

INSPIRATION IN ENGLAND/WALKING THE COTSWOLD WAY

**Sabbatical Report submitted by Matthew Svoboda
Spring 2026**

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Introduction

The purpose of my sabbatical was twofold: 1) to observe and learn from other choral directors and composers in England and 2) to compose new music based on walking the Cotswold Way, a 102 mile trek through the Cotswolds in England.

Sabbatical Goals

1. To observe choral directors at work in England with an aim of learning new approaches to rehearsal and performance, community building, and the English choral tradition.
2. To interview composers in England in order to gain insight into text selection, text setting, and musical elements of composition.
3. To walk the Cotswold Way, a 102 mile trek through the Cotswolds in England, and compose an extended composition based on the experience.

Outcomes and Observations

My sabbatical was centered around meaningful learning opportunities that developed from interaction with choral conductors, conversations with composers, and a personal journey I took by walking the Cotswold Way which has inspired the creation of a new composition entitled *Adelstrop*. Detailed summaries of what I observed and learned in these interactions are included in the Addendum to this report.

Observations about the current state of choir in England and its traditions

England has a rich choral history and, from my observations, the state of “The Choral Arts” there appears to be very healthy. There are thousands of local and regional choral societies throughout the United Kingdom with the majority being based in England. Professional choirs, amateur choirs, academic choirs, cathedral choirs, youth choirs, and the like provide a rich and varied diet of music for the public to enjoy, from the serious minded to more lighthearted and popular fare. The standard of training is rigorous and the skills of singers are exceedingly high at the cathedrals, elite academic institutions, and professional choirs I observed. Composers are regularly supported and commissioned resulting in a celebration of new and emerging work.

During my sabbatical I saw first hand that a sense of tradition is strongly maintained in the cathedrals and at venerable institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge. Repertoire selection, code of dress, rehearsal culture, scope of services, presentation of music, etc. are all highly governed by norms and practices that have been in place for ages. Community choirs, youth choirs, and professional choirs are more relaxed in these regards yet have their own cultural norms and traditions. I quite enjoyed the practice among community choirs of enjoying tea and “biscuits” (cookies) at the “interval” (break) in the middle of rehearsal.

Observations of Conductors

I observed 15 different choirs/choir conductors at work while in England, some of them on multiple occasions. I was able to engage with many of these conductors in conversation, to see how they approach rehearsal, performance, and community building, and to reflect on my own teaching practices accordingly. These observations exposed me to new warmups, repertoire, rehearsal language, techniques for skill building, and conducting practices that have given me much to reflect on, consider, and apply to my own work at Lane Community College. I have been inspired to approach rehearsal in new ways and to reconsider assumptions I've made about the best conducting gestures to use to gain desired results.

Conversations with Composers

During my sabbatical, I had conversations with four practicing composers. These conversations gave me new perspectives on matters related to composition—i.e. how to approach text setting, harmonic and melodic development, and the messy process of working through inevitable challenges that arise when facing the blank page to realize new work. These conversations fueled my own sense of creative exploration and I feel my creative output was significantly enhanced by these interactions.

Walking the Cotswold Way

Walking the Cotswold Way from Chipping Campden to Bath was an incredible experience and a significant trek for me. I had never walked so far in a single journey. While the path has an official distance of 102 miles, I estimate I walked 110 miles in total given some planned and unplanned side excursions from the trail. The unplanned side excursions account for the occasions that I got lost before finding my way back to the path with the help of maps and GPS. A few of the longer days were tough on me physically, but by taking my time and resting as I needed, I continued progressing along the route according to my planned itinerary.

The natural beauty of the Cotswolds was astounding, with dramatic skies, expansive vistas, colorful flowers, and glorious birdsong. Fortunately, the weather was mild and perfect for walking with only occasional rain. I passed through miles of farmland of crops, cows, sheep, and horses; through dense forest and open grasslands; and over many hills and vales that stretched between towns with names like Wotton-under-Edge, North Nibley, and Old Sodbury, to name a few.

The journey afforded me a new experience of extended solitude, which I relished immensely. Though I mostly walked alone, I met other walkers on the path and we enjoyed meals together when we happened to lodge in the same village.

Composition

The solitude of the Cotswold Way has carried over to my days spent composing in my home upon my return from England and deepened my relationship with my artistic self in a way that I find to be very healthy and rejuvenating. At the time of submitting this report, I can say that I am pleased with how the creative work is progressing. I feel that

this experience has rekindled a spark of interest in composing that had laid dormant for some time but will most certainly carry forward. I am excited to hear my new composition *Adelstrop* performed once it is completed.

Final Thoughts and Significance

Taking this sabbatical was certainly a privilege that I appreciate and one that has been invaluable to me on a personal and professional level. The sabbatical provided me with an opportunity to further my own understanding of the pedagogical skills that I use every day in my work with students. Observing other professionals at work has inspired me to approach my own choral rehearsals at Lane in new ways and I am excited to invigorate my teaching with the methods I learned in England. Likewise, returning to composition after a hiatus has reignited a creative spark that I had put on hold for some time and forced me to work through creative roadblocks, obstacles, and other challenges much like our students face in their own pursuit of musical excellence.

I firmly believe that one needs to continually practice and create in order to know how to teach this to others in a way that is relevant, authentic, and passionate. One of the great results of engaging in this work is that I can speak to students with credibility as I help them navigate their own paths and struggles in music. I am confident that the learning that resulted from this sabbatical will pay dividends in my ongoing work as a teacher at Lane Community College. Furthermore, I feel I can speak from experience when talking to other faculty, staff, and administrators about the value of taking a sabbatical and its benefits to students, academic programs, and the larger college community.

Addendum

- Observations of Conductors during Sabbatical in England
- Conversations with Composers during Sabbatical in England