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'O Lord, open thou our lips': listeners' experiences of BBC Radio 3's Choral Evensong on The New Radio 3 Forum

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Abstract

This chapter examines the listening experiences shared by contributors to The New Radio 3 Forum on threads related to BBC Radio 3's *Choral Evensong*. Focusing on the musical, liturgical, and spiritual content of the experiences, it argues that they represent a community of highly engaged, committed, experienced, and knowledgeable listeners. It also demonstrates that engagement with the forum is a key part of the extended listening experience for regular contributors. While listeners demonstrate a variety of musical preferences and attitudes towards religious matters, their loyalty to *Choral Evensong* is shown to override such differences, enabling them to engage in informed and opinionated debate. The chapter draws on studies of communication patterns and engagement in online special-interest groups, the internet's shaping of musical fandom, and the nature of online Christian communities to argue that the committed listening community that has developed on the forum and

the detailed and discursive nature of its interactions exist in a symbiotic and self-sustaining relationship. The richness of the listening experiences both generates the strong sense of community and is enabled and perpetuated by it.

Introduction

[L]istened to the Byrd again. Notes all there, mic / acoustic balance good – this time heard via headphones. But it was a scramble, as if against the clock. I kept asking myself whether they truly understood what they were singing: this is an impassioned, desperate cry from a faith embattled, pursued, and feeling hunted, abandoned not so much by the rest of Anglican England, as by God. 'Sion deserta,' then 'desolata' repeated so many times with increasing intensity and then falling to that almost unresolved murmured emptiness at the close. We got none of that. Disappointing.

[footnote] [1] 'CE Durham Cathedral Consort of Singers Wed 28th Feb,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, <http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18403-CE-Durham-Cathedral-Consort-of-Singers-Wed-28th-Feb-2018/page2>><http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18403-CE-Durham-Cathedral-Consort-of-Singers-Wed-28th-Feb-2018/page2>. [/footnote]

This rich and detailed listening experience is but one of many similar accounts posted each week to [The Choir](#) section of The New Radio 3 Forum hosted on the [Friends of Radio 3](#) website. This post, made by a user and forum host who has contributed more than 7,000 individual posts, is focused on the anthem 'Ne irascaris Domine' by William Byrd (1543–1623), sung by Durham Cathedral Consort of Singers as part of the *Choral Evensong* programme broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 28 February 2018.

[footnote] [2] Throughout this chapter, the italicisation of *Choral Evensong* refers specifically to the programme regularly broadcast on BBC Radio 3. Used without italics, the words choral evensong refer to the liturgical office more generally. [/footnote]

It encapsulates many of the characteristics of the listening experiences found within the forum in its attention to multiple different aspects of the broadcast. The listener expresses an opinion on musical matters, concerning both musical interpretation and

sound engineering, and draws on a clearly deep understanding of the religious and historical contexts of the repertoire. Opinions are expressed firmly and with detailed explanation. One important aspect is not reflected in this account, however. This message forms part of a conversation, in this case between nine active participants over 23 individual posts, in which experiences are shared and debated. The depth and regularity of such postings make the weekly forum threads concerning *Choral Evensong* an unusually rich and growing source of listening experiences, which reveal much about listeners' attitudes to this particular programme and the value they attach to being part of a community of like-minded listeners.

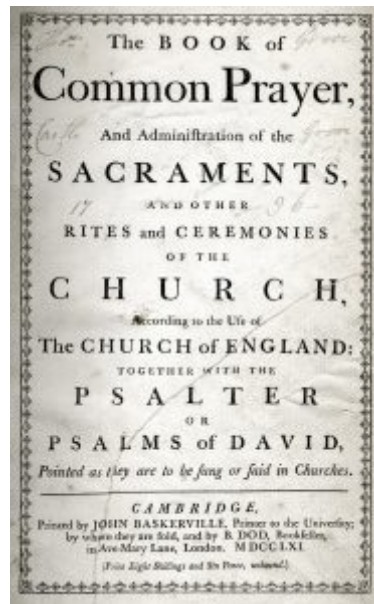


Figure 1: *The Book of Common Prayer* (Source: By John Baskerville – *The Book of the Common Prayer* printed by John Baskerville, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=12130813>)

Following brief overviews of choral evensong and The New Radio 3 Forum, this chapter explores three principal aspects of the listening experiences found within the forum. First, they are considered as musical experiences in which attentive listening coupled with extensive musical knowledge and experience is used to express forthright critical judgements on each broadcast. A notable feature of this aspect of the listening experiences is the attention given both to matters of musical performance and interpretation, and to the recording techniques and sound engineering employed in the broadcasts. Second, the accounts are interpreted as religious experiences in two distinct ways; alongside musical observations, many posts comment on the liturgical suitability of repertoire and other liturgical aspects of individual broadcasts. Meanwhile, comments directly indicating engagement with the broadcasts on a spiritual level are less common, but reveal a diverse range of attitudes. Finally, the importance of the listening community is examined, showing that participation and interactivity are important to many contributors, and that such engagement sustains the community and generates further contributions.

