

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

Addendum: Observations of Conductors during Sabbatical

Conductors observed: Matthew Coleridge, Craig McLeish, Ben Parry, Richard Pinel, Bob Chilcott, Robert Hollingsworth, James Potter, Naveen Arles, Jonas Rasmussen and Tori Langdon

Matthew Coleridge

[Matthew Coleridge](#) is a rising composer whose Requiem mass has been performed across Britain in concerts and workshops. His shorter *a cappella* works have been performed and recorded by major British choral ensembles. He has found success conducting his own works in dozens of Come and Sing Days and choral workshops throughout the UK and his work is increasingly being performed around the world.

I saw Matthew work with the Harrogate Choral Society Come and Sing Day on April 25, 2026.

Matthew Coleridge was not trained formally as a conductor and is largely self taught in this regard. His conducting skills are adequate for conducting his own music and I didn't see him conduct repertoire other than his own. During rehearsal, I felt that he spent a little too much time telling stories about himself rather than being focused on the music. Nonetheless, I did pick up a few tidbits of information that can be helpful to carry forward into my own work with choirs.

Warmups:

- 1) Touch heads, shoulder, chest and thigh as you count 8's, then 4's, then 2's, then 1's
- 2) Starting in A major and moving up by $\frac{1}{2}$ step: Do Mi So Mi Do on hum, ohh, ahh and hum moving to oh and ah

Rehearsal technique:

- 1) Assign stagger breathing by having singers pair up and decide who breathes early and who breathes later

Community building: Tea and biscuits (cookies) were served at the break. This charming tradition was common at the non academic/non professional choir rehearsals I observed and added to the feeling of shared community among the musicians.

Craig McLeish

[Craig McLeish](#) is an accomplished British composer, arranger, and conductor who serves as the longtime Musical Director for Young Voices UK, the largest children's choir concert series in the world. Craig has spent decades working fluidly across choral, classical, pop, and educational music. I spent more hours with Craig than any other professional in England. He invited me to stay with him in his home for two days and we

spent many hours traveling together and engaging in conversation about music, conducting, composition, and life. I observed him on April 21 conducting at his weekly Milton Keynes Community Chorus rehearsal (where he had me do some warm ups and lead the choir in a bit of jazz) and on April 26 at a Come and Sing Day with the Stowe School Choral Society in Stowe. I also got to see him work in his studio where he was creating music tracks for Young Voices UK.

Craig leads a highly engaging choir rehearsal. His pacing and sense of humor keep the learning process lively and fun. It is obvious how much his regular singers adore him and those new to him are persuaded quickly to relax and enjoy themselves in the music making.

Warmups:

- 1) Ask for a name of a pet, a vegetable, a fruit, etc. and then a couple of adjectives that are alliterative with the first word but different in meaning. For example, a pet named Salvo: "Silly Salvo, Springy Salvo" or "Rigley Rigby, Restless Rigby" or a vegetable: "Crunchy Carrot, Crinkly Carrot." Then do the following, first at a slow tempo and then at a quicker tempo, adjusting division of beat as needed for the text:

Silly Salvo Springy Salvo Silly Salvo Springy Salvo (Ascending in 8th notes)
Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do

Silly Salvo Springy Salvo Silly Salvo Springy Salvo (Descending in 8th notes)
Do Ti La So Fa Mi Re Do

This is a good way to connect with a new group as its fun, puts people at ease, and works easily because people love their pets.

- 2) Instant Stockhausen

Craig asks people to make a choral noise (could be a vowel sound or any old sound they choose) and then he asks them to follow his direction with his hands:

Left Hand controls volume (up and down) and Right Hand controls Pitch (up and down)

- 3) Sing the round [Jubilate Deo by Michael Praetorius](#). Do this all together once through, then in 2 parts, 3 parts, and 6 parts. Craig has his own [arrangement of this in Bb major](#).

Community building: Tea and biscuits (cookies) were served at the break.

Rehearsal Technique:

- 1) Stagger breathing: It's about when not to breathe as well as when to breathe. For example, nobody breathers in m. 20 between the words "God" and "of all."

