



THE CAMBRIDGE SUMMER CHORAL COURSE

Sarah MacDonald

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This month's column is an informal advertisement for a course that I hope you will all be intrigued by. I was honored to be a guest instructor and conductor for it this year, and I hope that it continues to thrive in the years to come. It was wonderful to meet so many musicians who were so keen to learn about choral music in the UK. Their enthusiasm was infectious and reminded me why I do what I do.

In the third week of June, a group of about 30 musicians arrived in Cambridge from all over the world to attend the Cambridge Summer Choral Course. The program was set up by the organist and conductor J. Marty Cope, Cambridge alumnus and director of music and arts at Park City Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas. A small inaugural version of the course ran successfully in 2019, but for reasons that won't need explaining, it did not happen for the next two years. It was really heartening to see that the momentum has picked up again post-pandemic, and that so many people were eager to participate. Some three or four decades ago, John and Joanne Rutter ran a summer residential course for organists, singers, and conductors with the purpose of allowing them to participate in the English choral tradition firsthand, and this new course was set up with that model in mind.

The participants were resident in Cambridge for a week, and the vision was to immerse them in life as a choral scholar—wearing Cambridge academic gowns, punting on the River Cam, attending Evensong every day followed by candlelit dining at Formal Hall, and of course regular trips to the pub. Famous names in Cambridge history were invoked to add to the experience: the single en-suite residential accommodation was in Gonville & Caius's new Stephen

Hawking Building, and the first pub to be visited was the Eagle, where Crick and Watson celebrated after the discovery of DNA. As far as I know, the participants were spared the other side of Cambridge undergraduate life, such as the overnight essay crisis (when your supervisor requires ca. 3,500 words from you tomorrow at 10:00 A.M. and you don't start the reading for it until after Evensong the night before) or the academic pressure of 100 percent final exams just as the weather starts to improve in May (only to find that the whole of the post-exam celebration week takes place in the pouring rain).

During the course, the participants observed various choirs in rehearsals and services, including Clare Choir (Graham Ross), St. John's Choir (Andrew Nethsingha), King's Choir (Daniel Hyde), and Selwyn Choir (Yours Truly). They attended specialist lectures by various Cambridge musicians on topics including vocal pedagogy (Lynette Alcántara), Gregorian chant (Edward Wickham), and the history of the choral tradition (Barry Rose). They also had informal talks and Q&A sessions with John Rutter, and with the many directors of music they met. One participant noted that the personal contacts made were as valuable as the information learned. A day in London saw the participants at Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral, and St. Paul's Cathedral, observing rehearsals and services with directors of music James O'Donnell, Simon Johnson, and Andrew Carwood, respectively.

A particular highlight of the week was the singing of Choral Evensong in Ely Cathedral by the course members themselves, under the direction of Barry Rose (it was to have been Tim Brown, director emeritus of Clare Choir, but The Plague put paid to that

at the last minute). I was delighted to be able to assist Barry Rose by taking some of the rehearsal, and then to hear the group sing confidently in the cathedral later that day. J. Marty Cope accompanied the service beautifully, and the repertoire was full of appropriately Cambridge-based music, including C.V. Stanford's Evening Canticles in C and Charles Wood's "O Thou the Central Orb" (both Stanford and Wood were Cambridge men).



I highly recommend this course to those of you who are intrigued by the English choral tradition. It was extremely well run and hugely enjoyable for participants and teachers alike, and I hope that it will thrive in the years to come. More information can be found at CambridgeChoral.org. I will close with some testimonials from this year's course members.

"Very fruitful days receiving special knowledge from legendary musicians, combined with a warm atmosphere and the beautiful city of Cambridge!"

Yuliia (National Theater of Opera and Ballet, Lviv, Ukraine)

"This experience was life-changing, and I can't wait to apply what I learned in a pragmatic way for the rest of my career."

Samuel (Church of the Incarnation, Dallas, Texas)

"One of the most extraordinary experiences! The equivalent of a VIP backstage pass to the English choral tradition—legendary directors, composers, and choirs."

Kathleen (Terrell, Texas)

"I'm so glad to have attended this course, because it provided a rare opportunity for a person from overseas to hear some of the finest English choirs, and from some of the top minds in the field. I think I took away most how each choir has its own unique sound within the choral tradition, and to hear from the choirmasters and other presenters regarding how they keep the tradition alive and also moving forward."

Matthew (Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri)

"This is a transformational immersion experience within the cradle of the English choral tradition. Everything about the program is first-rate: the city, venues, faculty, accommodations, and food, as well as the professional and personal camaraderie."

Timothy (University of Northwestern St. Paul, Minnesota)

Sarah MacDonald, ARSCM, is a Canadian-born organist and conductor, living in the UK, and currently holds the positions of fellow and director of music at Selwyn College, Cambridge, and director of Ely Cathedral Girls' Choir. She has been at Selwyn since 1999 and is the first woman to hold such a post in an Oxbridge chapel.