

# THE PETERBOROUGH SOUND

GARY SIELING

This year gives church musicians the chance to focus on the work of Dr Stanley Vann, born on 15 February 1910. Choir trainers especially can learn a great deal from his methods, approach and success. It was during his time as Master of the Music at Peterborough Cathedral (1953–1977) that his style of choir training was fine-tuned; as a result, his choir was generally regarded as one of the finest in the country. There was a friendly rivalry for top spot with King’s College, Cambridge, at that time in the capable hands of David Willcocks. Lovers of cathedral music would travel significant distances to experience the unique Peterborough sound of Dr Vann’s choir.

Foremost in the musical menu was psalm singing. Stanley wrote a large number of eloquent psalm chants, some to match specific psalms. There is a special beauty and cohesion between psalm and Vann chant which can greatly enhance psalm singing. Some chants are published in an album, and others are shared in manuscript between appreciative choirmasters. Examples of Peterborough psalm singing are available on CD and even on YouTube. The style is



unhurried, fluent and shapely, with excellent diction, worshipping the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

One aspect of the Peterborough sound, which many of us lesser choir trainers seek to reproduce, was the gentle insistence on quiet singing. ‘Only the very best choirs can sing quietly’: I have heard one comment that Dr Vann’s choir could achieve ‘a thousand different shades of pianissimo’. Using this level as a basis for choral singing meant that diction was given paramount importance and that louder moments had extra exhilaration.

Stanley always made a special point of thanking the choir after

a service or concert, but sometimes with a postscript along the lines of ‘... but a pity about the (whichever voice) entry on page 4 bar 17 and a shame about the intonation on (yet another page or bar quoted)’, and any errors in the performance were listed, all from memory. The points were made gently, but firmly. In my time as Assistant Master at Peterborough, Stanley although then retired was still a regular visitor to Cathedral services, and he would often take me on one side afterwards to give critical encouragement to my accompanying or conducting. I quickly learnt to appreciate his care and concern, and in the graceful but authoritative way in which he presented it. I am sure that many others who have been similarly blessed along the way feel the same. Another way in which he was held in high esteem in the Peterborough years was the remarkably low level of turnover amongst the lay clerks. At least one remained with Stanley for all of the 24 years and most of the others were long serving. The awarding of a Lambeth Doctorate in 1971 for ‘eminent services to church music’ was appropriate and justified.

There is not space here to say a great deal about the music. The number of Stanley's compositions during the Peterborough years was limited by time, as he was also busy as a successful adjudicator. Many of these pieces were not published as he was keen to keep the Peterborough sound 'in house'. However, in retirement he became prolific and the evening canticles, many, as with those by Howells, written for specific choirs and cathedrals, now number almost as many as Howells himself wrote. Much of the music is published; more should be performed, enjoyed and appreciated for its originality and enticing harmonic language.

Most of the organ music also dates from the busy retirement years spent with Frances at Holly Tree Cottage in Wansford. As with the finely crafted choral works,



many of the organ pieces are gentle in nature, so that the exuberant moments command attention all the more.

This year will create opportunities to re-establish the music and legacy of this slight and humble figure who is actually a giant amongst church musicians. He once said, 'I am more a prayer composer than a praise composer', but we must acknowledge both, and offer prayer in thanks for the man and his music which give us so much good cause to give praise to God.

→ For assistance with this article the author thanks Simon Mold, sometime chorister at Peterborough with Stanley Vann, Peter Moore, Director of the London Cantata Choir, and Martyn Vann.

Details of Stanley Vann's career and compositions are accessible through his website, where information is also available about the various celebrations in the centenary year. → [www.stanleyvannmusic.org.uk](http://www.stanleyvannmusic.org.uk)

Gary Sieling has recorded the major organ works of Stanley Vann on the organs of Chelmsford Cathedral where Stanley was Master of Music before moving to Peterborough. Copies of this CD are available from → [www.garysieling.co.uk](http://www.garysieling.co.uk)

Gary will showcase many of Stanley's organ pieces in his concert series this year and the choir of Bromley Parish Church will include his choral works in their programme. → [www.bromleyparishchurch.org](http://www.bromleyparishchurch.org)



Stanley Vann directs the Choir of Peterborough Cathedral at Christmas 1960.



Gary Sieling, sometime Assistant Master of Music at Peterborough Cathedral

#### DID YOU KNOW . . .

. . . that Sydney Nicholson's well-known hymn tune, usually set to the words 'We sing the praise of him who died' is named after a Buckinghamshire village lying just to the south of modern-day Milton Keynes? . . . that Nicholson purchased several old railway carriages in the 1920s and had them set up in an orchard above this same village, in order to establish a summer camp for the boys of Westminster Abbey choir, and also making the camp available to other choirs – including St Albans Cathedral?

. . . that the painting 'A Village Choir' by the artist Thomas Webster, which portrays a gallery choir of assorted singers and instrumentalists (a common sight in the days before the Oxford Movement swept choirs from such galleries into chancel choir stalls), was painted in the parish church of the same village, and depicts the choir exactly as it was in 1847?

. . . the name of this village (if you haven't already guessed)?

Bow Brickhill.  
Trevor Jarvis