

Halley's Comment



**Paul Halley - Report Of The Director Of Music
King's College Chapel
University of King's College, Halifax, NS
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My duties at King's began on Thursday September 6th, 2007 with the first sung Eucharist of the Michaelmas term. This service will remain forever indelibly imprinted on my brain as the mother of professional nightmares. In fact, since that service I have slept like a babe and have not been troubled by even a moderately bad dream. My most fevered imaginings could never have approached the terror of that real - time horror story. Aside from the complete lack of preparation on the part of the choir – a group of singers randomly selected by some dark and mysterious lottery – I too was totally unprepared for the fiendish cunning of the priests at the high altar, whose only ambition seemed to revolve around what chant could next be intoned that would stump the new gullible organist and his motley group of singers. And then the vile mockery after the service at Sherry Hour, when I was hailed as the “maestro”, the “worker of wonders”, while, in my ear of ears, I could hear William Byrd slowly turning in his grave – *Ave Verum Corpus*. Professor Hankey mentioned, in passing, that during the motet he could positively *feel* the “*sanguine*” fluxiting away as we hailed the true body.

And then we held the auditions. Over sixty students tried out. Some had never sung in a choir before. Some were hoping for a six-week run of “The Little Mermaid”. Others weren't “into religion”. But there were those who were keen and blessed with talent – or passion, which is the same thing. And out of this small but dedicated group, a choir was formed. Our first forays into Anglican Chant were often confused and poignant – “Thinkest thou that I will eat bulls' flesh, and drink the blood of goats?” Singing the “Gloria Patri” with our heads on our chests required weeks of calisthenics and the development of extraordinary peripheral vision. And then there's the jargon. What are “feces and responses”? What is a “feria”? What is a “genuine flexion”? Why are Nick Hatt and Gary Thorne and that other fellow lying face down on the floor while we sing the “O Vos Omnes”? Are they going to get prostrate cancer? How do you explain all this to the folks back in Sudbury?

By Advent we were fooling most of the people most of the time. The Annual Carol Service went well. Even President Barker was impressed. On December 9th we took the whole show on the road and strutted our stuff at St. John's, Lunenburg. At the end of the service the congregation applauded and the choir were understandably confused (and poignant). But we had a great party at Barbara Butler's after the service, and Fr. Thorne's best efforts at maintaining a suitably somber Advent were drowned out with rousing choruses of “White Christmas”, “Santa's Coming To Town” and other choice gems from the English Cathedral tradition.

Winter Term found us back in the stalls for the Octave of The Epiphany. The sopranos mistook this to mean even further efforts at stratospheric discoveries, which resulted in more dogs than usual in our Evensong congregation. That month we lost two altos and gained two basses which the gentlemen of the choir viewed more or less as a win-win situation.

In February we sang two drive-by Evensongs – one in Port Williams and another in Chester. At both these services Fr. Thorne preached like there was no tomorrow, which, eschatologically speaking, is perfectly correct. Again the choir were applauded while they carved intricate patterns on the slate floor with their sneakers.

Of course God, in his infinite wisdom, ordained that this, my first year at King's and St. George's, the two last great bastions of smells and bells (from which even the most olfactorily and audibly gifted members of the species run in terror) should be the earliest Holy Week/Easter marathon in living memory. By Laundry Thursday *Timor et Tremor* had come upon me without any shadow of a doubt.

Who could depart from the prostrate clergy on Good Friday at King's, complete with a sermon from the likes of Professor Neil Robertson, jump in the car with several choral scholars and roll up to St. George's two minutes before the three-hour service and hear Professor John Baxter holding forth with Fulke Greville between choral offerings from Palestrina, Sheppard and Poulenc etc. and maintain any semblance of sanity? Of course I lost my mind the day after Easter. I also lost my body – *mens insana in corpore insano*. And it was perhaps during my post-Easter collapse that the Chapel Choir came into its finest hour. Apparently last Thursday the Solemn High Eucharist went by without a hitch despite, or because of, the absence of the Director of Music. And this is what the quintessential Chapel Choir does. It sings the daily services, and it sings them well, regardless of who is in attendance or who in the choir is sick or feeling particularly agnostic that day. It sings sublime music in the midst of sublime poetry and prose in an effort, consciously or unconsciously (it matters not), to “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.”

This Friday, the Chapel Choir will be privileged to sing in Kristi Assaly's concert at St. Paul's. There will be applause, and since this will be an actual concert, the choir will have to take their first public bow. Seeing this bow will be worth the price of admission. Some of the choir will go on automatic pilot and cross themselves, or genuflect, or simply lower their heads, assuming a “Gloria Patri” is coming up. Very few will acknowledge the applause for what it is. So I would like to take this opportunity to quietly applaud the Chapel Choir and thank them for their many hours of dedicated work and particularly for their eagerness to learn and to listen. What this group has accomplished in a mere eight months is astounding.

So what about the future? First of all the new vestments (King's blue) will be arriving soon. The lovely old dear in Taiwan has been sewing her buns off for the past five months and the Almy's water-buffalo delivery system is in full swing. Cassock-bearing beasts have been sited off the Aleutians so it should be just a matter of days now.

Secondly, The Chapel Choir will be going on tour (for the first time in aeons) at the end of term. From April 28th through May 3rd, we'll be regaling unsuspecting members of the New Brunswick and PEI public with some of our favourite hits from the past season. Venues include Fredericton Cathedral, Charlottetown Cathedral and our very own All Saints Cathedral here in Halifax. (T shirts and mugs can be purchased from any member of the choir.) At the end of the tour, we hope to record a few tunes to throw up on the new web site.

Thirdly, with the permission of Fr. Thorne (and, I believe, President Barker) I have been consulting with Casavant Frères regarding a new organ for the Chapel. It could be that by the time you receive the next installment in these annual reports, work will be underway on the new organ, which will not be a moment too soon. This new instrument will also involve a new case which will add enormously to the visual appeal of the Chapel – continuing the “*beauty of holiness*” theme. It will also, sadly, eliminate one of the prime storage areas in the Chapel.*

Finally, and this is the least entertaining bit, I have to say that my experience at King's since last Fall has been so rich that it makes my head spin. We are blessed in this place with some of the most extraordinary minds and hearts I have ever encountered. What happens day to day in that tiny Chapel is not only rare, it is unique. Like all great art, it is precious and fragile and needs enormous support and encouragement. Under the guidance of Fr. Thorne, who should be adopted as a national treasure, the Chapel community endeavours to bring to life the Gospel of Christ. I am convinced that what the Chapel strives to be is not an anachronism – it is the future. It is vibrant, it is powerful, it is real, and it is necessary.

Thanks and blessings to all of you who work so freely and generously towards this end.

Yours in faith,
Paul Halley

* The current organ chamber is filled up with defunct thuribles, vintage vestments and the odd vacuum cleaner.