

Behind the scenes at Choral Evensong

In common with many organists, I very much enjoy attending Choral Evensong services at Cathedrals and College Chapels whenever the opportunity presents itself, and relish the sublime glory of the music and the singing. Imagine, therefore, my delight in being asked to assist a friend, Dr David Hyatt – formerly organist at Stevenage Parish Church and now organist at St John's in Bathwick, Bath – in the organ loft for Choral Evensong in Bristol Cathedral. David is not a professional organist but, living nearby, had been asked to accompany a visiting choir for a service.

David diligently practised up the music for the service, which included Noble in B minor and the anthem "O thou the central orb" by Wood. As well as rehearsals with the choir at their home church (Christ Church in Swindon), David also arranged to practise on the organ in Bristol Cathedral a few days before the service and spent some time determining the most appropriate registrations and setting the pistons on the organ.

The day before the service I had an opportunity to visit David at home and, as he played through the music on his digital house organ, I paid careful attention as to when I would need to pull out or push in various stops and couplers (where it would be very difficult for him to do this himself) and checked where the (numerous) page turns occurred! Not being familiar with the music, and only having time to go through each piece once, I found there was a lot to absorb and, in addition to marking up the music, I made careful notes of what I would need to do, and when, so that I could remind myself before the service.

On the afternoon of the service, David and I made our way to the organ loft in Bristol Cathedral about half an hour before the choir were to have their final rehearsal. The organ at Bristol Cathedral is a fine four manual instrument, with case work by Renatus Harris dating back to 1685. The organ itself has undergone many changes over the years but the modern instrument is essentially the work of J.W. Walker in 1907 with restoration work by Mander Organs in 1989 and further modifications by Cawston in 2004. It is described on the Bristol Cathedral website as "one of the finest examples of the English Romantic organ to be found anywhere in the world".

David had thoughtfully stuck bright green sticky-dots on the stops that I would need to be able to find quickly. These included the Great to Pedal coupler on the left-hand side of the console, and the 16' pedal trombone and the 32' pedal double open diapason on the right-hand side of the console. He didn't, however, mark up the two mixtures on the Great – I would have to find these for myself when needed! The half hour available to us gave David an opportunity to run through some of the pieces and for me to check that I knew what I was supposed to be doing and when. That, however, was the first time that the Choir Director had heard the music played on the Cathedral organ and he proceeded to request numerous – perfectly reasonable – changes to David's carefully planned registrations in order to achieve a good balance between the organ and the choir. I was very impressed at how David managed to absorb and implement all of these changes so quickly and effectively!

The choir rehearsal gave me another opportunity to practise my stop changes and page turns – as well as another opportunity for the Choir Director to request further changes! By the end I was beginning to feel confident that I would be able to do what we had practised without too much difficulty but, as soon as the rehearsal was over, David gave me two more general piston changes to add to my "To Do" list.

At 3.30pm the service started. David played with great skill, the choir sounded wonderful, and I didn't fluff any of my page turns, stop changes or piston changes, despite having to move from one side of the console to the other at great speed on occasion. Perhaps not everything happened exactly as we had planned or would have liked, but any slip-ups were very minor and would not have impacted upon the choir or have been noticed by the congregation. There was one hairy moment when the Precentor announced hymn 426 when both David and the choir had prepared hymn 427 (O praise ye the Lord) – as listed on the service sheet. The Choir Director soon corrected the Precentor and hymn 427 was duly sung.

Once David had finished his voluntary (Toccata XI in C minor by Muffat) I was finally able to relax. Whilst my contribution to the service was very modest, it was a real privilege to vicariously experience the service from the organist's perspective. Much like the swan gliding across the surface of the lake whilst paddling furiously below the water, so, it would appear, the skilled organist makes accompanying a choir seem effortless whilst being aware of, and keeping track of, so many things that are all going on at the same time.

As a relatively inexperienced organist I have never accompanied a choir, and I doubt that my own playing will ever be of a standard that I would be able to accompany a Cathedral service, but being present in the organ loft during a service has left me with renewed and increased respect for the contribution made by all organists to choral services.

Michaela Cottee