Sabbatical Report

Jason Charneski, Director of Music and Organist
Rye Presbyterian Church
November 2024

I thank the leaders and congregation of Rye Presbyterian Church for giving me a sabbatical leave this summer. I hope what I experienced will manifest itself in my own energy and commitment and, therefore, by natural extension to what you will hear and see in an always-inspiring music ministry to and with all ages.

I will share chronologically, as such is what has led me to this report.
I was glad to have Richard Coffey, my partner, with me for the majority of these experiences

I. Resources from the Wild Goose Resource Group (June 17 – 29)

My first project was to explore in detail and create a database of the music published to-date by the Wild Goose Resource Group (WGRG). WGRG is an arm of the Iona Community (the Iona Community uses a goose in its logo – I suspect there are a good number of geese on Iona Island, which is off of the southwest coast of Scotland). The founders of WGRG were John L. Bell and Graham Maule. We have sung a few of their hymns here at RPC, the most-used being "Will You Come and Follow Me."

WGRG's initial materials (from the 1980s and '90s) focused on service music from around the world, metrical Psalm settings (Psalms paraphrased in order to be sung as a hymn), and hymns/solos/simple choir-friendly music that explored topics related to social justice. The focus of materials has grown to include hymns and poetry that explore themes related to the environment and personal expressions of faith and spirituality.

The database I created has more than 700 entries gleaned from 20 collections of music and texts (there is some overlap of titles amongst these volumes). Beyond titles, I included information about scriptural references, seasonal appropriateness, broader topics (such as Creation, Discipleship, Lament, and Praise), and if the music would best be rendered by a choir (adult or children), a congregation, a small ensemble, or a soloist.

I look forward to utilizing a fair number of these texts and tunes in worship and beyond.

II. The American Guild of Organists' Biennial National Convention (June 30 – July 4)

I long have been an advocate for and involved in leadership in the American Guild of Organists (AGO). Thus, I looked forward to attending this national convention (held every other year), as the last one I attended was in 2018, in Kansas City. This year's convention was in San Francisco.

My experience at this convention was mixed. While the overall level of playing, especially by the younger performers, was excellent, some of the programming left me wondering if my colleagues have entered a period of playing music for musicians, especially in terms of new music. While I champion new music, it is unwise to program so much new music in each concert or model worship service that one rarely hears the standards of the repertory. In the end, most of these new works (commissioned by the convention or by the performers) are not heard again. Instead of spending huge sums of money on the commissioned works, I wish the money had been spent on getting more people – especially students and exhibitors – to attend the convention. Attendance at these events has dropped from 2,000+ twenty years to around 1,000 now. Enough of the negative; I share next what was positive.

(Cover photo: interior of Bath Abbey, looking to the East Window)

Chanticleer, the San Francisco-based male professional choir, provided the first real sounds of elegance and refinement. Their program spanned 500 years of choral splendor. The new music they included had melody, standard and daring harmonies, and a panoply of textures. My take-away from that concert to bring to RPC (to be sung by the Chancel Choir) is David Conte's setting of "By Night When Others Soundly Slept," a poem by Anne Bradstreet, a 17th-century émigré from England to New England.

Cathedral of Christ the Light, Oakland

Buildings can help define and inspire music-making. Many say that the most important stop on an organ is the room in which it is housed. The acoustics of a room have a great effect on how words – spoken and sung – are received. And, the amount of natural light in a space contributes to the degree of "openness" therein. Two significant buildings that housed convention events were the Cathedral of Christ the Light, in Oakland, and Grace Cathedral, in San Francisco.

The Oakland edifice is approximately twenty years old, with walls – primarily of glass – that form a parabola which leads to a relatively small ceiling area. Fixed wooden baffles serve to diffuse the sound and also provide a level of shade to the brilliant sunshine that can pour in. The organ is located equally (visually, at least) to either side of the chancel. The acoustic provides for a generous reverberation time and some nice development of lower pitches.

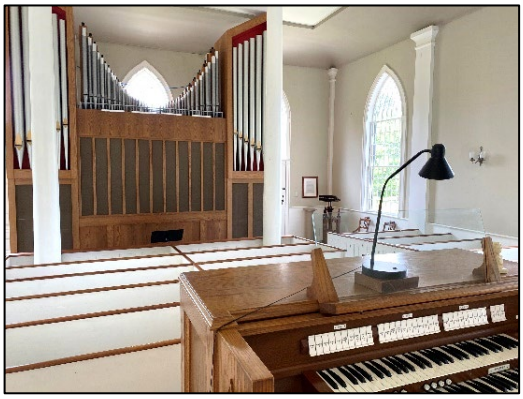
Grace Cathedral in San Francisco is built of concrete, not stone; this to withstand shaking caused by earthquakes. In addition, the ceiling over the nave is open to the underside of the roof (no vaulting filled-in), this, again, to minimize any damage or collapse caused by an earthquake. In quite a contrast to Christ the Light in Oakland, this Gothic structure, with its beautiful stained-glass windows (from the studio of Charles Connick – the maker of the Chancel Window in RPC), has significant supplemental lighting. The acoustic is even more generous; the sounds of organ, choir, and congregation roll and swirl throughout. We were fortunate to be seated in the Quire (the area in a cathedral that includes seating for the choir, the clergy, and the bishop, along with the high altar), the for an organ concert (a wonderful, spirited program given by Faythe Freese [University of Alabama]) and then in the nave for a service of Choral Matins. The music in the service was beautifully sung by the cathedral choir. I have ordered the set of choral responses by Joanna Forbes L'Estrange that were offered by the choir and piqued my ears.

Grace Cathedral, San Francisco

Two concerts that stood out as to a perfect synthesis of performer, style of instrument, and repertoire were given in succession, with just a 10-minute walk between the venues. The first on our docket was a program of music, performed by organist Peter Sykes (Boston Conservatory) from the German Renaissance and Baroque eras on a period-style instrument in a German Lutheran church. The second was an offering of twentieth-century transcriptions and other period works, performed superbly by Ken Cowan (Rice University) on an E.M. Skinner organ from the 1920s in an Episcopal church.

Two workshops had great value. The first was an exploration of software and processes used to enable music to be downloaded onto an iPad or iPads – yes, plural – in order to avoid physical page turns. Facial recognition software is the key to this, as one needs to determine which sort of signal will be used to indicate that it is time to turn the page (which is instantaneous): a wink of eye, a twist of the lip, a head nod, etc. I think this would be least prone to misinterpretation with organ-only pieces, where one does not need to give any other motions (such as needed when conducting a choir). Musicians who play other instruments have found this technology to be easy to use, as there is a pedal-actuator that can be employed (that's somewhat difficult for us organists!). The second workshop that put a spring in my step was an organ masterclass by David Higgs (my teacher at Eastman). Two young students played for Mr. Higgs and an audience of more than 100. I wish more of these sorts of events would be given at conventions (instead of wasting money on too many commissioned works; see above), as a master teacher/performer/conductor working with and imparting wisdom to the students themselves also provides the same information, encouragement, and inspiration to a room full of auditors.