Repertoire:

- 1) *Te Deum in C* by Benjamin Britten (Oxford, Ed. David Willcocks)
- 2) *Te Deum* by John Rutter
- 3) *In Terra Pax* by Gerald Finzi
- 4) *Let All Mortal Flesh* arr. Craig McLeish (based on the hymn tune Picardy)

Ben Parry

[Ben Parry](#) is a highly accomplished UK composer, conductor, and producer who regularly records with the professional vocal ensemble London Voices and frequently works on major orchestral, film, and soundtrack projects. He is highly regarded for his extensive contributions to major Hollywood film soundtracks, having served as a conductor, choir director, and vocal contractor for blockbuster franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Avengers* series, as well as standalone hits like *Dune: Part Two*, *Spectre*, and *Jurassic World*. He previously served as a singer, musical director, and arranger with the acclaimed Swingle Singers from 1987 to 1992 during which he toured globally and contributed over 50 arrangements.

I observed Ben work on two occasions—first on April 22 at the world class [School Farm Studios](#)—a premier residential recording facility in a converted 17th-century barn on the Essex/Suffolk border and second on April 28 as a guest clinician at the Royal Academy of Music where he was coaching conducting students in arrangements of his music.

Ben is incredibly efficient in rehearsal. He has excellent ears and knows just how to get the best out of his professional singers in a way that is collaborative and respectful. His gestures are highly musical and detailed. I marveled at how relaxed they were in a way that allows singers to perform at their best vocally but also how they contained a high degree of rhythmic precision. I was simply in awe of his skills and abilities as a musician, composer, conductor, teacher and communicator. During the conducting workshop at the Royal Academy of Music, he gave precise and helpful feedback to the student conductors that was supportive while also holding them to a high standard. Observing Ben work was a rare opportunity to see a choral conductor work at the highest level.

Richard Pinel

[Richard Pinel](#) is a prominent, prize-winning British concert organist, choral conductor, and educator. He currently serves as a Professor of Organ at the Royal Academy of Music and the Director of Music at St Mary's, Bourne Street in London.

I observed Richard Pinel rehearse and conduct the Choir of Kings College London on April 27th and April 28th as a guest conductor sitting in for Joseph Fort.

Richard is a consummate organist and choir director who can play choral and accompaniment parts at the piano or organ with ease. He works with the choir in an efficient and friendly manner. He trusts singers to get their parts learned and to fix errors as they come up without dwelling too much on reinforcing corrections in the moment. This is a matter of necessity because there is so much music to rehearse on a regular basis. It also works because the standard of expectations is high and the singers are all well trained/highly skilled and know what needs to be accomplished in service to the music.

Choir arrangement:

- 1) The choir was set up in two facing sections, typical for a church service in many chapels and cathedrals in England.

	Bass/Tenor
	Sop/ Alto
Conductor	
	Sop/Alto
	Bass Tenor

Warmups:

- 1) Richard had the choir sing through the service hymns as a warmup, once on a hum, then on a “yah”, and finally on text.

Rehearsal Process:

- 1) The choir would read the first verse from a hymn with music provided. Other verses would just be given as text and the choir would have to apply the text to the service music. Richard would clarify how to handle any text underlays that weren't obvious and needed adjustment or direction.

Repertoire:

- 1) Laudibus in Sanctis (William Byrd)
- 2) My Beloved Spake (Patrick Hadley)
- 3) Missa Brevis (Franz Joseph Haydn)

Bob Chilcott

[Bob Chilcott](#) is prominent British choral composer, conductor, and singer who is globally celebrated for his prolific and popular compositional output, particularly for amateur, professional, and youth choirs.

I observed Bob Chilcott in rehearsal on April 29th with [Commotio](#), a highly regarded SATB choir specializing in contemporary choral music and based in Oxford, England.

Choir arrangement:

- 1) The choir was set up in two sections side by side in the following arrangement. Some singers told me that this was new to them and made it a bit difficult to hear other singers from their section that were seated away from them.

Bass 1 / Tenor 1	Tenor 2 / Bass 2
Sop 1 / Alto 1	Alto 2 / Sop 2
—	
conductor	

Rehearsal technique:

- 1) Using a tuning fork, Bob would vocalize a single A and singers would quickly find their pitch from that.
- 2) Bob beats the pulse of the music in circular motions without being a slave to any typical conducting pattern. At slower tempi, he gives more of an ictus with a flick of his hand. His hands tend to move in rounded up and down motions, little waves or circles emanating from his abdomen forward in space.

James Potter

[James Potter](#) is a British conductor, choral director, and composer who serves as the Precentor and Director of Music at Magdalene College in Cambridge.

I observed James Potter in rehearsal with the Magdalene College choir on April 30th.

James is an excellent singer who can sing comfortably up in the Countertenor/ Alto range as needed. He quickly and easily gives starting pitches to the choir with a clear centered pitch.

