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## SAMPLE PAGES

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## CHRISTMAS AT WORCESTER

# *An interview with* JOHN PAUL HOSKINS

CMQ spoke to the Revd Canon John Paul Hoskins, Precentor at Worcester Cathedral, about the joys, challenges and opportunities presented by Christmas in one of Britain's oldest churches.

**CMQ** What makes Christmas at Worcester Cathedral such a special experience for both the congregation and visitors?

**JPH** People come to church because there's something in the combination of words and music, light and drama, and space and community that draws them in. Cathedrals are no different from thousands of other churches in that respect, except perhaps in the scale and resources of what we can offer. And our job is to show how all of this is not just wonderful in itself, but points to God here among us, the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

**CMQ** What are the aspects of the Christmas services and events that bring you the most joy? And what are some of your most cherished memories of Christmas at the cathedral over the years?

**JPH** We host a large number of school carol services in the run-up to Christmas, and I love welcoming the children and their parents to what might well be their first ever experience of being in a cathedral or even any church. This will only be my third Christmas here in Worcester (I arrived in January 2022), but I've been working in cathedrals most of my adult life (choral scholar and lay clerk at Guildford and Durham, bishop's chaplain in Gloucester). It's impossible not to be caught up in the sense of excitement and wonder of a packed, candlelit cathedral before the start of one of the main Christmas services.

**CMQ** Christmas is one of the busiest times of the year for all churches. What are the biggest challenges you face as Precentor when preparing for and running the various services and concerts, both spiritually and logistically?

**JPH** To some extent you just have to pace yourself. There's always a sense of being in two places at once. One of the hardest things to balance is to keep the focus on Advent – which is absolutely my favourite

church season with that sense of anticipation and expectation. At the same time for most people the Christmas festivities have already started and will even be winding down by the time we get around to really celebrating Christmas! The temptation is to be a bit sniffy about that, but in reality you just have to recognize that there is a tension between what are in effect two different calendars. But I see all the carol services in mid-December as a kind of trailer for the main event that is still to come.

**CMQ** How do you balance the need for tradition with the desire for innovation in the Christmas celebrations?

**JPH** It's generally about evolution rather than revolution. We're constantly thinking about what we might do differently, whether that just means new music or completely new patterns of services. People mostly want the familiar readings and carols at Christmas – quite a large part of what draws people to church at this time of year is their memories of Christmas past and a longing for all that that meant and continues to mean to them. So, what we're trying to do is to connect with that desire for the familiar, but at the same time very gently inviting them into a deeper connection with God through the incarnation of Jesus.

**CMQ** Christmas often draws people to the cathedral who might not attend regularly. How do you see this as an opportunity for outreach?

**JPH** For most of them, Christmas will be the only time they come to the cathedral. The biggest services of the whole year are the crib services on Christmas Eve, when we re-enact the whole Christmas story with the help of animals and audience participation. It's so popular that we've recently started to do it twice, and people are still queuing up to get in. And we've also introduced some very short daytime services (20 minutes or so, with just a couple of readings, carols and some brief prayers) on the busiest shopping



days in the run-up to Christmas, drawing in people who might not otherwise come to anything else.

**CMQ** What for you, and for the choristers, are the musical highlights of the season?

**JPH** It depends which choristers we are talking about. As well as the cathedral choir, with the boy and girl choristers, the choral scholars and lay clerks, we also have the voluntary choir, which celebrated its 150th birthday earlier this autumn, the youth choir and the chamber choir, all of which have their own programme of services and concerts with a huge variety of different music. I'm really looking forward to the Christmas concert Tidings of Joy a couple of weeks before Christmas, which will include Cecilia McDowall's cantata *A Winter's Night*. I suspect that for many people, especially the lucky choristers who get to sing it at the various services, the highlight is the solo first verse of 'Once in royal David's city'. And for me personally, the famous 'Word' chord in the last verse of 'O come, all ye faithful' (which was arranged by Sir David Willcocks, organist at Worcester from 1950–1957) really means that Christmas has finally arrived.

**CMQ** Beyond carol services, how does Worcester Cathedral engage with the local community during the Christmas season, particularly through special events?

**JPH** It all starts in late November with the city's Victorian Christmas Fayre, in which the cathedral is fully involved. The voluntary choir leads the singing at an outdoor opening ceremony next to the funfair in the Cornmarket. Another huge thing is our Christmas Tree festival. Throughout December and into early January we will welcome many thousands of visitors to see hundreds of trees in the cloisters and Chapter House, all creatively decorated and reflecting the local charities and businesses that provide them. And of

course, some of our musicians have been invited to a local hostelry to do some carol-singing on Christmas Eve ...

