



**AN INTERVIEW
WITH **BOB CHILCOTT**
2021 RAYMOND
BROCK MEMORIAL
COMMISSIONED
COMPOSER**

TIM SHARP



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As a composer, conductor, and singer, Bob Chilcott has enjoyed a lifelong association with choral music, first as a chorister and choral scholar in the choir of King's College, Cambridge, and for twelve years as a member of the King's Singers. He became a full-time composer in 1997 and has produced a large catalogue of music for all types of choirs, which is published by Oxford University Press. His most often performed pieces include *Can you hear me?*, *A Little Jazz Mass*, *Requiem*, and the *St John Passion*.

Bob has conducted choirs in more than thirty countries worldwide and has worked with many thousands of amateur singers across the UK in a continuing series of Singing Days. For seven years he was conductor of the Chorus of The Royal College of Music in London, and since 2002 he has been principal guest conductor of the BBC Singers. In 2017, Bob was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by The Royal School of Church Music and in 2019 took up the role of principal conductor with Birmingham University Singers.

His music has been widely recorded by leading British choirs and groups including The King's Singers, King's College, Cambridge, Wells Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, The Sixteen, Tenebrae, The BBC Singers, The Bach Choir, Commotio, and Ora. In 2016 he enjoyed a collaboration with the celebrated singer Katie Melua on the album *In Winter*. In 2017 two new discs were released by Commotio and Choralis: *All Good Things* on Naxos, and *In Winter's Arms* on Signum, his first recording collaboration with an American choir. Newer recording projects are with the BBC Singers, Houston Chamber Choir, and Wrocław Philharmonic Choir.

It is my joy and honor to interview Bob Chilcott on the occasion of his composition of the 2021 American Choral Directors Association Raymond Brock Memorial Commission.

Sharp: Please tell us about the last couple of years in the life of Bob Chilcott. What projects and pursuits have been at the top of your personal agenda?

Chilcott: I've had a wonderful last couple of years, and even though we are now compromised by the effect of the pandemic, there is still, thankfully, an energy at large

to plan ahead and to be positive. Compositionally, the past two years have seen a couple of big projects come into being for me. In 2019 the Three Choirs Festival premiered my *Christmas Oratorio* in Gloucester Cathedral (on August 1!), and the performance was subsequently broadcast at Christmas on the BBC. The second project was the completion of my children's opera, *Birdland*, which was due to be premiered in June 2020 at the Oxford Festival of Music with over 1,000 performers. There was also a joint premiere due to take place in the Theatre Royal in Norwich with several hundred young performers, which of course was postponed as well. *Birdland* will take flight again, that I know!

From a conducting point of view, a real highlight for me in 2019 was conducting the Verdi *Requiem* in the Royal Albert Hall in London with the 1,400 hundred voices of the Really Big Chorus. In 2020, I was due to conduct in Kyoto in Japan at a festival celebrating the Olympic year in Tokyo. I would have also conducted a choir of delegates at the World Choir Symposium in Auckland, New Zealand, as well as premiering of a new work of mine at PicFest in Eugene, Oregon. All these events, sadly, were not able to happen. Just before lockdown, however, we did manage to complete a recording for a CD of my music featuring my work *Circlesong* with Robert Simpson and his wonderful Houston Chamber Choir, along with the equally wonderful Treble Choir of Houston conducted by Robert's wife, Marianna Parnas Simpson.

Sharp: As one of the world premiere choral composers and arrangers, all of us are familiar with your wonderful composition, but we may not be as familiar with what led you to a career in composition. Can you tell us about your evolution as a composer?

Chilcott: I started composing around the age of thirteen. By the time I got to university at the age of eighteen, I had written a lot of mainly instrumental music; but at that time, in the mid 1970s, the compositional landscape in classical music was not one in which my kind of music could flourish. I found I had a flair for arranging and orchestrating, particularly in the lighter end of the music world, and this led me to becoming an

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arranger and orchestrator for the BBC.

