

BBC

Radio Outside Broadcasts



Shew forth thy praise!

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the wake of the General Strike, has weathered national emergencies, times of war and austerity, and shuddering social change over the past 90 years. Millions have entered the space it provides for calm contemplation, connecting there with a spiritual practice as deep and rich as any.

Each week around 300,000 listeners tune in to *Choral Evensong*. The programme is broadcast every Wednesday afternoon, usually live from one of Britain's cathedrals or college chapels, and is repeated the following

Sunday and available for 30 days on BBC iPlayer Radio. The clue to the show's contents lies in its title: *Choral Evensong* comprises the Anglican service of Evening Prayer, as ordained by the *Book of Common Prayer*, and is a carefully constructed blend of music and spoken prayer. Its audience reach extends far beyond the Anglican community, a point underlined by messages of goodwill and encouragement sent to the programme makers by atheists, admirers from other religious traditions, and those of little or no faith.

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THROUGHOUT ALL GENERATIONS: (far left) Hereford Cathedral trebles and BBC outside broadcast lorry in 2013; (left) Sheffield Cathedral Choir, Sheffield Cathedral and its acting director of music Joshua Hales; (below) the Rev Lucy Winkett and Wells Cathedral organist Matthew Owens

through the airwaves. This is church for the household and even for those who live in places where Christians are persecuted or Christianity is banned. And it offers an experience of choral worship to many who may never have been to a cathedral service. *Choral Evensong* brings us into contact with the wider world.

While the average age of many congregations may rest somewhere north of 50, that of choristers, choral scholars and lay clerks who bring *Evensong* to life remains forever young. The energy of Choral Evensong as done by the nation's leading cathedral and collegiate choirs clearly reinforces its appeal to radio audiences. Occasional live broadcasts, notes Owens, helps keep his choristers on their collective game throughout the year. 'It's important that we're as good as we can possibly be. Our experience of *Choral Evensong* means I can remind the choir that the quality of every service should be like that for a live broadcast. No performing ensemble can just switch on the high standards unless they're committed to delivering their best every day. But the realisation of that often only kicks in when an eight-year-old boy or girl chorister sees the BBC's microphones and the red light tells them they're live on air.'

Owens would like to listen to *Choral Evensong* more often. 'But I'm usually quite busy when it's being broadcast! The programme, he observes, reflects the health and wealth of choral worship. 'There are some magnificent things happening with our cathedral and collegiate choirs today in terms of artistic standards and musical variety.'

Choral Evensong was not notably concerned with variety in 1926. The first broadcast, performed by a choir of men's voices, included Byrd's fauxbourdon Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis and an anthem by Boyce. Westminster Abbey served as the broadcast's exclusive home during its early years. In 1934 a second weekly service was relayed from York Minster, with St Paul's Cathedral substituting for the Abbey two years later when work started on restoring

structure, adds Winkett, may be rooted in the 16th century, but it remains timeless. 'And it has a framework loose enough to hold all of the day's jaggedness, disappointments and dissonances. *Evensong* doesn't necessarily try to resolve them. I think it tells people that they are part of something bigger than themselves and that they are somehow held. That's why so many respond to it.'

For Matthew Owens, organist and master of the chorists at Wells Cathedral, Radio 3's *Choral Evensong* provides a bridge connecting individuals to a profound act of worship and meditation. 'Wells is off the beaten track for many people,' he comments. 'It's wonderful that we can take the message of the Gospel to them

So why has *Choral Evensong* endured? The Rev Lucy Winkett, precentor at St Paul's Cathedral for a dozen years before becoming rector of St James's Church, Piccadilly, suggests that its longevity arises from *Evensong*'s appeal to a broad audience. 'If you're reading *Choral Evensong* culturally,' she observes, 'it speaks of white, middle-class broadcast, particularly from somewhere like St Paul's, is that the vast majority of people experiencing *Evensong* are not like that at all.'

