

SASM choir joins St Matthew's to sing choral evensong at Guildford Cathedral

Putting two different choirs together is no easy task. Each has its own style and preference for music. The choir will be used to a particular conductor.

So preparing to join the choirs of St Andrew/Mark (SASM) with St Matthew's Surbiton to sing any service is a challenge for the directors of music. For a cathedral choral evensong, the work level increases exponentially.

It is a great honour for any parish choir to sing in a cathedral. The standard of cathedral singing is high and visiting choirs are expected to match it.

It is not only the singers that feel the pressure. The organist for the service needs to get to grips with a new organ, the various settings and how to balance it with the choir in what is usually a very large space and all in a short space of time.

On the day the choir is not only expected to sing well but to process in and out of the service with precision and grace.

Work on getting the choirs into shape for the service started in the summer. As soon as the music for the choral evensong was chosen, both choirs independently started rehearsing the repertoire, albeit at the same time as all the other music being rehearsed for Sunday services. The two choirs held their first joint rehearsal on July 29.

For the "dry run" choral evensong held at St Matthew's church on September 25, the choirs met again for a joint rehearsal and again on the Sunday afternoon before the service at St Matthew's on September 25.

This service turned out to be an even bigger occasion than expected. Tim and Katrina Lidbetter from SASM choir were celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary. So to add to the very generous (and much appreciated) cakes provided by St Matthew's, Tim and Katrina added to the fare.

Considering the amount of cake consumed in the break between rehearsal and the service, it is a wonder the choir was able to sing. But sing it did and not too badly. But, as the two Simons said, there is always room for improvement.

The choral evensong at Guildford Cathedral on October 1 was complicated by the building work going on in the cathedral, a substitute organ (electronic rather than the usual pipe) and a great deal of scaffolding.

At Guildford the choir had only one hour in the cathedral to get used to the acoustic, rehearse the full complement of music and learn how to get in and out of the stalls (and other small matters like lining up and which direction to face and when).

The processional logistics were hampered and somewhat confusing because of the building work and the fact that the usual route in and out was not available. Nevertheless, with the help of a vergger and understanding clergy, the choirs made it in and out without incident.

St Matthew's director of music Simon Hancock, conducting the choir for both evensongs, had the challenge of making sure both "sides" of the choir (decani and cantoris) sang literally together in Guildford Cathedral. Neither choir is used to having so much space between the parts. For this evensong, the choir was split into two choirs for most of the music so it was crucial that the two sides were exactly singing together.

Simon Harvey, acting organist for the day and director of music for SASM choir, had time booked for himself and his two young assistant organists at Guildford, Felix and Edward. All three had needed rehearsal time before the service to get used to the organ as well as how to adjust settings to fill such a large space – very different from a parish church.

"I thought that the singing was absolutely marvellous and that we gave a great account of ourselves on what was in some ways quite a curious afternoon in a partial building site," commented Simon Harvey.

"Nevertheless, the singing really shone through and I was impressed that everyone gave 100%. Although it

wasn't easy to hear the overall sound from the choir stalls, I can assure you it sounded great out front."

Simon Hancock made special mention of Rosemary Perry and Valerie Baxter for holding the second soprano line (only two of them against a considerably larger first soprano contingent on the "other" side of the chancel) as well as thanking Tim Lidbetter for cantoring at short notice as the cathedral could not provide a cantor for the service.

The "unsung" hero for SASM choir is Adrian Munt who not only makes sure everyone has the correct music in what he calls "party packs" but also transports the music to and from locations. This meant music had to be taken to St Matthew's and Guildford Cathedral (and back again).

Simon Hancock choose the anthem and setting for the second psalm (8) sung at Guildford. Mr Hancock composed the chant for Psalm 8.

Simon Harvey chose the canticles (Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis) and the Herbert Howells chant for the first psalm (7) sung at St Matthew's and also in the cathedral. Both music directors decided on which Preces and Responses to sing.

The next joint evensong with St Matthew's will be at Southwark Cathedral on Saturday, July 29, 2017.

St Matthew's will join SASM choir on Sunday, July 2, 2017 at St Andrew's church for "dry run" of the music for Southwark.



Music (for St Matthew's and Guildford Cathedral choral evensong)

Organ

Two assistant organists provided music at St Matthew's and Guildford Cathedral

Felix: "Folk Tune" from Five Short Pieces by Percy Whitlock and the second movement from Organ Sonata No 2 by Paul Hindemith

Edward: JS Bach's Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ, BWV 639 (I call to you Lord Jesus Christ) and Johann Pachelbel's Chaconne in F Minor

They alternated their performances for both evensongs. The order was Felix (Whitlock), Edward (Bach), Felix (Hindemith), Edward (Pachelbel)

Simon Harvey: Final Voluntary: Chorale Prelude on "Croft's 136th" by Parry.

Music sung by the choir

Responses: Ayleward^[1]_[SEP]

Psalms 7 and 8 (Psalm 7 sung at St Matthew's; both psalms sung at Guildford)

Simon Hancock composed the chant for Psalm 8^[1]_[SEP]

Canticles: Blair in B minor^[1]_[SEP]

Anthem: Summer ended, harvest o'er by Charles Wood