Warmups and Ear Training:

James had the choir practice intervals in a major pentachord up and down from a given pitch.

Do Re Do Te, Do Mi Do Le, Do Fa Do So, Do So, Do Fa

He also had the choir practice a Tritone up and Down from Do

This exercise could easily transfer to from minor based on the minor pentachord.

James then gave the choir a G and asked them to hum any note from the G major harmony. After they hummed their first note, he asked them to hum a different note in the G major harmony from the first note they chose.

After doing this he had them sing a note in each of the following chords in progression.

G major – C major – E minor – A minor – D major – G major – G minor
I IV vi ii V I i

Students were to find some way vocally to connect these chords and stay within the harmony.

Sight-Reading:

James had the choir sight read a short piece entitled *I am the Resurrection*. He then asked them “Is there anything you would do differently?” and had them try it again.

Robert Hollingsworth and IFagiolini

[Robert Hollingworth](#) is a British choral director, singer, conductor, broadcaster and academic. He is the founder and director of the vocal ensemble I Fagiolini and a Reader in Music at the University of York with a focus on music of the Renaissance and Early Baroque periods.

[I Fagiolini](#) is an internationally renowned British vocal ensemble founded in 1986 at Oxford by director Robert Hollingworth. Known for its innovative approach to early and contemporary music, the group specializes in virtuosic, often theatrical performances that bring Renaissance and Baroque repertoire to life. The vocal ensemble typically sings one to a part.

I observed Robert Hollingsworth and iFagiolini in rehearsal for most of the day on May 1st. They were preparing for upcoming concerts in their 40th season as an ensemble.

Technique:

- 1) Robert gives just the root of a chord and the singers find their pitches from his given note.
- 2) Wrench the diphthongs: Instead of singing on the first vowel of a diphthong or triphthong and then quickly moving through the other vowel sounds before the next word, Robert has the singers “wrench (or milk) the diphthong” to give a more interesting and richer color. The trick is to have singers move together through the vowels together, which can be broken down precisely but more easily becomes a matter of habit as people get used to singing this way and as long as people are listening to each other and moving together. For example, the words Now and Thou would be sounded as Naaooooouuu and Thaaaoooouu instead of Naaaaaaou and Thaaaaaaou.
- 3) Singing in French: Robert asks the singers to really get the legato connected linearly. In French, its not so much about word stress as its about maintaining “liquid lines.” English is more syllabic than French and more concerned with syllabic stress. Italian is more about long and short sounds.

- 4) On the word "Adieu" Robert asks them to sing U (ooh) with lots of space in the back to get a more lifted sound.
- 5) Robert is an expert in just intonation. He has an amazing ability to hear and adjust tuning for an ensemble so that it really tunes well. He has a [good resource](#) for this on the iFagiolini website. I was intrigued by the differences in singing diatonic verses chromatic semitones. Diatonic semitones are wider and chromatic semitones are narrower than on a piano. For example, moving from B to B \flat is smaller than moving from B to A \sharp even though the two notes are enharmonically equivalent on an equal tempered piano. Also, in the key of C, moving from F to E will be a little wider than expected because the Major 3rd from C to E is a little narrower in just intonation than on a piano. Similarly moving from C to B is also a little wider than expected since the B will make a major 3rd with the G and this Major 3rd will be a little narrower than on a piano.
- 6) Tuning: Go down 4ths by humming. Mi Re Do Te, keep repeat down a half step with each repetition.
- 7) Encourage opening/widening without tension. It's important to widen the throat instead of narrowing or constricting the throat so that there's less tension. Start with humming, then sing on an ooh vowel or another vowel that's comfortable and move to other vowels.
- 8) Monteverdi's Anima Mia, Perdona: Sing it more like if you were speaking it in terms of phrasing and lightness. Find the one main stress per sentence.

Repertoire rehearsed:

- 1) Tomás Luis Victoria: Alma Redemptoris Mater
- 2) John Wilbye: Cruel, Behold My Heavy Ending
- 3) Thomas Weelkes: Noel, Adieu Thou Court's Delight
- 4) Orazio Vecchi: Daspuò che stabilao
- 5) Claudio Monteverdi: Ah ,Dolente Partita!
- 6) Claudio Monteverdi: Cruda Amarilli
- 7) Jean-Yves Daniel-Lesur: La Voix du Bien-aimé
- 8) Gabriel Fauré: Le Jardin Clos
- 9) Léo Ferré: Chanson d'Automne
- 10) Herbert Howells: The Summer is Coming
- 11) Joanna Marsh: Batter My Heart
- 12) Howard Skepton: Tow Poems of Edward Thomas
- 13) Joanna Marsh: Geocentric
- 14) Ludwig Senfl: Das Glaüt zu Speyer (1534)
- 15) Adrian Williams: Sweetest Love, I Do Not Goe
- 16) John Wilbye: Sweet Honey Sucking Bees
- 17) Claudio Monteverdi: Anima mia, Perdona

Naveen Arles

[Naveen Arles](#) has established himself as an energetic vocal leader and amateur. He has over 25 years of experience running and creating singing groups of all ages and abilities, inspiring them to perform on national television, radio and on major London stages.

