

INSPIRATION IN ENGLAND/WALKING THE COTSWOLD WAY

Sabbatical Proposal submitted by Matthew Svoboda

I. INTENT AND PLAN

The intent of my sabbatical would be 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.

Background on my professional work in Choir and Composition

I hold dual masters degrees in Composition and Conducting which prepared me for my work professionally. For more than 23 years, I have been fortunate to direct choirs of various ages and skill levels. This has included extended work in Eugene as Director of Choral Activities at Lane Community College, Director of Music at Central Presbyterian Church, and Assistant Director at Oregon Festival Chorus as well as shorter term engagements with the Eugene Chamber Singers, the Eugene Symphony Chorus, and the Oregon Bach Festival Chorus. As a composer, I have written numerous works for chamber ensembles and choreographers and been commissioned to compose new works for the Pacific Youth Choir (Portland, OR) and Sage Ridge School (Reno, NV). My music has been used for liturgical purposes at Central Presbyterian Church; presented at the Oregon Aquarium, the Northwest Screen Dance Festival, and the Oregon Higher Education Conference on Sustainability; and featured in performances by the Oregon Repertory Singers and at numerous dance concerts at the University of Oregon and Lane Community College.

Background on my professional connections in England

Over the course of more than two decades, I have made professional connections with choral directors, composers and administrators who can assist me with my sabbatical goals, including Val Withams, Bob Chilcott, Craig McLeish, and Gitika Partington. These connections started when I served for 10 years as Director of Operations for the Pacific International Children's Choir Festival (PICCFEST) and have continued throughout my work as Director of Choral Activities at Lane Community College. A bit of context about each of these connections follows and letters of support from Val Withams and Craig McLeish are attached.

After working in music publishing, [Val Withams](#), founded [Choral Connections](#), an agency and management service in England "dedicated to working with choral composers and conductors, supporting them in their work, and creating new projects." Val represents Bob Chilcott and many other composers and conductors in the United Kingdom. As stated in her letter of support (attached), Val and is well positioned to "introduce [me] to some exciting opportunities" via her work with "Oxbridge Colleges and Universities, Cathedrals, professional ensembles, choral societies, community choirs, and children's and youth choirs" in England.

I first met [Bob Chilcott](#) in 2005 when he was a guest conductor at PICCFEST and have interacted with him multiple times during the six festivals he returned to in the same capacity. I have also featured his music in performance with the Lane Chamber Choir.

In Fall of 2020, as the world was finding its way forward during the pandemic, I learned about [ChoirCommunity](#), an organization based in the United Kingdom that was providing accessible

choir music at an affordable price. [Craig McLeish](#), one of the founders of ChoirCommunity, had written a piece called *Back to Zoom Choir!* which he gifted to choirs at no charge. Along with LCC's Media Services and Colin Gruener, a student in Media Arts, members of the Lane Chamber Choir and I created a video of [Back to Zoom Choir!](#) which received some regional recognition when it was featured in a [story by KLCC](#) that aired statewide on Morning Edition and All Things Considered.

In time, I submitted this video for consideration to the 60 Seconds of Sound contest hosted by ChoirCommunity. The Lane Chamber Choir took first place in the contest and as a result was awarded some money to spend on new repertoire and a commission by English composer and choral educator [Gitika Partington](#). Gitika interacted with the Lane Chamber Choir over zoom in Fall of 2023, completed her commission in Winter 2024, and the choir gave the world premiere of her new work *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* in Spring 2024.

Summary of 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 write *Walking the Cotswold Way* (working title), an extended composition based on the experience.

Proposed Timeline/Itinerary:

I need a sabbatical to accomplish my goals, and believe Spring term offers the best timing to do so, for several reasons. First, like many other performing arts organizations, collegiate and community choirs actively rehearse during the academic year from September to June before "going dark" in the summer months when members go on holiday or are otherwise "on break." Visiting England in Spring allows me the opportunity to observe choirs in rehearsal at their peak before they break for summer. Second, Spring is an ideal time to walk the Cotswold Way when fewer tourists crowd the area on vacation, less rainfall occurs on average than at any other time of the year, and the walking and surroundings (i.e. mild weather, wildflowers) tend to be at their peak. Third, in order to create at my best, I need time, space, and a quiet atmosphere in which to work. Taking a sabbatical at a time when my spouse is at work and our child is at school affords me a quiet space at home during the day in which to compose, something not available to me in the evenings or over the summer. Last but not least, taking a sabbatical in Spring term (rather than in Fall or Winter) is better for our own music program since starting the academic year is always a "heavy lift." I can be available in the Fall to help my colleagues get our new cohort of core students situated. Likewise, I can be present to audition the Chamber Choir in the Fall, sustain it through the Winter, and transition it to a colleague as a healthy group in the Spring so that continuity is best maintained in our choral program.