Choral evensong is arguably the most distinctive liturgical and musical service of the Church of England. Utilising the order for Evening Prayer found in *The Book of Common Prayer*, most of its principal elements are sung by the choir: the preces and responses, the psalms (typically set to Anglican chant), the canticles (Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis) and an anthem. Though neither is specified in *The Book of Common Prayer*, the Radio 3 broadcasts, and indeed many services held in cathedrals and churches, also typically include an introit sung by the choir, and a congregational hymn. Much original choral music has been written for evensong, especially by British composers, most notably paired settings of the canticles, commonly known as an Evening Service. Sung almost daily in many cathedrals, it also remains popular in many parish churches that still maintain a choir, though typically focused on Sundays only, and with varying frequency. The broadcasting history of *Choral Evensong* dates back to 1926, and one or more weekly programmes have been broadcast by the BBC with only occasional interruptions ever since. Since 1970, the programme has found a home on BBC Radio 3, and the current pattern consists of a weekly broadcast on Wednesday afternoons, which is repeated on Sundays. Programmes are also available via the BBC iPlayer. Most Wednesday services are broadcast live, and the most common venues are Church of England cathedrals and the chapels of some colleges of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Friends of Radio 3 was set up in 2003, emerging from discussion on an internet forum hosted on the BBC Radio 3 website. The New Radio 3 Forum, run under the aegis of the Friends of Radio 3 website, was set up in 2010, replacing an earlier forum. The BBC's own message boards for Radio 3 were closed down in 2013. The Choir forum is heavily dominated by the weekly threads about *Choral Evensong*. While the Friends of Radio 3 states its aims to be concerned with championing the station and holding it to account in terms of its official remit, the forum's own aims are more social in nature: 'The main purpose of this forum is to promote discussion of BBC Radio 3 and its programming.'

[footnote] [3] See 'The Aims,' Friends of Radio 3, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/aims/ and 'Terms and Conditions,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?2957-Terms-and-Conditions. [/footnote]

This statement contains two important points for understanding the nature of the forum: 'discussion' implies a level of communal engagement that is an end in itself; this is not a forum for advice or information. Furthermore, that discussion has a specific focus, which threads such as 'The Choir' narrow further; while membership is open to all aged over 16, this statement sends a clear message about the focus and limits of the discussion that members may expect to find and engage in.

The *Choral Evensong* threads are the only regular item on The Choir forum. Early each week, one of the forum hosts pastes the music list for the Wednesday broadcast from the BBC Radio 3 listings into a new thread. While there are occasionally further messages posted ahead of the broadcast and often a few during it, the majority of the discussion takes place in the hours and days afterwards. Analysis of the 39 threads relating to services broadcast from January to mid-September 2018 shows that on average there are 23 posts per thread, and each thread is viewed on average 1,669 times.

[footnote] [4] Posts per thread range between 4 and 56 and the number of viewings between 395 and 5,863. The method of calculating the number of viewings is not specified, so these figures should not be taken to equate to unique readers.

[/footnote]

This represents a substantial body of listening experiences, actively managed and maintained, and with full details of the listening event itself. Importantly, the very nature of the forum and its systematic organisation by its hosts facilitates and encourages participants to engage in shared listening experiences related to the same event; discrete listening events and the experiences associated with them provide the substance of the forum and its rationale for existence. The detailed consideration of the content of posts to the forum will demonstrate that participants have a wide range of preferences and motivations in choosing to listen to *Choral Evensong*, but their choice to contribute to the forum indicates a common desire and willingness to share personal listening experiences and engage directly with those submitted by others.

Musical experiences

Many of the listening experiences shared on the forum are predominantly concerned with the musical experience of listening to a particular broadcast, covering the compositional qualities of the repertoire and aspects of the particular performance, including matters of interpretation and technique. Participants also frequently engage with the nature of their listening experience as a radio broadcast, commenting on how aspects of the sound engineering and recording affect their enjoyment of the programme. The attention given to musical matters is unsurprising given both the centrality of music in choral evensong, and the programme's home on a radio station primarily devoted to broadcasting classical music. Examination of the listening experiences shows that many participants have extensive musical knowledge and experience, and firm preferences and opinions that they are able to articulate clearly, and that their engagement as listeners is deliberate, attentive, and often highly focused. The characteristics of Simon Frith's category of 'serious listening' are

frequently evident in the accounts, as well as Adorno's concept of 'good listening,' from which Frith's concept is developed.

[footnote] [5] Simon Frith, 'More than meets the ear: on listening as a social practice,' in *Listening to music: people, practices and experiences*, ed. Helen Barlow and David Rowland (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2017), <http://ledbooks.org/proceedings2017>. [/footnote]

Adorno's emphasis is on the listener taking the musical work seriously, while Frith draws attention to the ways in which listeners take the process of listening seriously. Attention to both is abundantly evident in these experiences; comments on repertoire, interpretation and technique are work-focused, whereas remarks on sound engineering and the individual circumstances of listening make clear that the listening itself is a serious endeavour.

Several comments posted in response to a broadcast from St Paul's Cathedral, London, on 24 January 2018 exemplify the breadth of focus on the musical experience of listening. One participant expresses their personal dislike of the canticles, S. S. Wesley's Evening Service in E, to which another responds 'At least for you, [...], they're using the shortened Nunc Gloria,' followed immediately by a point of correction from a third participant: 'This is the Gloria written for the Nunc. The longer version you sometimes hear is interpolated from the rarely heard Jubilate from the Service in E. (I sang on what was believed to be the first recording of this Jubilate).'

[footnote] [6] 'CE St Paul's Cathedral, London Wed, 24th Jan 2018,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, <http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18221-CE-St-Paul-s-Cathedral-London-Wed-24th-Jan-2018> > <http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18221-CE-St-Paul-s-Cathedral-London-Wed-24th-Jan-2018> . [/footnote]

Within this short exchange, participants express musical opinions and display detailed knowledge of performance conventions and the compositional background of the repertoire. Later, other contributors challenge the negative view of Wesley's music, expressing their admiration for this piece and his oeuvre more widely, and noting a trend on the forum to disparage both Wesley's music and that of Mendelssohn. After further discussion, one contributor comments:

I wouldn't want to compare Wesley with Mendelssohn! The latter is a world-class composer (many of whose orchestral works I've conducted), and as a kid I was blown away by being at a rehearsal of his youthful Octet. Wesley not quite in the same league, methinks.