I observed Naveen Arles (“Nav”) conducting rehearsals for middle and high school aged singers of the Centre for Young Musicians Choir associated with the Guild Hall School at the Notre Dame Catholic Girls School on May 2.

Naveen leads engaging and energetic rehearsals. He knew how to relate to this age group with humor and well paced activities that brought them into the experience of making music together. He used just the right amount of sarcasm to win their attention but his approach also let them know that he was in charge and that “not participating” wasn’t an option. I appreciated how he engaged the students by asking them questions and giving them time to think and find answers instead of spoon feeding them information. He did a good job of making sure that everybody was brought along in the process so that nobody was left out or sat on the sidelines.

He did some rhythmic games without much verbal direction. This invited the singers to watch him closely in order to learn what to do next and participate. He also had them sing the [Tropical Fruit Twist](#) song by Craig McLeish and another catchy vocal piece called Sing Up’s *In Harmony*. Two videos can be found here: [Video 1](#) and [Video 2](#).

Other warmups included a fun bit of a tongue twister on the words “Kitchen Junk of Chicken Stock.” It was in the vain of this video of [simple warm ups using food terminology](#).

More [inspiration for young voices from Craig McLeish](#) can be found on YouTube.

He introduced me to the concepts of “the intelligent choir” and “vocal painting” by [Jim Daus Hjerne from the Royal Academy of Music](#). Without verbal direction, you can indicate more or less volume by using two fingers on your arm in a V position and sliding them up and down your arm to indicate higher or lower volume.

After warm ups and games, Nav had the youth practice some repertoire for an upcoming performance including a version of You Will Be Found from Dear Evan Hansen. An [SATB version of this by Craig McLeish](#) can be bought at [ChoirCommunity.net](#)

Jonas Rasmussen and Tori Langdon

[Jonas Rasmussen](#) is an award-winning Danish choral conductor, composer, educator, and social media content creator based in Aarhus, Denmark. He is widely recognized as

one of the most distinctive and influential choral voices of his generation, known for bridging artistic excellence with playful, accessible musical engagement. He has a huge social media presence on Instagram and is making more long form [content on YouTube](#) that is fun and engaging.

[Tori Langdon](#) is a highly acclaimed UK choral conductor, broadcaster, and educator who is well-known for coaching choirs for the King's Coronation. She is the Associate Chorus Director of the London Philharmonic Choir, Principal Conductor of the Covent Garden Chorus and co-founder of the Stay at Home Choir.

I participated in the Come & Sing and Conductors Workshop with Jonas Rasmussen and Tori Longdon on May 2nd in London.

Rehearsal Technique:

- 1) Rules for stagger breathing:
 - a) Breathe instead of the notes rather than between notes
 - b) Don't breathe at the same time as your neighbor
 - c) Breathe as much as you need
 - d) Wave your hand when you breathe so your neighbor knows what you're up to
- 2) Remind the choir to sing to the end of long notes. "Be desperately in love with the notes until the end."

Warmups and Focus games

- 1) Have the choir sing a random pitch and then on their own time come around as a group to sing the same pitch. Can also try this with rhythm (everyone decides on a simple rhythmic motive on their own and eventually chants the same rhythm) or on a gesture (everyone decides on a simple gesture on their own and then eventually conforms to the same gesture. Can also experiment with combining two of these elements. For example, any rhythm and pitch or any gesture and pitch. This will reveal group dynamics and really bring together a sense of collaboration. It will show you who collaborates quickly and who insists on their own way and (stubbornly) refuses to adapt by holding an attitude of "follow me, I'm right."
- 2) Clapping Game: I made a good video on this and may also find it on YouTube.
- 3) Tuning activity: Split the choir into two halves and have each half sing a chord in C major (or another a comfortable key) in 6/4 position (So Do Mi) with Tenors and Basses on So, Altos on Do, Sopranos on Mi. I then show either 1 finger or 2 fingers to each half of the choir and point in a direction up or down. 1 finger indicates that each part in that half of the choir moves up/down by a semitone (half step). 2 fingers means move up/down by 2 semitones (a whole step). This is a good way to get bi-tonality going and have students learn the difference between singing half steps and whole steps. Each half of the choir will move

farther apart or closer together according to my gestures. I can also have someone from the choir lead one half of the split choir as I lead the other.

