

A significant voice in Anglican church music - Introducing the music of Ian King

by John Quinn

The composer Ian King was born in Hereford in 1962. He had an early and ideal musical grounding as a chorister at Hereford Cathedral and subsequently became an organ pupil of Roy Massey, who was at that time the cathedral's Director of Music. Under Massey's guidance Ian achieved his ARCO diploma at the age of 17. He read music at Oxford University, where he was organ scholar at St Peter's College.

For over 25 years Ian has been the principal piano tutor at Worcester Sixth Form College, passing on his love of piano playing to a younger generation.

Much of his compositional activity in the last few years has been in the field of sacred choral music. He has written pieces for the cathedral choirs of Worcester, Hereford and Brecon. He has enjoyed a particularly fruitful relationship with the Choir of Gloucester Cathedral for whom he has written a number of works. One of the highwater marks of that relationship came with the commission he received to write a set of Evening Canticles – Magnificat and Nunc dimittis - for the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival in 2016. 'The Gloucester Service' was first performed by the Three Cathedral Choirs conducted by Adrian Partington during the service of Choral Evensong that BBC Radio 3 broadcast live from Gloucester Cathedral during the Festival.



Ian King's music has attracted favourable attention in the three counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Worcestershire – Three Choirs territory - and this has brought him recognition and commissions. However, I think it would be fair to say that his music is not as well-known as it deserves. Plans are afoot to change that. I learned recently that, Covid restrictions permitting, Adrian Partington and the Choir of Gloucester Cathedral will be recording next March a CD for SOMM Recordings devoted entirely to pieces of sacred music which Ian King has composed for them over the last few years.

Keen to know more, I interviewed Ian King recently, by email, to discuss his life in music and his compositions. I started by asking him a fairly obvious question, namely which composition teachers or, indeed, other composers have particularly influenced him. I was somewhat surprised to learn that he is self-taught. Instead, he "learnt by listening to other composers", not least through spending many hours as a teenager listening to twentieth-century music on BBC Radio 3. "I loved Stravinsky, Schoenberg (you wouldn't guess that from my music now), Messiaen, and many other composers. Then at university I was hugely taken up with minimalism, in particular Steve Reich. That minimalist influence is still there in some of my work." I was also delighted to learn from Ian that we have a particular shared enthusiasm: the choral music of Sir James MacMillan. Ian values the variety and expressiveness of MacMillan's music, a judgement which I wholeheartedly share. I discovered that we also have in common great enthusiasm for the music of Vaughan Williams.

Ian explained that he has been very open to a wide range of other influences, in particular contemporary folk music: "I enjoy the music of modern progressive folk musicians, often with classical training and innovative creative approaches, such as Lau and The Urban Folk Quartet." He's also pursued interests in Jazz and 'alternative' rock music. More recently, he's been led to explore electronic dance music by his eldest son, James, who is a DJ and music producer.

So, Ian has a strikingly eclectic musical hinterland. Fearful of betraying my own ignorance of such subjects as rock music, I turned the conversation back to my own comfort zone. It seemed to me that given Ian's formative experience as a cathedral chorister sacred choral music was, perhaps, a natural path for him to follow, so I asked him how he'd got started as a composer. Ian told me that he'd composed some music as a teenager – badly, by his own admission – and he wrote a little more at university, but then “I had a long break from composing while busy raising three active young boys”.

However, another important element in his musical life was gradually emerging. His wife, Claire McDonald, whom he married in 1991, grew up in a strong family tradition of playing Scottish and Irish folk music. At first Ian and Claire just played traditional folk tunes together for pleasure, but “slowly that grew and I started writing original pieces in a folk/classical idiom. We formed a band, *Kings and Folk*, which was active on the local folk scene up to 2016, playing a variety of gigs in all sorts of venues, which was good fun.” Ian wrote and arranged a good deal of music for the group. They released 2 CDs: *'from Root to Sky'* and *'Branching Out'*, which have been played on Radio 3 and elsewhere.

Then, a major turning point came in 2011 with a commission for the Three Choirs Festival: *A Worcestershire Song Cycle*, with words by Chris Jaeger MBE. This 40-minute chamber work was a culmination of Ian's classical/folk synthesis, in part adapted from material on the CD *'From Root to Sky'*. *A Worcestershire Song Cycle* has been recorded on CD and I discuss it in a little more detail towards the end of this article.