[footnote] [7] 'CE St Paul's Cathedral, London Wed, 24th Jan 2018,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed

28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18221-CE-St-Paul-s-Cathedral-London-Wed-24th-Jan-2018/page2. [/footnote]

Frith notes that Adorno's ideas about listening were linked to the perceived quality of the music, but goes on to argue that serious listening is not confined to any particular genre, in part owing to the radio and subsequent technological developments that have allowed listeners to practise serious listening privately, making their own choices of repertoire and listening environment. As well as indicating a variety of listening environments, some forum participants also engage critically with ideas about the quality of a particular work. The comments about Wesley indicate this, as does a reflective comment on a broadcast from Salisbury Cathedral on 1 November 2017: 'Old story: standard repertoire sung as well as this is worth ten services where the 'difficult' is assayed maybe to catch the eye / ear? Today, the standard material was riches enough.'

[footnote] [8] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017. [/footnote]

Similarly, the frequent critical attention paid to the quality of the chanting of the psalms testifies that it is not merely the substantial repertoire items such as the canticles and anthems that are of interest to listeners, but the totality of the musical offering. What emerges is a clear sense of listeners who value excellence in musical performance, have opinions, sometimes strongly expressed, about the merits of particular works and composers, but whose fundamental interest and loyalty is to choral evensong as a complete entity.

Two posts on a broadcast from Merton College, Oxford, on 12 September 2018 are typical of the level of musical detail contained within forum posts. One contributor gives an overview of the whole broadcast, before making more precise comments about individual musical elements:

That was a very well-directed CE with notably excellent diction in the Psalms. The choral sound was perhaps a bit treble-dominated, but that may have been an engineering issue. The

Canticles, of the Latvian tendency [Eriks Esenvalds' Merton College Service], were very well done I thought. (One would hardly guess that Eriks E. had studied with Michael Finnissy and Jonathan Harvey!) If anything, the Brahms (although very tidily sung) was least suited to the choir, needing maybe a little more warmth of tone and sense of line.

[footnote] [9] 'CE Chapel of Merton College, Oxford Wed,12th Sept (L),' *The New Radio 3 Forum*, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?19239-CE-Chapel-of-Merton-College-Oxford-Wed-12th-Sept-L.
[/footnote]

Another contributor responds by quoting the above post, highlighting the comment about diction in the psalms, and responding with the observation 'Rather odd pronunciation of 'people' (Let the people praise thee ...), I thought: brought back ghastly memories of Michael Howard!'

[footnote] [10] 'CE Chapel of Merton College, Oxford Wed,12th Sept (L),' *The New Radio 3 Forum*, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?19239-CE-Chapel-of-Merton-College-Oxford-Wed-12th-Sept-L. [/footnote]

This brief exchange covers aspects of vocal technique, balance, interpretation, and suitability of repertoire in musical terms, indicating that the opportunity to make such observations is part of the appeal of listening and of participating in the forum.

The knowledge and experience of many contributors is especially apparent in the ways in which they connect comments on vocal technique, repertoire, interpretation and other contextual factors. The thread concerning a service broadcast from St Pancras Church, London on 16 May 2018, as part of the London Festival of Contemporary Church Music provoked considerable discussion that demonstrated such interconnectedness. Reactions to the broadcast were mixed, with some participants questioning the value of *Choral Evensong's* annual link with the festival. One listener drew particular attention to vocal technique in connection with Judith Bingham's anthem 'The morning star fades from the sky':

as before in this annual relay of this event from St Pancras, I'm afraid it was the vibrato on the top line that absolutely did for me,

and possibly the Judith Bingham anthem which needed such uncluttered delivery. I'd love to have heard that sung by a Baltic choir. Oh dear, I'm go[i]ng to get bashed for even thinking it, let alone saying it.

[footnote] [11] 'CE St Pancras Church Wed, 16th May 2018 (L),' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18848-CE-St-Pancras-Church-Wed-16th-May-2018-L. [/footnote]

Other contributors empathise on the matter of vibrato, though not all report finding it distracting. The anthem itself attracts further comment, including one remark that expresses a positive opinion of it within the broader context of contemporary choral composition:

The Bingham was top notch stuff and sounded to me as if it might be quite readily approachable for cathedral choirs. As a general point, how lovely not to have to endure pieces that were nothing more than a succession of 'beautiful', atmospheric chords. Anyone can do that (and I certainly have). Everything here had more substance than that, especially the Bingham.

[footnote] [12] 'CE St Pancras Church Wed, 16th May 2018 (L),' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18848-CE-St-Pancras-Church-Wed-16th-May-2018-L. [/footnote]

Regarding the use of vibrato, another contributor explains this contextually, showing a broader knowledge of contemporary patterns of employment and engagement in professional church music circles:

As for the soprano sound, that can be explained by the makeup of the choir. There are a lot of singers around in London trained at a music college with opera in mind and trying to make a singing career. Paid church services are a useful source of income for them, and they have a place in an octet at a wealthy church, or get depping gigs. We used to get broadcasts from St Bride's Fleet St, and occasionally other churches such as St Clement Dane's, with

a choir made up of this sort of singer. It's a specifically metropolitan phenomenon.

