

A Carol for King's

Every year, millions of people around the world tune in for the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge – and always much anticipated in that event is the premiere of a specially commissioned carol. Here, we draw from the archive to learn how in 2014 the then director of music Stephen Cleobury regarded the importance of commissioning a new carol each year, as he explained to **David Blackwell**; and afterwards, the current director of music, **Daniel Hyde**, brings us up to date

From the archive

In March each year, sometime around the Feast of the Annunciation, a meeting of almost equal importance for Christmas takes place. For it is then that the director of music at King's and his chosen composer meet to discuss one of the most significant choral commissions in the world; a meeting

▼ **Stephen Cleobury: 'Composers not known for their choral writing can bring a fresh perspective'**



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that leads, nine months later, to the candlelit Chapel of King's College, Cambridge, and its famous Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. It is a meeting to plan that year's new carol.

For director of music Stephen Cleobury and the composer it is an opportunity to discuss practical aspects of the commission: ranges of the choir parts and optimum division, use of the chapel organ and the ideal length (3-4 minutes, though carols have varied from Arvo Pärt's *Bogoróditse Djevo* at a little over a minute to James MacMillan's *Seinte Mari moder milde* at over seven). There is also the little matter of the text. Sometimes the composer chooses this, sometimes the composer may commission a new text, as Jonathan Harvey and Harrison Birtwistle both did, or Cleobury may suggest one from his extensive collection. By the end of the summer, Cleobury likes to see and approve the text, as this helps with planning the service; other than that, the composer has a free hand in the composition.

How does Cleobury select the composer? The choice seems to arise naturally from the



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many contacts he has made in the course of his professional life. 'The first carol I commissioned was by Lennox Berkeley, a composer I'd worked with at Westminster Cathedral,' he explains. 'I like to commission composers well known for their choral writing, but also those who are not, as they can bring a fresh perspective.' Do composers send unsolicited manuscripts and suggest themselves as possibilities? He smiles; 'Yes, but it's a choice I like to make myself.'

In 2014, the commission was written by the Swiss composer Carl Rütti, whose earlier carol I wonder as I wander had been sung several times at the King's Christmas Eve service. By then, Rütti had a wealth of experience of writing for English choirs, from the BBC



▲ The Choir of King's College, Cambridge: its annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is famous throughout the world

Singers to The Bach Choir, and a fascination for the purity of their singing: 'In my inner ear I hear the angel-like voices of King's College Choir – you know, in the German language "Engel" (angel) and "englisch" have the same roots!' he told David Blackwell.

In the summer, work begins on the new piece. Sometimes, a fertile musical imagination sees the composer checking back with Cleobury on unexpected details. So in 1998 Giles Swayne sought permission for the addition of an obbligato flute, and in 2003 Cleobury agreed Harrison Birtwistle could express his carol's *joie de vivre* with stamping, clapping and shouting. For Rütli, this was the moment to settle the choice of text and begin to refine aspects of the composition.

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He chose the 12th-century carol text 'Verbum caro factum est'... He also decided to make the work accompanied: 'Initially I thought to make it a cappella, since nearly all my previous carols are accompanied, but as I began writing some rhythmical patterns emerged separate from the choir parts and, well, who can resist writing for the organ in King's Chapel!'

As the new academic year begins in the autumn, Cleobury is keen to see his new carol. This is partly to meet publicity deadlines, but also from a natural curiosity and to help plan rehearsals, which begin in earnest from early December. Once the choir have the notes under their belts, Cleobury likes the composer to attend a rehearsal, so that aspects of the interpretation can

be influenced, and sometimes this is the moment for slight revision. And sometimes the composer may be treated to an early performance: thanks to his early delivery in 2012, the Australian composer Carl Vine was able to hear the choir sing his carol *Ring out, wild bells* when he was in the UK that October.

In December there is a growing sense of anticipation about the carol service, fuelled by the delayed release of the order of service. For such a hugely important premiere, it is remarkable that the first performance of the new carol is usually the service itself. 'Occasionally the work is included in the Cambridge Schools' Carol Service in December,' Cleobury says, 'but this is a closed event.' This can put considerable pressure on ▶

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◀ Current director of music Daniel Hyde conducts the Choir of King's College, Cambridge

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◀ the choir, but after 31 years of commissioning and performing new carols under Cleobury's leadership, it has vast experience to draw on. Occasionally things don't go quite to plan. 'James MacMillan's carol ends with a beautiful, evocative duet for two trebles,' Cleobury tells me, 'yet earlier in the service one of the soloists had to go out because he wasn't feeling well.' Unperturbed, and with the benefit of planning, he signalled to a deputy to take over.