I wrote a number of instrumental charts for singers or I reworked other peoples' work for the instruments we had. It was mainly for a studio orchestra of strings, rhythm section with the addition of a trumpet player who doubled on flugelhorn, and a sax player who dou-

bled on everything. Occasionally we could add the big band too, so it was like a full Hollywood-style orchestra. I was on a big learning curve and I loved it! When I joined the King's Singers, one of the first arrangements I did for them was a set of three carols for the group and the Minnesota Orchestra. It was a thrill for me to hear

Come and Sing with Bob Chilcott!

Be a part of this year's ACDA Raymond W. Brock Memorial Composition première through virtual informative chats, dialogue (Q&A), and rehearsals led by 2021 Brock composer, Bob Chilcott!

The acclaimed composer, conductor, and former King's Singer is joined by poet Delphine Chalmers to introduce and rehearse movements from this year's Brock commission, *Songs my heart has taught me*, in three interactive workshops in February. On Saturday, March 20, 2021, Bob conducts the BBC Singers in the première performance, given as part of the ACDA Virtual National Conference. Workshop participants may simply enjoy listening or may participate in the privacy of their home. ACDA is delighted to offer these workshops free of charge.

Online hour-long workshops will take place on the following dates:

SA/Treble voices: Sunday, February 7, 2021; 2:00 p.m. CST

TB/Lower voices: Sunday, February 21, 2021; 2:00 p.m. CST

SATB/All voices: Sunday, February 28, 2021; 2:00 p.m. CST

To participate in a workshop, please visit acda.org/bob-chilcott-workshops/ and click next to the workshop in which you want to participate. We anticipate each registrant will want to participate in EITHER the SA or TB workshop PLUS the final SATB workshop. You will need to register for EACH workshop separately.

The workshop music to *Songs my heart has taught me* will include only the first and last movements titled "Unison" and "Resolution." They will be available to view only in a digital format through J.W. Pepper's ePrintGO app. As we get closer to the workshop dates, a link to access the digital file will be sent to those who have registered.

The complete score to *Songs my heart has taught me* (Oxford University Press) will be available for sale beginning February 1, 2021, through all of Oxford's digital dealers including J.W. Pepper, Sheet Music Plus, Stanton's, and Pender's Music.

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my pieces not only brilliantly sung but brilliantly played.

Other opportunities for me with the group and other orchestras arose, including Detroit, Pittsburgh, Toronto, Salt Lake City, Atlanta, and Boston Pops. I did a lot of arrangements for just the King's Singers too. Actually I think one of the group recently told me there were over 100 of my arrangements in the library, which took me a bit by surprise. Quite a number of them were published, first by Hinshaw Music and then Hal Leonard. Don Hinshaw was hugely encouraging to me and published a few original pieces of mine. At the beginning of the 1990s I wrote a set of pieces for Gustavus Adolphus Choir, and these pieces, through the kindness of John Rutter, found their way to an editor at Oxford University Press. In 1995 I had my first piece, a carol called "Mid-Winter," published by Oxford, and this led to requests for commissions from a number of choirs in the UK and the US. So, aged forty-two, in 1997, I left the King's Singers and followed the path that I am still on now.

Sharp: What are your primary influences and inspirations for your choral compositions?

Chilcott: I have very broad musical tastes, and I think most of them are reflected in the music I write. As someone who has been a singer, I find the influence of music I have sung, particularly English Church Music, never goes away. Jazz has also played a big part in my musical life. I love the voice. I love singers, predominantly singers of songs—Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Fritz Wunderlich, Joni Mitchell, Rosa Passos, Alison Kraus, Paul Simon, James Taylor, Randy Newman, and if you're my age (or any age, for that matter!) The Beatles and early Elton John. I also love words. The power that songs and words have is their ability to conjure up whole worlds or stories, or glimpses of shared experiences, feelings, and senses in a brief moment of time. To try and distil these thoughts into a musical shape is something that really motivates my composing energy. I am also by nature a melody writer. I like to shape phrases that I think people might enjoy singing. The connection a composer has with the singing voice is a very complex one, because singers are not only motivated by shapes that allow the voice and the breath to flow, but also by the visceral sound and

meaning of words, and also the drama and the gesture of the piece that allows the singer the freedom to become the advocate of the song.