[footnote] [13] 'CE St Pancras Church Wed, 16th May 2018 (L),' *The New Radio 3 Forum*, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18848-CE-St-Pancras-Church-Wed-16th-May-2018-L. [footnote]

This level of musical insight and discussion, covering technical, interpretative, and contextual factors, is a crucial factor in the ongoing flourishing of the forum. Contributors have the experience and vocabulary to articulate their musical experiences in detail and use their knowledge to engage with the opinions of their fellow listeners. Contributions based on such levels of knowledge and experience are commonly found and valued in such special-interest online groups, as noted by Lee and Peterson in a study of alt.country music: 'one's standing in the group is maintained by the quality and quantity of one's written communication. Having wide-ranging information is valued, and those who chime in without having the facts are quickly contradicted.'

[footnote] [14] Steve S. Lee and Richard A. Peterson, 'Internet-based virtual music scenes: the case of P2 in alt.country music,' in *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, ed. Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), p. 195. [footnote]

While incorrect information is corrected on the *Choral Evensong* threads, it is equally the case that participants unsure of particular facts ask others for clarification or confirmation.

As noted above, some participants display technical knowledge that extends beyond the repertoire and its performance to matters of sound engineering and broadcasting technology. Extensive discussion of these aspects of the broadcast from St Paul's Cathedral, referred to above, reveal listeners acutely sensitive to the ways in which their experience is affected by their own listening environment and the choices made in recording and broadcasting. In-depth comments on binaural recording, FM, DAB, stereo, mono, and other factors concerning techniques and equipment reveal not only the depth of knowledge present within the forum, but also the high value participants place on *Choral Evensong* as a listening experience. One listener, though not using the technical terminology employed in other posts, explicitly links the technical and the musical elements of the listening experience:

At times I felt the sound was doing the aural equivalent of the awful camera swoops that certain producers seem to favour. A non echo passage would suddenly morph into aircraft hangar then lunge back to something smaller scale. I found it disconcerting and distracting, and difficult to tell if what I wasn't liking too much about the singing was the result of that or the singers. The snippet I heard on my car radio on Wednesday (last section of [S. S. Wesley's anthem 'Ascribe [unto the Lord']]) sounded much better than what I heard at home on Sunday.

[footnote] [15] 'CE St Paul's Cathedral London Wed 24th Jan 2018,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18221-CE-St-Paul-s-Cathedral-London-Wed-24th-Jan-2018/page4. [/footnote]

The depth of musical discussion highlights the importance of engagement with the substance of *Choral Evensong* for the ongoing life of the forum. The vitality of the listening community will be considered in detail below, but the conscious awareness of the listening environment demonstrated draws attention to the dispersed nature of the community.

Religious experiences

As observed above, the totality of the broadcast is clearly important to forum members. This indicates that they are aware that they are listening to something that, unlike much of Radio 3's output, is not simply about the performance of music itself, whether live or recorded, but that the music is part of a religious broadcast of a liturgical office. While most comments are focused on some aspect of the musical experience, some other posts nonetheless provide evidence that listeners also engage with broadcasts in religious terms. Posts dealing with religious matters directly tend to demonstrate two distinct types of engagement: liturgical experiences, which share some characteristics of the musical experiences noted above, and spiritual experiences, in which listeners share more personal reactions.

Liturgical experiences, like those of a musical nature, tend to be grounded in the listeners' knowledge and preferences. The thread concerning a broadcast from Salisbury Cathedral on All Saints' Day, 1 November 2017, provides two examples.



Figure 2: Salisbury Cathedral (Source: By Antony McCallum, who is the uploader, photographer, full copyright owner and proprietor of WyrdLight.com – <https://www.wyrdlight.com> Author: Antony McCallum, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=48172236>)

One emerges as part of a series of messages bemoaning the truncation of the hymn at the end of the service:

It's the second week in a row we've had a truncated hymn. Last week was post-service editing which left us with just 3 verses of 'Praise to the Holiest'. And this week 'For All the Saints' sounded very odd without its final verse, which alludes to the Doxology.

[footnote] [16] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed, November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017. [footnote]

This remark goes beyond frustration at the truncation of part of the service, a frequent complaint on the forum, especially concerning the organ voluntary. It shows awareness of the liturgical inappropriateness of cutting the final stanza of this particular hymn, which in addition to providing a sense of culmination also concludes with a Trinitarian doxological formula, a traditional way of concluding many texts in liturgical contexts:

*From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost:*

Alleluia, alleluia!

[footnote] [17] William Walsham How, 'For all the saints who from their labours rest,' *Hymns for Saints' Days, and other Hymns, by a Layman*, ed. Horatio Bolton Nelson (London: Bell and Daldy, 1864), in *Hymns & Psalms* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1988), Hymn 814. [/footnote]

The same service included a setting of the Te Deum sung after the anthem, which is not a standard part of the liturgy for choral evensong. One contributor asks 'Anyone know of the liturgical whys and wherefores of bolting on a Te Deum at the end? High days and holidays?'

[footnote] [18] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed, November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017. [/footnote]

In answer, another suggests, 'I guess it's in celebration of the *glorious company of the Apostles ... the goodly fellowship of the Prophets ... the noble army of Martyrs ... all being Saints, to whom the day is dedicated.*'

[footnote] [19] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed, November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017/page2. [/footnote]

Another member praises the singing of the Te Deum but expresses liturgical reservations:

The Te Deum was excellent, in my opinion. Exciting, gripping and the 'piano' bits were expertly done. I have, however, my reservations towards having a Te Deum whacked on at the end of an evensong, even if Matins isn't sung as often nowadays. It makes little liturgical sense in my opinion. Again, I'm prepared to be corrected.

