

Halley's Comment

**Paul Halley: An interview with Jonathan Bruhm,
Communications Director,
University of King's College, Halifax, NS
January 9, 2007**

Many ask what prompted Paul Halley's move to Halifax in July 2007. Here is a transcription of Paul's interview with Jonathan Bruhm, Communications Director at King's, January 2007, on precisely that question.

Jonathan Bruhm:

1a) What do you anticipate will be your immediate goals upon arriving at the King's College Chapel in the summer?

1b) Along that line, what do you anticipate will be your long-term goals?

Paul Halley:

My principal task is to develop the King's College Chapel choir into a world-class ensemble along the lines of the great Oxbridge Chapel choirs. The first step in this process will involve establishing and funding choral scholarships for twelve or so singers initially, as well as scholarships for two organ students. Over time it is hoped that the Chapel Choir, through concerts, tours and recordings, will develop the kind of reputation that will attract talented young people from all across Canada and indeed from around the world. I also hope that the Chapel Choir will serve as an ambassador for King's and help to spread the word about one of the finest universities in North America. If Oxford and Cambridge each have half a dozen of these fine choirs, Halifax deserves at least one!

2) Your reputation precedes you, and some may be curious as to why you have decided to come to Halifax. What were your primary deciding factors?

Before I answer this question you may be amused to learn that all our American friends think our move to Halifax is a "no-brainer". They view Atlantic Canada as a sort of saner, kinder New England, where the people are friendlier and the society more "cultured." They are fascinated by the notion that there is a place on the planet where vehicular traffic gives way to pedestrian traffic. I have no intention of disabusing their minds of these ideas. It would be churlish to squash such hope and idealism.

My family has considered the south shore of Nova Scotia to be a "second home" for about 25 years now. We've been spending chunks of each summer on various islands in the La Have area. My mother and sister live in the Annapolis Valley and we have many friends scattered throughout the province. We are all avid sailors – of the gunkholing variety – so the thought of living full time in one of the world's great sailing areas is certainly very appealing. However, while all these factors form an attractive background, the centrepiece of the picture is life in Halifax. As a conductor, keyboardist and composer, I am very excited about the possibilities for creative work in Halifax. From all I have seen and heard about the city, it seems to be unusually blessed with a great

number of talented, dynamic and independent minded people, and the many arts and educational institutions in the city suggest that there is significant support for these people.

I lived in Manhattan for 13 years when I was Director of Music at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. I had a wonderful time during those years, but I was frequently struck by the fragmented nature of the arts community in that rather large and sometimes ungainly metropolis. Of course there was no lack of talent, but the size and complexity of the place sometimes worked against the possibility of cross-fertilization among the different artistic disciplines. Many of the most interesting creative people I knew couldn't afford to live in Manhattan. Simply getting together could become a major project. I wonder whether Halifax might be fortunate in being big enough to offer all the opportunities that a cosmopolitan centre can afford, but small enough to allow a real sense of community to persist. Without that sense of community, of cultural context, I lose my place as an artist. I also wonder whether the geographical location of the place, perched on the eastern edge of the continent, gives Halifax the freedom to do its own thing, independent of fashionable trends or novelty. (Wendell Berry describes novelty as a new kind of loneliness.) One thing you could never say of King's College is that it's trendy. King's quietly (perhaps too quietly?) goes about the work it has decided is important and valuable, and consequently does it well and with impressive integrity. The same thing can be said of St. George's Anglican Church, where I will take up duties as Director of Music in July. If those parishioners had not stood by their beliefs and convictions, at a time when they were probably out of step with the rest of the country, the church would never have recovered from the terrible fire of ninety-four. Today it stands as a witness to the beauty of holiness in liturgy *and* social justice.

To date I have met several Haligonians from the academic and arts communities. If they are anything to go by, I am expecting life and work in Halifax to be very stimulating, intellectually demanding and spiritually nourishing. I only hope I'll be able to keep up!

3) What kind of an impact do you expect to have upon the King's community, as well as the vibrant Halifax music scene?

This is a difficult question. I can only hope that whatever impact I have will be a positive one.

I suppose one of the distinguishing features of my work so far has been to bring together artists from different genres and disciplines to create a fresh perspective on the "conversation" in which we've been participating for centuries. Once an artist (or an ensemble) has achieved a high level of skill and integrity in his or her own field, then the possibilities of fruitful collaboration and exploration with other artists become limitless. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Several years ago I was privileged to be involved in a production involving the Cathedral Singers in New York and the José Limón Dance Company. The piece was Kodály's "Missa Brevis". I was astonished at the emotional depths in the music that I had never appreciated until I experienced the wonderful choreography in those performances. On another level, I composed a piece based on the Gregorian chant "Ubi Caritas." Because I was fortunate in knowing Abdel Salaam, who has a first-class pan-African percussion and dance ensemble, I incorporated their exuberant artistry into the piece.

The result was a joyous celebration and a universal underscoring of the text – “Where love dwells, God himself is there.”

I have worked with musicians of many different cultures and genres. I have worked with dancers and people in the theatre. I haven't yet worked directly with folks in the film industry, but I look forward to that. I have the not-so-secret hope that one day I will be involved in a multi-media project based on some aspect of, or personality from “La Convivencia” – the time of the “coexistence” amongst Muslims, Jews and Christians – that occurred periodically in pockets of the Mediterranean world (particularly Spain) from around 711 through the 16th century. It would be incredibly exciting and certainly timely. I am not aware of any project like this happening in North America at the moment.

Such collaborations of course are not guaranteed successes. They are risky ventures that require a supportive, imaginative and courageous community in which to flourish. If Halifax turns out to be such a community, and I think it is, then who knows what the impact might be? Since I consider myself first and foremost a church musician, I would love to see a program coming out of the partnership between King's and Atlantic School of Theology that would train the next generation of church musicians. Such a program is sorely needed in Canada *and* the States at this time. Of course, once that program had proven itself, what's to prevent it from expanding into a School of Sacred Music, offering studies in the sacred music (and other art forms) of different cultures from around the world and from different periods of history as well. Perhaps Halifax will become one of the centres of “La Convivencia” for the 21st century. Perhaps we'll find traces of Mediterranean water in Halifax harbor, or hear the strains of a Cape Breton fiddle behind the Qawwali singer. Such things are possible at King's and in the Halifax community because the focus seems to be not on facile answers, not on slogans, but on the kind of thoughtfulness that shifts one's perspective. Father Thorne speaks of the King's chapel as a place “where the head and heart come together.” Whatever kind of impact I end up making, that is a place where I would like to be.