Ian explained the significance of this work in terms of the direction that his composing career subsequently took. “Only after writing *A Worcestershire Song Cycle* for the Worcester Three Choirs Festival in 2011 did my mind finally turn back towards sacred choral music, and in the last few years I have had a real sense of coming full circle back to my true musical home, to things which are deeply ingrained from my early years – but with the additional benefit of all the music I've explored in the time between, which provides subtle influences on my writing.”

It intrigued me that, having composed *A Worcestershire Song Cycle* which is so strongly rooted in folk music, Ian should have then turned his focus to the composition of sacred choral music. On the face of it, the styles and genres are very different: was the switch to sacred music a change of tack or, perhaps, a return to Ian's musical roots as a cathedral chorister? Ian explained that there were various factors behind the new direction that his music took. One was that the composition of the song cycle gave him the appetite to write “longer, challenging and more obviously classical music”. In addition, fate played a part. Ian became involved with the musical activities at the Worcester high school attended by his sons and the school invited him to compose a Christmas carol for their choir. The composition of this piece, *I saw a Maiden* (2012) helped to turn his thoughts towards sacred music, especially since it was performed as part of a carol service in Worcester Cathedral. Two more carols were composed for this school choir: *Ring the Bells* (2013) and *The Three Kings* (2014).

Crucially, though, as Ian said, “I think there was also some deeper internal need arising within me to return to my musical roots as a cathedral chorister. Why did such an instinct return at this time? I don't know, but I certainly felt a desire to return to this musical world which I had barely touched for many decades; and perhaps not just a *musical* world.” A fairly immediate product of Ian's new focus was the anthem *O clap your Hands* (2012). This piece, Ian says, shows the influence of his love of minimalist music.

This piece was the impetus for the strong relationship that Ian has built up with Gloucester Cathedral Choir over the last few years. He had known Adrian Partington, the Gloucester Cathedral Director of Music “at a distance for years”. Ian takes up the story. “I gave Adrian the CD of *A Worcestershire Song*

Cycle, to introduce him to my current style; then, with a new determination to focus on sacred choral music I offered a short anthem for the Gloucester choir: *O Clap your hands*, which we are very happy to say is to be included on the CD, as it's a favourite of ours! Bigger things grew from there."

Bigger things did indeed follow. *O clap your Hands* was first performed by the Gloucester Cathedral Choir in 2013 and Ian subsequently wrote several important works for them. The first of these was a setting of the *St John Passion* (2014), a 30-minute setting for choir and organ. This is the intended centrepiece of the CD programme so I asked Ian to give me some insights into the work, which Robert Sharpe, the Director of Music at York Minster has described as "A superb achievement".

One intriguing feature of the setting is that the narration is not delivered by just one solo voice. Ian explained the very pragmatic decision: "rather than using just one narrator, I realised that changing to a different voice at appropriate points in the story would keep the listener's ear fresh and focussed. So, through the whole setting the narration moves in a cycle: tenor, bass, alto; tenor, bass, alto, and finally tenor again, which I feel provides a balance between variety and cohesion." The score also contains solo roles for a number of other characters, including Jesus and Pilate; like the narration passages, all these are sung by choir members. The choir has two important functions. They sing occasional scriptural passages but Ian uses them in another, innovative way: "I use the choir humming as an accompaniment to Jesus whenever he sings, providing a contrasting and hopefully more ethereal sound compared to the other characters". That, it seems to me, is an interesting contemporary take on Bach's use of strings to accompany the words of Christ in the *St Matthew Passion*.

A more recent work is Ian King's setting for choir and organ of Carol Ann Duffy's poem *The Christmas Truce*. This is another piece written for Gloucester Cathedral choir and they first performed it in November 2018. I was away at the time of that performance and so I missed it. I was keen therefore to hear about the work from Ian. As he discussed it with me, it immediately became clear to me that this project had especial significance for him. "The starting point for any choral composer should always be to draw inspiration from the text. In this respect, I am doubly fortunate with *The Christmas Truce*: firstly, the events of Christmas 1914 in the trenches have moved me since hearing the story many years ago; and secondly, Carol Ann Duffy's poem retells the tale in such a powerful yet simple manner, capturing the wonder of this brief moment when humanity overcame destructiveness."

Duffy's poem is a substantial one, so Ian explained that, in consultation with Adrian Partington, he decided to use a narrator for much of the setting, which helps to keep the pace moving. The choir, he says, provides support for the narrator (and sometimes carries the story too), referencing the carols and other songs that are mentioned in the text. Ian admits that he enjoyed himself working in additional Christmas carols for the choir, as an accompaniment to the narrator. My chagrin at missing the premiere of *The Christmas Truce* was compounded when Ian told me that "the first performance was the best performance I've ever heard of any of my pieces, in terms of matching perfectly how I heard it in my head!" That's certainly whetted my appetite for the planned recording.

