell: Music for Queen Mary. Academy of Ancient Music. (EMI)

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**2007**

I Heard a Voice: The Music of the Golden Age [Weelkes, Gibbons, Tomkins]. (EMI)

**2008**

Christmas at King's. (EMI)

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**2009**

England, my England. (EMI)

A Festival of Nine Lessons & Carols. (EMI)

Handel: *Messiah*. (EMI)

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**2010**

A Year at King's. (EMI)

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**2012**

Nine Lessons & Carols. (King's College Recordings)

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**2013**

Britten: *Saint Nicolas; Hymn to St Cecilia; Rejoice in the Lamb*. Britten Sinfonia. (King's College Recordings)

Mozart: *Requiem* Realisations. (King's College Recordings)

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**2014**

English Hymn Anthems. (King's College Recordings)

Fauré: *Requiem; Cantique de Jean Racine; Messe basse* [Choristers only]. (King's College Recordings)

Favourite Carols from King's. (King's College Recordings)

Goode: *Six Anthems*. (OxRecs)

**2015**

Evensong live 2015. (King's College Recordings)

1615: Gabrieli in Venice. His Majesty's Sagbutts & Cornetts.  
(King's College Recordings)

Hymns from King's. (King's College Recordings)

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**2016**

Durufié: *Requiem*; Four Motets; *Messe Cum jubilo*. Orchestra  
of the Age of Enlightenment. (King's College Recordings)

Evensong Live 2016. (King's College Recordings)  
Jubilo / Alison Balsom. (Parlophone)

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**2017**

Bach: *St John Passion*. (King's College Recordings)

Second Farewell to Cambridge. (King's College Recordings)

Tecchler's Cello: from Cambridge to Rome. Guy Johnston (cellist).  
(King's College Recordings)

Vaughan Williams: *Dona nobis pacem*; Bernstein: *Chichester  
Psalms*. (King's College Recordings)

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**2018**

Byrd: Motets. (King's College Recordings)

100 years of Nine Lessons & Carols. (King's College Recordings)

**2019**

Evensong Live 2019: Anthems and Canticles.  
(King's College Recordings)

A Festival of Nine Lessons & Carols: The Centenary Service.  
(King's College Recordings)

Herbert Howells: Cello Concerto; *An English Mass*.  
(King's College Recordings)

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**2020**

Bach: *St Matthew Passion*. (King's College Recordings)

Bruckner: *Mass in E minor*; Motets. (King's College Recordings)



*East Asia Choir Tour, 2013 Credit: Choi Jae Wood*