Preparatory Work (Summer 2025 through Winter 2026)

1. Arrange all travel and lodging at destinations along the Cotswold way. Stays in Chipping Camden, Stanton, Winchcombe, Cleeve Hill, Seven Springs, Birdlip, Painswick, Selsley Common, Dursley, Wotton-under-Edge, Hawkesbury Upton, Tormarton, Cold Ashton, and Bath. (See map below)
2. Arrange rehearsal observations and composer interviews in London and Oxford with help of Val Withams and Craig McLeish who have each offered their assistance in doing so. (See attached letters of support)
3. Research 1) English choral tradition and approach to vocal tone and placement and 2) Strategies for selecting, adapting, writing and setting texts for composition. (See Resource List below)
4. Familiarize myself with the geography and history of the Cotswolds (particularly as it relates to the route I would walk on the Cotswold Way) and equipment/resources I will need for the trek. (See Resource List below).
5. Take local/regional 8-10 mile hikes to condition myself physically for the demands of the trek.
6. Familiarize myself with new approaches to incorporating electronic media into composition (i.e. Ableton Live, Logic, Tidal Cycles).

March/April 2026 (Week 1 of term)

- Finalize preparations for walking the Cotswold Way
- Travel to England and get settled in London

April 2026 (Week 2 of term)

- Observe choir rehearsals/performances in London (See letters of support from Craig McLeish and Val Withams for a list of potential choirs to observe)
- Interviews with composers in London: Gitika Partington and/or others that Val Withams helps me arrange. (See letter of support from Val Withams)
- Begin selection, adaptation, and/or writing of texts for composition

April 2026 (Week 3 of term)

- Travel to Oxford
- Observe choir rehearsals/performances in Oxford (See letters of support from Craig McLeish and Val Withams for a list of potential choirs to observe)
- More interviews with composers: Craig McLeish, Bob Chilcott and/or others that Val Withams helps me arrange. (See letter of support from Val Withams)
- Continued work on selection, adaptation, and/or writing of texts for composition

April 2026 (Week 4 of term)

- Travel to Chipping Camden by train and bus
- Begin walking the Cotswold Way from Chipping Camden to Painswick via Broadway, Stanton, Wood Stanway, Hailes, Winchcombe, Cleeve Hill, Dowdeswell Reservoir, Seven Springs, Ullenwood, Crickley Hill, Birdlip, and Cranham Corner (See map below)
- Journaling, compiling materials for composition (interviews, sounds from the trail), and brainstorming/sketching initial ideas

April/May 2026 (Week 5 of term)

- Continue walking the Cotswold Way from Painswick to Bath via Selsley Common, Dursley, North Nibley, Wotton-under-Edge, Alderley, Lower Kilcott, Hawkesbury Upton, Horton, Little Sodbury, Old Sodbury, Coomb's End, Tormarton, Dryhem, Pennsylvania, and Cold Ashton (See map below)
- Journaling, compiling materials for composition (interviews, sounds from the trail), and brainstorming/sketching initial ideas
- Return to London following trek

May 2026 (Week 6 of term)

- Return to Eugene
- Finalize selection, adaptation, and/or writing of texts for composition
- Begin composition: determine overall form and instrumentation including any electronic elements; draft melodic ideas and harmonic plan

May 2026 (Week 7 of term)

- Continued work on composition: set texts with melodic lines, solidify harmonic choices and begin to write "short score" at piano

May 2026 (Week 8 of term)

- Continued work on composition: begin to orchestrate from "short score"
- Work through inevitable challenges that arise

May 2026 (Week 9 of term)

- Finalize work on composition: fully realize melodic, harmonic, and orchestrational plan
- Incorporate any electronic media
- Make necessary revisions to piece