- 4) Bam and Fluff: The choir can only say “Bam” or “Fluff” with a gesture I give. I can also try to communicate a mixture of the two options with a gesture of “Flam.” The point is to see how clearly I can communicate these three gestures and get accurate results. I can try this within a conducting pattern or without using any particular conducting pattern.
- 5) My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean
 - a) Stand sideways and extend your arms from the back of room to the front in a way that doesn’t hit your neighbor. Tilt your arms so that your back arm tilts down and your front arm tilts up
 - b) Start singing My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean. Change the tilt of your arms every time you sing a word starting with a “B” as in “Bonnie”
 - c) Once that’s done add shifting feet by raising the heel on alternate feet each time you sing a word starting with “M” as in “My”
 - d) Once that’s done, add a nod of your head every time you sing a word that begins with the sound “Oh” as in “Ocean” and “Oh”

Conducting Workshop notes

- 1) Breathing gives consistency in conducting, much like gravity gives consistency in our natural world
- 2) Conductor Charades: communicate the concepts of Yes and No only with gesture (body gesture, facial gesture, etc.) Have the choir say Yes and No as you gesture. Then have them say the opposite of what you gesture.
- 3) Conduct a character or emotion. Have the choir guess the word you show. Examples of words might be “delightful,” “stressed,” “angry,” “depressed,” “sombre” etc.
- 4) Conducting gesture: Ask yourself: how little can I do to show the character of what I want?
- 5) Try conducting with palms down and palms up and hear the result. Hands open is inviting and conducting with more open hands invites a different relationship between you and the singers. If I conduct with open hands by cradling my hands in smaller gestures closer to my body, I communicate something differently than if I conduct with open hands in larger gestures with my hands spaced farther apart.
- 6) It’s important to find one’s own “neutral” that works for their body type and makes sense for them. Neutral can be your table where your ictus reliably lands. Once you have established neutral for yourself and the singers, singers will have a sense of consistency and you can then stray from neutral in your gesture to communicate something different to the singers.
- 7) It’s also important to establish a neutral for the sake of communicating legato. Once legato is firmly understood, then staccato, marcato, accents, etc. will make more sense. Try conducting side to side for legato instead of only being downward focussed towards the “table.” Try conducting with a more open hand as you move side to side with a little more circular motion in upward cupped gestures. Try conducting this way with only one hand to communicate subtlety.

- 8) By establishing your neutral space and gesture, you can recalibrate your minimums and maximums so that your bigger gestures mean fortissimo and your smaller gestures mean pianissimo.
- 9) Whatever you choose to do (up hand or down hand gesture), stick with it! Don't change willy nilly between them or the choir won't understand your meaning. Only change from neutral to make meaning.
- 10) When conducting, you can connect to the next phrase by breathing in time and by making sure the phrases are connected by the kind of breath you take.
- 11) "Warm ups" are for locking in together as a choir and conductor, not so much for warming up the voice. Jonas prefers calling warmups "Lock in Sessions" because you can come back to them at any time during the rehearsal to "lock in" again rather than just at the beginning of rehearsal to warm up. It's good to "sign post" and explain to the choir why you are doing a particular warm up or lock in session. It helps people learn and connect to their learning.
- 12) Building towards memorization: Practice passages by ear, away from the music. Memorize the music as a conductor so that you also model the importance of memorization. Try memorizing in smaller bits, i.e. 2 bars at a time. Change up the rehearsal process all the time with time for memorization so that people get used to memorizing in little bits.
- 13) When a piece (or larger section of a piece) is due for memory, Jonas turns off all the lights in the room and has the students sing it in the dark. The only illumination is on him from an iPad that is on his music stand reflecting his face and arms so they can see his gesture and expression.
- 14) Choir is like a forest. In the forest there are both trees (people who can stand by themselves and hold their own part) and koalas (people who need to hug a tree to feel secure in their part. Semi-scrambling is a mixed formation in which koalas can bring a friend with you for security's sake.
- 15) Students want to sing to each other more than they want to sing to me. Have students look each other in the eyes.
- 16) Encourage students to sing strong and wrong instead of meek and weak. You wouldn't want to give a weak handshake to your girlfriend's/boyfriend's parents that you're meeting for the first time.
- 17) Healthy competition can help engage people in rehearsal. For example, "TB sing louder than SA" or "Everyone sing louder than me."