[footnote] [20] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed, November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28

September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017/page2. [/footnote]

Later, a more definitive answer is provided by another member, essentially affirming the suggestion previously made:

A Solemn Te Deum may be sung at the end of Mass or the Office, or as a stand-alone service, to mark occasions of particular rejoicing.

An instance of the last may be found in your Book of Common Prayer under 'Forms of Prayer for Day of Accession' – the third section, 'The following Service may also be used on the same day at any convenient time.'

[footnote] [21] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed, November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017/page3. [/footnote]

Once again, the discussion is enhanced and sustained by contributions reflecting considered opinion, openness to new insights and reasoning, and informed clarification. Listeners' familiarity with the liturgical context of the broadcast is a key part in their engagement with the programme in its totality, and not just the musical content.

A thread concerning a broadcast by Royal Holloway Chapel Choir on 8 November 2017 includes several comments indicating that for some listeners, the listening experience has a distinctly spiritual element. One comments, 'I turned my radio on just as the Ave Maria introit started and was transported far away to another world, which was balm for the soul, where troubles and worldly concerns are left aside for awhile.'

[footnote] [22] 'CE Chapel of Royal Holloway Chapel, University of London 8.xi.17,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17930-CE-Chapel-of-Royal-Holloway-Chapel-University-of-London-8-xi-17. [/footnote]

Another remarks, 'Really enjoyed the anthem, fresh, striking and spiritually uplifting. Only the dull and unfelt intercessions spoilt the hour for me.'

[footnote] [23] 'CE Chapel of Royal Holloway Chapel, University of London 8.xi.17,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17930-CE-Chapel-of-Royal-Holloway-Chapel-University-of-London-8-xi-17. [/footnote]

Such comments show another way in which some listeners engage with *Choral Evensong*; as in the comment about the introit, this spiritual aspect may be closely linked with the type of aesthetic or interpretative musical opinions discussed above.

The comment on the anthem and prayers, meanwhile, reveals both that listeners' engagement may be on a spiritual level, and that it is not confined to the musical content of the broadcast. A post on a thread relating to a broadcast from Hereford Cathedral addresses the prayers specifically: 'Liked the strikingly worded prayers too. I don't often comment on them on these threads, but today, they will have spoken to and for many.'

[footnote] [24] 'CE Hereford Cathedral Wed 10th Jan 2018,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18151-CE-Hereford-Cathedral-Wed-10th-Jan-2018/page2. [/footnote]

The remark that 'I don't often comment on [the prayers]' suggests that this is not recognised as one of the main functions of the forum, but that listeners understand, and in some cases appreciate, their inclusion in the broadcasts. More negative reactions to the spiritual content of programmes are also expressed by some contributors. Responding to a thread about a programme entitled *Music and Readings for Epiphany* that replaced *Choral Evensong* on 3 January 2018, one listener indicates that the spiritual element is something they prefer not to be overly prominent:

As for today's 'broadcast,' it verged (for my taste anyway) on religiosity; especially inappropriate as it's not Epiphany yet, and as it was recorded in August. The two 'Reflections' (read 'Sermons') were IMHO hammering home very trad. Christian dogma. I know

that Radio 3's CE is technically part of the BBC's religious broadcasting quota, but I don't think most of us regard it as such.

[footnote] [25] 'Music and Readings for Epiphany Wed, 3rd Jan 2018,' *The New Radio 3 Forum*, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18129-Music-and-Readings-for-Epiphany-Wed-3rd-Jan-2018/page2. [/footnote]

Although one further member expresses agreement with this remark, neither these comments downplaying the spiritual value of the broadcast nor those elsewhere affirming it can be assumed to be representative, as most participants refrain from direct comment on such matters. Moreover, the viewing figures for the forum suggest that many more people read it than contribute posts, which makes any claim about the general views of participants difficult to sustain.

The objections to the more overt spirituality perceived in the *Music and Readings for Epiphany* broadcast need to be understood in the context of the normative format of *Choral Evensong*, which is, of course, thoroughly liturgical and, as such, rooted in and expressive of the historic Christian doctrines of the Church of England. Both the content of the liturgy and listeners' familiarity with it may affect their perceptions of it from a spiritual point of view. The comment about the 'religiosity' of the Epiphany broadcast, made by a frequent contributor to the forum, may imply that they do not generally regard *Choral Evensong* as displaying such characteristics. This may be an important factor in interpreting the popularity of choral evensong in cathedrals and greater churches more broadly, beyond the BBC Radio 3 broadcasts.

[footnote] [26] The Greater Churches Network in the Church of England comprises large churches, often former monastic foundations, that, although technically parish churches, share some characteristics in terms of the scope of their work and worship with cathedrals. Many, such as St Martin-in-the-Fields and Romsey Abbey, have particularly active choral music ministries. [/footnote]

Midweek services of choral evensong were identified as an area of numerical growth in a [2013 report](#) published by the Centre for Church Growth Research, Durham University. The report highlights responses from worshippers at several cathedrals that stressed the importance of the musical style, quality and professionalism found in worship; the authors summarised that 'Not only was Choral Evensong listed as growing; it was

identified as the most consistently well-attended weekday service in nearly half of the cathedrals in our survey. This enthusiasm reflects the popularity of cathedral music.'

