

Music at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Willesden

Built in 1930, the National Shrine of Our Lady of Willesden is a large, spacious, Grade II listed building in the heart of Harlesden, London NW10. As well as having been declared a National Shrine in 1950 (pre-reformation devotion to Our Lady of Willesden dating from about 120 years prior to that at Walsingham), it also serves as the Diocesan Shrine of Our Lady for Westminster. It has a fine acoustic for music, and is a lovely church in which to sing.

My association with the Shrine started in 2006, and from the outset the 1952 Hill, Norman & Beard organ failed to enthuse, not least due to the considerable lack of wind. Indeed, when the organ was finally dismantled in 2018 we discovered that it consisted of parts with 6 or 7 different job numbers on them, and the trunking from the blower had been partially blocked by a loose and frankly superfluous felt lining (or dead cat, as I called it!)

The parish priest wanted to start singing Vespers on the first Sunday of the month, a practice that has all but died out in the parishes, and I had the idea of collecting together some singers to enable Vespers to become Choral, in the hope that it would make the Shrine a destination for those who loved music and good liturgy but didn't want to travel all the way into Central London. I had managed similar at my previous parish, where some lovely concerts and grand musical liturgies (relatively!) had been achieved in the short time that I was there. This group of singers over time became known as the Shrine Singers, and most months continue to sing Choral Vespers, when recruitment and availability allows. It also helps keep me sane!

In 2010, the Liturgy changed, or more accurately a new translation of the Mass in English was issued, along with some specific guidelines about what may, and indeed may not, be sung at mass. The still often ubiquitous folksy choruses of the 1960s were now discouraged, and the singing of the Mass Propers, whether in Latin or the vernacular, were to be encouraged. Indeed, Pope Benedict's instruction was that Chant & Polyphony were the exemplar of Sacred Music, and secular styles are to be discouraged during the Mass. Under the direction of the parish priest we set about learning the simple English chants that replaced the hitherto more popular settings from the 1970s, occasionally venturing to sing the original Gregorian settings of antiphons or masses. For me this meant that my presence was required rather more often than it had been, as my deputy could happily play simple hymns, but was less comfortable with the chant and the increasing complexity of the liturgy. Finding a suitable deputy since has proved something of a challenge: amid the successes there have been mistakes! ("We don't want him again!")

The parish choir I inherited usually sang heartily, and were encouragingly familiar with a number of now scarcely heard traditional hymns. They were mostly made up of ladies of a West African or Caribbean background, with one or two sparse, but distinctive men's voices. Not least among these was a long standing bass who in his younger years had learnt all the traditional Chant masses and regularly sang as soloist at the Shrine and many neighbouring parishes. Sadly, well into his 80s, he was taken from us to Covid in 2020. Another had returned to his native Martinique some years ago to help rebuild after a hurricane, but still in his 20s he collapsed and died one morning due to an undiagnosed heart condition. Recruiting men's voices has been and remains a challenge!

In 2014, mindful of the advancing years of the remaining members of the choir, I started a Children's Choir. It was seen as a means of continuing catechetical formation for children after

First Communion. This venture saw some success, growing to 15 or 16 children, capable of making a very lovely sound, within a few years. Soon afterwards I started the parish Schola as a means of allowing those who could read, or at least learn a part other than the melody, to contribute to the singing of motets and anthems, in harmony. It was also intended to be the place of progression for the children to move on to from the Children's Choir when they reached the end of school Year 8. Both the Schola and the Children's Choir saw some success for a time, however recruitment remained a substantial obstacle.

At around the same time I was given the go-ahead by the parish priest to recruit an organ scholar to accompany the Children's Choir & Schola when they sang, to accompany the Shrine Singers at Choral Vespers, to deputise for me from time to time, and to further learn the specific skill of liturgical accompaniment. This in turn forced me to confront the issue of the organ itself. Playing that old, failing instrument posed challenges that a seasoned organist would struggle with, so I didn't deem it fair to a student to have to cope with the difficulties it posed, so no action on recruiting an organ scholar was taken at that time.

