

ADDRESS

THE WESTMINSTER SOUND

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Westminster Cathedral was opened in 1903 at a time when the European tradition of Catholic Church Music was at a low ebb. Cardinal Vaughan, the founder of the Cathedral, established a residential choir school and a fully professional men's choir. He also began the daily singing of Divine Office and this at a time when most of the European Cathedrals had abolished it. Cardinal Vaughan tried to found a community of Benedictine monks to work alongside the Cathedral Choir in the singing of the office but this unfortunately did not come to fruition. He appointed Richard Terry as the Cathedral's first Master of Music—a man of dynamic energy, considerable musicianship, fiery temperament and a very real vision of what a Cathedral tradition should be. Terry had been in charge of the choir at Downside Abbey and spent a lot of time researching and performing Tudor music. Just before Cardinal Vaughan established the Cathedral, he heard Terry performing Byrd's five part Mass and decided that it was the type of music he wanted in his new Cathedral. At that time, this was quite revolutionary: most English Catholic churches were singing the music of Schubert, Gounod, Turner and similar composers. In the last century in Brompton Oratory, for example, Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique Symphony" was performed on Good Friday. Cardinal Vaughan wanted to set up a new style of church music, an important element of which was to be the Solesmes method of singing plainchant. He wanted his Cathedral Choir to implement contemporary Papal Instructions on Sacred Music, and to set an example of excellence to the Catholic community of Europe.

Richard Terry carried out Cardinal Vaughan's wishes most faithfully. He performed a great deal of music, a lot of which had been forgotten following the Tudor period. He was one of the prime movers in the rediscovery of English polyphony and introduced to England the superb music of Italy and Spain and the Netherlands. Under his direction, the Cathedral Choir established an international reputation. His music was regularly reviewed in the National Press and his choir undertook a very heavy programme. To give you some idea of the amount he performed, I have been through the Cathedral Service List for Holy Week of 1922. This shows that the choir sang four masses by Taverner, all three masses of Byrd, all 18 of Victoria's Tenebrae Responsories, the Tallis Lamentations and four of his motets, eight motets by Byrd, and works by Croce, Howells, Tye, Philips, Blytheman, Vaughan Williams and others, totalling

over the whole week 91 separate items, many having many more than one movement; and this does not take into account all the proper plainchant of the week. Terry achieved a great deal at Westminster—perhaps one of his more bizarre feats was to turn down an applicant for the Choir School who later became the Archbishop of Westminster. Cardinal Heenan as a boy of eight or nine was entered for the Cathedral Choir School, but failed his voice test. I think Terry would have been very amused by this, particularly as Cardinal Heenan has now become one of the Choir School's firmest supporters.

Now, I expect you are wondering what this has to do with the Westminster Sound; in fact, it is fundamental to its understanding. The man who really established the vocal reputation of Westminster Cathedral was George Malcolm. He was appointed just after the ending of the Second World War, at a time when the music of the Cathedral was in a bad state: the choir school had been evacuated and then disbanded owing to the bombing of London, and the professional men's choir was greatly depleted. George Malcolm is a musician of great sensibility, rhythmic vitality and energy. His background in church music was formed with Fernand Laloux at Farm Street and Fr. Driscoll at the Sacred Heart at Wimbledon, and it is interesting to recall that Ernest Newman described Fr. Driscoll's choir as being one of the best in Europe. As a result of this, it became an ambition of George Malcolm to develop a really fine boys' choir and at Westminster he set out to fulfil this with an unusual singlemindedness. Many factors have contributed to the Westminster Sound and one of the most important is the acoustic and size of Westminster Cathedral. It is a very large church, built mainly in brick, and decorated extensively in marble and mosaic. The choir sings from an Apse behind the High Altar. The acoustic is good but a choir has to work hard to be really audible in the nave. The building is particularly sympathetic to soprano and tenor sound—low sounds tend to get lost. There are other acoustic peculiarities—one of the most noticeable to my ears is that the echo which follows a loud chord or organ climax usually goes about a semi-tone flat. It is an extraordinary phenomenon with which it is very difficult to come to terms. Now one of the reasons for the Westminster Sound is that George Malcolm trained the boys to sing to the back of the Cathedral. He wanted the choir to be audible throughout the church, and when you remember that the building is 360 feet in length, 156 feet wide, 117 feet in height, and that the choir sings from one end of the building rather than from the sanctuary, this is quite a daunting and voice-developing exercise. I have followed the same principle because it is absurd for a cultural establishment to spend £30,000 a year on music when it is not audible in the building. George Malcolm, in his early experiments, discovered that it was possible to devise a sound which floated on the acoustic, a sound which really penetrated into the building, and I was very interested to hear John

Eliot Gardiner make the same point when talking about his performance of Monteverdi's Vespers in the Cathedral. He said that it was possible to shape choral sound to suit the Cathedral acoustic and thereby greatly enhance the overall effect. This is unquestionably true and is of considerable importance to the understanding of the Cathedral Choir.

