

SIR STEPHEN
CLEOBURY
AN ADDRESS
BY PROFESSOR
IAIN FENLON

Saturday 19 March, 2022

King's College Chapel
Cambridge

SIR STEPHEN CLEOBURY CBE

*An address by Professor Iain Fenlon
in King's College Chapel, Cambridge.*

Saturday 19 March, 2022

IN ONE of the most familiar lines from *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust wrote: 'Time, which changes people, does not alter the image that we have retained of them'. The image of Stephen that remains so sharply focused, now almost two-and-a-half years after his death, is that of his single-minded devotion to music-making, above all in this place. The daily routine of intense preparation of the Choir critically depends upon the musicality, tenacity and skill of a single individual. During the thirty-seven years that Stephen occupied the post of Director of Music at King's, he developed a distinctive approach to this task: an approach that has shaped so many lives. Ultimately this was invested in the daily practice of choral singing, which he regarded as the best possible use of mind, heart, and voice. Many of those who sang in the Choir, or served as Organ Scholars, have gone on to work in opera houses, cathedrals, and concert halls throughout the world. So too have instrumentalists and composers who studied here and performed under his direction.

When he took up his post in 1982, the tradition that

he inherited largely consisted of an established corpus of Victorian and Edwardian Anglican church music, interspersed with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholic liturgical Masses and motets. This repertory, not dissimilar to the practices of cathedral choirs throughout the land was, with all its faults, firmly entrenched. But modifications could be made, and Stephen gradually but cautiously set about making them. In this he was greatly helped by the then Provost of King's, Bernard Williams, whose infectious enthusiasm for music provided vital friendship and encouragement.

A significant feature in the process of repertorial rejuvenation was Stephen's interest in a trio of contemporary composers, whose music was united by a minimalist approach to composition inspired by religious belief. One of the earliest consequences was the choice of the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt to write a new carol for the Christmas Eve service in 1990. This was an ambitious move. Pärt was then one of the most commercially successful and acclaimed living composers. Building upon the positive experience of working with him, Stephen continued to champion not only Pärt's music, but also 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, together with unadorned melodies strongly influenced by Chant traditions. This produces an austere effect that has been termed 'holy minimalism'. A similar journey, turning away from the radical modernism of serialism and extreme dissonance, had also been made by the Polish composer Henryk Górecki; his music had similarly aroused Stephen's curiosity. These strands come together in *ikos*, a recording devoted to choral works by all three composers, and

one of the most remarkable that Stephen made with the Choir.

Part of the impetus to explore new or unfamiliar music came from Stephen's time as Chief Conductor of the BBC Singers. The story is told of his first rehearsal with this professionally seasoned body, ready to test the mettle of any new conductor, but particularly one who had arrived from the distant and unworldly region of the organ loft. Faced with a moment of uncertainty about the notation of the score a hand shot up, but before the question could even be formulated Stephen had produced the answer. 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.

Exploration of new or unfamiliar music historical runs like a thread through Stephen's career. When he took up his post of Organist and Master of the Choristers at Westminster Cathedral in 1979—the first Anglican to hold the position—little in his previous experiences could have prepared him for the quite-different demands of Catholic liturgy and ceremony. Realising that his knowledge of Gregorian Chant 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, had grown into a genuine enthusiasm. The performance of Chant in its liturgical context remains an important aspect of Stephen's liturgical legacy to the Chapel.

Equally dramatic in its reverberations was the early decision to introduce newly commissioned works into the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. In this context, 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 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 style. In addition to new works by his Cambridge colleagues including Alexander Goehr, Robin Holloway, and Richard Causton, and pieces by others prominent in British musical life such as Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies, Stephen commissioned less familiar names from elsewhere. Two King’s alumni, Thomas Adès and Judith Weir, also accepted invitations to compose new carols for Christmas Eve. Through such initiatives, sophisticated contemporary music was brought into the homes of many for whom the essence of the Christmas carol was its reassuringly approachable evocation of an arcadian or boisterously rustic medieval past. The reaction to new and 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’. The College was not minded to follow this advice.

To the Procession for Advent and the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, the two main set-piece occasions of the annual cycle, Stephen also added new elements to the existing Easter services, filling out the week after Palm Sunday with additional performances, many of which were also broadcast by the BBC. Assisted and encouraged by his wife Emma, the traditional performance of one of the Bach Passions

was now accompanied by works that were rarely heard in Cambridge. One, the performance of Messiaen's *Trois petites liturgies*, was a high point of Stephen's long involvement with the Cambridge University Musical Society. In addition to his appearances with University and college ensembles, he also worked with a number of professional choirs and orchestras including the English Chamber Orchestra and the Philharmonia Chorus and Orchestra. The BBC Concert Orchestra, a regular participant in the Easter schedules, appeared under Stephen's direction for the last time on Good Friday 2019 in a memorable performance of the Verdi *Requiem*.

To a greater extent than any previous holder of the post, Stephen spent much of his time on tour and in the recording studio. Recording was an essential part of the activities of the choir, and when the major record companies began to retreat, it was decided that King's would set up its own label. In another expansion of the horizons, the presence in Cambridge of the Academy of Ancient Music facilitated exploration of the possibilities of historically informed performance using period instruments.

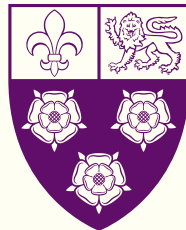
* * *

On 22 November, 2019, the feast day of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music and musicians, Stephen finally gave up the unequal struggle. During his final days, many of those who were part of the formidable network of singers, orchestral players, conductors, composers, recording producers and engineers, librarians, and scholars that Stephen had gathered around him over the decades, sent messages of solidarity from every corner of the musical world. Many of them are present this afternoon. So too are many members of King's who were privileged to

experience at first hand his single-minded dedication to carefully prepared and meticulously rehearsed music-making.

Nietzsche famously remarked that ‘without music, life would be a mistake’. More expansively, Plato, whose views on many things Nietzsche rejected, wrote 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, a passionate believer in the life-enhancing power of music, would have agreed with both of them. And we have been the fortunate and grateful beneficiaries.

Professor Iain Fenlon
King’s College, Cambridge
March, 2022



KING’S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE
MMXXII