[footnote] [27] John Holmes and Ben Kautzer, *Report on Strand 3a: Cathedrals, Greater Churches and the Growth of the Church* (Durham: Church Growth Research Programme, 2013), p. 28, http://community.dur.ac.uk/churchgrowth.research/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Publication_edition_Strand_3a.pdf. [/footnote]

Aside from the style and professionalism of the music, and the liturgy more generally, the particular nature of congregational engagement may also contribute to the growth and popularity of choral evensong. Beyond the recitation of the creed and any congregational hymns, attendees largely participate by listening to the words and music spoken and sung by the clergy and choir. In an interview with author Jonathan Arnold on performing sacred music, organist and choral director Stephen Farr reflects on congregational engagement in choral evensong:

I've heard it expressed by several people that one of the reasons why Choral Evensong and cathedrals are, in a sense, thriving is because they allow people to choose the degree in which they want to engage with the worship and if they do want to just sit in the back and listen to it then it's a framework in which they can just be, have some space ... I think that's why a lot of people are drawn to cathedral, formal, worship more than they might be to other forms. That idea of being able to keep at an arm's length but being able to approach as close as you want to is, for some people, what they need and who's to say that that's better or worse?

[footnote] [28] Jonathan Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 60. [/footnote]

Listening to *Choral Evensong* enables a further degree of detachment between the listener and the spiritual content of the worship, while engagement with the online forum allows a different form of participation and interaction. The negative reactions to the Epiphany broadcast indicate that some listeners favour the type of arm's length engagement, at least with regard to overtly spiritual content, to which Farr refers. The level of discussion about the music, however, shows that, in other ways, listeners are deeply engaged, not just on aesthetic matters of musical interpretation, but also on the music's role and suitability within the liturgy as a whole. Arnold makes an implicit link

between the musical nature of choral evensong and some congregants' desire to engage in a very private way:

With the resources at their disposal cathedral chapters are able to offer a high standard of spiritual worship, within the context of beautiful architecture and with sublime music. If one wishes, one can attend a service at any cathedral in Britain with relative anonymity without fear of being coerced into joining a church group or rota.

[footnote] [29] Arnold, *Sacred Music*, p. 119.

[/footnote]

Participation in the forum acknowledges some level of engagement with a religious broadcast, which, for some listeners, goes beyond a solely musical experience. The online nature of the forum, however, enables participants to retain the anonymity to which Arnold refers by choosing a pseudonymous avatar rather than revealing their own name. This practice, common in internet forums, gives participants an additional element of control over the ways in which they share information, opinions and ideas with fellow members. Using an alternative identity allows participants to remain somewhat distant from one another, which may suit well those disinclined to comment on more spiritual matters, or indeed resistant to them. Other members, however, use names that appear to be their own, so this cannot be regarded as a general principle among the membership. More generally, though, the infrequency of comments describing spiritual experiences may be seen as reflecting something of the perceived appeal of choral evensong more broadly by those attempting to interpret growth in attendance at cathedrals. The quality of the musical performance within the liturgy is obviously of considerable value to forum members, and provides the main stimulus for discussion. Similarly, just as the liturgy itself, with its regular structure and content, does not demand visibly active participation from congregation members, so too its familiarity and regularity means that it does not require extensive debate or discussion on the forum.

The varied means of engagement with choral evensong were highlighted by the Bishop of Chelmsford in an address to the National Cathedrals Conference in September 2018; the bishop urged cathedrals to respect worshippers' privacy, arguing that this was a positive element of services such as choral evensong.

[footnote] [30] Olivia Pickard, 'Don't 'pounce' on cathedral-goers who just want to pray quietly, says bishop,' *The Telegraph*, 18 September, 2018, <a href="https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/09/18/dont-pounce-cathedral-goers-just-want-pray-quietly-says-

bishop/"><https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/09/18/dont-pounce-cathedral-goers-just-want-pray-quietly-says-bishop/>. [/footnote]

Similarly, the relatively small amount of spiritual content on the forum does not necessarily indicate that participants are not engaging with broadcasts in this way. For some, the combination of remote listening and the forum's dispersed and partly-anonymised membership may provide an appealing way of keeping spiritual or devotional aspects largely private while still enjoying the opportunity for interaction.

A listening community

By sharing their listening experiences on the forum, members are voluntarily participating in a community of listeners. As illustrated above, members of the community have different musical tastes and opinions and differing attitudes towards liturgical and spiritual matters, but are connected by their appreciation of *Choral Evensong* and the enjoyment of discussing broadcasts with each other. The persistence of the forum in the era of social media sites highlights the importance of both the object of discussion and the discussion itself for members. While the shared interest in *Choral Evensong* is the obvious common factor among all members, the continued activity on the forum despite the development of social media sites such as Facebook is striking. While this may reflect preferences on the parts of users, the nature of the topic is also significant. Although Facebook does enable conversation and discussion between strangers on topics of mutual interest, it is predicated on the concept of 'friends,' and thus most connections made are between people known to each other offline. Boundaries are less clearly delineated than on the forum, and usage for topic-based debate is therefore often less intentional. In many ways, the forum exhibits the qualities of the earliest generation of online communities: 'This first generation of virtual communities was, for the most part, built upon people encountering one another for the first time in an online context that grouped people by interest, not geography.'

[footnote] [31] Nicole B. Ellison and Danah M. Boyd, 'Sociality Through Social Network Sites,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, ed. William H. Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 163, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199589074.001.0001. [/footnote]

While special-interest groups abound on Facebook, including the Choral Evensong Appreciation Society, the key difference is that The Choir forum is dedicated solely to discussion of choral music broadcast on BBC Radio 3, whereas Facebook gathers together multiple different strands of users' lives in one site. Although the Facebook group is occasionally mentioned within the forum, it does not have the same narrow

focus; while there is often some discussion of *Choral Evensong*, it also includes many posts from members promoting services being sung by their own choirs. The forum, as a distinct entity, demands conscious engagement from participants; as they are acutely aware of their listening environments, so too the deliberate act of logging on to the forum focuses their attention on the listening experience to the exclusion of other considerations.

