

## Two Simons, two choirs and Southwark Cathedral

Choral evensong for any choir is one of the most beautiful as well as demanding services to sing. For the choirs of St Andrew & St Mark (SASM) joined with St Matthew's, singing this service in a cathedral adds not just more pressure but added spiritual and musical dimensions.

No matter how large or small the cathedral, it is a rarity for parish choirs to be given the opportunity to sing in what are some of the most beautiful religious buildings in England.

On the last Saturday of July, SASM and St Matthew's joined to sing choral evensong in Southwark Cathedral, the site of Christian worship for over 1,000 years and the mother church of our own diocese. The Southwark Cathedral choral evensong introduced both choirs to some new music and widened the repertoire for the conductor, St Matthew's music director Simon Hancock.

The "two Simons" – Simon Hancock and Simon Harvey, director of music at SASM – have been collaborating on joint evensongs since 2014. The tradition began after Helen Hancock, who worked as a curate at SASM, was given St Matthew's as her first parish. Helen, also a singer and lover of choral evensong, wanted to bring the two church choirs together.

"I'd actually sung with the [SASM] choir once or twice when Helen was curate, so I knew quite a number of choir members," says Simon Hancock.

After joining St Matthew's in 2012, some of his choir members encouraged him to join forces with SASM. The first joint evensong went well. "From our point of view, the chances of performing a good service of worship is greater if it is joint. From the first, [St Matthew's] choir benefitted enormously – and enjoyed it," explains Simon Hancock.

The two Simons struck up "a good rapport" and decided to do more joint choral evensongs. In 2015 Portsmouth was the first joint cathedral visit. Simon Hancock's nephew was sub-organist there. "There was a connection and it seemed a small step to go there. I guess we needed to feel we were up to singing in a cathedral as a parish choir. We didn't want to disgrace ourselves."

This first joint cathedral visit was followed in 2016 by Guildford Cathedral. "Portsmouth was a good steppingstone. As it's a former parish church converted into a cathedral, it's not enormous, although it is an amazing building," explains Simon Hancock. Singing in Guildford, a much larger space, helped give the choirs more confidence to sing in "one of the most beautiful and ancient cathedrals, Southwark".

Music for the Southwark choral evensong, like the others, were jointly chosen by the two Simons. Each took the lead in turn to suggest the canticles and anthem. Simon Harvey chose the canticles for Southwark – Wood in E flat (number two) and the anthem, Herbert Sumsion's *They that Go Down to the Sea in Ships*. As the officiating priest on the day at Southwark remarked: "We haven't had the Wood sung here for a long time and it is wonderful to hear the Sumsion."

Adding to the musical experience at Southwark was a selection of organ pieces played by one of SASM's young organists, Edward. The music he played before and after the choral evensong included Naji Hakim's *Mariales* (incantation, pastoral and dance), Johann Pachelbel's *Chaconne* and Jehan Alain's *Choral Dorien* (the first time Edward played this in public).

"I decided to play these pieces as they are ones I could already play and enjoy doing so. They are also calm and reflective, so suit the mood," says Edward of his selection.

Simon Hancock, who conducted the choral evensong, found the experience of facing the joint choirs a mixture of challenge and opportunity. "Musically it's fulfilling. I feel privileged to be in charge of a choir that sings that well. When the choirs are at their best, they are very, very good. I enjoy enormously combining the choirs. It gives me personally the kind of music we can't do with St Matthew's alone," says Simon Hancock.

Standing in front of over 30 singers in a cathedral can be nerve-wracking. However, Simon Hancock says he is not daunted by the task, using the same style as he does every Sunday at St Matthew's. "I conduct in a fairly collaborative way as far as possible. But there are times when you have to say 'this is how we're going to do it. This is my interpretation and how I feel it should be done.' Singers with a professional attitude accept that."

Support from both choirs as well as Simon Harvey also makes the task a bit less formidable. "I feel I'm getting support from both choirs. And it's a joy to work with Simon – such a brilliant organist. I take it for granted that what comes from the organ will be top notch and that he'll come in at the right time, spot on. That's a tremendous support to me as a conductor," he says.

Another aspect of conducting joint choral evensongs is that Simon Hancock says he has a chance to conduct “big works that I wouldn’t be able to do otherwise. Over the years I’ve done a lot – from university chapel days when I started, through various church choirs. I think these cathedral events are the biggest I’ve done. They are very exciting to do.”

When the two music directors first started working together, he says, it was challenging “but very quickly I really enjoyed it. It’s a win-win and everyone benefiting.”

For the Southwark choral evensong, although Simon Hancock was not familiar with the Sumsion, he was “absolutely on board”.

“I love Charles Wood. He is a magnificent composer. While I didn’t know the Sumsion, I quickly grew to love it. “

The experience was inspirational for both choirs and one hopes for the congregation. For Simon Hancock, it was “a chance to worship God in a very special way and hopefully to help others to do so. Without that aspect it’s just a performance of beautiful music in wonderful surroundings, which reward though that is, is only a part of the whole experience.”

### **Save the dates**

The next joint choral evensong will be on **Saturday, September 1, 2018** at **Chichester Cathedral**.

*In 2019 the joint choirs will be singing choral evensong at Winchester Cathedral on Saturday, June 1, 2019.*