And so a new work is given life through this unique event. Cleobury's commitment to his new carol is shown by his often repeating it in January and February as part of the Christmas season. He also, at the Christmas Eve service, likes to reschedule one other new carol from a previous year, though there are constraints, as the expectation is that the service is mostly traditional and familiar. Most of the commissioned carols have also been recorded, either by EMI or on King's College's own label.

For Cleobury, the chance to sing new music is an important part of the choristers' education, and they relish this opportunity. And what of the wider reception of the carol? 'When I first started commissioning new carols, I received a few letters critical of me introducing something so modern into something so traditional,' he tells me, 'yet now the comments are much more supportive.' He pauses: 'In a way the new commission itself has become part of the tradition.'

On Christmas Eve, an audience that has patiently queued in the College quadrangle and listeners around the world will hear for the first time how the commissioned composer has met this challenge, as King's College Choir once more leads us into this glorious celebration of Christmas. ■

A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is broadcast live from King's College, Cambridge, at 3pm on Christmas Eve on BBC Radio 4, and at various times on the BBC World Service. First published in Choir & Organ, November/December 2014.

David Blackwell is co-editor of Carols for Choirs 5 (OUP, 2011) and co-editor of Oxford Hymn Settings for Organists: Advent and Christmas and Epiphany (OUP, 2014).

King's College, Cambridge Commissioned Carols 1983 - 2021

1983	In Wintertime	Lennox Berkeley
1984	Fix on one star	Peter Maxwell Davies
1985	Illuminare Jerusalem	Judith Weir
1986	Nowell (Holly Dark)	Richard Rodney Bennett
1987	What sweeter music	John Rutter
1988	The Birthday of thy King	Peter Sculthorpe
1989	St Steven was a clerk	Alexander Goehr
1990	Bogoróditse Djevo	Arvo Pärt
1991	A gathering	John Casken
1992	Swetě Jesu	Nicholas Maw
1993	When Christ was born (Christo paremus cantica)	Diana Burrell
1994	The Angels	Jonathan Harvey
1995	Seinté Mari moder milde	James MacMillan
1996	Pilgrim Jesus	Stephen Paulus
1997	Fayrfax Carol	Thomas Adès
1998	Winter Solstice Carol	Giles Swayne
1999 (TV)	Dormi, Jesu!	John Rutter
1999	On Christmas Day to my heart	Richard Rodney Bennett
2000	The Three Kings	Jonathan Dove
2000 (TV)	The Shepherd's Carol	Robert Chilcott
2001	Spring in Winter	John Woolrich
2002	The angel Gabriel descended	Robin Holloway
2003	The Gleam	Harrison Birtwistle
2004	God Would be Born in Thee	Judith Bingham
2005	Away in a Manger	John Tavener
2006	Misere' Nobis	Mark-Anthony Turnage
2007	Now comes the Dawn	Brett Dean
2008	Mary	Dominic Muldowney
2009	The Christ Child	Gabriel Jackson
2010	Christmas Carol	Einojuhani Rautavaara
2011	Christmas Eve	Tansy Davies
2012	Ring Out, Wild Bells	Carl Vine
2013	Hear the Voice of the Bard	Thea Musgrave
2014	De Virgine Maria	Carl Rütti
2015	The Flight	Richard Causton
2016	This Endernight	Michael Berkeley
2017	Elisha's Carol / Carol Eliseus	Huw Watkins
2018	O Mercy Divine	Judith Weir
2019	The angel Gabriel	Philip Moore
2020	No commission	
2021	TBA	TBA



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Daniel Hyde, current director of music at King's College, Cambridge, writes:

After the late Sir Stephen Cleobury was interviewed by David Blackwell in 2014, he commissioned a further four carols in the intervening years leading to his retirement. Richard Causton is a Fellow in Music at King's College; Michael Berkeley carried on the tradition in 2016, after it was started by his father in 1983; Huw Watkins is no stranger to Cambridge music and Judith Weir is unique among this list as having been commissioned twice by her alma mater on this occasion. Upon arrival as the new director of music in 2019, I turned to Philip Moore for his first commission, giving a nod to York, to where the Cleoburys moved on retirement. 2020 was a most unusual year, and the decision was made not to commission a Covid carol, as it was not clear whether a service on Christmas Eve would be possible. As things turned out, the service was not broadcast live, for only the second time since 1929.

This year's new carol has been co-commissioned by King's College with support from Lucian Nethsingha. Lucian, who was an undergraduate at King's prior to a distinguished career at St Michael's Tenbury and Exeter Cathedral, died earlier this year, and it is appropriate that we should honour his memory in this way.