

Come & Sing Evensong!

An Introduction



It is a great pleasure to have been invited to compile and edit this new collection of pieces which would suit a *Come and Sing Evensong*.

Evensong has always been very special to me, ever since I was a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, through my whole career in parish churches up until my time as Director of Music at Salisbury Cathedral, where I directed evensong every day. It has the perfect form and rhythm, with a daily selection of psalmody, two canticles, readings and an anthem. Hymns are an optional extra. And, of course, so much wonderful music has been written for this service – we are spoilt for choice!

The idea of a *Come and Sing Evensong* came to me in my 'retirement' job as Director of Music at St Mary's Church in Swanage. We have quite a healthy-sized choir, but I was looking for more new recruits and realized that there were a lot of people who loved singing for evensong, but who were loathe to make a regular commitment to the choir. It occurred to me that if we opened up one service a month to anyone who wanted to join, we would probably get a lot of new singers – and that is exactly what happened. Now we have a large pool of singers who join us once a month for evensong, which is excellent outreach for the church. I am also able to call on certain singers to join the regular choir from time to time, which is a bonus. I have further developed the idea by inviting guest conductors each month to lead the service. This has been fascinating, as everyone has the same message, but says it in a different way, and I learn new things on every occasion.

I am hoping that this volume will encourage more people to try out this idea. Perhaps you don't have a regular evensong choir, but this would give you the chance to establish something once a month or maybe once a quarter – whatever suits your needs.

So, how do you put on a *Come and Sing Evensong*? My first piece of advice is to see both the rehearsal and the service as one. Sometimes you will have a successful rehearsal and then the service doesn't go so well. Other times you might go into the service feeling that the rehearsal has been tough, but suddenly your singers rise to the occasion and sing brilliantly. My point is that it doesn't matter either way, as long as people benefit from the whole experience. They will go away wiser and will have learnt much, whatever the outcome musically.

My second piece of advice is to plan your music carefully. People like a challenge musically, but they also want to enjoy themselves – and you want to send them away smiling and wanting to come back the next time. So, if you are going to choose a set of canticles that are a bit challenging, make sure that your anthem is either simple or well known. Singers enjoy familiarity. If everything is new, you are likely to struggle, as people will lose the sense of enjoyment. Stick to the same responses for a number of these events. You will only have limited time and you don't want to waste it all on the responses. Choose a short bit of psalmody – 8 to 10 verses. It is much better to do a few verses well, rather than many badly. And remember – many people won't be familiar with Anglican chant and you will have to develop a house style. I'd recommend using the *Parish Psalter with Chants*. It's the easiest psalter to use with Anglican chant, is still in print and is readily available. Alternatively, you might decide to do a plainsong psalm – why not?

If you are planning to do a few evensongs, it might be sensible to repeat a set of canticles or anthem so that the second time people are more familiar with the notes and the style. Speaking of style, I try to vary the music in our services by selecting pieces from different centuries, or perhaps using an unaccompanied piece rather than one with organ accompaniment. I often start off with a very simple introit too – but something that will give confidence to the singers. A number of the anthems in this collection are suitable to be used as introits.

Ideally, in all these events you need a competent organist to support the conductor. If you know that your organist is going to be secure, then you have a foundation on which to build your work. Always encourage your singers. Explain what you want clearly and try to get the best out of them. But remember that you are very unlikely to get a perfect performance – that is not what these events are about. People want to learn, but also to enjoy themselves and so as conductor you will set the tone.

A word to singers who will be joining in. If you have a chance to look at or listen to the repertoire beforehand, you will at least have an idea of what each piece sounds like – especially if you are not a good sight-reader. Most of the music in this collection is available on *RSCM Choral Coach*, where you can sing along with a choir, and test yourself. Have a go at everything during the session – even if it feels too hard for you. Nobody minds wrong notes when you are starting out. Perhaps use some discretion later and miss out bits that you find too hard. Watch and listen around you – and enjoy!

Finally, I think that the whole experience needs to be social: refreshments are crucial as well as time to chat and mingle. We start our Swanage rehearsal at 4pm. We prepare packs of music which could include this book so that, when people arrive, everything is there for them. We rehearse until 5.45pm and then have a cup of tea and cake, and give people half an hour in which to chat together. Then there is time to settle down before the service at 6.30pm.

Come and Sing Evensongs are exciting – you never know who is going to turn up, or how it's going to go – but they are so rewarding, and they bring people into church to sing who otherwise would never do so.

Good luck!
Simon Lole, 2023