

A Tradition of Music

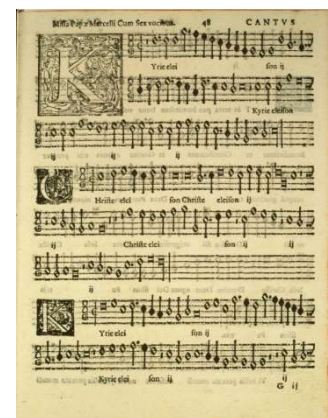


ALL SAINTS
MARGARET
STREET

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The musical repertory that has developed from settings of religious texts is vast. Just as religious themes were once the dominant genre in which artists would explore their craft, so too religious texts, and in particular the central parts of the Mass, once dominated musical composition. The polyphonic Mass Ordinary of the Renaissance period was probably the pre-eminent compositional genre of its time. As a proportion of total music composed, religious music has declined in recent centuries – in particular since the mid-20th century – though many composers still work in this area, harnessing the power of music to help communicate, explain and explore religious texts, and to capture some of their spirituality.

The Mass Ordinary refers to the parts of the mass which use the same text every time – the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei. All but the Credo were in place by the early 8th century. Initially, these would have been sung to simple chants, but by the 9th century they began to take on more elaborate melodic forms. The beginning of polyphony within the mass probably dates from between this time and the 11th century, and it was in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance period that the musical form of the polyphonic Mass Ordinary was created, which by the mid-15th century had become the largest contemporary musical form. An



important development came with the beginning of the 16th century, and the printing of Mass collections – the first being in 1502. The first book of Masses by Palestrina – perhaps the most important Mass composer of the century – was published in 1554. By his death in 1594 he had composed 104, though only half were published in his lifetime.

Towards the end of the 16th century, other great composers and rivals to Palestrina emerged, including Victoria, Lassus and Byrd, each bringing their own distinctive styles to the genre. Many works by these composers are regularly sung at All Saints – including 25 motets by Byrd. In the 18th century, under the influence of the style of Neapolitan composers, the Mass setting became more elaborate, often employing choruses, or instrumental support and music for solo voices. The various sections of the Mass (such as the Gloria and Credo) were often divided into several movements. A supreme example of this ‘cantata mass’ style is Bach’s B Minor Mass, which – at nearly two hours – and requiring immense musical forces, was probably never intended to be used in a liturgical context in full.

The Viennese Mass emerged in the later part of the 18th century. These settings generally possessed a more integrated structure, and showed the influence of the symphonic tradition. Haydn and Mozart both composed Masses in this style. A century later, All Saints was one of the first Churches in London to use Viennese Masses, and the choir currently sings 11 Masses by Mozart and 7 by Haydn. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, most composers of importance – from

Beethoven and Schubert to Liszt and Bruckner – would turn their hands to the Mass. Notable Masses in the All Saints repertoire from this period include three by Schubert, one by Hummel and one by Gounod.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the revival of traditional liturgical worship within the Church of England from the mid 19th century – of which All Saints was an important part – saw a significant stream of settings from Britain. The Anglican tradition is well represented at All Saints by, among others, Stanford, Ireland and Howells. The monumental 20th century Masses of Langlais, Kodaly and Flor Peeters are also in the repertoire, as are smaller scale Masses by other recent composers including Kenneth Leighton, Seiber, William Lloyd Webber and Lennox Berkeley.

Music at All Saints retains the traditional approach, and is unusual these days in that about twice a month the Creed at High Mass is sung to a choir setting. The church's repertoire continues to represent a wide cross section of music and worshippers can hear music from the 16th century until the present day – the repertoire embracing such figures as Purcell, Blow, Boyce, Bairstow, Dyson, Harwood, Jackson, Mathias, Walton, Tavener, plus all the other works mentioned above.



No less glorious a source of music of remarkable beauty and spirituality is the service of Evensong, which is sung weekly at All Saints. Its roots lie in the Roman offices of Vespers and Compline, from which Thomas Cranmer created the Anglican service we have today. The main musical elements are the two Canticles (the Magnificat and Nunc dimittis), the Psalms and an anthem, which draw from a rich repertoire of settings from many of the composers already discussed above. All Saints also has a particularly impressive collection of Benediction settings of the Tantum Ergo and O Salutaris – including around 70 settings from the 16th century to the present day.



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