The nature of the community established on the forum shares characteristics with other online special-interest communities, including faith communities, and fan communities more broadly. The content of the listening experiences, the interaction between participants, and their obvious commitment to both *Choral Evensong* and the forum itself are all important elements in understanding the ways in which the listening community functions and the value placed upon it by its members.

As noted earlier, the forum and these particular threads devoted to *Choral Evensong* use self-definition to create a community based on shared interests. While participants' activity varies in its intensity, the weekly threads bear witness to a core group of listeners who typically share their experiences following each broadcast, and engage in detail with each other's comments. The willingness and desire of members to keep contributing to the forum is essential for its ongoing existence, and demonstrates their commitment to it as part of the totality of the listening experience. Nancy Baym's observations of an online group of soap opera fans also applies to the behaviour and attitudes of forum participants: 'The community of r.a.t.s. is founded in more than "the experience of shared pleasure"; it is in part a group identity constructed through ongoing communicative practices.'

[footnote] [32] Nancy K. Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), p. 119. [/footnote]

By asking questions and expressing and debating opinions, forum contributors can find their listening experiences enriched, either through enhancing their knowledge, or having their reactions shaped by other participants. For example, one member initially described Basil Harwood's anthem 'O how glorious is the kingdom' as 'instantly forgettable,' but following a positive response to it from another contributor, went on to post that 'I'm going to listen again on the strength of some of your comments.' Some hours later, the same listener posted the following:

If I may recant somewhat on the steps of the scaffold, having had another listen this afternoon, I do take back some of what I said about the Harwood anthem – it's a better piece than I gave it credit for first time around. It opens very well, especially on the organ, and then when the choir come in. Old Basil was well

advised to bring this material back later in the piece, because around the middle it does seem to me to sag into less interesting material, which I suspect my attention was on first time through. Worth an airing though, so I would modify my intemperate initial judgement.

[footnote] [33] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed, November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, <http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017>.

[/footnote]

This kind of extended listening experience, in which opinions are shared, challenged, and modified, is made possible by the forum. The listening context may vary considerably from listener to listener, and may well not facilitate such debate by itself, whereas the forum draws together different reactions and ideas in stimulating ways. As Mark Duffett observes, albeit in relation to a different medium and genre, the growth of online communication has had profound effect on fan culture: 'When people used online discussion boards alongside their television viewing, technologies of convergence enabled communal rather than individualistic modes of reception.'

[footnote] [34] Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 239.

[/footnote]

In the above example, the listener's reaction to Harwood's anthem is shaped by another member's post, which itself begins from a position of scepticism, but reaches a different conclusion:

Having never [heard?] the Harwood, I was pleasantly surprised! Never been the biggest fan of Basil's works, but this did keep my attention for the most part. Also a welcome rendition of the English words of the ancient antiphon, rather than the more common 'O Quam Gloriosum'.

[footnote] [35] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed, November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, <http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st->

2017/page2"><http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017/page2>. [/footnote]

This conforms to Duffett's observation that shared online experience 'enables people to understand what they see or hear through novel frames of references and sets in train a productive multiplication of perspectives.'

[footnote] [36] Duffett, Understanding Fandom, p. 250. [/footnote]

This process is also an example of the type of interactivity that Rafaeli and Sudweeks identify as important in prompting continued engagement with an online forum. They describe interactivity as an 'iterative process' that involves both speaking and listening, which, in online forum terms is demonstrated by direct engagement with a previous post in the thread.

[footnote] [37] Sheizaf Rafaeli and Fay Sudweeks, 'Interactivity on the Nets' in Network & Netplay: Virtual Groups on the Internet, ed. Fay Sudweeks, Margaret McLaughlin and Sheizaf Rafaeli (Menlo Park, CA: AAAI Press, 1998), p. 175, p. 187. [/footnote]

This is precisely how the change of opinion has come about in this case, and it is a mark of the forum more generally; opinions are posted in the knowledge that they will not necessarily be uniformly shared by all members, but rather that they will be taken seriously as material for debate, discussion, and reflection.

The listening community has also established its own boundaries. In part, these are shared across the whole of The New Radio 3 Forum, as set out in the 'House Rules,' which provide a code of conduct concerning the tone of discussions and indications of what is considered suitable for discussion. Boundaries are also established informally within The Choir forum, however. In response to a light-hearted debate about the merits of particular composers, in which several participants made use of football-related metaphors, one of the forum's hosts expresses disapproval: 'Disappointed that experienced posters on The Choir threads have turned this one into silliness.'

[footnote] [38] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed, November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, <http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017/page2>. [/footnote]

The discussion thereafter reverts to more direct discussion of the broadcast in the usual manner, indicating that participants respect the forum's central purpose and acknowledge the shared value derived from it.

The high regard participants have for the forum is an extension of the value they place on the weekly broadcasts of *Choral Evensong*. While they are sometimes critical of repertoire choices or matters of interpretation and performance, this is typically expressed within the broader context of appreciation for and loyalty to both the programme and the ongoing work of the choral foundations whose services are broadcast. This loyalty to the programme is sometimes revealed in statements of frustration and anxiety at disruptions to the broadcasts, irregular programmes within the schedule, and the use of pre-recorded services in place of live broadcasts. As noted above, members resent truncation of elements such as the hymn or the concluding organ voluntary, revealing the importance they attach to hearing the service in its entirety.

