

JOINING THE BANDWIDTH

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The internet has caused a seismic shift in society. Those who engage with it minimally may write it off as trivial, but this is a huge underestimation of its impact. Far from simply being a portal for Google searches and video games, the web has transformed the way we think, communicate and function as a society. Academics compare its impact with the Industrial Revolution, and we as the church need to embrace these developments if we are to engage with the shifting culture around us.

You may be reading this as someone fully plugged into new technology – never separated from your gadgets and always checking email or surfing websites! Or you may be reading this as a sceptic, frustrated that the people around you spend hours staring into computer and phone screens! Either way, I hope this article will offer some thoughts that are relevant to all and will help to harness the potential of the web to enhance church music.

Some of you may be asking ‘has the web *really* transformed the way we think and function as a society? Isn’t that an overstatement?’ Sociologist Marshall McLuhan famously said ‘the medium is the message’. The media we use in society are as important as the message they carry. When television was invented, it wasn’t merely what it broadcasted that shaped us – it was the medium itself: the TV set with its instant availability, individualistic recreation and visual stimulation that made an impact in ways the radio never could. For people with a TV set, life now looked different in the ways they spent leisure time, discovered information and constructed their world view.

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Likewise the web transforms us – with its vast connectivity across the globe, access to more information than available to any previous generation and the ability

to build relationships and communicate through screens rather than face to face. This impact is compounded by mobile internet via phones and tablets. On buses, trains, tubes and restaurants, faces are staring into handsets, absorbed in their screens. In some ways this is positive as we see the world as a global village and increase our knowledge and connections. But in other ways it distracts us from the here and now, and potentially threatens our ‘physical world’ relationships and presence.

So what does this Brave New World mean for church music and those of us who oversee sung worship? I believe it can be both positive and negative, but we can harness it to enhance deeply our services.

You may see mobile technology as frustrating, with its need to announce ‘please turn off your mobile phones’ at the start of services in case silence is shattered by a beeping text or jangling ringtone. This kind of announcement is worth doing – a note in the order of service could suffice if you don’t wish to say it verbally. You may also be frustrated by people fiddling with phones during the service – checking an email, or worse still, playing a secret game of Angry Birds under the pew!

However, our shift toward constantly accessing mobile devices isn’t all bad, but represents a powerful new way of communication and relationship. It’s a new way of ‘doing life’: people want to take a photo, send a text, share their thoughts on Facebook or Twitter while they are having an experience. If we cannot embrace that as the church, we are out of step with the culture we are trying to reach. Yes, we need to be ‘in the world but not of it’, but had the church rejected the developments of the Industrial Revolution, I think we would have failed to keep in step with the people we exist to serve.

Much depends on your congregation and serving its needs in worship. If it is younger and tech-savvy, perhaps you could have a church Twitter account where congregants can tweet reflections on the service or songs they would like to sing. Perhaps you could have a Facebook page for your church where you build a sense of community among your team and congregation as you

all read the updates and comment. Some clergy I know have a mobile phone for 'sermon questions' during the preaching; they read the texts at the end and answer the questions. It's a nice way anonymously to ask something without having to raise a hand or speak out loud.

If your congregation is not tech-savvy and wants to keep all that at bay, by all means foster an environment that best serves them. But don't forget that reaching the under-30s and keeping the pews filled for another generation will mean engaging with these things. So I'd recommend some level of online presence, even if just a basic church website where those online can discover who you are and consider a visit.

The web has vast potential for church music in terms of teaching and learning. Searching YouTube for demonstrations of how to play a certain worship song or choral arrangement will give you plenty of home-made and professional instructional videos to learn from. Most contemporary Christian songwriters have websites where their songs can be listened to via web-streaming – just type their name into a search engine to find their site. Using the music store iTunes means that you no longer have physically to go to a music shop and find CDs when you need to locate a song. Sheet music is also simple to find, buy and download online from a simple web search.

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Sharing ideas with others in church music spheres is simple too. Never has the ability to find someone in the same position as you been easier. Search for 'choir director', 'worship leader', 'church music director', etc., and you'll find a host of websites, blogs and Facebook groups where you can meet like-minded people and have useful discussions. These sites usually share wisdom and resources which are useful and inspiring.