III. The Portageville Chapel (July 10-16)



The Portageville Chapel, Portageville, N.Y.

My "alone time" was just about one week in Portageville, N.Y. (adjacent to Letchworth State Park, to the south of Rochester), this to have uninterrupted practice time on the little organ in what had been the Universalist church there (built in 1840: still no plumbing and no heating!). Rural is the best word the describe it, given the rooster crowing throughout the day, at a property adjacent to the cottage that was included as the place to stay. I was able to get into a routine of sorts: 2.5 hours at the organ each morning, then lunch, then back for 2 hours in the afternoon, then a nap, then back for about 1.5 hours in the early evening. I was glad to learn the notes of three pieces: the energetic closing movement of the Mendelssohn first organ sonata; the beguiling-and-spooky *Canon in B Minor*, by Robert Schumann; and the oh-so-satisfying *Passacaglia in C Minor*, by Bach.

IV. England – Journeying About and The Three Choirs Festival (July 20-August 3)

Rick and I saved the best for last, as the saying goes. We began with four nights/three days in London, staying in a hotel near Paddington Station (ideal for any Underground trains and for our trains to/from the West Country).

<u>Sunday, July 21 – Morning at All Saints' Church, Margaret Street, London</u>

In the morning we went to worship at All Saints' Church, on Margaret Street, at the recommendation of Simon Thomas Jacobs, a dear friend who had been an associate organist there and has performed in concert and has assisted me in worship here at RPC. The building is a model of the Victorian Gothic revival, with a liturgical emphasis in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, known as the Oxford Movement.

The organ and the choir were excellent (the choir – nine professional singers, women and men) offering English composer Lennox Berkeley's *Missa Brevis* (Kyrie eleison, Gloria in excelsis, Sanctus & Benedictus, and Agnus Dei) and Edward Bairstow's setting of Henry W. Baker's words, "Jesu, Grant Me This I Pray." We sang two hymns: "I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say" (to Kingsfold) and "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven" (to Lauda anima, with descant). The Creed also was sung by the congregation.

All Saints' Church, Margaret Street, London

Sadly, all of the spoken portions of the service were unintelligible, this due to under-amplification (therefore, during the sermon, I counted chairs in the nave: the church can seat about 350; my guess is that attendance was around 125). Beyond this, I wonder about this parish's ability to retain newcomers, as the hymns were provided in a small-print, words-only version of *The English Hymnal*, and the closing rite – The Angelus – was sung without any printed musical guide. Simply assuming that people know the tunes is unwelcoming; but, then again, if the goal is to offer worship regardless of who is in attendance, it probably does not matter how any sort of lack of welcome or engagement is perceived.

<u>Sunday, July 21 – Afternoon at St. Paul's Cathedral, London</u>

Walking into and then through the nave to the crossing in St. Paul's Cathedral is awe-inspiring. We arrived in time to hear the peal of bells prior to Evensong, which was sung by the choirs of St. Philip's Cathedral in Atlanta. There was no organ prelude; rather, the organist played the introduction to the opening hymn ("The Day of Resurrection" – to Ellacombe; the scriptural emphasis that evening was in advance of the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene) and away we sang: there were more than 300 seated in chairs underneath the dome.

On the plaza to the southwest side of St. Paul's Cathedral, London

The hallmark of the English Evensong liturgy is what is offered by the choir. Though the words of each of the ordinary portions of this service do not change, the musical settings do: they often are rich and touch the soul; choral sentences (known as Preces and Responses; setting for this service by Richard Shephard), Psalms sung to what is known as Anglican Chant (Psalm 139, using a chant by Alan Stephen Hemmings), the Magnificat [Luke 1:46b-55] and the Nunc Dimittis [Luke 2:29-32], in a setting by Francis Jackson, and an anthem (William Mathias's exuberant *Let the People Praise Thee, O God*).

As this service fell on the eve of a feast day that fell on a Sunday, we sang two more hymns: "Walking in a Garden" (to Dun Aluinn – an Irish melody that was new to us) and "Christ Is Alive!" (to Truro). There was a brief sermon. The melody lines of the hymns were printed in the service leaflet, with the words printed underneath – this was helpful, especially, for the tune that was new to us.

Naturally, we stayed for the postlude, which was Maurice Duruflé's published recreation of Charles Tournemire's improvisation on "Victimae paschali," the great medieval Easter plainsong melody. What a sonic experience!!

July 22 and 23 – Being Tourists in London

As I had not spent much time in London during prior trips to England, we decided to be tourists for two days. On Monday, July 22, we visited the British Museum (where the Rosetta Stone is on display) and the British Library, which holds books and scores too numerous to name! We went to the West End that evening to see *Les Misérables*. A treat, indeed!

On Tuesday, July 23, we walked across the eastern end of Kensington Gardens to see the Albert Memorial and the exteriors of Royal Albert Hall and the Royal College of Music. Just beyond those edifices was our real destination: the Victoria and Albert Museum, where, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, one could spend days and still not see everything!

July 24 – 26: Bristol, Glastonbury, Wells, and Bath

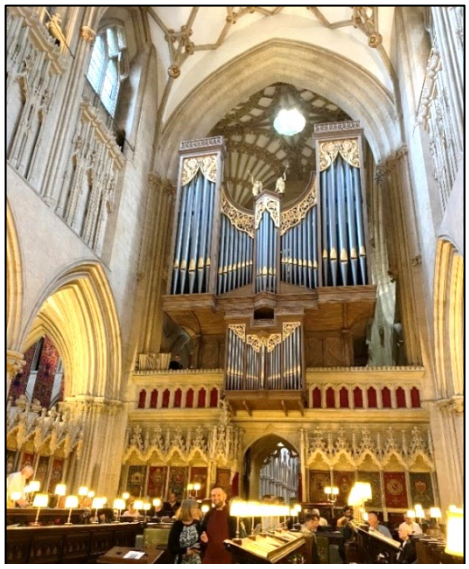
A quick (90 minutes) and inexpensive train took us on July 24 from Paddington Station in London to Bristol, where we stayed for three nights. The next day (July 25), we bought very inexpensive bus tickets (2 pounds per segment) to Glastonbury in order to see the ruins of the abbey, and to Wells in order to see the cathedral and attend Evensong.

