

A tale of two cities

After almost two years as director of music at St Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, John Scott tells *Malcolm Bruno* how one tradition compares with another

Crossing Fifth Avenue to grab a bite of lunch with John Scott, I could see the glamorous beginnings of Central Park and its horse-drawn carriages a few blocks to the north and then St Patrick's Cathedral only two blocks southward staring straight over the broad avenue at Rockefeller Center. 'London and New York are very distinctive in many ways,' Scott testifies, as we dodge a string of frantic yellow taxis stealing through an amber light on 52nd Street, 'and yet, it doesn't feel that different. New York – like London – is a very individual hub of world power. I'm a Yorkshireman by origin, though until I arrived in New York in 2004 I'd spent my whole professional career at St Paul's. So I'm quite used to cities of this size and stature!'

It was in the autumn of 1978 that Scott, just 22, arrived at St Paul's Cathedral from St John's College, Cambridge, to become third organist. 'I grew into the institution, and when in 1990 the Director of Music position became vacant following Christopher Dearnley's retirement, the then Dean, Eric Evans, was concerned that the whole of my working life would be at St Paul's, and that my energy – my freshness for the job – might wane.' Scott sensed at once the wisdom of this advice and agreed to take on the directorship for a term of 15 years. 'But after about ten swift years I realised, though not entirely clear what they might be, that I should be seeking other options!'

St Thomas was not yet then one: 'But I had been a participant in Gerre Hancock's excellent Choirmaster's Conference in 1998, and then again in 2003. It's a unique concept – the choir is handed over for the best part of a week to a guest conductor, for services and workshops attended by a wide



right John Scott stands in the west gallery in front of the organ built 10 years ago by Taylor & Boody
Photo Bruce Parker



audience. I was very fortunate to be asked twice,' Scott says, 'and having had this "hands-on" experience of working with the St Thomas Choir, I thought I would put my name forward when Gerre's successor was being sought. After two intensive interviews with the search committee and numerous phone conversations with the Rector, I was delighted when he offered me the job.

The founder of St Thomas's Choir School in 1919 was another much esteemed Englishman, T. Tertius Noble. An illustrious career had taken him as Stanford's assistant to Trinity College, Cambridge, before he had become organist and choirmaster in his own right, first at Ely Cathedral and then York Minster. He arrived in New York at St Thomas in 1912, where he would remain for 35 years as a dominant force on the Anglo-American sacred music scene, both as a performer and composer. 'It was a seminal year for the then 90-year old parish of St Thomas, originally established much further south in Manhattan on Broadway,' Scott continues. 'Like Victorian London, New York was growing – in its case northward. And a new St Thomas Church was opened on Fifth Avenue and 53rd Street, complete with a fine E.M. Skinner organ, a year after Noble's arrival. Tertius Noble brought not only the Victorian Anglican tradition with him from England, but the energy to create a choir school. And the school he established remains the only church boarding choir school in America,' Scott points out, adding that the non-sectarian American Boychoir is the only other boarding choir school in the US.

'So, an excellent tradition was founded quickly, and 80-odd years later I inherited a fine choir – in good shape and good heart – which is a great deal to

build upon.' The choir currently has 24 choristers, plus 8 probationers, and 14 men. 'The auditioning process is very selective: we have boys from all over the US, from as far west as Oregon, from the south and, of course, from the east coast. Ironically only two boys at present live in Manhattan itself! The Choir School, with its Headmaster and his dedicated and supportive team of colleagues, is a terrific resource in providing a first-rate musical programme. Housed in a 1988 building just five blocks away, the school exists to educate the choristers only. And with Carnegie Hall and Central Park just around the corner, the location is ideal!'

St Thomas remains an unashamedly Anglican establishment, offering the conventional liturgy (Evensong and Eucharist) during five choral services weekly. Scott continues, 'There was a good deal of tradition stemming from the Tertius Noble era on my arrival, along with fine anthems and canticles by Rorem, Sowerby and Hancock in the repertory. I've been looking back to the Early English school, introducing more Tallis, Sheppard, Taverner and Byrd into the mix, along with commissioning music by living American composers.' This includes John Adams's protégé Nico Muhly, whose *Bright Mass with Canons* received its premiere in February, along with mass settings by Dan Locklair and Jackson Hill, as well as more recently composed works by Eric Whitacre and Anthony Piccolo.