Other Choir performances

In addition to the formal observations I made of choirs in rehearsal as listed above, I also enjoyed hearing several choirs in service and performance. These included two free lunchtime performances by St. Martins Voices at St. Martins-in-the-Field Church in London; a Eucharist service and Evensong service by the Choir of Gonville and Caius College in Cambridge; an Evensong service by the Choir of Kings College in Cambridge; performances by the Bath Community Gospel Choir, Bath Show Choir and Horizons One Hundred (choir and orchestra) at "Party in the City;" and a Eucharist service by the Abbey Girls and Lay Clerks at Bath Abbey. In general, I can say that the

standard of these performances in England was quite high particularly for the church services. Singers were engaged and committed to the music they were singing.

Full List of Choirs observed in rehearsal, service, and performance

Date(s)	Name of Choir and Location
April 21	Milton Keynes Community Choir, Milton Keynes
April 22	Library Sessions choir for recording with Ben Parry, School Farm Studios
April 23 and 27	St Martins Voices at St Martins-in-the-Fields Church, London
April 25	Come and Sing Day Choir with Matthew Coleridge, Harrogate
April 26	Stowe School Choral Society with Craig McLeish, Stowe
April 27 and 28	Choir of Kings College, London
April 28	Conducting Masterclass Choir, Royal Academy of Music, London
April 29	Commotio, Oxford
April 30 and May 3	Choir of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge
April 30	Choir of Magdalene College, Cambridge
May 2	Centre for Young Musicians Choir, Guild Hall School, London
May 2	Come and Sing Day Choir with Jonas Rasmussen and Tori London, London
May 3	Choir of Kings College, Cambridge
May 16	Bath Community Gospel Choir, Bath Show Choir and Horizons One Hundred (choir and orchestra)
May 17	Abbey Girls and Lay Clerks Choir, Bath Abbey

Addendum: Conversations with Composers during Sabbatical

Composer interactions: Conversations with Peter Robb, Craig McLeish, Matthew Coleridge, and Cecilia McDowall.

Peter Robb

Peter is a composer from Eugene, Oregon who is writing a new piece for treble voices on the mid 13th century medieval text *Sumer is Icumen in*.

We discussed the importance of composing away from the piano. While the piano is very useful as a compositional tool, using it can lead you in certain directions that are less than vocally optimal because the fingers have their own musical tendencies that are different from the voice. It can be more helpful to conceive and write vocal lines by singing them. You can still use the piano to work out harmonic structure.

It is also a good practice (and quite a different challenge) to write a purely *a cappella* work because the overtones of the piano aren't present to help cement the upper voices or add richness to the harmony. The importance of voice leading becomes more salient and chord voicings can really affect how rich and brilliant (or dull and flat) the choir sounds. There are no hard and fast rules to guide one and the process can be quite mysterious. One must hone and trust their musical ear as a guide. Composition can be thought of as a puzzle to solve on many levels!

We discussed the importance of sketching out an entire piece without getting bogged down in details too early in the process as that can lead to getting stuck in minutiae. Even if the sketch is rudimentary (i.e. sketches of motives, gestures, textures that work together rhythmically) it can be helpful to achieve a working conception of the piece as a whole. The sketch may not even sound musical in the beginning, but one shouldn't be too concerned with this as it is merely an initial stage in a "drafting" process. I think this can be very helpful advice to me as I do tend to dive into details early and can't find the forest for the trees.

We discussed including "easter eggs" in the music...little moments of musical wonder and discovery for the singer/listener that are special surprises. We also discussed the importance of a natural build up to a climactic moment, perhaps at the durational "golden mean" of the piece.

We discussed the importance of researching the text for alternate meanings....he mentioned that the text in *Sumer is Icumen in* about the goats "farting" was interpreted

as “jumping around” in the Victorian age, but this may say more about that age’s social norms and mores than about the original meaning of the Medieval text.

We discussed different ways to incorporate onomatopoeic sounds for animals...instead of representing sheep “bleating” with the word “bleat,” this could be accomplished with a falling “baaah” motive which actually sounds more like sheep and sings better.

Other animal sounds relationships were: cows “moo,” goats “toot,” loudly sings “cuckoo” which all have assonance.