July 25

The ruins of Glastonbury Abbey, looking west from what had been the easternmost end of the building.

The Glastonbury Abbey ruins were fascinating, simply because of the lore surrounding the place (the supposed burial site of King Arthur and Lady Guinevere) and the footprint and remaining bits of walls and pillars of what had been an enormous monastic community and church. The monasteries were dissolved in 1539 by King Henry VIII, this to consolidate religious expression and power to the monarchy via the establishment of the Church of England. Thus, unless the King granted a status change from monastery to cathedral or other royal abbey, the communities disbanded and fell – literally – into disrepair and ruin (pillaging also was a big factor).

We arrived at Wells Cathedral a few minutes ahead of the time to be admitted into the Quire to be seated for Evensong. The visiting choir (the choirs of River Road Baptist Church and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, both in Richmond, Va.) offered Margaret Burk's setting of the Preces and Responses, David Hogan's sumptuous and exciting settings of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (the "Mount Saint Albans" service), and William Bradley Roberts's setting of words from Psalm 62 "Our Souls in Silence Wait for God Alone." The organist played the Buxtehude *Praeludium in G Minor* [BuxWV 149] for the postlude.



The east façade of the organ and the choir stalls in Wells Cathedral

Wells Cathedral is distinct in that it is the first truly consistent Gothic style cathedral in England (meaning, no Romanesque or Norman influences). Begun as an abbey in 1175, it was consecrated in 1239. That was a remarkably quick timeframe! It was granted cathedral status in 1245 (Bishop of Bath and Wells). Architectural features there include "scissors arches" at the base of the central tower at the points where the Crossing intersects the Nave and the North and the South Transepts. Surprisingly, the acoustic is not generous nor warm (no swirl or roll to the sound).

Nave of Wells Cathedral. Note the scissors arch, with the west façade of the organ behind it.

July 26

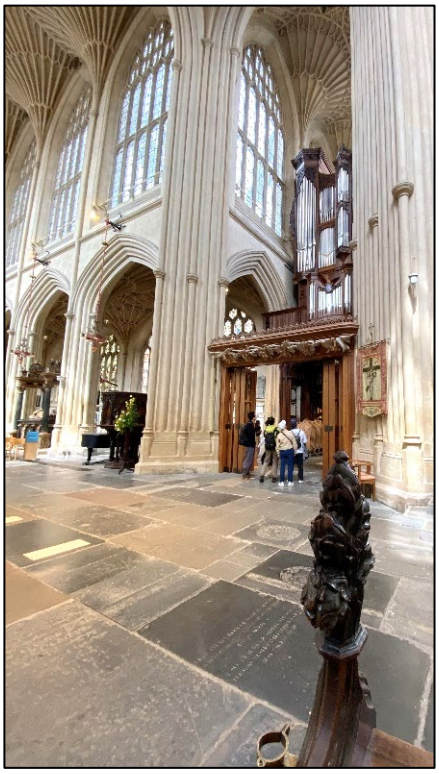
On July 26, we visited two landmarks of the Perpendicular Gothic style: Bath Abbey (in Bath) and the parish Church of St. Mary Redcliffe (in Bristol). The Perpendicular style was the last phase of the medieval Gothic style. It is characterized by much thinner pillars, higher ceilings, decorative vaulting, and much more glass! Perhaps the most well-known example is the chapel of King's College, Cambridge.

West façade of Bath Abbey

The current building that is Bath Abbey is rather recent (if one looks at the 1400s as recent), replacing two prior buildings. Bath claims a place in the history of the monarchy as the site at which King Edgar (considered to be the first king of a unified England) was crowned in 973. Bath was a draw for the infirm, as legend had it that the water in the Roman baths adjacent to the abbey had healing qualities. One of the results of this is that many who came to Bath seeking such healing died and then were interred in the abbey. The number of memorials equals (if not surpasses) that of Westminster Abbey.

The immediate impression upon entering Bath Abbey is that of light and height. One's eyes are drawn to the fan-vaulted ceiling (original at the far east end of the Quire, made consistent through the remainder of the Quire and the entire Nave in the 19th century as a part of the Victorian Gothic revival). The windows make up approximately 75% of the walls! The acoustic is spectacular for song and speech!

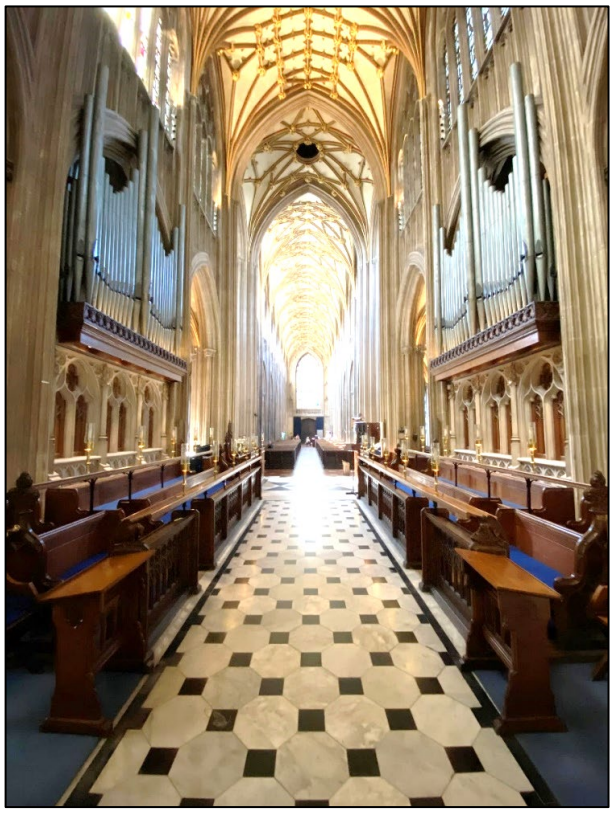
We received a hearty welcome from one of the docents, as he discerned quickly that we were from the U.S.A. He pointed to a 48-star U.S. flag that had been given to the abbey in 1948 as a post-war gesture of friendship, and shared a great deal of the history of the architecture. At noon, a volunteer chaplain offered a few minutes of silence and prayer, following which she passed by us and we engaged in conversation. The staff in the gift shop were pleasant and helpful. We left saying that this is a must-consider place for an RPC Choir-and-Friends Tour.



Bath Abbey. Organ in the North Transept.

Upon our return to Bristol, we walked to the Church of St. Mary Redcliffe (because it's in the Redcliffe section of the city). Many often mistake this for Bristol Cathedral due to its size, location, and prominence. Bristol, while not on the seacoast itself, was England's major seafaring community during the late medieval years. The rise of a wealthy merchant class led to this spectacular parish church (on a visit to St. Mary Redcliffe in 1574, Queen Elizabeth I is reputed to have said that she found the church to be "…the fairest, goodliest, and most famous parish church in England.")! Portions date from the late 1100s, but most of what one sees was erected in the 1300s and 1400s.