**CMQ** Worcester puts on a range of events during December, but are there any new or unique ones planned for this Christmas that particularly excite you?

**JPH** As well as all the usual things, this year we're also putting on some different sorts of events, including a couple of orchestral concerts of favourite Christmas music, and a performance of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.

**CMQ** Speaking of those events, how do you feel the cathedral's Christmas celebrations help people reconnect with the true meaning of Christmas? What role do cathedrals like Worcester play in keeping the spiritual essence of Christmas alive in modern society?

**JPH** People want to make the connections, especially at Christmas. I think everyone has a sense of being part of something bigger than ourselves, a sense of the holy drawing them in. Different people will feel that sense in different ways, and so part of what we're trying to do is to engage with all those different possibilities, trying to offer something for everyone. For some people it's about fun and celebration and community, for some people it might be about powerful words and preaching, for others it might be the beauty of music and drama, or it might even be a combination of all these things. What all churches are trying to do – and of course Worcester Cathedral is no different from anywhere else in this – is to help people join the dots. And we do that in the context of the Christian story of the Word made flesh, God moving into our neighbourhood, and interested and involved in everything about what it means to be human. That's what Christmas is all about.

**CMQ** Looking ahead, what hopes or aspirations do you have for future Christmas celebrations at Worcester Cathedral?

**JPH** It's probably not about doing anything radically new: we have already had over a thousand years to develop what we offer at Christmas! My job is to help the cathedral – and especially our fantastic musicians, led by Samuel Hudson and Nicholas Freestone – to be even better at serving the people of the city of Worcester and the surrounding county. I want this to be a place where more and more people are drawn in and catch a glimpse of Christian goodness, beauty and truth. And if you've never been to Worcester Cathedral, whether at Christmas or any other time, come and see us!



Above: Pamela H / Stockimo / Alamy Stock Photo



Above: The organ at York Minster / Shutterstock

# O SACRED INSTRUMENT!

VICTORIA JOHNSON

For the second time in her ministry, the Revd Canon Dr Victoria Johnson is about to witness the renewal and renovation of an iconic organ. She reflects on the vocation of these magnificent instruments to sound out the praises of God and give voice to the whole church.

It is easy to think of the organ as being a child of the industrial revolution, a modern musical machine as much a feat of engineering as the steam locomotive. Yet, these instruments originate from the ancient world. The Roman water organ or *hydraulis*, invented by Ctesibius of Alexandria in around the third century BC, was the forebear. The *hydraulis* was able to offer an

impressive dynamic range through its various pipes, with virtuosic performers enchanting listeners at Roman entertainments, banquets, rites and the theatre. The first organs really did provide the soundtrack to secular life.

Around the time of Christ, the *megrepha*, a primitive and very loud pipe organ, called priests and people to






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*Over what kind of church will the new organ preside in the 21st century?*

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**Left:** A Roman *hydraulis* pipe organ from the Zliten mosaic, c.second century BC.

worship in the synagogue. Early Christian communities avoided such instruments, offering their praises with voice alone. For centuries, the church was suspicious and resistant to instrumentation in worship, favouring a cappella singing. Over time, however, the pipe organ was found to be a suitable enabler of the church's song and eventually found itself at the heart of Christian worship, most likely through the monasteries and cathedrals of Western Europe. It has since become an essential tool, an *organon* of the Christian faith.

Yet, like all things made with human hands, these instruments age and eventually need replacement or repair. At some point, they need to invoke the power of resurrection.

### SUNG BACK TO LIFE

On Easter Day 2021, the grand organ of York Minster was brought back to life after a once-in-a-century refurbishment. The liturgy for reawakening the instrument after its slumber incorporated elements from a Roman Catholic liturgy for the benediction of the grand organ of Notre Dame de Vimoutiers in 2019, alongside prayers from the previous organ rededication service in 1903. Various invocations called upon the organ to sing itself back into life: 'Awake, O sacred instrument!' said a voice. 'Sing of Jesus, our Lord, dead and risen for us today.' The organist responded with a glorious improvisation to each bidding. 'Awake, O sacred instrument!' said another voice. 'Bring the congregation of the faithful together in songs of thanksgiving and praise.'