Craig McLeish

Craig is a prolific and versatile composer in a wide variety of styles. We conversed on a whole range of musical topics over the days we spent together. Craig exposed me to choral repertoire that he loved and introduced me to more of his own compositions. I was also able to see him work a bit in his studio.

Craig tends to compose in part by singing a line that comes to him and his music feels naturally vocal because of this. He was trained as a singer from the age of seven in St. Paul’s Cathedral and was exposed to masterworks of choral/vocal music on a daily basis for years as a child. He often comes up with a harmonic plan for his works and then writes vocal lines to fit within the chordal structure. He has a wealth of information on repertoire and has a keen sense for composing and arranging vocal music. He plays piano and guitar quite well and is very adroit at mixing music in Logic and Pro Tools.

Matthew Coleridge

I was able to have a brief conversation with Matthew Coleridge during a break from rehearsing his music at the Come and Sing Day in Harrogate on April 25th. Below are some notes from that conversation:

- 1) Q: Do you start with text or music first? A: Sometimes he starts with a couple of chords (i.e. in a passage that begins “Be Still” from *Breath of Life*, vii. *These Great Trees are Prayers*) or sometimes a rhythmic idea is the germ of a piece (as in *Adam Lay Ybounden*), but mostly the text gives him ideas. In one case (*Benedicite* from *Breath of Life*) he wrote the music first and then found words to fit. Once a living poet put words to music he wrote and it worked perfectly: *The Heart’s Affections*

- 2) He considers *Breath of Life*, vii. *These Great Trees are Prayers* to be his best work to date
- 3) He finds different texts, puts them all on a wall and explores various ways to combine them.
- 4) He also composes using Sibelius (notation software) where he can hear lines and build from there. He plans to move to using Dorico (notation software) as he has heard it is better.

Cecilia McDowall

[Cecilia McDowall](#) is the most prominent composer I was able to interview. She is one of the UK's leading composers of sacred and secular choral music, best known for her expressive choral and vocal music. She is widely celebrated for a highly communicative style that blends lyrical melodies, rhythmic exuberance, and rich colorful harmonies with occasional dissonance. She has won many prestigious awards and her music has been commissioned and performed by leading choirs and orchestras and at festivals worldwide.

I spent 90 minutes talking with Cecilia McDowall about music and composition over tea at the Victoria & Albert Museum on April 28th. I gleaned many things about her process of composition from our conversation. Here are some questions I asked and her answers, summarized by me from the notes I took during our meeting.

- 1) Q. What do you do when you get stuck?

A: She takes a break, keeps improvising, lets it marinate, goes to bed, starts again. If she gets too attached to a bit that's not working and has to revise or let go of a passage that isn't serving the whole, she remembers a quote by Samuel Johnson who wrote the dictionary: "Don't be afraid to sacrifice your pretty ones."

- 2) Q: How do you first approach a piece after having selected the texts? Do you sketch a larger form first? Does the poetry usually suggest a form?

A: Interviews on [Woman's hour](#) and a [Choralosophy Podcast](#) have Cecilia talking about her process. She told me that her process is unique to each piece and that she has to find her way each time. Often the commission will demand a length and dictate the forces and the poetry will suggest a form or structure.

She will sometimes sketch out a plan, develop a harmonic language charting where she wants to go, and get to work. She tries to preserve an economy of means by using just the right amount of motivic or thematic material and

developing it, often through repetition that is varied in some way so as not to get boring. She moves between the pillars of harmony she has charted out, looking for opportunities for word painting, and with an eye and ear to how the music can always move forward.

She mentioned that a conductor once told her that a piece of hers was a study in E major. She had begun the piece in E major then began to transform the harmony with classy notes from the next scale degree up (or half step) so that there was lots of dissonance until she resolved it in the new chord. This would continue as she passed through various keys, but she ended up back in E major in the middle of the piece as well as at the end. The music traveled through various keys between pillars of E major on its own musical journey.

- 3) Q: What are you looking for in a text? I noticed that some of your most recent chosen texts connect to a larger world issue. Has that become more important for you over time?

A: She is looking for texts that can be organized around a central idea that people can relate to. *The Girl from Aleppo, Bird of Time, Music of the Stars*, etc. all come to mind.

- 4) Q: You write so well for keyboard. What is your process in writing a vocal piece with an independent keyboard part that supports the voices but has its own identity?

A: She does play piano and studied piano, cello, and oboe as a student. She sings all of the vocal lines to make sure they work for the singers and are enjoyable to sing. She tries to give the altos something to sing that's not boring!