Consider starting such a website yourself. Sites used to be expensive, but with free blogging platforms like WordPress you can start a blog site for free. Check this out by Googling 'WordPress' and you can have a free, basic blog site up and running within minutes. It can be a great way to share your thoughts on worship and to connect with the people in your congregation and beyond. Perhaps you could ask the people who serve with you in the music team to write for your blog? This fosters a great sense of unity and involvement within the choir, band or whatever group you have. Blogging about the

stories behind next week's music – either the original composer's or your own – how it was written and what it means, could deepen engagement with the music each week. Having such a site also helps you recruit new musicians. If people visit the site and enjoy the blogs they may be drawn to participate; they will certainly feel that they know you more deeply than from a distance on Sundays. A blog or website is a great place to advertise your musical events too!

No positives come without pitfalls. Online engagement can take up a vast amount of time and energy, as seen when people are glued to their smartphones! So as church musicians we must focus first on the members of our congregation and the provision of excellent worship for them, and not become absorbed with the global reach of the web. Another negative is if people are too free to use smartphones during church, as it can create a sense of disconnect across the room if people are sidetracked by emails or text conversations. Everything in balance seems a good approach.

If you are taking your first steps into engaging with the online world, I'd suggest these things: join Facebook and create a profile; join Twitter and search for other people who are interested in church music and 'follow' or 'friend request' them. Consider buying a smartphone (I'd recommend iPhones in particular) where you can access all this easily, on the go. Think about creating a blog, or at least begin reading the blogs of people involved in church music. You can find them via a simple internet search; then bookmark their addresses in your web browser so you can find them again easily.

How could the Holy Spirit use new technology to make church music even better and more engaging?

If you are already deeply engaged with technology, think about how incorporating it into your services could enhance people's engagement and experience. How can we harness this new phenomenon in a way that focuses people on the service and each other more, not less? How could the Holy Spirit use this new technology to make church music even better and more engaging? Technology and all inventions, I believe, spring from our God-given cry of the soul to see and know God more. Thus, this new wave of mobile technology represents our desire to connect, to belong and to be fascinated by what

we see and hear. These things can only truly be satisfied by God alone, so let's embrace them and see them as a cultural thirst for God rather than a negative distraction. We live at an exciting juncture in history as the technological revolution breaks like a crashing wave. Let's welcome and explore all the opportunities it brings to church music.

You can follow Vicky Beeching's blog about church music, worship, technology and life in general at <http://vickybeeching.com/blog>



THE CHISLEHURST YEARS
Harry Bramma, RSCM Director
1989–98, discusses Sydney
Nicholson and the College of St
Nicolas: The Chislehurst Years by
John Henderson and Trevor Jarvis

This important book, meticulously assembled by the honorary librarians of the RSCM, is crucial reading for those who wish to know more about the beginnings of the School of English Church Music – as it was then called. But it is more than that: it chronicles in considerable detail the history of church music in the early 20th century. Most of the key figures and places pass through its pages. Additionally, it is an interesting social history. Though only 72 years since the SECM left Chislehurst, the world which emerges from this study seems distant and even alien.

Central to Nicholson's vision was the creation of a college where students could gain hands-on experience working with choir and organ at the rigorous round of daily services, starting with matins at 7.30 am! The music for services was varied – plainsong, village church, town church and cathedral. Initially it was not intended to run a residential choir school, but when Nicholson heard

of the impending closure of the Duke of Newcastle's private school, serving his private chapel at Clumber Park, Nottinghamshire, he said he was prepared to take those redundant boys who wished to come. The residential choir school at Chislehurst became an important element, albeit an expensive one. Some complained that the college choir was too good for students who would have to cope with rough-hewn material in parish churches!

The college was an all male society, with the exception of the lady superintendent and the matron. Of course this male ambience was not unusual at the time. Most boarding schools and Oxbridge colleges were peopled entirely by men and most Anglican parish churches, large and small, had a choir of men and boys. This was so even after the war – certainly in the part of Yorkshire where I grew up in the late 1940s. All this seems very unusual in 2012 – but it was how things were in those days.

This book is irresistible, the more so because it is lavishly illustrated on nearly all of its 186 pages. There are photographs of the choirs, choristers, students (including a young David

Willcocks) and members of the Nicholson family and other notables. It also has an outstanding foreword by Martin How, who had experience as a schoolboy of the RSCM under Nicholson.

When the RSCM left Addington Palace in 1996, we took with us several trunks of archive material which I found in cellars and attics. It gives me pleasure now to see so much of this material in print.

The early years of the SECM were a phenomenal success. Those who read this book will have no doubt about the reasons for this meteoric rise in those Chislehurst years.