Another thing which greatly helps the boys' vocal development is that the Cathedral, having no financial endowment, has been unable to support a real counter-tenor line and has usually relied upon boy altos. This has heightened the difference between the ordinary English Sound and the Cathedral Sound. The use of boy altos has always been controversial: I have always found, as with adult singers, that the range of individual boys varies quite considerably. Some have a natural alto range, others have high voices and still others have a natural second soprano range. I try and develop the potential of each individual voice, and have found that the true boy alto is just as acceptable a sound as the counter-tenor. Obviously, having a lively alto section does considerably colour the rest of the choir and this is a case where practical, financial necessity has altered the vocal colour of a choir.

But another really important factor in the Westminster Sound has been the type of music which the Choir sings and the language in which it is written. It is unquestionable that language, both consonants and vowels, shape the vocal sound. The Cathedral Choir still sings mainly in Italianate Latin, which is notable for its natural vowel sounds and its economic use of consonants. The open forward quality of the Latin greatly helped George Malcolm. He always insisted upon excellent diction—with "t"s being placed properly, "r"s being rolled, "m"s and "n"s being clearly sounded. When you think about this, particularly the lack of diphthongs and modified vowel sounds, it becomes obvious that Latin is an ideal language for the development of a free, forward voice production.

This, in conjunction with the type of music sung at Westminster, begins to illuminate how the so-called continental sound is developed. The basic repertoire of the Cathedral remains plainchant and polyphony. Plainchant is not only beautiful music, but is also an ideal form of vocal exercise. Always sung in unison, and often unaccompanied, it produces an excellent sense of line and a fine awareness of vowel sound. It is also very useful in ironing out the natural breaks in a boy's voice. The range most commonly used extends from Bb below middle C to about a high D sharp, although it can go up to a high G sharp or even an A.

Regularly singing in unison over this octave—with the vital factor of the bottom notes having to be audible—has greatly contributed to the Cathedral Sound. Also, the plainchant singing of the psalms, with their

quick change of throat position and the necessity for clarity of diction, has been of help. The daily singing of polyphony is also of note. Regular unaccompanied singing tends to heighten the sense of listening within a choir, and produces among the singers a far greater awareness of the importance of sound quality. Most continental polyphony was written with the forward sound in view and it is interesting to hear Italian or Spanish choirs singing their native classical music. Recently, I had the extraordinary experience of listening to the Sistine Choir rehearse Palestrina. Their recordings do not do them justice. Their vocal sound is wonderful, but it is somewhat distorted and tamed by modern recording techniques. The Sistine Choir's tuning is somewhat different to English tuning, but their dynamic range, rhythmic sense and sheer tonal opulence are amazing, and these people, incidentally, are the type of singers—the type of sounds—for which Palestrina wrote. Polyphony sung with the open Italian vowel sounds does produce a brighter sound and does help a choir to produce a distinctive quality of tone.

Another important contribution to the Westminster Sound is that the boys have lessons in voice production. They are taught to use their voices in a similar fashion to the adult professional men choristers. A lot of this is done by imitation, but it is essential for the individual boys to appreciate how singing works. I always try to develop the positive qualities in a voice rather than eliminate those parts which at first hearing sound offensive. In doing this I aim to produce a blend which has variety of colour, rather than a sound which is always the same. I do not consciously try and force the chest register upwards. It needs to be developed with the same persistence as the head register. I teach the boys to use their resonances, so that their voices are well placed and correctly produced. It is also very important to encourage the natural vibrato as this is an essential part of the voice.

These are some of the factors which go towards the making of what is known as the Westminster Sound. I certainly do not claim it to be the only right way of singing—after all, there are many different ways of singing well, but the sound is capable of considerable musical feeling and always seems to have great impact on the listener. It is excellent for precision, definition and colour. Obviously, one has to amend it when singing certain types of music, but it remains an instrument of great expressive range and sensibility.