



REVIVING CHURCH AFTER THE PANDEMIC THE VITAL ROLE OF MUSIC

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Before I was ordained, I was a freelance musician and cello teacher. I therefore felt strongly for all those involved in the performing arts who found themselves out of work when the lockdowns started, even though music and the performing arts make up such an important aspect of our social functioning and well-being. As a curator of our beautiful Victorian St Stephen's church, set in a residential neighbourhood in south London, I realized that making the building available to musicians who were temporarily destitute fell well within the so-called five marks of mission set out by the Church of England. Two of them are: 'To respond to human need by loving service' and 'To seek to transform unjust structures of society'.

'DO CULTURE MORE LOCALLY'

When restrictions were first lifted, I was approached by local musicians who needed a place to practise and to record and broadcast. The chamber group of the orchestras of St Martin-in-the-Fields wanted to experiment with giving some concerts to small audiences again. This period of the lockdown was

marked by tears as musicians and conductors wept with joy at being able to assemble and play together once again. We developed a new format of having two one-hour concerts over an afternoon and early evening in our well-ventilated church, with lots of cleaning and wiping in between. These proved to be popular and before long other groups, and even a pop-up opera, were using our venue. This brought the church to the attention of new audiences in the neighbourhood, many of whom wanted to 'do culture more locally'. All this got me thinking about restarting our church music in a similar vein. I discussed it with Thomas Hewitt Jones, whose parents live locally, and he started providing music with just one cantor for church services. Gareth Valentine, a West End musical director who also lives locally, joined in and composed a musical-style St Stephen lockdown Mass setting for one voice, piano and organ.

In the meantime, while the church was still locked for everyone else, I gave a church key to Alexander Trowell, who had just been appointed organ scholar at Corpus Christi College, Oxford but was unable to



be in Oxford for the whole of his first year. He started a group of 'choral scholars in exile', who at first streamed, and later also sang choral evensongs and complines to a live public. This attracted a surprising number of young undergraduates and their friends to church.

LIFELINE FOR PROFESSIONAL MUSICIANS

St Stephen's church started to become a lifeline for professional musicians who needed to record and play in front of audiences again. The Consone Quartet, who were soon going to rise to fame and success, also practised, recorded and gave concerts here. Two young members of our congregation, Jill Valentine and Jernej Albreht, both professional musicians, had taught almost everyone in their neighbourhood a musical instrument during the 18 months in which they could not perform with orchestras, and used the church for showcasing in neighbourhood concerts what can be achieved with a bit more time to practise. In exchange for using the church, they have been providing viola and clarinet music for our worship. Even BBC Radio 3 noticed what we were doing and we were mentioned on *In Tune*. Nicholas Ansdell-Evans, the composer, organist and pianist, who works at the English National Opera and is also a member of St Stephen's, advised us on the purchase of a new grand piano, which now stands in the church and earns its keep by being played in rehearsals and recordings almost every day of the week.

REBUILDING THE CHOIR

All this got me thinking about how to restart our choir and bring back congregational singing, once it was allowed again. We found Oliver Lallemand, a fantastic choral director and organist, who – like so many professional musicians over the last few years – had found himself with less to do. He came to us highly recommended as a 'good singers magnet'. He set about recruiting a brand-new choir for St Stephen's by putting on Saturday workshops called 'Come and Sing Big Anthems'. Before long we had a group of

enthusiastic singers and a robed choir once again.

On a busy Sunday we can now expect as many as 36 singers in our choir. The repertoire stretches from late-medieval with tambourines to Hewitt Jones with organ, piano and brass. To tackle some more unusual and tricky repertoire, Oliver applied for and was awarded a grant from the Ouseley Church Music Trust, which will allow us to recruit a quartet of choral scholars to sing alongside the regular adult amateur choir. I am looking forward to the choir singing some of my favourite music by Cyrillus Kreek, Urmass Sisask, Erkki-Sven Tüür and Morten Lauridsen.

CHILDREN AND THE CHOIR

The final challenge was how to bring children back into our choir. In the past, the children in our choir had largely come from the several private schools in our neighbourhood. Oliver and I developed a new idea. The local primary school, Dulwich Wood, at the heart of my parish in the Kingswood Estate, had had no musical life for years. I applied for a grant to the Allchurches Trust and we were given funds for Oliver to go into the school to provide live music for assemblies and to help develop their school choir along with a singing teacher provided by Dulwich College. Only one term later, we now have 13 robed children in our choir. This section of the choir is developed by Caroline Lenton-Ward, another musical member of our congregation who performs regularly at the Royal Opera House and who has considerable experience in animating children's choirs.

From here, the only way is up! We have set up a special committee to explore the building of a wonderful new organ to support our growing musical needs and aspirations, both amateur and professional, for the next century.

Above: Photos courtesy of www.ststephensdulwich.org/community/archive-photos-church-life