I understand that it's also hoped to include on the CD 'The Gloucester Service', the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis that Ian King wrote for the 2016 Three Choirs Festival. The Magnificat is a terrific piece. Much of it is characterised by agile, dancing music, which is most attractive and often exciting. The thoughtful setting of the Nunc Dimittis is no less impressive. Particularly striking are the textures that are achieved in the similar but not identical settings of 'Glory be'. I asked Ian to tell me more about the inspiration for these canticles. "My first reaction when asked by Adrian Partington to write a Magnificat and Nunc dimittis for the Three Choirs Festival was excitement at the chance to write for the three cathedral choirs on such a special occasion, but also a reluctance to set these particular texts. The words have already been set so many times by so many composers through centuries of Anglican music, as I remember from my years as a chorister at Hereford Cathedral. How could I bring anything original to the work? But this initial misgiving soon gave way to a sense of challenge and a desire to consider the text anew for myself. I started by immersing myself in the words, reading them over afresh

and considering how my music could best reflect their meaning. I believe the composer should always be led by the text when setting words to music, and I feel this is particularly important when writing a religious work.

“I did not listen to any other musical settings of the texts while composing, though the opening of Stanford’s Magnificat in G with its beautiful treble solo was certainly in the back of my mind. The joyful nature of the opening words of the Magnificat is reflected in my setting by dance-like music using irregular rhythms similar to those found in Eastern European folk music. These rhythms recur regularly throughout the Magnificat, giving some musical continuity to the whole. The Magnificat starts in C major and the Nunc dimittis ends in the same key; a symbolic statement of ultimate beginning and ending, for nothing is more fundamental in musical life than the key of C. Both the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis finish with the Gloria, as is normal. I needed to set these words suitably each time, yet also wanted to have considerable variation between the two Glorias, to give the listener a fresh and thoughtful perspective on words we have heard and said so many times.”

Ian wrote a second set of Evening Canticles for Gloucester but this was a rather different undertaking. The ‘Gloucester Girls’ Service’ was composed to mark the first anniversary, in November 2017, of the inauguration of the cathedral’s girl choristers. The canticles were written at the request of Adrian Partington and of Nia Llewellyn-Jones, the conductor of the girl choristers. Ian told me that “As a composer, my initial consideration was ‘What is unique to writing for girls? Firstly, a naturally high vocal line, suggesting a thin and ethereal sound. Secondly, a limited dynamic range compared to a full choir setting.” The vocal forces had implications for the organ part, too. “The organ part is written mostly in a low to medium pitch range below the vocal line, allowing the girls to shine above”. Furthermore, the dynamics of the organ part are deliberately restrained. Ian explained that the music has three key stylistic influences: English choral music from c.1600; Syncopated dance rhythms; and the use of folk-like pentatonic scales. I’ve heard a private recording of the first performance and the music makes a strong and immediate appeal; it’s fresh-sounding and very effective. It is planned to include these canticles on the CD, which will bring them to wider attention.

Between 2017 and 2020 Ian King also composed for Gloucester Cathedral’s choir *a cappella* settings of five Collects and it is intended that a selection of these will be included on the CD. The first of the five Collects is ‘We Beseech Thee, Almighty God’ (2017) which is the prayer for the 5th Sunday in Lent. This was followed by settings of the Collects for Candlemas & Whitsunday (2019) and for Epiphany & Advent (2020). The latter had been scheduled to receive its first performance at the Advent Sunday Carol Service in Gloucester Cathedral on 29 November 2020. However, with church services prohibited under the current Covid lockdown in England during November, that premiere may have to wait a while. I was curious to know what had attracted Ian to setting texts such as these. “Initially I wanted to write something small as a relaxation between bigger pieces; due to increasing ill health I found it easier to focus on short pieces. I asked Adrian Partington what would be a useful short text to set for the Gloucester choir and it was he who suggested Collects, as they would fill a musical gap in the repertoire for a particular day.” Ian added that the musical mood of these short pieces is mostly reflective, as suits the texts, though sometimes more dramatic, especially in the Advent Collect

Having learned so much about Ian’s music from the composer himself, I thought it would be interesting to get a performer’s perspective. Who better to turn to than Adrian Partington, Director of Music at Gloucester Cathedral? I was struck immediately by his great enthusiasm for Ian King’s music. Adrian explained that as Director of Music at Gloucester Cathedral, he gets sent, every year, very many choral scores by aspiring composers, who are each hopeful that he can programme their music for performance in the cathedral’s worship. Much of what he receives is estimable; but to his regret he can only perform a proportion of it.