She also told me that many of her works are flexible and can be done on the piano instead of organ or instead of being accompanied with strings.

- 5) Q: Your music is lyrical but also has an energetic, rhythmic quality that keeps it moving forward and is engaging to the singer and listener. How do you write vocal parts that don't sound like they are too instrumental, but are naturally vocal in nature? Do you start with the rhythm of the text? Do you sing your ideas for lines?

A. Yes, see above (question 4)

- 6) Q: How do you confront the challenge in choral writing of keeping the text intelligible, especially when writing polyphonic lines with other instruments? Do

you find there's a dilemma or trade off in writing interesting parts with a modern sensibility and keeping the text intelligible?

A: This is always a challenge, but she uses repetition and keeps an ear to dynamics to do her best to make the text intelligible.

7) Q: What specific qualities in a poem or prose passage make you believe it will "sing" well versus being better left as a spoken work?

A: Check out *O Sing unto the Lord*. She avoids texts with too many prepositions (and, of, but, etc.) She uses repetition with variation to get the ideas of the text across to the singers and listeners.

8) Q: How much does the actual *sound* of the vowels and consonants (independent of their meaning) influence your choice of pitch or vocal registration?

A: She uses melismas to bring a vowel to a comfortable range for a given part; she knows the difference between men closing vowels in a higher range and women opening vowels in a higher range so she sometimes has to work a passage to a comfortable range on a melisma until it will really sing in a comfortable range for the singer and be understandable for the listener. Check out *Christus Natus Est* and her cantata *A Winters Night*.

9) Q: How do you handle texts that have been set many times before (like the Latin Mass)? Do you consciously try to avoid them to maintain an original voice?

A: She's been asked to set *I Know That My Redeemer Liveth*, *In Dulci Jubilo*, *Let All The World Sing*, and other texts that are well known and have been done so many times before. She just has to deal with it and get to work to make it her own. It doesn't seem that she enjoys this as much, but she does her job to do her best with her own creation.

10)Q: When writing polyphonic or staggered parts, how do you ensure the audience can still discern the intended meaning of the words?

A: She uses dynamics and repetition. See above (question 6)

11)Q: How do you differentiate your personal style from the many "imitators" of popular contemporary choral sounds?

A: Her harmonic choices and her harmonic language is her thumbprint. She doesn't like overly homophonic writing that we see in so much contemporary choral music. From my perspective, I can say that she writes polyphony well.

One of her works seems to borrow from a key change in Lauridsen's *O Magnum Mysterium*, but it worked! This was *Ave Maris Stella* (can be done *a cappella*).

Select compositions we spoke about or that I listened to/read about in preparation for this interview include:

- *Standing as I do before God* (Tenebrae) integrates a soloist in with the choir. It sets to music the powerful final reflections of World War I nurse Edith Cavell, who was executed by a German firing squad in 1915
- *Alma Redemptoris Mater* (Seraphic Fire)—Medieval sounding
- *Music of the Stars* — It captures the magnificence of the stars and speaks to power of music to console and uplift. Some text by Neil Degrasse Tyson and Cecilia feels that setting prose to music needs a different approach. There's a moment where the strings drop out and the choir sings a cappella...it's like a brilliant moment of "ahh" (beholding the stars).
- *Bird of Time* — collaboration with Seàn Street, inspired in part by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, it explores the fragility of nature, the passage of time, and humankind's relationship with birds, reflecting on themes of sorrow, loss, and hope. Brilliant writing, the end of the second movement is so haunting.
- *Songs of the North* (2026)...uses an 821 form. Sets fantastic texts celebrating 50 years of the Northern Poetry Library. It includes the folksong *Water of Tyne* and addresses the felling of the Sycamore Gap Tree.
- *On Angel's Wing* is a 15 minute cantata about the beauty of the natural world.
- *Night Flight* is a piece about Harriet Quimby's pioneering flight across the English Channel in 1912. It won the British Composer Award for Choral music in 2014.
- *Photo 51* is a piece about the pioneering work of Roselyn Franklin and her often-overlooked role in discovering DNA's double-helix structure.
- *O Oriens* hails Christ as the "Morning Star," a symbol of hope and light piercing through winter's darkness. It is on a CD she gave me.
- *Good News from New England* is an *a cappella* piece with audience participation that sets William Bradford's account of the Pilgrims' arrival after their long, perilous journey. It includes a poem from his wife who died mid journey, possibly by suicide. A movement called *Thanksgiving* can be excerpted. It ends with the "old hundredth" hymn tune which can be sung by the audience along with the choir.