

WALKING ON WATER – THE MINSTER CHOIR STORY

Dr Ronny Krippner reflects on his eight years in Croydon

As my time at the Minster is now slowly coming to an end, I am simply astounded how quickly those eight or so years have passed. I'm so very grateful to all the lovely people at the Minster for their kindness and their unflappable support of our music tradition. If I had any regrets, then perhaps it is not saying 'thank-you' enough! It was music and the beauty of the Minster services that made me come to Croydon – and I have never looked back. Although it's not quite goodbye yet (my last service is on Christmas Day), I thought it might be worth reflecting on my time here and how the music at the Minster flourished. I'm not one for being coy – I worked hard for it – but as always with these things, it's a team effort, and I'm sure the following pages will make this quite clear.

The Minster always had a strong choral tradition and many of my eminent predecessors are well-known figures in the world of English cathedral music: Derek Holman, Roy Massey, Michael Fleming, David Brookshaw, Simon Lole, Carl Jackson, David Swinson, Peter Nardone, Nigel McClintock, Andrew Cantrill and, going back almost two hundred years or so, Thomas Attwood Walmisley. For a number of years, there has been a strong connection with the RSCM, too, with Addington Palace almost on our doorstep (by the way: Martin How is still playing the piano every morning at the Minster and continues to compose wonderful things – he is a great supporter, mentor and friend). Traditionally, the Warden of Addington Palace was also Director of Music at Croydon Minster, and that collaboration presented a great model for many years. Every era comes of course with its own challenges and things do change. In 2012, the then headmaster of Whitgift School (part of the John Whitgift Foundation), Dr Christopher Barnett, and the then Vicar of Croydon Minster, Canon Colin Boswell, agreed that the position of Organist & Director of Music at the Minster should be combined with that of Director of Choral Music at the School. With Croydon Minster just having received its new honorific Minster title in 2011, aspirations on both sides were high, and quite rightly so: there should be sung services during the week, as well as concerts, international choir tours, recordings and broadcasts, all worthy of a Minster church. And this sense of raising the bar, taking things to the next level, is what attracted me to Croydon.

When I arrived at the Minster, I quickly realised that some of the initiatives my predecessor Andrew Cantrill had put in place had already set the Minster Music on the right trajectory: the boys were singing Evensong every Tuesday and the girls did the same every Wednesday. Whilst Croydon is certainly not short of talented children, we needed to find a new model, however, that would ensure the steady recruitment and training of boy and girl choristers, as well as male and female choral scholars. Carol Jewell, the then Headmistress of Old Palace School for girls (located in the former Old Palace and also part of the John Whitgift Foundation) and a member of the Minster Choir, agreed to offer Choral Scholarships to girls from the School who wanted to sing in the Minster Girls' Choir; Whitgift School agreed to a similar arrangement for their boys. There has always been (and continues to be) a strong sense that both the Boys' Choir and Girls' Choir should remain open to children from other local schools as well, and both our treble lines are made up of half the children coming from the Foundation Schools and the other half from local primary and preparatory schools. This model is not perfect and may not work in other places, but it works very well here in Croydon! Let me be clear: recruiting choristers from different schools has definitely become

more challenging over the past years, with lots of children having already signed up from an early age to a plethora of clubs, sport activities and (particularly in Year 5) external tutoring sessions for 10+ and 11+ entry exams. One has to work hard to convince parents of the benefits of the English choral tradition, but on the whole, it can be done and it works. We run “Be a Chorister for a Day” events and regularly visit about 20 schools during the year, offering “Golden Tickets” to promising young singers (I’m grateful to Alex Berry from Bradford Cathedral for that tip!). All of this is hard work, but it does pay off and we currently have 25 boy choristers and 26 girl choristers on our register.

Whilst recruiting choristers is not so much of an issue at Croydon, finding volunteer adult singers certainly is. Singers need to be very good sight-readers and finding suitable volunteer singers of that calibre in London has become increasingly difficult. At the Minster, we have a number of excellent semi-professional volunteers but not enough to fill all the vocal parts and early on in my time we looked at ways of creatively filling the back row of the choir stalls in order to maintain our cathedral-style choral tradition, and at the same time not turning the group of adult singers into an exclusive group of professional singers only (which we wouldn’t be able to afford anyway!). The first step was retaining the boys when their voices broke, and we knew this would only work if the boys felt very much at home at the Minster and regarded their singing in the choir as a crucial part of their social life. Regular cathedral visits, concerts and recordings soon helped galvanise the boys, and girls, and we’ve been able to build up a very capable group of male and female Junior Choral Scholars who form the basis of our back row today. In addition, it was possible to convince the Minster and our two other stakeholders (Whitgift and Old Palace Schools) that we needed professional voice leaders, particularly during the week when volunteer singers are not always available to us. The task of these professional singers is not only to lead their part, but also to be vocal role models to the boys and girls when they sing alongside them, giving them useful tips here and there to improve the quality of everyone’s singing. At Whitgift, we soon introduced our GMA scheme (Graduate Music Assistants): the graduates work during the day at the School and sing at the Minster in the afternoon and on Sundays/feast days. This has proved a very successful model and one that continues to attract outstanding postgraduate singers. The GMAs are supplemented by a team of professional deputy Lay Clerks who are jointly financed by Croydon Minster, Whitgift School and Old Palace School, enabling us to run a busy schedule of five choral services per week during term time:

Tuesdays	5.30pm Choral Evensong	Boys’ Voices or Boys’ and Lower Voices
Wednesdays	5.30pm Choral Evensong	Girls’ Voices or Girls’ and Lower Voices
Thursdays	7.00pm Choral Evensong (Compline during Lent)	Lower Voices
Sundays	10.00am Sung Eucharist	Boys’ and Lower Voices or Girls’ and Adult Voices
	6.30pm Choral Evensong	Girls’ and Adult Voices or Boys’ and Lower Voices