My model for most of these innovations has been in no small part the successes experienced by the Diocese of Leeds, where the school singing programme is about to be extended nationwide. If Leeds and Bradford can manage to achieve what they have then surely we in suburban NW London certainly can, runs the logic!

For much of the last year and a half Sunday liturgies have been live-streamed, initially without congregation but with choir and organ. Then on Palm Sunday this year the live-streamed mass became a public liturgy again. Throughout this time the live-streamed sung mass has continued, with or without congregation, often under circumstances which elsewhere would have meant it was not possible to proceed. Sadly, Covid has, at least for now, put paid to any Children's Choir as such, though we retain three boys with broken or breaking voices who are being taught harmony parts. Sadly they have no-one to sing with and learn from, so it requires rather more of my attention than it might otherwise. That said, I am very happy with their progress, yet still look for ways to improve upon the opportunities for them.

Following the rebuilding of the parish hall and the restoration of the Shrine Chapel - a space with a lovely resonant acoustic - it finally became the turn of the organ. We are very fortunate that the old organ wasn't simply replaced with an artificial electronic instrument without discussion, as might have happened in many other parishes. It was and remains our concern that quality pipe organs are maintained and promoted, as befits the King of Instruments, especially for worship purposes.

Initially we looked into restoring what we had, knowing that funding work for an organ would be a very difficult task, a small number of quotations were obtained. Once horizons had been broadened the idea of replacing what we had with another superior, but redundant instrument became our preferred objective as a better use of sparse resources. I visited a number of redundant instruments, including a very fine, though small, 1903 Walker in Kent, and a very large instrument, needing much restoration, that had once been housed in the Royal National College for the Blind, where Alfred Hollins had been a student. I even met with the priest of a neighbouring parish with a view to inheriting their organ, formerly from the Duke's Hall at the Royal Academy of Music.

Finally there came the opportunity to acquire a Grade II* listed 1903 William Hill instrument, and a visit to a very wet Pontypridd with the organ builder Gary Owens was made. It came to

our attention as it was on the BIOS's 'At Risk' list, due to water ingress in the church where it had been housed for over a century, and was quite literally running out of time. Tonally, it was very little altered, and similar in design to another Hill instrument I was responsible for some years ago for a brief time. All was agreed, and the necessary permissions for the removal of the 'old' and installation of the 'new' were applied for, and duly granted. Work could commence!



View of the nave from the organ gallery, where work is under way

Photo: Fr Stephen Willis

We knew for a time that we would be without an organ, so we were very lucky to have been loaned for this period a small, sweet toned mid 19th century Booth/Bevington instrument that our friend Martin Renshaw had removed from a school in Cumbria, in order to restore and install at St Joseph's College, Ushaw, Durham. Indeed, I'm still getting used to the straight, flat pedalboard! Initially we thought this would be for a matter of months, yet 2 years later we still await the completion of the installation of our mighty Hill, though the next phase is due to start on Monday 20th of September. Delays such as these are not unique to us during these trying times!

Funding this venture remains a challenge, made much worse by the Covid closures which have eaten far more into the parish reserves than is comfortable, and putting any future projects in doubt. This includes any possible further development of music at the Shrine; it may now not be possible to fund an organ scholar, for example. Indeed, the organ fund itself has had to borrow from parish reserves in order to fulfil our legal obligations and pay the bills. While donations are always gratefully received, and regularly made, we still need to raise in the region of £80,000 if we are to complete this project comfortably and successfully. To say that we would not welcome and be very grateful for any donations that can be made (please specify the organ fund, and don't forget to GiftAid!) would be untrue, but again we appreciate that we are not alone in this. If you can manage to lend some support, however modest, to this most

worthwhile project you know that you will be helping safeguard the future of an organ that might otherwise have had none, and the potential development of the musical education of children and young people.

The parish webpage, as part of the Diocesan website can be found here: <https://parish.rcdow.org.uk/willesden/>, and we have a Facebook page (search for Music at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Willesden), and an Instagram account (@olwillesden.music) where past snippets of the Sunday mass and Choral Vespers have been posted alongside the monthly music list and photos of the mighty Hill in various stages of ongoing installation.

Simon Lewis
Director of Music
National Shrine of Our Lady of Willesden, London NW10