Sharp: How much time do you dedicate to composition? Tell us a little about "a day in the life of Bob Chilcott" and your way of working.

Chilcott: I have always been quite a disciplined composer. You have to be when you are working from home. I think it's important to commit to deadlines and have a strong writing regime. The teapot, the telephone, and the television are never far away, and they all have to be resisted! I work office hours, normally between 9am and 6pm. An hour a day longer than Dolly Parton. I never work in the evenings or late at night.

Sharp: What does receiving the ACDA Raymond Brock Memorial Commission mean to you?

Chilcott: It is an enormous honour for me, particularly as a non-American composer, to receive this commission. When I see the list of distinguished composers who have received it in the past years, I feel very humbled. I have heard a lot of the premieres at various past conventions, and these pieces have been given their wings through their association with the Brock Memorial Commission. One piece that I remember particularly is *I Thank You God* by Gwyneth Walker, sung in Chicago in 1999 by the Women's Honor Choir conducted by Morna Edmundson. This powerful setting is one of the strongest pieces in the upper voice repertoire, and I have performed it many times all over the world.

Sharp: Tell us about the piece you wrote on this occasion. What inspired you and how did you choose the text?

Chilcott: With the theme of the ACDA 2021 National Conference being Diversity in Music, I was asked to write a piece to be sung by a choir specially formed for the occasion: the Diversity Choir. This was a very exciting prospect for me, as not only was I asked to write the piece but was also asked to conduct the choir. I knew

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that I had a lot of thinking to do; it was clear to me that a work like this needed a new text. A few years ago I was asked to write a piece for a girls school in Reading in England, a school with wonderful music and an excellent choir. The director of music asked if I would consider the possibility of setting words written by a young woman who sang in the choir and was a final-year student at the school.

I met with this young woman, one Delphine Chalmers—a quiet, thoughtful, and clearly deeply intelligent person—and we talked through the idea of writing something together. A few weeks later she sent me a wonderful poem, and the piece *Dancing in memories stream* came to life. When Delphine left the school she became an English scholar at Oxford University, and we would meet from time to time at a café just opposite Oxford University Press to discuss other projects. Delphine has now just recently graduated from Oxford University. Up to now, as well as writing the piece for her school, we have written a piece in honour of the Japanese conductor Keiichi Asai called *Because it was you*, a book of eight songs for upper voices titled *Times and Seasons*, and a work *Our Roots*, written in lockdown, to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Santa Fe Women's Ensemble.

I knew that for the Brock commission, I needed Delphine's perceptiveness, empathy, sensitivity, and her warm and thoughtful intelligence. In my quite long life I have been lucky to live through a lot of change, most of it for the better, and the one thing that I realise more and more as I get older is that I have learned almost all that is good and positive in my life, such as relationships and friendships, people, community, and things that unify and bring joy, through music. Delphine and I decided to try to reflect how musical concepts can sit side by side with aspects of the human story in a piece called *Songs my heart has taught me*, a cycle of four songs with the titles, "Unison," "Harmony," "Rhythm," and "Resolution." The pieces, written in a broadly accessible style, are for mixed voices and piano.



Delphine Chambers

Sharp: Due to COVID-19, ACDA's National Conference will be virtual for the first time in our sixty-two-year history as an association. Can you describe what we have been able to do to premiere your Brock Commission this year?

Chilcott: When we heard that the 2021 National Conference was going to be virtual, we had to put our thinking caps on. As everyone in choral music, or in performance music in general, is aware, different countries in the world are moving at different speeds with regard to live music performance, and performance with a social-

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ly distanced audience. At the time of writing, in the UK we have a number of classical music concerts taking place with small audiences. These are largely recitals, including a large series coming from London's Wigmore Hall, but there are also orchestral concerts taking place with small, socially distanced orchestras in different venues across the country. Choral concerts are not yet back on the agenda.