One of the most distinctive and enticing parts of the job is the Concert Series, underwritten by endowment and annual donations. It is a high-profile series of sacred choral music, mostly performed by the St Thomas Choir and its period-instrument orchestra, the Concert Royal,

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top T. Tertius Noble at the Skinner console in the late 1930s. He came to St Thomas Church in 1913 from York Minster

Photo courtesy of St Thomas Church,

above choristers, with Noble standing behind, pictured on the feast of All Saints, 1929, days after the stock market crash, at a ceremony to dedicate the bells given by the Arents family

Photo courtesy of St Thomas Church,

right & page 14 in the song room rehearsing and last December's Messiah concert

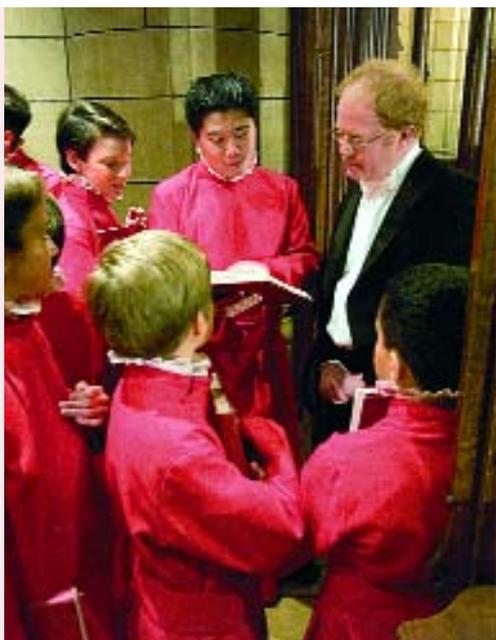
Photos Bruce Parker



or The Orchestra of St Luke's, with a guest choir or two completing each annual cycle. 'This season we've had two *Messiahs* before Christmas, *The Creation* as well as the *St John Passion* during Lent, and a Bach cantata programme after Easter. In addition, we have hosted the choirs of New College, Oxford, Clare College, Cambridge and Westminster Abbey. The choir of St John's College, Cambridge, will be here next week. We'll also welcome the choir of Westminster Cathedral, finishing the year with our own Mozart programme. For me the exciting part is not only the number of major performances, given national prominence by the *New York Times*, but the fact that I have plenty of time to prepare, with the choir and the orchestra too.

Aside from services and major concerts in New York City, touring also plays a significant role. 'We visit other US cities regularly and on alternate summers travel abroad. We just returned from a week's tour, which took us from National Cathedral in Washington to concerts in Virginia, South Carolina and Florida; this week we give a benefit concert in New Orleans. Next year an invitation from Andrew Lucas to appear at the St Albans Organ Festival will form the centre-piece of a tour beginning in Edinburgh, working its way south to Durham, York, Wakefield (my home town!), St Albans, Windsor, Westminster and St Paul's.' Given the achievement attained under Scott, already affirming his St Thomas Choir in the top league of North American choirs, there may be some surprises for British colleagues anticipating anything less from these New Yorkers!

But what, one is eager to ask, from a choir bearing so many similarities in sound and discipline to its British counterparts, is the



difference? 'It is noticeable that the men haven't had the range of opportunities open to a lay clerk in Britain. And for the American boys the "treble culture" of English cathedrals is even more unusual. But on the other hand there is a freshness, a youthful energy, not dampened by the weight of tradition.' I reflect on John's words, that his is now a young choir – Tertius Noble arrived in 1913, while St Paul's choir and traditions date from nearly 800 years earlier, in 1127.



One enters St Thomas's compelling world from Fifth Avenue. Built in the French High Gothic style, it is completely of stone construction, and its magnificent reredos, encapsulating the Chancel organ, is one of the largest in the world. 'This instrument,' Scott explains, 'is especially suited for French romantic and contemporary literature: its tutti, with its French-style reeds, is absolutely thrilling. But the original Skinner element of the organ was changed out of all recognition during the 1950s' Aeolian rebuild, and I rather regret the consequent lack of quieter accompanimental colours. For an organ of this size (it's after all larger than the St Paul's instrument), it seems odd to have only one of six divisions under expression, especially as accompanying the Anglican choral literature is so central to its existence.

'By contrast, the ten-year old Taylor & Boody in the gallery is a most beautiful asset to the church, adorning the space underneath the rose window. The instrument takes as its inspiration the Dutch organ of the 16th-century Brabant school, and although of modest size for such a monumental building, it speaks into the church with great effect. The gorgeous shutters to the case provide an early reflection of the sound, framing the instrument so attractively. Its sound is both persuasive and musically engaging, and, like the finest old organs, the pipes speak in both a vocal and instrumental manner.' Interestingly, though with only 21 stops over two manuals and pedal and tuned in unequal temperament, it finds its way into services – frequently used during choral services (either immediately before or after) and during communion at the 11am Eucharist on Sundays – as well as in the weekly Sunday afternoon recital.

Scott is now firmly rooted in New York. He has not toured to play recitals during the choir terms in the past two years and never misses a Sunday when the choristers are present. 'I recently gave recitals in Concord, New Hampshire, at Harvard and in Vancouver. But this is exceptional. For me,' he continues, 'the excitement is to be here in New York: expanding the repertoire and thinking creatively about the concert series. I'm proud to be a part of this American interpretation of the Anglican choral heritage, and I hope that St Thomas can continue to play its role as a beacon, and as a springboard in nurturing the church musicians of tomorrow, whether as singers, players or directors. I'm ably supported in my work here by my two excellent assistant organists, Jeremy Bruns and Christian Lane. It is my aspiration that they will in time establish their own excellent programmes in churches and cathedrals across America, spurred on by their experience of the St Thomas tradition.' ■