June 2026 (Week 10 of term)

- Scribe composition into professional notation software

June 2026 (Week 11 of term)

- Create parts for individual players
- Proofreading and editing of composition and parts

II. GROWTH

Growth as a Faculty Member (Observation and Interviews)

Having an extended opportunity to learn from other choral directors and composers in England will inform my work directing choirs and teaching music at Lane Community College in multiple ways. For me, the rich benefit of learning from others in a different culture is rooted in encountering other points of view, other ways of working, other ways of solving technical demands, and other ways of achieving an aesthetic and artistic vision. In turn, these learning opportunities translate into real world experience that I can incorporate into my work with students at Lane Community College.

Through observation and engagement with other choral directors and composers in England, I intend to gain a better understanding of their approach to the following:

1) Rehearsals/Programming/Performance/Community building

Val Withams and Craig McLeish have offered to help me connect with choirs to observe in rehearsal and performance. Both of these professionals are networked to a wide variety of English choirs that differ in terms of ability, purpose, and approach to the choral arts. Observing various choral directors in action with singers is an indispensable way to gain new perspectives and approaches to teaching, become acquainted with new repertoire, and find inspiration as a choir director at Lane Community College.

2) English Choral Tradition/Choral Tone and Vocal Placement

England has a long and rich history of choral music that predates that of the United States and largely developed in cathedrals and their associated schools for boy choirs. As a result, English choirs are known for cultivating a pure, bright, and straight tone without too much vibrato. This differs from the typical tone of American choirs which developed in the mixed choir tradition of the 20th century and is characterized as being rounder and with more vibrato. I wish to learn firsthand about the English Choral tradition and how this distinction in tonal approach is achieved through differences in resonance placement.

3) Composition and Text Setting

Interviews with composers I have an established relationship with (Gitika Partington, Craig McLeish, and Bob Chilcott), and/or others that Val Withams helps me arrange, will be beneficial as I prepare to write my own new work for voices and instruments based on walking the Cotswold Way.

I am interested in interviewing various composers about how they approach

- 1) selecting, adapting, writing and setting texts for music
- 2) composing for the voice; lyrical considerations, setting vowels and consonants
- 3) other musical elements: harmonic and melodic choices, color palette, density of texture, phrasing and form

Growth as a Professional (Composition)

Walking the Cotswold Way and composing a piece about the experience will enrich my professional life as a composer. With the demands of my job at Lane and the realities of family life, it's difficult to devote myself to composing an extended piece of this nature. Having the time and space to engage in creative work of this scope and magnitude will challenge me to compose on a larger scale, something that I can't achieve in fits and starts in my day to day life. Walking a 102 mile solo trek and composing a piece about the experience will also provide me an opportunity to live for a time in a kind of "monastic mindset" that will be rejuvenating, artistically and otherwise.

With this part of my sabbatical, I intend to achieve the following:

1) Walking the Cotswold Way

I intend to walk the Cotswold Way, a 102 mile journey from Chipping Camden to Bath, England. (See map below) I intend to take 13 days to complete this journey by foot, leaving time for exploration and reflection along the way. During the journey, I will be carrying a field recorder and cell phone to collect experiences, interviews, sounds, thoughts, and inspiration for generating new music.

2) Composition and Premiere of New Work

Once I finish walking the Cotswold Way, I intend to write an extended composition for voices, instruments, and/or electronic media with specific instrumentation being determined by my experience during the journey. This new work will be premiered at LCC in the 2026-2027 academic year.

Relation to Previous Sabbatical

I was awarded a one term sabbatical in Spring term 2018. During that sabbatical, I engaged in a prolonged study of improvisation techniques and collaborated with choreographers Jana Meszaros and Sarah Nemecek, the multi-media artist Laura Glazer, set/lighting designer James McConkey and the poet John Darin to compose new works for dance and choir. The work for dance centered around the life and poetry of Hazel Hall and resulted in *The Room Upstairs*, a multimovement dance piece premiered by Lane dance students in Winter 2019. The work for choir resulted in a *Mountains*, an *a cappella* choral piece premiered by the Lane Chamber Choir in Winter 2019.

