

# ‘Spaces and buildings are an inspiration’

The composer on matching music to acoustics and thanking the scientists

JOHN RUTTER, whose choral music is particularly loved at this time of year, has an insider’s understanding of voices. His own earliest musical memory, when he was about four, was of singing in school assembly. ‘In those days, it was mandatory for schools to start each day with an act of Christian worship,’ he recalls. ‘There were hymns that were written with children in mind, such as *All things bright and beautiful* and *When a knight won his spurs*—my love of singing started right there and then.’

Composing came soon after, when he first opened the ancient upright piano in his parents’ flat in north London. ‘I couldn’t read or write music, but I doodled and sang in my piping child’s treble voice.’ His parents, who didn’t play themselves, got ‘quite excited’ and sent him for piano lessons with a Mrs Melville in Kentish Town. ‘She discovered fairly quickly that I had all the makings of a truly atrocious pianist, but that I had quite a nice voice and enjoyed making up tunes and giving them names.’

Mr Rutter, now 76, was fortunate to attend Highgate School, where pupils were given a fine musical grounding—fellow composer John Tavener was a contemporary. ‘A rather peppery individual named Martindale Sidwell gave singing classes to the junior school and would threaten to beat disruptive boys with a violin bow. Many years later, a member of my professional choir, the Cambridge Singers, sang for him. “You tell Rutter,” he growled, “that it was a cello bow and if I’d known how he was going to turn out, I’d have beaten him harder!” In fact, he never actually beat anyone and he was a good spotter of musical talent.’

On Sundays, Mr Rutter would fit in chapel at Highgate and singing in the choir for the morning

service at St Mary’s Primrose Hill, where the English Hymnal was born. ‘That’s when I absorbed my love of language. Mine was the last generation that got to hear the resounding words of the 1611 King James Bible and the 1662 prayer book on a regular basis,’ he observes. ‘The language leapt off the page—it was written to be read aloud because so many people at the time weren’t literate. I was steeped in that language and I think, as a result, I have always had a keen response to text.’

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Mr Rutter went on to Clare College, Cambridge, where he sang in the chapel choir—‘You wouldn’t have wanted to hear us, even sober, which we rarely were!’—and formed a close friendship with the composer and conductor Sir David Willcocks—they co-edited four editions of the much-used ‘Carols for Choirs’—who introduced him to his first publisher, Oxford University Press.

‘Spaces and buildings are a deep inspiration,’ says Mr Rutter. ‘Clare was right next to King’s College Chapel, one of the most wondrous architectural spaces and acoustics anywhere in the land. That great fan-vaulted space blesses any sound: it keeps dying away for something like five seconds—the perfect classic reverb. Or, as Willcocks famously said: “It makes a fart sound like a sevenfold Amen!”’

Mr Rutter, who wrote the well-known *Shepherd’s Pipe Carol* in 1963, made the first recording of his own music when still an undergraduate, which developed his passion for matching the building to the music. ‘A friend was assistant organist at Ely Cathedral [in Cambridgeshire]; the cathedral is terrific for music, but the adjoining Lady Chapel is even more amazing. You can almost sing solo chords in there because of the way that the sound lingers on.’

As director of music at his old college, Clare, he took the choir on a tour to Venice. ‘We sang in nine or 10 different venues, including San Marco, where we were allowed to rehearse in the evening when the basilica was closed. I experimented with placing members of the choir in different parts of the building, in the balconies, so that the sound came from all over the place. It was extraordinary.’

Mr Rutter’s normally busy schedule of conducting and presenting his choral works all over the world has, of course, been curtailed by the pandemic. ‘I’m almost ashamed to admit it,’ he says, ‘but the composing half of me was perfectly happy in lockdown. In fact I took a couple of months to notice that anything was different; I emerged blinking into the sunlight.’

‘I won’t pretend I composed more than I would have done, but what I was able to do was to dust down some stuff from the back catalogue and take on adaptations that would never otherwise have risen to the top of the pile.’

It also led to the creation of a choral learning app. ‘People had been asking me for a long time if I could make piano transcriptions for amateur pianists so that they could play choral pieces of mine such as *For the beauty of the earth* and *The lord bless you and keep you*. I finally got down to it, so you can listen to the line in the music that you want to learn. There are quite a few on the market, but, usually, your part gets pounded out on an electronic keyboard and I wanted to do it with really good human voices. That was possible to organise remotely and it meant being able to give work to singers. They’ve had such an awful time.’

The carols that Mr Rutter has composed for this Christmas were the result of a commission from the music director of the Oxford Philharmonic, Marios Papadopoulos. ‘He rang up and said: “John, I’ve got an idea, a way to pay tribute to the Oxford vaccine team, who have been toiling away day and night saving the world. We could record some carols as a way of saying thank you from the musicians of Oxford: a Christmas present from us to the scientists.”’

Henrietta Bredin

## On the record

*I Sing of a Maiden*, five new carols by John Rutter, recorded by the Cambridge Singers, is on digital release ([www.johnrutter.com](http://www.johnrutter.com))

**Favourite building?** A contest between St Paul’s and almost any one of our amazing Gothic cathedrals

**Book?** My favourite work of fiction is *Tom Jones* (Henry Fielding) because

it is life-affirming and the goodies win. Across all literature, it’s probably Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*

**Alternative career?** Writer or psychiatrist