There are exceptions, though. “Occasionally I receive a piece which immediately causes me to think we should perform it as soon as possible. This was the reaction I had when I received *O clap your hands*

by Ian King. The music engaged me straight away; I found it tuneful, (actually “catchy” is probably the word,) sophisticated rhythmically - although in the form of a sort of *ostinato* - and well written for the voices. Like much good music, *O clap your hands* is a neatly-formed improvisation on the material presented in the opening few bars: the “jazzy” opening of the piece is treated in many different ways, with variations of scoring, harmony and tonality. I liked it immediately; and the work passed its most gruelling test when the Cathedral Choristers said that they liked it too! Aside from the admirable technical aspects of the work, I heard a voice speaking in the music which was rather different from that which I hear in pieces of a similar kind. I have searched for a word to describe what I hear in this piece and in Ian’s many other subsequent pieces, and the nearest I can find is “melancholic”. Although *O clap your hands* is, of course, an exuberant interpretation of a positive text, certain harmonic processes and melodic inflections make me feel that the overriding cheerfulness of the work is somehow presented against the mixed realities of the human condition.”

This first encounter with Ian King’s sacred choral music was just the start, as Adrian went on to tell me. “After performing *O clap your hands* a number of times, I was eager to perform more of Ian’s music, and was thrilled to receive in 2014 the score of the *St. John Passion*. This unique and powerful work was commissioned by my colleague Canon Neil Heavisides, who was at that time the Precentor of Gloucester Cathedral. As far as I am aware, no composer has attempted an interpretation of these profound and dramatic chapters from the Gospel according to St. John quite like Ian has. The use of the comparatively-new NRSV Bible texts, the use of three different narrators, and the subtle but telling use of occasional organ accompaniment all combine to give the work a different ambience from all other passions of which I am aware. On the surface, the musical language of the *Passion* seems a long way from that of *O clap your hands*; but the same compositional traits are apparent in both works: a fastidious interpretation of all texts, a harmonic language which is mostly tonal, but with much appropriate dissonance when the text demands it; the frequent and intense use of fourths and fifths; and an almost Tudor-like use of imperfect cadences. There is also in the work an almost limitless melodic variety and an equally impressive variety of different scorings. I have been fortunate in the past forty years to conduct many of the choral masterpieces of the past five hundred years; and I say without hesitation that Ian King’s *St. John Passion* is a masterpiece. Gloucester Cathedral Choir has performed the work every Good Friday since 2014 (except for the dismal year 2020); and I am pleased to learn that other choirs have taken the work up, notably that of St. Mary Redcliffe in Bristol.”

We moved on to discuss the *Magnificat and Nunc dimittis* that Ian wrote for the 2016 Gloucester Three Choirs Festival, the ‘Gloucester Service’. Again, I found that Adrian expressed great admiration for this composition. “This wonderful work is the best new setting of the Evening Canticles which I have encountered for decades. It demonstrates once again how carefully Ian thinks about the text before putting pen to paper. From the dance-like opening sung by a solo treble symbolising the joy of Mary, to the dissonant diminuendo of despair symbolising the fate of the rich, every verse of each poem receives poetic treatment. The music *makes* the listener re-think the famous texts; there are no Anglican clichés here. This is one of the most refreshing, invigorating and thought-provoking set of Evening Canticles from the whole canon, stretching back to the Reformation.” That’s praise indeed, and Adrian went further: “I always say that Ian’s setting of the word “Glory” from the *Nunc dimittis Gloria* is the most thrilling and moving since Howells’ *Collegium Regale*. The Choristers, incidentally, love this work!”

The musical connection between Ian King and the Gloucester Cathedral choir was further strengthened over the next couple of years. In 2017 he wrote the *Magnificat and Nunc dimittis* for the Girl Choristers of Gloucester Cathedral, which Adrian described as “wonderful”. He pointed out that this set of Evening Canticles is quite different from the ‘Gloucester Service’: “it is much more austere and contemplative, and beautifully conceived for the very different ambience of upper voices alone.” Thereafter Ian composed a set of five motets using the words of the Collects for the Day of several of the Anglican Church’s principal Sundays: Advent, Epiphany, Candlemas, Lent V and Whitsunday. These are small-scale pieces but they have clearly caught Adrian’s attention. He described them to me as

“beautiful *a cappella* motets, of increasing sophistication through the series, which again demonstrate Ian’s profound interpretation and presentation of texts. During moments of tenderness to moments of exaltation, Ian explores unique avenues of both harmony and scoring. A rewarding few minutes can be spent, for example, comparing and contrasting the unusual, laconic “Amens” of each motet.”