While my previous sabbatical also resulted in the creation of new, original music, I see this sabbatical as diverging in new directions from the work I accomplished during that leave. My sabbatical in 2018 largely focussed on improvisational techniques and collaboration with artists from other disciplines in the United States. In contrast, this sabbatical is centered around observing and learning from other choral professionals in a new cultural context and composing new work based on a personal, solo experience in that culture.

Learning in a different cultural context is always a rich experience. While I have visited England as a tourist in the past, it has only been for a brief vacation and not with these focussed learning objectives in mind. I am excited by the prospect of learning from others in

England because I have developed relationships with English choral colleagues who can connect me with meaningful learning experiences. Moreover, centering a sabbatical in England allows me an opportunity to learn approaches and concepts at a deeper level without the limitations of a language barrier. Likewise, taking a 102 mile solo trek through the Cotswolds and composing new work based on that adventure would be a new experience for me. Though I'm an avid hiker, I have never attempted a solo trek of this length and I'm excited by the prospect of creating new work that would come from such a personal journey.

III. RELEVANCE AND VALUE

The activities of my proposed sabbatical are relevant and beneficial to my work at Lane and in the larger community. These activities will inform my teaching in multiple subjects (Chamber Choir and Music Theory) and result in new work I compose and premiere at LCC. I expect the benefits to pay dividends for the long term in the following specific ways:

1. Observing choir rehearsals in England will give me new insights into how others approach choral rehearsal, performance, tone production, and community building. This will directly inform and invigorate my own work with choral students in the classroom and with local and regional choirs that I interact with in recruitment visits and choral concerts/festivals held annually at LCC.
2. Interviewing composers will enlighten my own understanding of how others approach formal matters in text setting and composition. This directly relates to my work with students in Music Theory and Chamber Choir as I help them uncover a composer's intent in setting text for music, engage with the challenging subject of counterpoint, or grasp the inner life and meaning of the music they compose, analyze or sing. It will likewise help inform the decisions I make as I select, adapt and/or write texts for *Walking the Cotswold Way* and any future works involving voices and instruments.
3. Focused preparatory research on the English choral tradition, the English approach to vocal tone and placement, and on matters regarding text setting and composition will prepare me for observations and interviews with choral professionals so that I gain the most from these interactions.
4. Composing *Walking the Cotswold Way* will result in new music to be premiered at LCC and enjoyed by local/regional audiences.

I firmly believe that one needs to continually study, practice, and create in order to teach music to others in a way that is relevant, authentic, and passionate. I am confident that the learning that results from this sabbatical will pay dividends in my abilities to effectively teach students at Lane. Likewise, facing the challenges that this sabbatical provides will make my own artistic growth current and credible to students navigating their own paths in music. Composing an extended piece of this nature will certainly sharpen my own compositional skills as I work through creative roadblocks, obstacles, and other challenges that arise much like our students face in their own pursuit of musical excellence.

IV. COLLEGE CORE VALUES

The college articulates the core value of “Learning” as 1) working together to create a learning-centered environment; 2) recognizing and respecting the unique needs and potential of each learner; and 3) fostering a culture of achievement in a caring community. I will address each of these in turn.

- 1) I am excited to learn how choir directors in England approach “flipping the classroom” to create learning centered opportunities that engage singers’ curiosity and develop their own sense of personal agency during rehearsal and performance. I am equally excited to learn how other composers approach matters of composition and text setting so that I can gain new insights and perspectives that I can share with students.
- 2) I have purposely asked Val Withams and Craig McLeish to connect me with choirs of various skill levels so that I can see a variety of approaches in rehearsal. I am eager to see how new approaches I learn can be applied to students at Lane who have unique needs as well as differing aspirations and learning styles.
- 3) The experience of learning and performing music is social and collaborative by nature yet fraught at times with anxiety as students risk vulnerability in front of their peers, teachers, and an audience. I am excited to learn how choir directors in England approach building community so that singers feel safe and supported as human beings, face their fears, and persist to realize greater levels of musical and personal achievement.
- 4) Furthermore, composing a new work is always a rich learning experience as I learn to face the “blank page” and realize my ideas. The process can be messy and at times exasperating; rarely is it straightforward or easy. I expect my learning and growth to be significant with this project since I have not attempted to compose an extended piece for voices and instruments since graduate school (over 20 years ago).

V. EVALUATION OF SUCCESS and DISSEMINATION

The markers of personal learning, growth and success that can come from this sabbatical will be evident in the takeaways and finished work that I accomplish.

