



A degree of harmony

Martin Cullingford tracks the history of music at Cambridge from the mid-15th century to the present day

Ask people what images Cambridge brings to mind and in many instances it will be cassocked choristers singing exquisitely beneath a ceiling of Gothic splendour – especially on Christmas Eve. Which just goes to prove that music, in its many forms, is among the University’s most instantly recognisable jewels, as indelibly linked in the popular mind with Cambridge as architecture and rowing – and rightly so, for it has been an integral part of Cambridge life since the University’s origins. As Robin Holloway, one of today’s Professors in the Music Faculty and a Fellow of Gonville and Caius, puts it: ‘music in Cambridge is as old as Cambridge itself.’

As a theoretical discipline, music was part of a medieval University education – one of the four subjects of the

Quadrivium – and so even non-practising musicians would have been expected to study it. But it was in the mid-15th century that Cambridge awarded what are believed to have been the world’s first music degrees. In 1464 a MusB was conferred on Henry Abyngdon, Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal under Edward IV. He was clearly a musician of renown, his death inspiring a Latin epitaph by Thomas More in praise of his talents. The same year also saw a MusD awarded to Thomas St Just, Chaplain to Edward IV and Warden of King’s Hall.

‘There seem to have been two types of musician that circulated at universities,’ says David Skinner, Director of Music at Sidney Sussex and a specialist in early music. ‘One was the practical musician,

those that sang and perhaps composed. Then there were those who were somewhat more intellectual, like Robert Fayrfax (who received his BMus in 1501 and doctorate in 1504). The Church was the way in, and as far as we can tell universities didn’t know how to reward their musical endeavours other than grant them leave to supplicate for their degree after having demonstrated for a number of years their art.’ These early degrees were in some ways comparable to today’s honorary degrees, given to musicians of merit in recognition of their work in the wider world, though it was not long before degree candidates were expected to submit a composition by way of an exercise. Other notable early recipients were Christopher Tye (1536), John Dowland (in the late

16th century) and Orlando Gibbons (1605).

The second major milestone of 15th century musical life in Cambridge was the foundation of the '*College roial of Oure Lady and Seynt Nicholas*' – which became King's College – by Henry VI, who laid the first stone on Passion Sunday, 1441. Five years later he laid another stone, the first of the grand, cathedral-scale chapel which was to be home to a choir of 24 'singing men and boys'. Few today would question the beauty of the splendid acoustic of that mystical soundbox, housed beneath the glorious fan-vaulting roof. Although King's followed the pattern of similar foundations at Oxford, the chapel's sheer size and the very fact that it was a royal foundation changed the landscape (literally) of musical life at Cambridge. 'When you consider the size of the place, and how different it is from any other collegiate church in the land, it must have been a magnet: the place to be,' says Skinner. 'Certainly some of the composers mentioned by Morley in his *A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke* (1597), and also those that have degrees, tend to hail from King's, or have passed through King's at some point or another.'

During the Civil War and Commonwealth era the government's edict abolishing choral services was studiously observed in Cambridge and the chapels' organs removed. Cromwell himself was rather fond of music – just not in church, where he considered it a distraction – notably chamber music, even writing to the University in 1658 and insisting it confer a degree on organist and composer Benjamin Rogers.

The restoration of the Monarchy saw music restored to Cambridge's chapels; Charles II's reign also saw the appointment of the

University's first Professor of Music. But despite being one of the University's oldest Chairs, its early history is not as illustrious as one might expect. The first incumbent was Nicholas Staggins, created Professor in 1684. Charles II had ordered Cambridge to create him MusD – he was Master of the King's Band – and the University, possibly piqued by being told what to do, elected him public professor without a salary. No lectures were required, and the University did not intend the appointment to continue after his death. This it did, however, but although the Professor was often a leading musician, his duties were not particularly onerous, limited to the examination of exercises for degree candidates. The post did not require professors to be resident (though some were) or to give formal lectures (though some did).

That said, a tradition did develop of the Professor writing music to mark a University occasion. Maurice Greene, professor from 1730, set Pope's *Ode on St Cecilia's Day* for the opening of the new Senate House (it was also his doctoral exercise). His successor John Randall (who as a boy had sung the solos in Handel's *Esther* under the composer), wrote music for the installation of a Chancellor.

