

# ENCOUNTERS

PETER WRIGHT, ORGANIST & DIRECTOR OF MUSIC, SOUTHWARK CATHEDRAL



MAGGIE HAMILTON

Our raison d'être here, like any cathedral, is not to do concerts, recordings or broadcasts – it's the daily Evensong, the wet Tuesday in February, which is as important as the big occasion: if you can sing the psalms beautifully with five people in the congregation on a Tuesday in February, then the big occasions take care of themselves.

I came to Southwark Cathedral in March 1989, after 11 years as assistant at Guildford. I have less rehearsal time than most people, because we can't rehearse in the morning with the boys (they come from about 15 different schools); my challenge has therefore been to balance having a sufficient core repertoire which repeats – so the boys have pieces they can perform well and not just be struggling through new repertoire – but also to keep the professional men sufficiently challenged, with enough new repertoire that they aren't bored.

The girls' choir, which started in 2000, has been a major change, and has enlarged the musical programme. Apart from Sundays, the boys were only singing on Tuesdays and Fridays, so we've increased the sung services without taking anything away from the boys.

The girls and boys sing occasionally together, for example at the big festivals – they also sang in the *St Matthew Passion* under Trevor Pinnock at the Proms – but otherwise keep their identities. The thing I'm most proud of is that, despite having much less rehearsal time than other places and not having the benefits of a choir school, we've maintained a standard that holds its own against places with a lot more on their side. Apart from the Proms, we've done recordings, BBC broadcasts – quite a lot of big events as well as maintaining the *opus dei*.

The dedication of the choristers over the years has been remarkable. I remember that, shortly after I came here, there was a tube and train strike. I wasn't surprised when one boy was absent, because he lived in Highgate [six miles away]; but at 5.25pm he came in breathless – he'd walked all the way! It was remarkable, and I was very touched by that.

At Southwark, children can sing in the choir regardless of financial resources and background – with talent and commitment, anybody can be a chorister here. I've found it very rewarding to get professional standards out of children who wouldn't necessarily come from musical backgrounds. It involves

a lot of logistics with schools and parents, but it's worth it.

The pastoral side is also very important. One chorister from a very difficult background was a handful, but he had great talent and he clearly loved it. Years later, when he was about to get married, he came up, gave me a big hug, and said, "You know I had a really hard time at home. I want you to know that the choir here was the anchor, really a lifeline for me – it meant so much." So I feel we've done more for some of these children than just music.

Another highlight of being here is the wonderful organ [T.C. Lewis, 1897]. I never tire of it – I go and play all over the world, but I always come back here and think, "This is pure quality." One All Souls, they were doing work on the roof over the organ. We came in and started rehearsal, and the organ was making some very funny noises. The contractors had failed to cover the organ for the entire weekend, which had been extremely wet, and the organ was full of water. So for All Souls and the Duruflé Requiem we had little more than one manual working, a real challenge for Stephen [Disley, assistant organist]. I was brokenhearted. Harrisons did a wonderful job and it sounds as well as ever, but that was an awful moment.

There's a much greater footfall now through this area than when I arrived, and cathedral congregations have also increased over the last 20 years. In a cathedral you can explore your spirituality while retaining your anonymity. To go to Evensong, you don't have to do anything; like in a monastery, you can just let the prayer wash over you.

Throughout my 30 years here, I've been wonderfully supported by lay clerks, assistants and clergy. This has enabled us to achieve high standards and to convey the Christian message through the incomparable language of music – for, as Aldous Huxley said, "After silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music." ■

*Peter Wright retires from Southwark Cathedral in August 2019.*