The organ (by Harrison & Harrison) is considered to be one of the finest worldwide, and the placement of the console close to where the choirmaster stands makes for ease of communication amongst the musicians. The relative narrowness of the Quire results in the singers being able to hear one another quite well. The overall acoustic is excellent, with a sense of warmth but not too long a period of reverberation. Again, another place to consider for an RPC Choir-and-Friends Tour.



St. Mary Redcliffe, Bristol. At the steps to the high altar, looking west.

St. Mary Redcliffe has two significant connections to North America. The first is that explorer John Cabot's journey in 1497 was the result of funds "found" by Richard Ameryck, the Sheriff of Bristol, this on the order of King Henry VII (the docent told us that he like to think that America was named for Ameryck; not Amerigo Vespucci…). Upon his return to Bristol, Cabot presented the church with a whalebone, likely found in the fishing areas off the coast of Newfoundland. The whalebone is still in the church, near a model of Cabot's ship, the *Matthew*.

The second American connection is that King Charles II arranged for a loan from Admiral William Penn (Penn had garnered significant wealth through his capture of Jamaica from Spanish forces). Upon Admiral Penn's death, his son – also William (the Quaker) – requested repayment of the loan. The king could not repay the debt; instead, he offered land in North America to William Penn on the condition it

be named after the admiral. Thus, Pennsylvania came into being! Admiral Penn's funeral armor is mounted on a wall near the west door of the church.

July 27 – August 3: Worcester, Coventry, and Gloucester

July 27

We took a train from Bristol to Worcester, which we were to call "home" for the next week. We checked into The Cardinal's Hat – a pub (Worcester's oldest – dating from the early 1400s) with six rooms above it, a couple of blocks from Worcester Cathedral.

It was Worcester Cathedral's year to host the annual Three Choirs Festival. Begun in 1715, the festival rotates among three cathedrals that are very much equidistant from one another: Gloucester, Hereford, and Worcester. The choirs of these cathedrals form the core of the musical offerings for the week. The festival has grown mightily, now being a separate organization with a professional staff, a board of directors, and a financial development team. The choral performing forces now include the three cathedral choirs combined (approximately 70 singers; boys and girls sing the soprano parts; adult men and women sing the alto, tenor, and bass parts), a Festival Chorus (some 200 adult singers, men and women, auditioned), a Festival Youth Choir (approximately 50 singers, young men and young women, auditioned), and a Community Chorus. Two professional choirs performed during the week: the BBC Singers and the Armonico Consort. A professional orchestra – The Philharmonia Orchestra (based in London) – supplied the majority of the instrumentalists. The London Symphonic Brass also performed. Concerts, lectures, tours, and other events took place each day from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. There is no way any one person can attend all of the programs!

West front of Worcester Cathedral

Worcester Cathedral is large. The Nave and the Quire are approximately the same length. For the festival period, a large stage and steep choir risers were erected in the Crossing. Festival audience seating in the Nave was in the form fold-down chairs 53 rows deep (rows 36-53 were on steep risers just inside the west door). Other chairs and moveable pews were located in the side aisles. My guess is that seating capacity in the Nave was about 1,400.

The opening concert that evening featured two major works for the Festival Chorus, vocal soloists, and orchestra, both of which were new to my ears: *The Hymn to Jesus*, by Gustav Holst, and a setting of the Stabat Mater, by Charles Villiers Stanford, both conducted by Samuel Hudson, the director of music of Worcester Cathedral. Though the overall theme of the week was the natural world, it was clear that a good amount of the music would honor these two giants of British musical art, as this year marks the 150th anniversary of Holst's birth and the 100th anniversary of Stanford's death.

July 28

The West Window of Worcester Cathedral. Note the seats on risers, in place for festival program audiences.

Sunday morning's service was Communion, with the three cathedral choirs joined by the men of the Festival Chorus in order to offer Charles-Marie Widor's *Mass* for two choirs and two organs. Widor composed this mass for the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris, specifically to include the Sulpician priests (men) as one of the choirs (Widor presided at the grand organ – the west gallery organ – for 63 years. In typical French tradition, there is a separate organ in the east end to accompany the choir). To make this work, Worcester Cathedral's primary organist (Nicholas Freestone) played a digital organ (speakers installed in the arcade openings of the Nave), with the cathedral's organ scholar playing the pipe organ installed above and on both sides of the Quire (closed-circuit television makes all of this possible, based upon organ consoles' placements). We soon learned that the digital organ (which, quite frankly, sounded like an overloaded stereo system) is used regularly to accompany services that take place in the Crossing/Nave (a temporary situation, it seems…), with the pipe organ used for services in the Quire. With the Nave filled with that many singers and festival attendees, the hymn singing was robust (even though led by the sound of the digital organ)! The opening hymn was "Come Down, O Love Divine" (sung to Down Ampney); the Gradual hymn (between the Epistle Lesson and the Gospel Lesson) was "Jesu, the Very Thought of Thee" (sung to St. Botolph); the Offertory hymn was "Just as I Am, without One Plea" (sung to Saffron Walden – far more satisfying to my ears than Woodbury [the tune many of us know]); and, the closing hymn was "Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer [neé Jehovah]" (sung to the standard Cwm Rhondda). The printed Order of Worship included melody lines for the hymns (with texts printed underneath), the congregational portions of the sung liturgy, all of the texts, and all instructions relative to sitting, standing, kneeling, and receiving communion.

The preacher of the day was the Bishop of Worcester, the Rev. John Inge, who used the story of the feeding of the five thousand as a way to connect the words feast and festival. His presence, as well as the cathedral's dean and other clergy, at events throughout the week reinforced the overall spiritual dynamic to the festival (each concert was preceded by a prayer).

Following a delicious (and filling) Sunday Roast dinner at a restaurant across the street from the cathedral, we returned to the cathedral grounds for a mid-afternoon concert in what is now called College Hall (it originally was the monastery refectory). This concert, titled "Byrd Takes Flight," featured works by William Byrd (1543-1623) and his teacher, Thomas Tallis (c. 1505-1585), along with new works that took ideas and motifs from these masterpieces of the English Renaissance (during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I) and expanded upon them. Performed by the five-voice Corvus Consort and a duo called Music on the Edge (saxophone and flute), hearing these pieces with just one singer on a part made for a level of intimacy that showcased an oft-overshadowed sophistication in pieces from this era.

