

CS 40 Transcript

[00:00:00] Originally, Christmas carols weren't for church. I'm Colleen Phelps and this is classically speaking. Choirs used to travel from house to house on Christmas Eve, singing for a treat here and a drink there, but in the 1870s, these songs were collected into volume specifically for church and published in Cathedral, slowly adopted them into even song services. And then by 1878, the bishop of Cornwall had noticed how much alcohol the town was consuming at Christmas parties and pubs. So he announced at 10 p.m. on Christmas Eve, you need to come to church. There would be a service of carols combined with readings. It was the first ever service of nine lessons and carols. King's College, Cambridge first held a festival of nine lessons and carols in 1918 in an effort to comfort a student body that had lost so many of its numbers to World War One. And they've broadcast it nearly every year since 1928. But this year?

[00:01:08] You know, we didn't know if it was going to happen.

[00:01:10] That was the voice of Daniel Hyde, the director of music at King's. The broadcast reaches about 30 million people every year on radio and even more on television.

[00:01:19] Obviously, the tradition is very long standing, just over 100 years now that the Carol service on Christmas Eve is being broadcast live and then just over 60 years. There's also been a completely separate television, Carol, service. So the tradition in a normal year is a very vibrant, once very exciting one, it's one which has kept, if you like, the same shape with the carols and the readings being interspersed. But of course, it's the variety of Carol choices over the years. And perhaps for the last 37 years there's been a commissioned Carol, specifically for the occasion. It's that way of making the variety interesting and thought provoking and of course, some as familiar in some of the not so familiar. So it's it's an important thing.

[00:02:18] Some of the commissioned carols have become Christmas favorites all over the world, like this one by John Rutter.

[00:02:37] Obviously, there's a lot of rehearsals being done before the day, but in the morning, so well before anyone's even woken up in America, we would have had a sound balance rehearsal with the radio producers by that stage. You're really sort of topping and tailing, obviously, and you're not really trying to do much more than get the group warmed up and ready to go. We would have had a dress rehearsal the day before. So this morning session is very much to hear any notes, any input from the producer as to little details we might want to nuance and to get everybody warmed up and then we'll go off for lunch, had a quick nap on my sofa, which my office is next to the chapel. I think I probably put my head down for 20 minutes and then I had multiple alarms set and at 20 to three and we walked in and got ready. And then by which time the chapel is full. So many people have queued overnight. They've got a ticket first thing in the morning. There's a great sense of expectation in the chapel. It's it's a sort of hushed anticipation, really. And then the choir will make his way to the west door a good five minutes before the broadcast starts. And we sort of stand there waiting for this red light to flash. And there's a routine whereby the the red light flashes and then it stops flashing. And whilst it's stopped flashing, the organist has to stop playing. And I would call a boy forwards to the microphone. And then when the light comes on and stays on, so it's not flashing, it's on permanently. That means that we're on air and the boy starts singing and off we go. That's really what happens.

[00:04:33] That is an interesting quirk of the service for an audience of 30 million. The music starts with one child's voice. For many listeners, this is the moment Christmas starts, massive pressure on a little voice, so they just don't tell the boys who it'll be.

[00:05:09] Nobody other than me knows who is it, who it's going to be until that moment. So in the morning, in the balance rehearsal, as well as balancing the full choir and just having those notes I mentioned, we maybe have three or four boys who might be in contention for the solo and we will try them all out in a sort of standing position because they obviously have to step out of the choir and they have to stand at a microphone and we have to be balanced. And of course, different voices might require a slightly different sound engineering. And so we trial three or four boys, and then I will probably speak to the producer in the van and say, I think it's going to be X or Y. And then usually I would stick to that. I would know ahead of time. I think that's normally it's a consideration that not only who has the best voice and who sings that well on the morning, but it's also a sort of an accrued knowledge that I have of each child, how they might perform under pressure or not, so that the guy in the sound box knows which balance settings he probably needs. And yes, at that we're all standing out at the west door. Once the light stops flashing, that's when I point to a kid and it means that they just don't have any time to think about it. And it also means that when they go for lunch, their parents don't have any time to worry about it, because if they knew beforehand, then of course, it would be like setting a cat among the pigeons

[00:06:55] A reading announcing the birth, because, of course, up to that point has been the prophecy and the annunciation and the idea that this is going to happen. I think there's always that moment when you sort of think, well, Christmas is here now, but actually for me, it's more the end of the service, because whilst it is, you know, it's a carol service that we do every year, it's something which is so closely vetted by people all over the world that actually there's a huge sense of relief to get to the end. But but the two carols that always finish to come, All Ye Faithful and hark the Herald, they're also pretty kind of upbeat. So there is that sense of relief. But you can kind of enjoy the momentum. And actually it's, I think, something which the congregation also senses because, of course, they join in with those carols and the sound in the chapel. We only get that sound once a year.