As you may know, we have a national broadcasting service in the UK, the BBC. The BBC has five full-time professional orchestras and one full-time professional chamber choir, the BBC Singers, of which I am principal guest conductor. The BBC Singers are back working together, and in early October I did a recording with them. It was deeply moving and at the same time strange to be once more engaging with real singers, singing live, something that in normal life we would have always taken so much for granted. The Singers, who were restricted to twelve for this recording, were two metres apart in a large studio. It was wonderful to hear them adjust to being far apart and working to

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create a cohesive sound. We are delighted that the full group of eighteen BBC Singers and a pianist, with me conducting, will film and sound record *Songs my heart has taught me* for the 2021 Conference, and this film will be shown toward the end of the Conference. It will also be broadcast on BBC Radio 3, our classical music channel.

Sharp: You have been such a wonderful colleague to ACDA over the years. Can you describe what you think is the importance of an association such as ACDA?

Chilcott: The first time I attended a National ACDA Conference was in 1995, in Washington DC, and I came along for one day. I could not believe that so many people would come together to share their love of choral music. Two years later I decided to come to San Diego for the whole conference and I loved it. It was a marvellous experience. I remember on one of the days, Bruce Johnston from the Beach Boys, with whom we had worked quite closely on an album when I sang with the King's Singers, called me and asked if we would like to go with him and his wife to Tijuana to have lunch. They drove down from Montecito, and I took Bruce into the ACDA exhibition hall and introduced him to my slightly bemused colleagues at the Oxford stand. Actually, no one was more bemused than Bruce, who could not believe that choral music could attract so many people.

That conference had me hooked for so many reasons—great concerts, loads of new repertoire, but most importantly I got to know and meet a lot of new American choral friends. I have attended every conference since, with the exception of Los Angeles in 2007, and have always returned with loads of new energy, new ideas, and new friends. I have been especially fortunate to have conducted two National Honour Choirs at the Conference. The first was in New York City in 2003, where I conducted the Men and Boys Honor Choir, who gave of their hearts in two performances in Riverside Church. This day and these two concerts, I will never forget, as this choir and occasion resonated for me in a way that I have rarely felt in my life.

The second National Honor Choir I conducted was in Salt Lake City in 2015, again young men and boys,

but this time, middle school. This was also a wonderful experience, and not only did we get to perform in the Abravanel Hall, but also in the Tabernacle. And both these performances I could not have done without my friend who played piano for both, a great musical colleague, Kevin Caparotta. I met Kevin through another long-standing friend, Cheryl Dupont, and it was Cheryl who asked me if I would take part in two ACDA retreats for Children's Choirs conductors that happen in the early part of the year. I have done two of these wonderful events, one in Morristown, New Jersey, and one in Houston, Texas.

It occurred to me, when I looked out into the room in Houston, that I knew almost everyone who was there. It was a timely reminder of one of the many things that ACDA does so brilliantly—it connects people. I am one of a number of people from the UK who attend ACDA Conferences, and we all go back pretty much with the same impressions. Whether on a regional or national level, ACDA manages to galvanise choral musicians. You have strong university and college programmes and strong church programmes run by professional musicians. People come forward to serve, to organise, and to inspire. The systems you have in place, such as Honor Choirs and All-States, are tried and tested and help to support structures that feed into the choral life of the country.

It seems to me that ACDA operates as a very effective hub that helps to make all these different cogs function in a very collective and positive spirit. And like similar organisations all over the world, it will continue. Of this I am sure: ACDA will work in the future to move forward and react to the complex and vital discourses of the day in order to share and celebrate the broad palette of singers, conductors, cultures, repertoire, and style that helps to paint the big and beautiful picture of choral music worldwide.

Sharp: Thank you, Bob, for your wonderful contribution to our Brock Memorial Series, and for your dedication to our shared choral mission. □