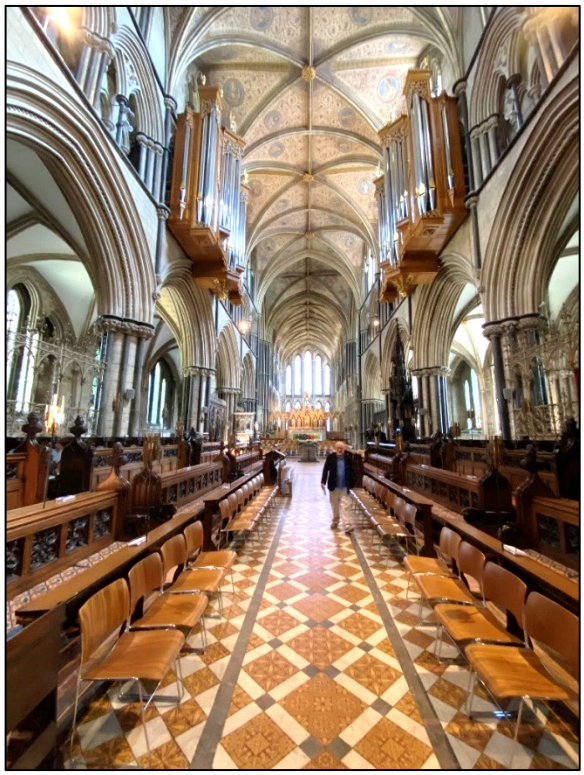
Worcester Cathedral, at the steps to the high altar, looking west through the Quire and out into the Nave. Rick is standing next to the tomb of King John.

Evensong, sung by the Festival Youth Choir, followed the mid-afternoon concert. This was held in the Quire, which had a good number of extra chairs placed in it (we sat near the tomb of King John) and also outside of it, in the ambulatory. This service was a highlight of the week for me, the simple reason being that the choir and its director (Adrian Partington, the director of music of Gloucester Cathedral) were in complete sync with each other. The music was so well rehearsed that many of the singers did not need to look at the printed music, as Mr. Partington gave them everything they needed through his hands, mouth, eyes, and overall being. Thus the music and worship contained therein had no hindrances. As a result, my heart and mind were taken to be in the presence of the Almighty. The Preces and Responses were by John Reading; the Psalm setting by Edward Hopkins. The Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis were Stanford's settings in C Major (op. 115); the anthem was "Light of the World" from Edward Elgar's first oratorio, *The Light of Life*. We sang two hymns: "Help Us, O Lord, to Learn" (to Sandys – a tune new to me) and "My God, How Wonderful Thou Art" (to Westminster – another tune new to me). Rick and I chose to remain in the Quire following the organ postlude (the last movement of the Elgar organ sonata), this in profound gratitude for what had just transpired.

There was not much time between the conclusion of Evensong and commencement of the evening's concert; thus, no supper (this pattern was to be repeated each evening), so we were glad we had the large Sunday Roast dinner at lunchtime!

The Sunday evening concert, conducted by Geraint Bowen (the director of music of Hereford Cathedral), featured four works. The first, for orchestra and chorus, was *messages*, commissioned by the festival of Nathan James Dearden (b. 1992). The second, for orchestra alone, was *Still, Glowing,* a work written in 2008 by Judith Weir (Dame Weir recently completed her term as the Master of the King's Musick). The third, also for orchestra alone, was Ottorino Respighi's much-loved *The Birds* (which, in their songs, convey messages to other birds). The major work on the program was *The Cloud Messenger*, a work – begun in 1903, finished in 1910 – by Gustav Holst based upon fifth-century Sanskrit poetry of Kälidäsa. The story is too involved to get into here; suffice it to say it has to do with the legend of a cloud carrying a message from a banished husband to his wife on one of the Himalaya mountains. Holst had made his own translation of the poem. The music was quite dense and rather mystical (this mystical aspect would be a hallmark in *The Planets*). The following, from Joseph Fort's program note sheds some light on the rarity of it being performed: "The first performance…in 1913 was an utter flop, a lack of preparation causing the choir to come to grief in the final section of the work. Deeply disappointed, Holst sought no further performances of it, and it lay hidden for decades."

Up to this point, I had been wracking my brain as to what to program for RPC's annual Cantata Sunday in December. It was during this program that it began to fall into place: I recalled coming to know Holst's *Christmas Day*, a suite of carols for choir and orchestra, during my high school years.



The Quire of Worcester Cathedral, looking east to the high altar and the Lady Chapel, with East Window, beyond.

It's a cheerful piece of about 9 minutes' duration. Then I thought about the Holst and Stanford anniversaries being observed by the festival: we had just heard the Stanford *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in C* at Evensong. Was that available in a version for orchestra (instead of organ)? iPhone to the rescue: yes. The Magnificat text is ideal for singing during Advent, and the Nunc Dimittis is the culmination of the Christmas cycle (scripturally): Simeon confirming that Jesus is to be the "…light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people, Israel." So, with the Magnificat taking care of the beginning of the cycle, the Nunc Dimittis taking care of its end, and Christmas Day doing its thing, what about Christmas Eve? The answer lay in the *Christmas Cantata*, by Daniel Pinkham (who would have turned 100 in 2023), scored for brass quartet and organ.

July 29

The first event on our docket on Monday, July 29, was a mid-afternoon concert in the cathedral that featured newly-discovered works by Francesco Scarlatti (younger brother of Alessandro; uncle to Domenico) and the well-known *Gloria*, by Antonio Vivaldi. Performed by the 16-voice Armonico Consort (with orchestra), under the baton of Christopher Monks, this program was one of the unexpected discoveries of the week. The recently-unearthed Scarlatti works (a setting of Psalm 110 – known as *Dixit Dominus* – and *Messa á 16* – the Kyrie and Gloria in excelsis portions of the Mass, written for 16 voices) were showpieces of vocal and orchestral gymnastics (fitting, as the Summer Olympics were underway in Paris). These works included scoring for quartets of the same voice-types: four basses, for example. It seemed that each of the 16 singers had a turn (or more) singing in a solo quartet or as a soloist. This is stunning music that, as some would say, should be "left to the professionals." An interesting bit of lore about these works: They were found at the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, with a letter indicating the sets were bound for Worcester for performance at a Three Choirs Festival – it took just about 300 years for such to transpire! The Vivaldi, placed between the Scarlatti works, was offered at a brisk pace that sometimes didn't allow for the sound of the double-bass's notes to develop in a way that provided support and warmth.