The late 17th century also saw the emergence of concert-giving societies in Cambridge, in the colleges and in rooms in local inns, notably the Red Lion and the Black Bear. Programmes from a music club held at the Black Bear in the late 18th century can be found in the University Library. 'Outside the choral world, prior to the Cambridge University Music Society (CUMS) there wasn't anything formal,' says Richard Andrewes, the UL's Head of Music. 'There was the Black Bear Music Club, in no way a University organised society,

but within which members of the university played an important role.' Prominent musicians would take charge of subscription seasons, including Charles Hague, a violinist and Professor of Music from 1799–1821. 'It wouldn't have been a big band, but large chamber music – symphonies by Haydn, or *concerti grossi*. At that time concerts were miscellanies – they would include songs, trios, instrumental solos, would start off with an overture, end the first half with a symphony.'

Music as an academic subject in the form we know at Cambridge today began to take shape in the 19th century. At the century's opening there was no formal tuition in music, nor examinations, and residency wasn't required until 1892, only acceptance by a college. Thomas Attwood Walmisley, who became Professor in 1836 while still in residence for his BA, was one of the first to organise lectures. But it was his successor from 1856, William Sterndale Bennett, who made the first major contribution to increasing the standing of the degree. In his first year he wrote a document setting out what he felt should be the requirements of a degree, which included membership of a college, exercises and their performance, and appropriate fees. Eleven years later the Senate decided to recognise his work by awarding the Professorship an annual salary of £100.

The composer Charles Villiers Stanford succeeded to the Professorship in 1887, and his long tenure (he retired in 1925) was to leave a positive legacy on much of Cambridge musical life, as well as on the repertoire of Trinity College's chapel. Which is not to imply it was always a period of academic harmony: the story goes that Stanford fell out with the University and reputedly

Left. Maurice Greene, Professor of Music from 1730, and John Hoadly by Francis Hayman, oil on canvas, 1747

Orlando Gibbons





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refused to live in the city, travelling up to Cambridge and conducting supervisions in the railway hotel before heading straight home again.

By the end of the century, the study of music at Cambridge was on a solid footing, undergraduates now having to live in the University, formal lectures held, and talented students attracted. So too was concert life, which had at last become a formal and permanent part of the University. In 1843 the Peterhouse Music Society had been founded, changing its name the following year to the Cambridge University Music Society. 'There was a group of undergraduates, initially at Peterhouse, who wanted to do something more than just in their College, so it burst the bounds of Peterhouse and became a University institution,' says Andrewes. 'But for the first 40 years of its life it was a relatively undergraduate activity – then there were reforms in 1870 when Stanford joined the society.'

By its jubilee year in 1893 such was the Society's standing that Stanford (who con-

ducted the chorus, into which he introduced women), was able to persuade composers including Saint-Saëns and Tchaikovsky to conduct their works with the orchestra whilst visiting Cambridge to accept honorary degrees. CUMS has since evolved into a major part of Cambridge's musical offering, allowing choral singers, orchestral players, soloists, composers and conductors among the student body to work within a music-making organisation of the highest standard. As Stephen Cleobury, music director of King's College and conductor of CUMS since 1982, puts it 'given that the music Tripos is quite rightly and properly devoted to academic and intellectual music, CUMS provides the other side of the musical coin.'

CUMS is one of the two Cambridge institutions that Cleobury has spent the last quarter of a century leading. The other is the Choir of King's College Chapel, which in the 20th century in many ways became the chief standard-bearer for Cambridge choral music. For this, much is owed to Eric Milner-White, a

former Dean of King's who, back from the First World War where he had served as an army chaplain, felt that the Church of England needed some more imaginative services. In 1918, taking as a starting point a formula devised 40 years earlier by the Bishop of Truro, he introduced the Christmas Eve Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, slightly revising it the following year, when *Once in Royal David's City* was added at the beginning.

The service was first broadcast in 1928, just a few years after the BBC itself was launched, and with the exception of 1930 has been broadcast every year since – even during the Second World War, when all the glass was removed from the unheated chapel and the location couldn't be mentioned on air. The basic structure of the service has become part of the Christmas tradition in churches internationally, and made the choir of King's Chapel probably the most famous in the world. The service continues to evolve.