Adrian was keen to mention two more works: first, the *Jubilate* of 2015 for children’s choir. This was commissioned by Nia Llewelyn Jones for Gloucester Cathedral’s Junior Choir. “This totally appropriate setting of Psalm 100 is again full of good tunes, and although written for a choir of un-auditioned youngsters, it does not patronize them like so much “children’s” music does these days. It has some sparkling vocal challenges to make the children think and work, and an exuberant organ part which combines with the thrilling children’s lines to produce a piece full of innocent *joie de vivre*.”

Finally, Adrian talked to me about what he describes as “a unique work”: *The Christmas Truce*. This is a setting from 2018 of former Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy’s famous poem about the spontaneous ceasefire on parts of the Western Front on Christmas Eve, 1914. “Ian scores the work for speaker, SATB chorus (with many divisions) and organ, rather in the manner of the *St. John Passion*. Using snatches of popular Christmas Carols from both England and Germany, and a huge variety of different choral formations, Ian recreates through music a landscape of a freezing moonlit night in a place beyond barren, made temporarily joyous by the unexpected display of humanity from the combatants. The Dead are never forgotten, however. Once again, Ian’s insights into the text, and his musical interpretation of them produce a work which is both profound and beautiful.”

Adrian’s admiration for Ian King’s music is self-evident. I asked him to sum up. “I believe that in time Ian King will be recognized as a significant composer of Anglican Church Music. It has been a privilege for me to conduct all these wonderful works; and I intend to try to share them with as many people as possible in the remaining years of my professional life.”

We shall have to wait a little while to hear the proposed Gloucester Cathedral Choir CD of Ian King’s music. However, it’s already possible to hear some of his music via [his website](#). The BBC broadcast of the Three Choirs Festival premiere of his ‘Gloucester Service’ is there. I can also strongly recommend listening to *What is our life?* (2015) The excellent recording of this piece on Ian’s website is by ‘The 24’, the choir of York University’s Music Department. The conductor is Robert Hollingworth, the founder of I Fagiolini. I gather that Ian and Robert Hollingworth were choristers at Hereford Cathedral, though they were not exact contemporaries. This is a gravely beautiful setting of lines by Sir Walter Raleigh. Ian told me that, though he has composed few secular choral works in the last few years, he was attracted by the “profound theme” of this poem which Raleigh wrote while in prison awaiting execution. The setting is for *a cappella* choir divided into up to eight parts. The harmonic language is chromatic and complex at times and the piece is very rewarding. So, too, is one of Ian King’s Christmas pieces, *Christmas hath a darkness* (2019). This setting of a poem by Christina Rossetti was written for Geraint Bowen and the Choir of Hereford Cathedral, whose performance is the one heard on the website. There’s a tender *a cappella* opening section followed by a more extrovert central section in which the organ has bell-like music in the right hand. The unaccompanied music of the opening returns for a brief, thoughtful coda.

Three CDs of Ian’s music can also be downloaded free of charge. Two discs contain some of his folk-music compositions: *From Root to Sky* (2007) and *Branching Out* (2014). The third disc is closely linked with the first of those two collections. *A Worcestershire Song Cycle* (2011) uses some of the tunes first recorded on *From Root to Sky* but now set to poems specially written by Chris Jaeger. There are seven songs in all – plus two instrumental numbers – for soprano, tenor, pianos and violins. The folk-music origins of the songs are clearly audible – and the songs are none the worse for that. The music covers a wide range, from the poignant melancholy of ‘Reflections of a Malvern Love’ and ‘1651’ to the humour of ‘Faithful City Morris’. The most intense music is heard in ‘A January Night on Fish Hill’ which portrays the bleak depths of winter in the countryside. My own favourite is the closing song, ‘The

Cathedral at Dusk'. The earlier songs are allocated to one or other of the singers but here both come together. The principal material, sung by the tenor, is derived from the haunting instrumental 'Air in D with Old Irish Melody' on the *From Root to Sky* album, against which the soprano wordlessly sings in the background the tune that's associated with the hymn *Lord of All Hopefulness*. It's a serene conclusion to this affectionate musical *tour d'horizon* of Worcestershire.

It's well worth checking out Ian King's music through his website in advance of the impending new CD. The sessions for that disc are due to take place in Gloucester Cathedral in March 2021 for subsequent release by SOMM Recordings.

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