Evensong that day was sung by the combined choirs of the three cathedrals, directed by Mr. Partington. The Preces and Responses were sung to a setting by William Smith. Psalms were sung to chants by Heathcote Statham and Thomas Walmisley. The canticles (Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis) were the setting in B-flat Major by Herbert Howells, known as the "Collegium Regale," as they were written for King's College, Cambridge. We sang one hymn: "Soldiers Who Are Christ's Below," to Orientis partibus (sung often to "The Friendly Beasts").

The evening concert featured the Festival Chorus and orchestra, under Mr. Hudson's leadership, in a performance of three new-to-me works. The first was a piece for orchestra alone by Welsh composer Cameron Biles-Liddell (b. 1997), titled *Yr Afon Yn Yr Awyr (The River in the Sky)*, for which the composer had in mind the movement of the River Dee. The second piece, *O Sweet Spontaneous Earth*, by Dame Judith Weir, for choir and orchestra, was a setting of three texts: "O sweet spontaneous "(e e cummings), "Peace on Earth" (William Carlos Williams), and "I reason, Earth is short" (Emily Dickinson). Following these was the complete – and beautiful – *Serenade for Strings*, by Elgar. The major work on the program was the *Mass for the Endangered*, commissioned of Sarah

Kirkland Snyder (b. 1973) for Trinity Church, Wall Street. The text, by Nathaniel Bellows, combines the Ordinary of the Mass and original poetry that seeks to raise awareness about threats to the environment. The original poetry reminded us of the style and tone of Christopher Smart, as found in his words set by Benjamin Britten in *Rejoice in the Lamb*. Ms. Snyder's musical language here is heavy on minimalism, and with a small orchestra (12 instruments), it left me rather disappointed and perplexed (maybe that was the intent).

July 30

The festival had a quieter day (of sorts) on Tuesday, July 30. Thus, we chose to take a train to Coventry in order to visit the remains of the bombed-out cathedral (some 500+ bombs were dropped on Coventry the night of November 14-15, 1940) and the new cathedral, opened in 1962, built adjacent to it and for which Benjamin Britten wrote the *War Requiem*. The destroyed cathedral had not been a cathedral all that long – a mere 22 years. It had been the largest parish church (St. Michael's) in England, the floor area covering some 24,000 square feet, with a commanding spire, built mostly in the 1300s. Walking through the shell of the old cathedral to gain access to the new cathedral reminded me of humankind's power to destroy and to create.

Coventry. The ruins of the old cathedral next to the new cathedral.

As a funeral was being held in the new cathedral at the time we arrived, we walked around a bit, espying a parish church – Holy Trinity – to the west of the cathedral grounds. It dates from the late 1200s and features a "Doom Painting." The Doom Painting, located here at the top of the arch nearest the Crossing, was a genre employed in medieval times (in this case, after the Great Plague in the 1340s) to tell the story of damnation and salvation to the illiterate (akin to stained glass windows depicting Biblical scenes and stories).

Following lunch, we returned to the new cathedral. The liturgical west wall (in this case, facing south) is composed entirely of clear glass. The amount of natural light from that direction is stunning. The remainder of the walls are fairly dense with limited stained glass. What appeared to be a large mural of the Risen Christ on the east wall is, in fact, a huge tapestry. Being a modern building, slender pillars support the ceiling and roof; thus, there are no visual impediments toward the Quire. The decoration above the choir stalls, cathedra (the bishop's throne), pulpit, and lectern is a series of metal-and-wood sculpture of birds – intended to be phoenixes – rising from the ashes (a connection to the new cathedral having somewhat risen from the old; this idea also applies in part to the current St. Paul's Cathedral in London, which Christopher Wren designed and saw built to replace the Gothic cathedral that was destroyed in the Great

Coventry. The "Doom Painting" in Holy Trinity Church.

Fire of 1666). The organ pipes are placed on four stories and on both sides of and to the rear of the Quire (it must be a tuner's nightmare!). The acoustic is reverberant, yet somewhat on the "cool" side.

We returned to Worcester in order to attend the evening concert: a performance, recorded for broadcast on BBC Radio 3, by the BBC Singers, organist Anna Lapwood (of TikTok fame), and instrumentalists. Conducted by Sofi Jeannin (the BBC Singers' director), the concert demonstrated why the BBC Singers are considered one of the top choral ensembles worldwide.

The interior of the new Coventry Cathedral.

The first piece, *Seascapes*, by Kristina Arakelyan (b. 1994) intersperses four original movements (with texts by Christina Rossetti) with the "Four Sea Interludes," transcribed for organ, from Britten's opera, *Peter Grimes*. The choral movements were beautiful; the organ interludes (played on the pipe organ in the Quire) suffered from not being registered loudly enough to be heard at the rear of the nave (there were moments when we could see Ms. Lapwood playing – via monitors affixed to pillars – but heard nothing).

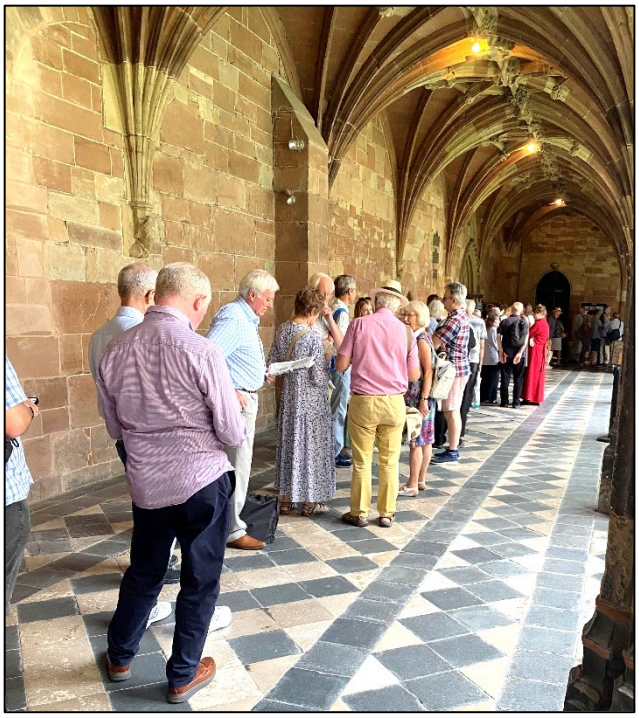
The second piece on the program was *Figure humaine*, by Francis Poulenc. This unaccompanied masterwork (8 movements, lasting approximately 22 minutes, with scoring at times for fourteen vocal parts) was written in advance and anticipation of the liberation of Paris in 1944. The texts, by Paul Éluard, had been banned in Nazi-occupied France (RAF planes dropped leaflets containing the last poem – Liberté). The Allies liberated Paris more quickly than expected; so, Poulenc authorized the premiere in London, broadcast on the BBC. While there are hints of Poulenc's standard harmonic language (including sequential movement by major-7th chords), this is music that pours forth a rare hyperintensity of emotion.