It was beautiful to orchestrate this once-in-a-lifetime liturgy and to observe the instrument retake its place at the heart of the worshipping church. It was as if the instrument was reclaiming its reason for being: a liturgical instrument with a liturgical purpose. Reflecting on that auspicious day, it struck me that its dedication and rebirth were somehow articulating the human vocation to worship and praise. Here was an

instrument made of wood and metal (and fibre-optic cables) embodying our ultimate purpose before God.

The prayers mined from the 1903 liturgy were sobering. They had a solemnity that seemed to orientate the worship away from pride and ego and towards our transcendent other. The prayers were directional, to and for God, a response of the creature to the eternal. They reminded everyone that worship only ever has one purpose: it is neither for self nor for society (though worship can inform both and help both to flourish), nor is it an education nor an entertainment – worship should give glory to God alone.

### THE HEART OF THE BUILDING

The whole deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction were fastidiously documented, and planning for the project stretched back at least a decade, involving hundreds of people. The scaffolding required for the dismantling and rebuilding was a feat of engineering, and nothing was left to chance – even the font used to inscribe each of the stops was chosen and designed with care. I suppose it was a little like building the first computer or the engine of a huge ship: as challenging physically as it was technically. But unlike a computer, this machine seemed to have a soul – or at least be *soulful* – and its seat was in the heart of a building created to give praise to Almighty God. The vocation of this instrument was bound up with the vocation and purpose of the church itself.

Over 5,000 individual pipes had to be cleaned, repaired and made new in the Durham workshop of Harrison & Harrison. Meanwhile, the mechanics and acoustic engineering of this instrument, situated in a particular space, had to be re-examined and reimagined for the 21st century. The last time that such a task had been undertaken was when Edward VII was king, Arthur Balfour was prime minister and Thomas Tertius Noble was York Minster's organist.

The first decade of the 20th century was a time

of optimism and ambition: it was the decade of art nouveau, the internal combustion engine, Einstein's special theory of relativity, and of the musical-boundary pushing works of Debussy, Mahler, Rachmaninov and Richard Strauss. The 1903 organ witnessed the two world wars, global pandemics, economic depressions and natural disasters. On 6 August 1945, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, an atomic bomb was dropped on the city of Hiroshima. The Minster organ was accompanying Ireland in C and the choir sang *I sat down under his shadow* by Sir Edward Bairstow at the Eucharist. In 1984, lightning struck, causing a fire that ravaged the south transept and filled the organ's lungs with smoke. On 30 November 2005, the organ offered fanfares alongside African drummers as Britain's first black Archbishop was enthroned, and in 2015 it sang out as the first woman was ordained a bishop in the Church of England in York Minster. For over a century, the organ looked on as the community of York buried their dead, were joined together in holy matrimony and gave thanks for new life. Day by day, it performed its liturgical duties and lived into its vocation by accompanying the songs and prayers of the faithful.

What changes will the new instrument observe as the decades roll on? Over what kind of church will it preside in the 21st century?

### A CHORUS OF VOICES

The blessing and dedication of this grand musical instrument in the cathedral felt like a profound, almost ineffable message. The organ sang like a heavenly chorus of diverse voices, ranging from the tiniest singer (spoken through a pipe no bigger than a pencil), to a voice that could have resonated from the largest ocean liner. This chorus seemed to gather up in its song the voices of all who heard it, voices that could barely articulate their own hopes, sorrows, fears and joys. Despite its grandeur, it seemed to speak with humility and nobility, fulfilling its vocation to enable the faithful to speak to God.

One of the many technical feats of the new instrument meant that it projected its voice fully into the nave of the cathedral. Many cathedrals struggle with instruments that don't quite inhabit the space. Yet, with some switches, shutter work and attention to wind pressures (resulting in a much greater 'lung capacity'), the York instrument can now reach to the back of the nave and support the singing of thousands. The new instrument makes you tremble when it speaks. It gives completely of itself and then, just when you think it has given everything, it gives more, with what has been described as its 'limitless bravura'.

Equally as moving is its ability to hold the space with near silence. The quietest stop, the Echo Dulciana, is like a thread of silk, guiding any diminuendo into prayerful stillness. At the end of Herbert Howells's Gloucester Service, this stop is the last voice to be heard, fading into nothing and disappearing into the heavenly realm. Breathtaking!