We have found that the constant exposure of our singers to a comparatively large repertoire of cathedral music has not only helped improve choral standards at the Minster, but also at Whitgift and Old Palace Schools, whilst also sharing excellence with children from the local community. It is this mutual benefit that makes the partnership between the Minster and both schools a successful model. But what about singers from the Minster community who would like to sing occasionally but can’t commit to the Minster’s busy choral schedule or

may not meet the standard required to be a regular member of the Minster Choir? We decided to start a project-driven choral society, the “Whitgift-Minster Choral Society”, which quickly gained considerable momentum. This choir is made up of chorister parents as well as members from the Minster, Whitgift School, Old Palace School and local communities and works on specific projects, such as Brahms’ *Ein Deutsches Requiem* or Handel’s *Messiah*, often joining the Minster Choirs and the Whitgift Chamber Choir. This makes for a choir of over 150 voices and I cannot tell you what a thrilling and inspiring experience it is for all the singers (and myself!) to perform large choral works with orchestra in a building such as the Minster. It is hard work, but very rewarding.

Over the past few years, the Minster’s Choral Foundation has built up a fine reputation for excellence in choral singing and this has resulted in the Minster, as well as our two choir schools, becoming Associate Members of the Choir Schools’ Association and for the Minster’s Director of Music to qualify for membership of the Cathedral Organists’ Association. We were particularly proud when BBC Radio 3 approached us to broadcast Choral Evensong live from the Minster in November 2018 (which hadn’t happened in decades), followed by BBC One’s live broadcast of our Midnight Mass last December (which was a complete first for us). This not only helped promote the Minster’s and its Choir’s work beyond Croydon, but also made our singers realise that what they do is indeed special (which doesn’t always feel that way when singing a mid-week Evensong on a drizzly November day with hardly any congregation present). One should never forget how important the BBC’s work is in helping to maintain our wonderful choral tradition and what a powerful morale boost to singers a BBC broadcast can give! We greatly look forward to our next BBC broadcasts on the 21st December (5.30pm Evensong, recorded broadcast to be aired on 27th April 2022) and 22nd December (4pm Evensong, live broadcast).

At the Minster, the secret to our choral programme is working in partnership with others, and this not only applies to working with schools from the John Whitgift Foundation, but also to collaborating with other choirs, too. For the last six years now, our girl choristers have been singing an annual joint Evensong with the Girls’ Choir of Guildford Cathedral, alternating between the Cathedral and the Minster. When it comes to our Boys’ Choir and male Junior Choral Scholars, the format is slightly different: each year they team up with the Choir of the Chapel Royal, Hampton Court, and the Godfrey Searle Choir, Reigate Grammar School, to perform in a Three Choirs’ Concert which is hosted in either Croydon, Reigate or Hampton Court. This has turned out to be a very popular event and it is heart-warming to see and hear one hundred boys and men united in song. Apart from working with other choirs, the Minster remains a strong supporter of the RSCM and its mission and it was good to welcome the RSCM’s new director, Hugh Morris, recently to discuss how we could best support the RSCM’s work. The RSCM chorister training scheme (originally conceived by Martin How) forms the backbone of our chorister training and within the last six years, 110 of our choristers have successfully passed RSCM award examinations.

Although the Minster has always maintained chorister recruitment links with local primary schools, we feel the time has now come to explore new ways of choral partnerships with schools in Croydon. Our new Priest-in-Charge, Fr. Andrew Bishop, is not only a fantastic supporter of the Minster’s choral tradition, but is also a visionary who is keen to share our choral excellence with the Croydon community. Fr. Andrew and I were particularly inspired by Tom Daggett’s work in East London, and the recent *Choir Church* conference has prompted us to look at new ways of making this model work in Croydon. The working title

for our choral partnership initiative is *MinsterSing!* and it is hoped that our choral outreach programme is launched within the next couple of months. I am also grateful to my colleague, Dr Chris Ouvry-Johns from Leicester Cathedral, for some excellent outreach suggestions which, no doubt, will help shape our new school partnership programme.

It goes without saying that a busy choral schedule such as ours cannot be run by one person alone and I am immensely grateful to our (former) Sub-Organist Tom Little, who over the last ten years or so has not only been a first-class organist, but has also helped with the chorister training. Tom has recently started his new position as Director of Music at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin – a well-deserved promotion! Also, many generations of graduate Organ Scholars have left their mark on the Minster Music by contributing to our chorister training programme, playing for services and helping with the administration. So you see, Croydon Minster's Choral Foundation is very much a team effort, and one we can be proud of.

So, what is the most important thing I have learned over the past eight years at Croydon Minster? I guess the answer would have to be the realisation that a successful Director of Music needs to be both a hard-working musician and a diplomat. And I would argue that particularly the latter is key in maintaining a happy relationship between the Minster and the two John Whitgift Foundation schools, a relationship that allows Croydon Minster's Choral Foundation to flourish. We are not a cathedral, nor are we a rich parish church, so maintaining a strong choral tradition with five choral services per week is a bit like walking on water. But together with great supporters such as Fr. Andrew Bishop, Chris Ramsey (Whitgift's new Headmaster) and Jane Burton (Old Palace's new Headmistress), the future for choral music at Croydon Minster is looking very bright indeed.

Finally, if I were asked to sum up the *raison d'être* of our Choral Foundation in a nutshell, I'd probably say: Croydon Minster, located in a particularly poor part of Croydon, seeks to bring beauty where there isn't much beauty. This is what we're about. And I am absolutely certain this would have met with John Whitgift's approval. Long may it continue.

I wish you all the best for the future – and thank-you!

Dr Ronny Krippner