The concluding piece was *In the Land of Uz*, an unmemorable 35-minute cantata by Dame Judith Weir, the text of which is the entire Book of Job.

July 31

One aspect of the festival that made some of the music-making hearable to those who could not attend any one of the evening concerts was a practice wherein the final rehearsal for the concert was "open" to all. Though we had tickets for the concert that evening, we took advantage of this option that morning. It was good to listen from different seating areas in the cathedral; as a result, we knew our seats that evening (on the elevated risers near the west door) would afford us a good aural and visual experience.

The day's Evensong was held earlier – 3:00 p.m. (instead of 5:30) – this because it was broadcast live on BBC Radio 3. I suspect this was the most-attended Evensong of the festival. The three cathedral choirs, conducted by Mr. Hudson, sang the service, the highlight of which was hearing a new setting of the canticles (Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis), commissioned by the festival of Worcester-based composer Ian Venables (more about Mr. Venables to come in details from ensuing days). The Preces and Responses were a setting by Thomas Tomkins (1572-1656), who served Worcester Cathedral as director of music from 1596-1646. The anthem was *For Lo, I Raise Up*, a setting by Stanford of verses from Habakkuk 1. We sang one hymn: "Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim" (to Paderborn; very similar to Hanover, the tune more of us probably know). The organist (Mr. Freestone) offered a fine reading of the *Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Major* (BWV 552), by J. S. Bach.



The queue for Evensong at Worcester Cathedral: a jovial daily custom!

The evening concert had one work on its bill: the *Petite Messe Solennelle*, by Gioachino Rossini. Written toward the end of Rossini's life and while he was living in Paris, one of the stories surrounding the piece is that the French emperor (Napoleon III) apparently quipped that the work was neither little, nor solemn, nor especially liturgical. He was spot-on! This is opera for the church; and, what an opera it is! This original version, scored for choir, soloists, two pianos, and harmonium (reed organ), was conducted by Mr. Bowen (who appeared to be experiencing and exuding great joy). It has something for everyone: soaring melodies, great fugues, solo and ensemble arias, and even an organ interlude.

August 1

Thursday morning (August 1) began with a time of "Cake and Conversation" with Bob Chilcott (b. 1955), one of England's leading composers and arrangers (we have in the RPC music library a few pieces by him). Mr. Chilcott, who as a boy sang with the choir of King's College, Cambridge, went on to have a career with the King's Singers. At the age of 42, he chose to focus solely on composition and arranging. He shared with us the importance of having great mentors and of the need to encourage the next generations of musicians. He cited two stylistically-different composers as the greatest influences upon him, this due to their friendships and genuine interest in music-making: Gyorgy Ligeti and John Rutter.

Evensong that day was in the form of a hymn-sing, with a brass ensemble added to the organ's leadership. A group of sopranos from the Festival Chorus provided the descants, and Mr. Hudson and Mr. Freestone the majority of the arrangements (Mr. Freestone's harmonization of Eventide [for "Abide with Me, Fast Falls the Eventide"] was of particular note). This event was a celebration, in part, of the 10th Anniversary of the American Friends of the Three Choirs Festival (a separate 501(c)(3) organization). The singing was thrilling. The Rev. Dr. Stephen Edwards, Dean-designate of the cathedral, gave a short address about the local, national, and international relationships forged through sacred music.

The concert that evening was an all-*a cappella* program sung by the three cathedral choirs, conducted by Mr. Hudson. They opened with Eric Whitacre's (b. 1970) *Lux aurumque* (a Christmas text), which makes sense in a room with a warm, reverberant acoustic. There followed one of Stanford's secular motets, *The Blue Bird* (poem by Mary Elizabeth Coleridge), and then a commissioned work, Paul Mealor's (b. 1975) *Ring'd with the Azure World: Four Madrigals on Birds.* The first half concluded with Stanford's *Three Motets*; the RPC Chancel Choir has sung two of these in recent years – "Justorum animae" (The Souls of the Righteous), for the annual observance of All Saints' Day, and "Beati quorum via" (Blessed are the sinless), words from Psalm 119. The other motet, "Coelos ascendit hodie," is specific to Ascension Day.

The second half of the concert was *The Angry Planet*. This is Bob Chilcott's setting of words by Charles Bennett. The composer's note in the printed program book (the program book itself – at 200+ pages – is a memento that shall find a home in my library) describes the work best, as it really is a masterpiece of genius; orchestral writing for voices:

"*The Angry Planet* was commissioned by the Bach Choir in 2011 and first performed at the BBC Proms in 2012…David Hill [conductor of the Bach Choir] had the idea to commission a piece…on the subject of the fragility of our world and on our need to respect and care for our environment….and it was on this theme that Charles Bennett developed the scenario of a forest at night, a place that here is chosen to depict this fragility. Through the course of four sections of the piece, each one representing a three-hour period…the concept of loss and fracture is depicted and traced through the voices of creatures in danger of extinction. This is articulated at various points in the piece by the mixed youth choir in an exaggerated spoken style – through the voice of the slow-worm, the wildcat, and the horseshoe bat, culminating in the voice of the corncrake chanting a litany of animals that have become extinct….The children's choir, meanwhile, punctuates these movements with simple songs in which they play the role of hardy weeds and flowers that, despite so much loss, have managed to survive. As morning comes, we see the signs of new life depicted by an otter leaping through water. The work is brought to close in an atmosphere of tentative optimism as the young singers respond like a flock of birds to the question, 'Can we learn how to live with this world?' with the answer, 'Perhaps.'

August 2

Gloucester Cathedral

On Friday, August 2, we took a train to Gloucester in order to visit the cathedral. Though of the same length as Worcester Cathedral (some 426 feet), the differences, in terms of architecture were readily apparent. First, the pillars in the Nave are from the Norman era – huge! Second, the ceiling of the Nave (68 feet) is lower than the ceiling of the Quire (86 feet), as the style from the Crossing (and central tower above it) through the Quire to the Lady Chapel is Gothic. The East Window is the size of a tennis court! The acoustic is spectacular (I hope this can be a place for the RPC Chancel Choir to help lead worship)! The cloister is on the north side of the Nave (unlike most, where the cloister is placed on the south side) is in the *Harry Potter* films.

Beyond the stunning visual and aural whole, some of the features are noteworthy, particularly the Lady Chapel (Perpendicular Gothic), with a stained-glass window devoted to three Herberts: Herbert Brewer (director of music there from 1896-1928), Herbert Sumsion (Brewer's successor, who served from 1928-1967), and composer Herbert Howells (who studied organ with Brewer). One of Howells's sets of canticles is written with the acoustic of Gloucester Cathedral in mind. The second feature is the presence of flying buttresses within the walls of the Crossing and the Transepts, in order to support the weight of the tower. The third is the tomb of King Edward II.