Winkett notes how city-based congregations invariably comprise a mix of regular worshippers, tourists and those who have stumbled across *Evensong* for the first time, as well as others in search of peace at the working day's close. 'Music is a language of the human spirit,' she observes. 'It expresses something of our spiritual nature. That's why the live broadcast is really important. If you're asking who we are as a church, who we are trying to speak for and to, the answer is everybody. *Choral Evensong* is of the people, for the people.' The service's

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AN ANNIVERSARY FEAST

Details of the celebratory evensong



AT THE TREBLE: organist James O'Donnell directs the Choir of Westminster Abbey

RADIO 3 IS MARKING the 90th anniversary of *Choral Evensong* with a special broadcast from Westminster Abbey, the location of the programme's very first transmission back in 1926. A specially-invited congregation of the UK's eminent cathedral music directors and organists will convene for the celebration which takes place on the eve of the Feast Day of St Michael and all the Angels. The music, sung by the Choir of Westminster Abbey under their organist James O'Donnell, includes Tippett's *Plebs angelica*, written for the Choir of Canterbury Cathedral in 1943, Gibbons's Second Service and Harris's 1925 anthem for double choir, *Faire is the heaven*.

3 The special 90th anniversary service of *Choral Evensong* will be broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 on Wednesday 28 September at 3.30pm



STARRED VERSES: William McKie, master of the choristers, rehearses the day's hymns with the Westminster Abbey trebles in 1947

Bristol and a 'Blues Evensong' from Oxford's University Church.

Stephen Shipley, series producer of *Choral Evensong* and an Anglican priest, believes that the intricate language of the traditional evening service, the intensity of its prayers and the beauty of its music resonate deeply with people today. 'There is no other tradition of regular choral worship like it,' he observes. 'The standard of performance and the range of new music written for *Choral Evensong*

ample time for microphones to be rigged and systems to be checked by the sound supervisor. The clergy are called the following day at 1pm to read their contributions; the organist arrives soon after for a dry run of the day's voluntary. The choir gathers at 1.30pm to sing through the chosen settings of the responses, the psalm or psalms, the canticles, anthem and Te Deum, while timings are taken and the sound is balanced to represent what a member of the congregation might hear from a point close to the music director's stand. The service begins at 4pm and lasts an hour.

As with all outside broadcasts, disasters are not unknown. Stephen Shipley lost a sequence of four live services to technical gremlins and a fire in an electricity substation. 'Things usually run smoothly and to time,' he notes. 'But there's a *Choral Evensong* blooper tape that includes choirboys being sick in the middle of responses!' The producer's deepest memories have been etched not by professional pitfalls but by *Choral Evensong*'s power to transcend the mundane, to touch deep emotions. A year after the destruction of New York's Twin Towers, *Choral Evensong* was broadcast from Trinity Church, Wall Street. 'You could hear quiet sobbing from the congregation,' he recalls.

Choral Evensong returns to Westminster Abbey at the end of September to record a special 90th anniversary service (see box, top right). The occasion's intensity and stillness stand among the hallmarks of a programme set to surge past its latest anniversary to its first full century and beyond. ■

the latter's organ. The choirs of New College, Oxford and King's College, Cambridge filled much of the Evensong schedule during the Second World War, with help from over two dozen regional cathedrals and a few parish church and public school choirs.

The BBC's outside broadcast unit spread its post-war net to catch the first of many services from the Edington Festival of Music within the Liturgy; it also travelled overseas to reach New York's St Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, and St George's Cathedral, Cape Town. In April 1970 the BBC decided to convert Evensong's weekly broadcast into a monthly affair; he restored the old *status quo* after receiving letters of complaint by the sackload. *Choral Evensong* soon became a mainstay of Radio 3's schedule. It was first broadcast in stereo from Gloucester Cathedral in 1971, introduced its audience to the sound of girl trebles 20 years later, and has since challenged convention – and conservative fans – with a jazz service from Clifton Cathedral in

'Choral Evensong is of the people, for the people'

is as good today as ever.' Shipley also stresses the high worth of the programme's place within Radio 3's output, where a live service might follow a repeat of one of the BBC Proms, perhaps a performance by the Berlin Philharmonic and Simon Rattle. 'That means we have to be constantly aware of the quality of singing and also work with the clergy to make sure the spoken parts of the service are done well.'

The clergy, he adds, do not always appreciate rehearsing Bible readings before a broadcast. Yet time to prepare and rehearse have been part of the *Choral Evensong* deal for as long as anyone can remember. The BBC's outside broadcast van usually arrives at the chosen venue on Tuesday evening, leaving

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