One of Cleobury's innovations was to introduce the

annual commissioning of a new carol, beginning in 1983 with a work from Lennox Berkeley. 'It seems to me that a great tradition like our annual carol service has to be refreshed constantly, otherwise it withers, it just becomes a museum piece,' says Cleobury. 'I think the regular formula – with the unchanging lessons – works rather well as a mould into which you pour new things. Secondly, I believe quite strongly that our leading composers, who are working across a broad canvas, can also write excellent music for choirs. Church music need not be a cottage industry.' The past two decades have seen the King's College commissioning policy introduce new carols from Thomas Adès, Judith Bingham, James MacMillan and John Rutter, among other leading British composers, to the choral repertoire.

Broadcast and recording technology played a huge role in enhancing the worldwide fame of Cambridge choirs from the mid-20th century onwards. Though some King's College recordings exist from Arthur Henry Mann's time as conductor, it was from the

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) went up to Trinity to read Music and History in 1892. He was taken up by the brilliant set of Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore and G.M. Trevelyan who were members of The Apostles. After graduating in 1895, Vaughan Williams studied at the Royal College of Music as a pupil of Charles Villiers Stanford



COURTESY THE ESTATE OF URSULA VAUGHAN WILLIAMS FROM TONY PALMER'S FILM O THOU TRANSCENDENT THE LIFE OF VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Far left. Charles Hague by Henry Hoppner Meyer after George Henry Harlow, mezzotint, published 1813

Left. Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky came to Cambridge in June 1893 to receive an Honorary Degree and take part in a gala concert to mark the jubilee of the Cambridge University Music Society (CUMS.). Tchaikovsky directed the CUMS orchestra in the first English performance of *Francesca da Rimini*. He died five months later

time of Boris Ord (Director of Music at King's 1929–57) onwards that the medium really took off. The choir of St John's College was quick to follow suit – the superb discography resulting from George Guest's 40 years as conductor (1951–91) greatly enhanced the choir's international reputation. The other major 20th century catalyst for choral development was the admission of women to hitherto male-only colleges, allowing choirs without schools (and, therefore, boy trebles) to attain new standards of excellence; many of these are also now making critically acclaimed recordings.

In 1947 music finally became a formal Tripos subject with the creation of the Music BA Hons. According to Nicholas Marston, Chairman of the Faculty Board of Music and a Director of Studies of King's College, 'One of the major shifts comparing then with now, or even 30 years ago, is from a course which – as its detractors might say – was intended above all to produce *Kapellmeister*, who were destined for cathedral organ lofts and able to write a good

fugue or anthem, or a setting of the canticles, to something in which music scholarship – musicology – is much more central.' Marston sees two figures as most instrumental in this change. The first, Edward Dent, was Professor from 1926 to 1941. 'He was not first and foremost a composer, as so many Cambridge professors had been, but someone who was at the centre of European musicology – he was the president of the International Society for Contemporary Music and of the International Musicological Society'. The second was Alexander Goehr, Professor from 1976 to 99 (and now Emeritus Professor), who Marston credits with having 'probably had the most significant effect on the shape of the Tripos as it is now'. It was Goehr who established the University's first lectureship in ethnomusicology, in the early 1980s. 'Even when I was an undergraduate it would have seemed a very strange thing to many of us, studying non-Western music. It's difficult to believe now,' says Marston. Goehr also introduced courses exploring

music cognition, the fruits of which are to be found in the Faculty's Centre for Music and Science which opened in 2003.

Robin Holloway, Professor since 2001, agrees with Marston's assessment of Goehr's era. As an undergraduate Holloway had chosen English over music, 'because the music tripos seemed so fusty and alien to anything contemporary...but I think Goehr changed all that. It was changing anyway, because things do change slowly. He didn't bring in modernity and contemporaneity, he brought in a kind of stiffening of older disciplines – but because he was a composer with roots in the past but flowers in the present, both those things flourished.'

The sheer vitality of this past half century meant music at Cambridge arrived at the 21st century in excellent health, and capable of being experienced on many levels and in many ways. On the one hand is, as Holloway describes the sort of undergraduate attracted to today's Faculty, 'the kind of young musician who also feels that they would

benefit from a more academic, historic, technical study of the subject, rather than going straight into a conservatoire'. On the other is the tourist queuing outside King's Chapel to hear the world-famous choir sing Evensong. Either would find it hard not to conclude that musical life at Cambridge today is one of remarkable richness. ■

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