[00:08:26] Daniel Hyde is in his second year as director of music at King's. Now he's only the ninth director of the choir since 1799 and his predecessor, Steven Cleobury, who died in November 2019, was in the role for nearly four decades. Hyde recognizes that this is all part of a long, rich history.

[00:08:46] I see myself very much as a sort of guardian or steward of this overall tradition. As you say, it's not just Christmas here, but it's the year round running of this choir which has this name, I think through primarily through the Christmas broadcasts, but of course, does a lot of other things for 364 other days of the year. So it's been I've been here for a little over a year now and it's been very much a case of listening and learning. Taking on anything like this, I think is very important to not come with preconceived ideas or indeed, in my case, not to think it might be exactly the same as it was 20 years ago when I was a student here. So it's been a it's been a fact finding year. It's been very interesting. It's been very thought provoking. It hasn't been without his frustrations. But then I suppose no switch to a new job comes with, you know, just the perfectly green grass and happy times.

[00:09:57] Have you made any changes to the lessons and Carol service to put your own ideas into it, not to the structure of it?

[00:10:06] I mean, that is pretty set in stone. The things that I can do involve the choice of music. But I suppose the other within that choice of music, the main thing would be how to choose the carols, which the congregation sings. This seems to be a huge talking point for people. You know, what's a death camp going to be? Are they going to be the original David Wilcox discounts or are they going to be mucked around and changed?

[00:10:35] A descant is the soaring vocal part that comes over the melody. Goosebumps practically guaranteed.

[00:10:59] So I suppose I've I've really, for the last year and this year, certainly tried to be pretty eclectic in my music choices, tried to give a little nod to my predecessors. In fact, this year I don't have a commissioned Carol, because, of course, at the time I should have been commissioned and we were shut down by covid and it was not at all clear whether we would be able to have a carols service. Indeed, it was not at all clear whether we would be able to have the full choir back or whether we would be in some reduced format. So I took a decision not to ask somebody to write to a brief that was unclear and perhaps might not actually have even got an airing because, you know, we didn't know if it was going to happen. So that is a disappointment this year. But I think it's the better decision than having something which we might not be able to fulfill or indeed might not actually give a composer and their music the performance that it would deserve.

[00:12:00] Yeah, the service is kind of a big deal, so in a global pandemic, how are they going to make it happen? Find out after the break.

[00:13:12] This is not the first time extreme precautions have had to be taken to keep the broadcast of carols from Kings on air during World War Two, the chapel windows were boarded up and the heating was turned off for safety. The broadcast didn't say where the singing was happening to avoid making the call. It a target, but the choir sang on. So this year, the burning question for months has been how are they going to make this happen? Many choir directors can understand that the planning started very early and took a lot of goal oriented organization.

[00:13:46] What are the priorities that we want to achieve in opening up and getting back to normal and of course, getting the choir out of the freezer? As I was saying to someone the other day, getting them back up and running, that was the first priority. And then what were we doing that for which we decided that we were aiming to be able to fulfill our Christmas broadcasts. And so those sort of shared first priority is really what's driving our activity at Christmas. Oh, and we just kind of we're working quietly to do everything we can to do these broadcasts, and I think I was saying to my colleague, who's the dean of chapel the other day, I said, if we get to 430 on Christmas Eve when the red light goes off, then I think, you know, will have will have achieved quite a lot in the circumstances. We are doing all of that without expecting a congregation. So for the television, we need all the floor space that's available for the cameras and the studio production people to be able to suitably distance into space within the chapel. And what's interesting about that is I think we'll probably get quite a different TV show because we'll be able to get different angles from cameras that are will be in different places. And then on Christmas Eve, because, you know, it's still unclear where will all be worldwide by the time we get to Christmas Eve, we've decided that, at least for the moment, the only way to do that is to work at the moment without the expectation of a congregation, because then we'll know exactly who's in the building. We'll know where they've been when they when they arrived or when they left. And it's very peculiar. But I think that's the only way we can see ourselves getting to that point at this stage.