I will keep an organized record of observations, conversations, and interviews with choral conductors and composers with whom I interact in England. This record will be a valuable resource to me upon my return to the classroom and inform my approach to such matters as warmups, rehearsal sequencing, approach to vocal tone, community building, and helping students understand the meaningful relationships that occur between text and music. In addition, I intend to share a summary of my learning with my music colleagues at LCC with the hope that it may inform and inspire their own work with students and in the community at large.

Another marker of success will be the completed composition, *Walking the Cotswold Way*, which I intend to premiere at Lane in the 2026-2027 academic year following my sabbatical. Depending on the final instrumentation of the composition, possibilities for presenting the completed work include programming it for concert separately or as part of a choir, band, or electronic music concert(s) in Fall 2026, Winter 2027, or Spring 2027.

At this point, I am purposely leaving final decisions about voicing, instrumentation, and the incorporation of electronic media open so that it can be informed by my experience of walking the Cotswold Way. Nonetheless, I am excited by the possibility of incorporating sounds I collect “from the trail” as part of the work and being inspired by conversations with others I encounter along the route. I am also excited by the prospect of extending the work beyond any initial performance(s) by creating a video version that could be experienced online or presented without live performers. With this in mind, I plan to take photos and/or record videos of the landscape and people I meet along the trail. This would open up the possibility of dissemination of the work beyond the concert format in which it is initially presented.

I am encouraged towards this aim because of the positive, statewide attention that the video of *Back To Zoom Choir!* received during the pandemic. In addition, I was delighted by how well the music and dance video *Seastar* was received by audiences at the Northwest Screen Dance Festival, the Oregon Higher Education Conference on Sustainability, and via the Oregon Coast Aquarium’s email and social media networks. Not only did this represent Lane Arts well in the larger community, but it helped educate an estimated 15,000 people about the plight of sea stars and issues of sustainability/environmental stewardship.

I expect to continue to grow as a conductor, composer, and teacher for many years to come and see this sabbatical as an opportunity to delve into an extended and focused study that will push me to new levels of skill and realization in these pursuits. Likewise, I know that I personally thrive when I am able to engage in creative work that is challenging and inspiring to me. I hope that my own passions for pursuing creative work can inspire others to do the same in ways that are meaningful to them. As is my nature, I will share my sabbatical experience both formally and informally through conversations with faculty, staff, and administrators as opportunities present themselves.

RESOURCE LIST

Resources for the Study of English Choral Music

Caldwell, John. *The Oxford History of English Music, Vol. 1: from the Beginnings to c. 1715*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992. Print.

Caldwell, John. *The Oxford History of English Music, Vol. 2: from c. 1715 to the Present Day*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

Karolyi, Otto. *Modern British Music: The Second British Musical Renaissance—From Elgar to P. Maxwell Davies*. Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1994. Print.

Resources for the Study of Composition and Text Setting

Barker, Paul. *Composing for Voice: A Guide for Composers, Singers, and Teachers*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print

Barker, Paul Alan and Maria Huesca. *Composing for Voice: Exploring Voice, Language and Music*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge, 2018. Print.

Kerchner, Jody L. and Katherine Strand, editors. *Musicianship: Composing in Choir*. Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2016. Print.

Keys, Scarlett. *The Craft of Songwriting: Music, Meaning, and Emotion*. Boston: Berkeley Press, 2018. Print.

Longenbach, James. *How Poems Get Made*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018. Print.

Parker, Alice. *The Answering Voice: The Beginnings of Counterpoint*. Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 2014. Print.

Young, Toby, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Composition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Print.

Resources related to the Cotswolds and Cotswold Way

Hayne, Tricia and Bob Hayne. *Cotswold Way: 44 large scale maps & guides to 48 towns and villages. Planning - Places to Stay - Places to Eat. Chipping Camden to Bath*. Fifth ed. researched and updated by Bryn Thomas. Surrey, UK: Trailblazer Publications, 2024. Print.

Teller, Matthew. *The Rough Guide to the Cotswolds: Stratford-Upon Avon & Oxford*. 4th ed. London: APA Publications, UK Ltd. 2021. Print.

Map Overview of Cotswold Way (Chipping Camden to Bath)

