



Upbeat

The Newsletter of the London Gallery Quire

New Version – November 2015 - No. 12

Doctor's Notes:

When we visit a church for the first time, the minister usually asks me if we need the use of the organ. No we don't! One of the distinguishing features of West Gallery music is that it can always be rendered without the use of any keyboard instrument. The reason is quite simply that in the West Gallery period, that is about 1700-1850, very few town and country churches had organs.

The earliest West Gallery music was sung unaccompanied. But in the 18th century as now, amateur choirs tended to lose pitch, so the practice arose of using a bass instrument, usually a cello, bassoon or serpent, to keep the choir in tune. It was soon found that this practice had the additional advantage of helping any bass singers whose sight-reading was less than perfect to hold their part. Inevitably the practice spread to doubling all four parts with instruments. That in turn led to composers including independent passages or "symphonies" to be played by instruments alone.

The instruments in use were whatever local musicians could lay hands on. Some quires used strings, some woodwind, some both. After the end of the Napoleonic wars brass instruments such as keyed bugles became available, and were duly pressed into service. Toward the end of the West Gallery period the concertina made an appearance in some bands. Mostly the instrumentation of symphonies is unspecified, though some composers, notably Joseph Key (d.1784) asked in some pieces specifically for violin, oboe or bassoon, and in one case a trumpet. How many quires were able to fulfil his wishes is uncertain.

At the time of writing London Gallery Quire boasts a band consisting of violin, flute, oboe, two B flat clarinets, one bass clarinet, and bassoon. Lurking amongst the singers are players of recorder, violin, Viola da Gamba, crumhorn and serpent, who make their main contribution with their voices, but can be called upon when the band needs strengthening. The band plays independently as *The Garlickhythe Occasionals*, a ceilidh band, under the leadership of Brian Stewart, our fluter.

West Gallery music is not technically challenging for amateur instrumentalists, and offers an ideal introduction to ensemble playing. We are always pleased to hear from any potential recruits to our band.

Francis Roads

Sub Doctor's Notes!

This is a description of how I go about composing choral music. I sometimes skip steps; sometimes take a lot longer over one step than at other times. Of course, this is only what I do — others may have very different approaches.

Choose a text. Nowadays this is a bit easier than it was when I was a teenager; there is an entire internet out there including many websites with poetry and quotes on them. If I'm looking for a poem on a particular topic, I might do a bit of research, but I'm more likely to ask the Twitter hive mind, as personal recommendations of poetry are always good.

I might also ask someone to write a suitable poem or metrification of an existing text. Sometimes, of course, a competition will specify a text, meaning I can skip this step. I always have to be very careful of copyright issues, as anything written by someone who died less than 70 years ago can only be used with their permission.

For 'Addington', which the LGQ will sing and play in December, I leafed through a copy of the New English Hymnal. I was looking for a hymn text that didn't already have a strongly associated tune, and something that was relevant in some way to images, since we'll be performing at the National Portrait Gallery.

Learn the text. It isn't enough just to have the words in front of me I need to understand them. For me, this is usually a matter of repetition: I'll read the text several times, silently and aloud. This usually takes at least an hour, sometimes much longer, but occasionally it can be very much faster if, for example, the text is a psalm I already know well. It also helps to note any structure, rhyme scheme, onomatopoeia and other devices. At some point, snippets of tunes or rhythms start to fit the words; I write these down, sometimes singing them first, other times not. If I'm having great difficulty relating to a text, I often find writing it out longhand helpful.

Begin to set the text. Sometimes I go straight into writing the melody sometimes I plot a rhythm first, in stick notation. The latter has the advantage of not needing manuscript paper, which is sometimes helpful! Writing the rhythm out first is something I'm more likely to do with a text that doesn't have a regular metre, or when I'm anticipating writing something quite "modern"-sounding in terms of the melody and harmony;

I don't want the rhythm working against the words if listeners (and maybe singers!) are already slightly disoriented. If there's a time limit or minimum time requirement, I'll divide this by the number of words and try to get a feel for the tempo I'll need, and start making some decisions about repeating words or lines.

If I'm writing in a particular style, or for a particular acoustic, I'll be keeping those ideas in mind: when I wrote music knowing it would be sung in the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral, I needed to take into account the echo, and when I write in a shape-note idiom I am not going to use all 12 notes in an octave.

Continue to set melody. After I have some snippets of a tune, or possibly stick rhythm notation for an entire text, I start at the beginning and fill in any gaps in the melody. I'll make a provisional decision here about what key to write in, and what vocal parts and/or accompaniment to use, though these may be subject to change later. As I write the melody I generally add in small bits of harmony and accompaniment as they occur to me, but the focus is to finish the first draft of melody.

Transcription and editing. I transcribe the notation I have into the computer, print it out, and then continue adding more music on paper. If there's an accompaniment I try playing it. I fill in the notes in all the parts, and sing through each part to check for awkward bits. Then it's back to the computer with the changes... sometimes I do some editing as I transcribe, but on the whole I still find pencil and paper more comfortable.

This part of the process can take several iterations for me to be really happy with all the notes. If I don't have access to a computer, I sometimes end up copying the work out by hand several times. It seems that the mechanical action of transcribing into the computer or writing out by hand "tidy" copies of what I've already composed helps the creative work on some level.

More editing. When I have all the notes in place I'll do a final print, then add dynamics and other instructions on paper before entering them into the computer too. Whenever I try to skip the "print it out and write on the paper" part of this I mess up, so I guess I'm stuck with it. Sorry, trees.

Wait. If possible, I then leave the piece in a drawer for a week or two. Sometimes coming back to something after ignoring it for a while will reveal major flaws or minor typos (though these are just as likely to escape my notice).

Publish. If the piece isn't for a particular commission or competition, I then put a .pdf and .mid file online, usually at the Choral Public Domain Library www.cpd.org, as well as at Patreon www.patreon.com/artsyhonker.

If a piece is submitted for a competition and is not selected, sometimes I opt not to publish it, either for text copyright reasons or because I rushed for a deadline and have since decided the work isn't that good. I'll also print a copy for my records, though the best adjective for my paper filing system is probably "indescribable".

Of course, composing the music and making copies available online is only one part of the process. After that it's down to others to learn, rehearse and perform the music I write!

Kathryn Rose

Michael Spittal – R.I.P.



I first met Mike at Chiltern West Gallery Quire in 1995. When in 1997 I decided to found London Gallery Quire, he and Antonina became founder members. He was a strong bass singer on whom I could rely to get things right, and to provide leadership for the other members of the section. His jovial presence will be greatly missed by all of us.

Francis Roads

Editorial

It is with regret that I must relinquish my role as editor for Upbeat from the end of 2015, as family commitments will see me missing more rehearsals than attending in 2016.

Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the contributors who have come up trumps with some fantastic articles. Topics such as historical notes, challenges, poems, helpful guides have all made the task interesting and enlightening. I truly cannot thank you all enough.

However a very special thank you must go to TDH, who unflinchingly puts up with my mistakes and idiosyncrasies with patience (which I lack) and sound advice.

Jannette Stewart

Please come and join us on: -

Saturday 7th November a concert at Wanstead URC

Sunday 22nd November Evensong, Pond Square, URC Chapel, Highgate, London

Wednesday 2nd December Christmas Concert, St George's German Church, Alie Street.

Friday 18th December Christmas Carols, National Portrait Gallery, London.