The organ is silent at present, as most of it has been removed to the Nicholson and Co. shop in nearby Malvern for a complete restoration and renovation. It is expected to be reinstalled by the summer of 2026, just in time for Gloucester's next turn to host the Three Choirs Festival.

Gloucester Cathedral. Choir stalls and east façade of the organ case.

Back to Worcester we went for Evensong and the evening's concert. Evensong that day was sung by the three cathedral choirs, conducted by Mr. Bowen, with Mr. Freestone at the organ. The Preces and Responses were an engaging, fresh setting by Ceclia McDowall (b. 1951). Psalm 38 was sung to two chants: the first by Martin How (1931-2022; the RPC Chancel Choirs sings his setting of *Day by Day*); the second by Herbert Howells. The canticles were a setting written by William Mathias (again, another composer whose music has been sung by the RPC Chancel Choir) for Jesus College, Cambridge. The anthem was *Bring Us, O Lord God*, by William Harris (another composer in the RPC repertory). We sang a hymn, "Lead, Kindly Light," the words by John Henry Newman, the tune (Alberta) by William Harris.

Gloucester Cathedral. Looking to the East Window (the size of a tennis court) from just inside the Quire at the organ screen. Note the flying buttress in the east wall of the South Transept.

The concert that evening offered by the Festival Youth Chorus and the orchestra. The first piece, *Shipping Forecast*, by Ceclia McDowall, was fine, but not particularly germane to the program. Next up was what was titled *Serenade for String Orchestra*, an arrangement – by Jeremy Dibble – of movements from Stanford's string quartets; these were quite engaging.

The main work was the *Requiem* by Ian Venables (b. 1955). This performance featured the original scoring for organ transferred to the orchestra. This is a work that, though challenging, is something so beautiful and thoughtful that it needs to find its way into more choirs' libraries. We were fortunate that evening to be seated next to Deryck Webb, one of the tenors of the Gloucester Cathedral choir (he encouraged me to bring the RPC Chancel Choir to sing at Gloucester Cathedral!). He knew the composer and had sung the work; thus, he wanted us to meet Mr. Venables (which we were able to do following the closing concert Saturday evening). Again, making personal connections is so important.

August 3

Our final day in Worcester began with attending the open rehearsal for the evening's concert. The work to be performed was *The Kingdom*, an oratorio by Edward Elgar, written in 1905. We were thankful to have with us copies of the choral scores (with piano reduction of the orchestra) in order to follow along; these from the library of Kevin Walters (my predecessor at RPC).

Evensong that day was sung by the Worcester Cathedral Choir, under Mr. Hudson's leadership, with Mr. Freestone at the organ. The Preces and Responses were a setting by Donald Hunt (1930-2018), who served Worcester Cathedral as its organist and master of the choristers from 1976-1996. The Psalms (65 and 66) were sung to chants by Martin How (see above) and Sir Ivor Atkins (1869-1953; organist and master of the choristers at Worcester Cathedral from 1897-1950). The canticles were Stanford's setting in A Major. The anthem, *Glory Be to Thee, O Lord*, by John Rutter (b. 1945), was a setting of original material alongside the final stanza of the Lutheran eucharistic chorale "Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele" (Adorn Yourself, O Lovely Soul). Again, the choir sang with conviction, joy, and elegance. We sang two hymns: "In Christ There Is No East or West" (to St. Stephen) and "You Living Christ, Our Eyes Behold" (to Laus Deo – attributed to J. S. Bach). For the postlude, Mr. Freestone played the Stanford *Fantasia and Toccata in D Minor*, op. 57, with appropriate gravitas and spirit!

The closing concert, as indicated above, had one work on the program, *The Kingdom*, a massive and deeply moving oratorio by Sir Edward Elgar. The tradition is that, when held in Worcester, the festival closes with a major work by Edward Elgar (given Elgar being Worcester's favorite son), in a rotational order: *The Dream of Gerontius*, *The Apostles*, and *The Kingdom.* The Nave seating was filled (we were quite pleased with our seats in row 48 – quite high up on the audience seating riser near the west door).

I will cherish and always be thankful for the opportunity to partake of the bounty of the week's musical cornucopia and the people who welcomed us and made it all possible.

V. Reflection and Looking to the Future

I return to RPC this fall inspired by much of what I saw, read, and heard. Of significant note is that, through the numerous Evensong services, I came to experience how daily worship helps to repoint one's heart and mind toward better things. It reminds us of the lineage of those many generations of disciples who went before us and built institutions (be they human, and therefore, far from perfect) that speak to and live out the moral messages – individual and communal – contained in the Bible and in writings and actions in the two thousand years since God – in the form of Jesus – walked with, taught, healed, and broke bread with us mere mortals. It is our call to keep spreading this Good News and to expand the words and ways we share it.

As you likely have discerned by reading this report, I appreciate architecture, construction, and art (visual and aural). Using a building as a metaphor, part of our building – our music ministry to children and youth – suffered damage during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is what we now are repairing and strengthening.

My hope is that we can build upon the new Children's Choir that has started this season and through my sessions with the 4- and 5-year-olds in the nursery school that started in January. An organic progression, wherein we expand the offerings as these children mature (and new children take their places), is a logical way to move into the future. Perhaps in two years we add a grades 4-5 ensemble; then, two years after that, a grades 6-8 ensemble. The goal of these ensembles is to foster discipleship and relationships within a musical construct; performance is secondary. Participation by the children and their parents thus far, along with good humor and encouragement from the co-pastors and the staff, makes this new area of my work joy-filled.

Today's poets and hymnwriters keep vibrant and thoughtful the words they – and we – use to describe our faith and impart it to the next generation. Many of today's composers look for sonic combinations that stretch our ears while using forms that keep us grounded. What great things are to come, and what profound things from the past have we yet to uncover?

With these tenets of text and tune in mind, the best way to judge effectiveness, appropriateness, and the challenges and rewards of new or yet-unknown music is by listening to it. I count myself fortunate to been given the time through this sabbatical leave to listen to so much and to look for ways to incorporate it into the repertoire of the Chancel Choir, our burgeoning Children's Choir, and the body of hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs sung by the congregation.

In closing, these words from the hymn "Holy God, We Praise Your Name," summarize my life's vocation and avocation: "…and from morn to set of sun, through the church the song goes on."

Ever forward,
Jason

Worcester Cathedral. Closing concert of the Three Choirs Festival. August 3, 2024.