[00:16:15] Is the choir having to sing masked right now, or are you so isolated that you're able to be in a bubble together?

[00:16:23] So we've got we've got multiple bubbles, the children at school or in a bubble in their boarding house so they can stand in their normal places. They arrive with masks. They wear masks when they leave their house. And we are all wearing masks until we actually start rehearsing and singing. The adults are standing and much more distanced positions than normal.

[00:16:47] So really, the challenge at the moment is just getting used to the choir. So spaced out ensemble and the whole the whole business of choral discipline that we normally take for granted when we study in our usual places, that that's a much bigger challenge now because we're all that bit more spread out. And of course, we're spread out in a building that has an acoustic six seconds or whatever it is. So it's it's quite a challenge to make that happen. But it's it's proving interesting because, of course, it's throwing up things we don't normally work on or things we don't normally think about. And I and I think it's helping some people to feel a lot more confident in what they're doing because they have to step up and do it without standing directly next to other people who are also doing it.

[00:17:49] Singing in a chapel built in the 1600s. It sounds amazing, but does anything about the room actually work against you?

[00:18:08] Yes, I think the sound of the building is wonderful, but I think it can encourage singers to be a little bit lazy. It can encourage them to wallow in their own sound because they rather enjoy hearing it coming back to them. And of course, one of the things we always have to prepare for is when we go on tours and you're singing in big concert halls now, they don't tend to have the acoustic of King's College Chapel. So we have to be ready to adapt. And so I take the view that I'm really training the choir not to rely on the building. And I think that's its downside. We could very easily allow the building to do a lot more for us, but that would be stupid when we need to go on the road.

[00:19:01] OK, fellow Americans, I know what you're thinking. 400 year old stone building in England, a boarding school. Is this like being in a Harry Potter book? Is it like Hogwarts but with music instead of magic?

[00:19:12] Well, I think that I think that comes partly, doesn't it, from the children wearing top hats and gowns and all those sorts of things.

[00:19:20] That's right. Top hats.

[00:19:22] And, of course, the buildings, the surroundings here are pretty impressive. But I can I can tell you that behind the scenes, it really isn't.

[00:19:32] You came into the position following Stephen Cleobury, who had been there for 37 years. How did you manage the inevitable baggage that comes with someone having been there for so long, or is that a very American fear? When you're coming into an institution where in England, you may be coming into an institution more often?

[00:19:51] No, I think I think it's a fair, reasonable fear to have. I mean, I had the benefit of knowing Stephen because I was a student here 20 years ago. And obviously we've become very good friends and colleagues in that time.

[00:20:07] Here's a taste of that history from the broadcast in 1963.

[00:20:23] I think inevitably, if somebody is in any job for that length of time, there are things which might change or indeed just gradually morph into other things when somebody new takes over. Stephen was very clear when he retired, you know, he didn't expect me to carry it all in sort of a complete isolation from the rest of the world. So I think he knew that I would bring something new to it, but I haven't been in any rush to throw anything of his out and bring anything of mine in, because I think, you know, he was here for 37 years is absolutely right. But then the choir's been going for 500 plus years. And so there's a sort of sense of reality in all of this that. It's not really about Stephen and it's not really about me.

[00:21:45] The music of the service of nine lessons and carols is, by its nature, a transition, the moment where the quiet contemplation and, yes, darkness of Advent. Opens up to the light of Christmas. It has survived multiple pandemics and it'll survive this one, too, and maybe in a year with less travel and fewer holiday happenings as we listen with perhaps more of our attention, it'll drag us into the light with it. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio. The show is edited by Anita Bugg and mastered by Carl Pedersen. I'm Colleen Phelps. Tune in to Nashville Classical Radio on Christmas Eve at nine a.m. to hear carols from King's. I'll be listening with you. Thanks for coming through 2020 with us. Your backstage pass to classical music, classically speaking.