### GLORY TO GOD ALONE

The destiny of this instrument, born again on Easter Day 2021 during the global pandemic, was not to simply sound out the vestiges of Christianity in an empty sepulchre, nor provide the background music to a world-famous visitor attraction. It was to assert the faith of the church with that 'limitless bravura' and to signify humanity's first calling, which is to worship and love God forever. Its dedication and setting apart was somehow able to redeem all singing and speaking, inspiring and liberating voices to offer praise. The resonance of the instrument reminded the church of its purpose.

J.S. Bach understood that music is made to the glory of God alone, signing his music '*Soli Deo Gloria*' to signify who and what the music was for. Our sacred instruments have a similar calling. The organ is a medium through which human beings offer praise to God, and the story of the organ is woven into the worshipping life of the church.

The story of the York organ is mirrored in other churches, chapels and cathedrals where similar instruments have been renovated, renewed and replaced. Recent notable work has been undertaken in Norwich, Manchester and Salisbury cathedrals, and at King's College, Cambridge.

In my new role, as dean of St John's College, Cambridge, I await the arrival of a new organ in 2025. I shall once again be privileged to witness the birth of a new musical presence and the emergence of a new liturgical voice to lift our song. The instrument will take its place at the heart of a cherished chapel, lifting our song in prayer and praise for generations to come. To mark its arrival, there will be a series of celebrations and dedications, ordaining this musical instrument to take up its vocation to make a joyful noise, to the glory of God alone.

Extracts from this article are taken from *On Voice: Speech, Song and Silence: Human and Divine* by Victoria Johnson, which is published by Darton, Longman & Todd, and is available now in paperback from [www.rscmshop.com](http://www.rscmshop.com), priced £14.99. ISBN: 9781913657987R.

## PLAY THE ORGAN YEAR URGES ORGANISTS TO 'THROW OPEN THE DOORS'

Organizations from across the organ and church music world have announced Play the Organ Year 2025, a year-long project to increase the number of people playing the organ and appreciating its music.

The Play the Organ Year campaign aims to create as many opportunities as possible for people to not just hear, but also play an organ for the first time. The initiative involves organizations including the Royal College of Organists, Incorporated Association of Organists, Royal School of Church Music, Society of Women Organists, British Institute of Organ Studies, Institute of British Organ Building, Cathedral Organists Association, Association of Assistant Cathedral Organists and The Organ Club.

Organists and venues are being asked to plan First Encounter organ recitals throughout 2025, including specially designed Play the Organ sessions for newcomers wherever possible. Organists can also join in by simply using Play the Organ Year material to introduce one or more new people to the instrument over the year.

Organist and broadcaster Anna Lapwood MBE is supporting Play the Organ Year as its patron, alongside a team of leading organists around the UK working as regional ambassadors. Anna said: 'The organ is a unique and fabulous instrument, and we want as many people as possible to discover how truly thrilling it is to play one! I hope that as many of us as possible take up the Play the Organ Year challenge to throw open the doors and make 2025 the year we share this remarkable experience with a record number of people.'

To help organists and venues arrange Play the Organ Year events and activities, a free Play the Organ Year resource pack is available to download at

[www.rco.org.uk/play](http://www.rco.org.uk/play). The pack includes how-to guides and advice, branded content and templates, and detailed plans and resources for hands-on Play the Organ sessions suitable for anyone from a complete music novice to someone with a little experience of piano or other keyboard instruments.

Also at [www.rco.org.uk/play](http://www.rco.org.uk/play) is a Play the Organ Year listings page, where organists and venues can upload details of their Play the Organ Year events, and people can then search to find events near them throughout the year. The RCO, its partners and the Play the Organ Year ambassadors will also be running their own events around the UK, starting with a launch First Encounter event on Sunday, 19 January at Central Hall Westminster in London.

Digital resources will be published on YouTube and Instagram, providing opportunities for anyone unable to attend a physical Play the Organ Year event to take part on keyboard instruments at home. Organists will be encouraged to submit the results of their Play the Organ Year activities, with the target of reaching more than 2,000 newcomer sessions on the organ during the year.

Chief Executive of the Royal College of Organists Sir Andrew Parmley said: 'The organ is a magnificent instrument unlike any other. But with declining church attendances, cuts in school music education, and ever-smaller audiences for live performances, fewer people are getting the chance to discover this for themselves. So, Play the Organ Year is an attempt to reopen this experience to as many people as possible – to encourage them to take a step towards the organ, to lay hands on it wherever possible, and to discover for the first time the unique and thrilling experience of playing this remarkable instrument.'



**PLAY THE  
ORGAN  
YEAR 2025**

Left: Play the Organ Year patron, Anna Lapwood.