Occasional broadcasts that depart from the usual liturgy of choral evensong meet with mixed reactions. While irregular liturgies such as the Epiphany service mentioned above attract some criticism, the regular choral liturgies of other Christian traditions are often met with approval. For example, a broadcast of *The Office of Tenebrae for Holy Week* from Westminster Cathedral in March 2018 received considerable praise for both the repertoire and its performance, as illustrated by one contributor's effusive post: 'Wow. Thrilling, passionate singing, plus superb [sic] unobtrusive engineering. A fitting offering for the season plus last Sunday's Holy Week programming. Radio 3 has come up with the goods this week and can (almost) be forgiven the repeats.'

[footnote] [39] 'The Office of Tenebrae for Holy Week 28th March 2018,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?18533-The-Office-of-Tenebrae-for-Holy-Week-28th-March-2018/page3. [/footnote]

By contrast, a broadcast of Vespers from Montserrat Abbey attracted considerable criticism for not using the Abbey's own choir and for the way in which Anglican elements were interpolated within the liturgy:

Montserrat Abbey has a very fine 1000+ yr old tradition in its own right / rite, has fine idiomatic and at times idiosyncratic monastic chanting, and a globally famous men and boys choir, so to have this awkward Anglican-flavoured mish-mash foisted [?] to celebrate the day became almost a parody.

[footnote] [40] 'Choral Vespers Wed, Oct 4th 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17741-Choral-Vespers-Wed-Oct-4th.

2017/page2"><http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17741-Choral-Vespers-Wed-Oct-4th-2017/page2>.
[/footnote]

The remark about repeated broadcasts in the above example concerning the *Tenebrae* service exemplifies the most consistent negative reaction on the forum. Live broadcasts are valued and expected, and the distinction between these and repeats of recorded services is often actively highlighted by the forum host starting the thread each week. While members still engage with the musical content of repeated services in the ways described above, they do so alongside expressions of dissatisfaction and anxiety that repeats are being scheduled more frequently. This sometimes leads to expressions of concern that *Choral Evensong*, or at least the continuation of live broadcasts, is not a high priority for those responsible for BBC Radio 3's programming; summarising a post about a live broadcast from Salisbury Cathedral, one contributor commented 'Overall a great service, and just shows on what BBC3 will be missing out when they cut out Live services ...'.

[footnote] [41] 'CE Salisbury Cathedral Wed November 1st 2017,' The New Radio 3 Forum, accessed 28 September, 2018, <http://www.for3.org/forums/showthread.php?17893-CE-Salisbury-Cathedral-Wed-November-1st-2017>. [/footnote]

The high value placed on live broadcasts is separate from that placed on high standards of performance, which may be found in live and repeated services. Rather, it suggests that the listening community considers it important that *Choral Evensong* continues to represent the living musical and liturgical tradition maintained in cathedrals, churches, and chapels. Such a view might be motivated simply by the desire to continue having new broadcasts to hear and discuss, but, given listeners' attitudes towards *Choral Evensong* as a broadcast liturgy rather than simply a musical performance, for some, it may also have devotional or spiritual motivation.

Heidi Campbell's study of online Christian communities offers several useful parallels for understanding the nature of the *Choral Evensong* forum threads, including listeners' attitudes to live broadcasts. She notes that, for many, participation in online church communities served as a supplement to their participation in an offline church, but for others, the experience was a substitute for offline engagement. Her work identifies three basic reasons people articulated for the latter: 'being unable to locate churches that would accept them; being unable to find a church that could provide the teaching or interaction they wanted; and being unable to overcome previous negative church experiences.'

[footnote] [42] Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 177. [/footnote]

The importance listeners attach to live broadcasts may, in part, reflect the decline in services of choral evensong in parish churches over recent decades. Depending on their location or situation, listeners may be unable to attend such services in person, so listening to live broadcasts provides a way of continuing to participate in a valued tradition, whether for aesthetic, liturgical, or devotional reasons.

Similarly, Campbell discovered that many participants in online religious communities found aspects of value in their online interactions that they could not easily replicate offline, including having their personal contributions valued by other members, and being able to engage in deeper communication.

[footnote] [43] Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, pp. 182–185. [/footnote]

Understood in this way, the forum's sustained popularity may indicate that it provides participants with access to a community like-minded in its musical and liturgical preferences that is not so readily found in physically-located parish churches, given both the diminished provision of choral evensong and the associated decline in the number of parishes maintaining a choir.

Conclusion

The weekly threads of The New Radio 3 Forum dedicated to discussion of *Choral Evensong* are a rich source of listening experiences from a body of knowledgeable, opinionated, and committed listeners. Listeners' knowledge and experience manifests itself in the detailed levels of musical and liturgical discussion frequently found within the forum. While their musical and religious attitudes and preferences may vary considerably, participants share a commitment to the programme and the perpetuation of the choral and liturgical tradition its live broadcasts represent. This commitment overrides differences of opinion and taste; such differences are in fact embraced and encouraged as a way of furthering discussions. The willingness of participants to make such detailed postings and to engage with one another's contrasting views and interpretations points to the importance of the forum as a listening community.

The forum's online existence is crucial in attracting a large body of like-minded listeners, while also enabling those listeners to manage their identity and participation individually. In common with other special-interest online groups, the quality and

quantity of discussion is key to its ongoing success; members are drawn back in the expectation of finding stimulating points for discussion, and by contributing to that discussion, especially if they do so frequently, help to ensure its perpetuation. These forum threads are founded on and sustained by the sharing of listening experiences that bind together a dispersed virtual community of listeners. While individual listeners may be motivated to differing degrees by a combination of musical, liturgical, and spiritual factors, they are united by a common ability, willingness, and commitment to share and debate listening experiences that are technically detailed, contextually rich, and dialogically engaging. The listening experiences are intentionally expressed in ways that will stimulate the community of listeners, participation in which itself extends and enriches the experience of listening.

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