St. Martin's – the sound of music

WITH five hymns, sung prayers, a sung psalm, an extra sung piece during communion and an applause rousing recessional played at the end of every Sunday service, it is obvious to even a casual passerby that music is an important part of St. Martin's Church on Brabyns Brow. For those in the congregation, the choir, and for its Director of Music, it is much more than that. It seems fitting to focus on the beauty of the church's music in this, the second of a four-part series, a peek inside St. Martin's.

The association between music and the Church is a longstanding and enduring one. Its cultural influence goes far and wide, and many readers will remember the Christian songs and hymns of school days which continue to influence much of modern-day culture, including songs on the terraces at football matches. Singing in church originates from the ancient Jewish tradition of chanting Old Testament Psalms which was then adopted by the early Christian church. This evolved through the Middle Ages into monastic Gregorian chanting and, during the 16th century Protestant Reformation, was expanded into robust, participatory congregational singing.

That tradition remains very much alive today in Churches across the country and indeed the world, but with many variations on the genre of music, depending on denomination and congregational preferences. Father Timothy Hupfield explains that: "Music has held a central place in the history of the Church across the world from its very beginning. Indeed, the book of Psalms in the bible are sacred songs, written for use in worship. There is something very special about music which has long been recognised. St Augustine is thought to have said, 'those who sing, pray twice.' St Hildegard of Bingen used music in her description of God's presence in everything, even the most ordinary and mundane, saying: 'there is the music of heaven in all things.' It is little wonder, then, that music continues to be key to so much of what happens in church. Music opens our hearts and minds to God, and to one another, bringing us together in joyful harmony."

In the early nineteenth century, the music of the Church of England was limited and staid, but it began to improve considerably over time and, from the 1840s onwards, this was in large part due to the Oxford Movement. By the time St. Martin's opened its doors in 1870, the importance and variety of music in Anglo-Catholic churches was well established. In line with the Oxford Movement's musical innovations, the church was designed with choir stalls in the chancel and the blue-robed choir, consisting only of boys and men, would occupy these stalls, and sing Anglican choral music on special Sunday occasions, if not more frequently. Moving forward to the 1950s, a photograph reveals a choir consisting of six boys and seven men, all in choir robes, and seven women, not in choir robes, as female choir members were not allowed to sit in the choir stalls but sang from the front right-hand pew. Fortunately, nowadays things are more equal and for many years now, the Church has warmly welcomed female choir members. At St. Martin's they occupy the choir stalls alongside their male counterparts in the chancel, the blue robes originally used at the church having been replaced by red ones.



Dedicated members of the Choir. Inset below: Director of Music, Alan Thornecroft

The traditional Anglo-Catholic music of St. Martin's is provided by the combination of its noble Father Willis organ skilfully played by Director of Music, Alan Thornecroft, and its dedicated choir.

The original organ in St Martin's was completed in time for the church opening in 1870. It was built by Henry Willis & Sons, one of the most distinguished names in British organ building and reflects the craftsmanship of "Father" Henry Willis (1821–1901), whose work helped define the sound of Victorian church music. The organ was modest in scale, with just ten stops, a single pedal stop, and a 25-note pedalboard, ideally suited to the size and acoustics of the church, capable of supporting the choral tradition with clarity and warmth whilst accommodating much of the organ repertoire of the period.

Over the years, the instrument has been thoughtfully enlarged and adapted with a complete restoration in 1992 by Wood of Huddersfield, ensuring the instrument's continued vitality. According to Alan, although the organ is larger than a typical chamber instrument, it is perfectly balanced for St Martin's.



The Anglo-Catholic tradition is especially reflected in the monthly Choral Evensong. Alan explains that Choral Evensong is: "one of the best ways to experience the richness of St. Martin's musical tradition, with its flowing psalms, varied musical settings and quiet sense of order, offering a time of calm in a busy world. This service is one of the great treasures of the Anglican tradition and is clearly cherished at St. Martin's, where singers and congregation are carried peacefully through the timeless and deeply comforting words and music."

After studying music at university and following a brief career as a music teacher and tutor, Alan joined St. Martin's as its Director of Music in 2017, travelling for services and rehearsals from the Wirral to do so. Alan leads the choir at St. Martin's, seeing his role as one of encouragement to help draw out the best from its members. His musical selections mean there is always a new challenge to be mastered by the choir before the piece's incorporation into a choral service.

The quality of the choir's singing does not happen by accident. It depends on committed regular rehearsals, careful preparation and an enthusiasm that keeps going even when the music may at first appear daunting. Alan explains that: "the repertoire can be demanding with works such as Anton Bruckner's Christus Factus Est which requires concentration, discipline and musical confidence from all involved." New pieces can sometimes be a challenge to which choir members rise whilst encouraging and supporting each other. Week by week, notes are learned, lines are refined and confidence is built. The result is not only musical improvement but the quiet satisfaction of meeting a challenge together and discovering that perseverance can produce something truly uplifting and rewarding.

The choir members are a dedicated group of people with a keen interest in worshipful music which they willingly share with others. Choir membership is not only about individual voices, but about listening, blending and trusting one another. Speaking to choir members reveals the sense of togetherness at the heart of the choir's life and the strength of support for one another that helps sustain the group through every rehearsal and service.

'A great privilege'

Two members of St. Martin's choir share their thoughts on their own experience of joining and being part of the choir:

Andrew enjoyed being part of St. Martin's choir so much that he joined it twice, once in the early 1990s for a period of ten years before taking a break due to family commitments and then rejoining in 2019. In his words, Andrew: "considers it to be a great privilege to be able to join with others and, week by week, sing the sacred choral music of the last 400 years. When hearts and voices are raised together, the results are truly uplifting."

Charlotte joined the choir more recently in 2023 when she returned to St. Martin's where she was christened, after becoming a mother herself and wanting her children to also be part of the Church of England. A long-standing church member heard Charlotte singing in the congregation and suggested she should be in the choir and, after a successful audition, she joined their ranks. For Charlotte, becoming a member of St. Martin's choir consolidated her faith and she went on to be confirmed. She finds that: "Singing is good for your mental wellbeing and brings peace to your soul. The music and choir are of a very high standard, and Alan is an excellent musician and teacher. The music and singing at St. Martin's bring me, and hopefully, the church and wider community much pleasure."

St. Martin's Church has been deeply connected with the Anglo-Catholic tradition in music since its earliest days. It is easy for church members there to consider as 'normal', the rich quality and variety of music, both played and sung, that is such an integral part of church life there. The music of St. Martin's is far from 'normal'; it is a wonderful musical and spiritual experience.

For anyone interested in joining the choir at St. Martin's, new members of any voice range are welcome and the best way to find out more would be to come to a church service and speak with Alan or a choir member. Prospective members would have to audition before joining and rehearsals are on Fridays at 7.15pm and before services.

For the rest of us, everyone is welcome at St. Martin's. Whether it's for worship, music, peace, friendship or a combination of those, why not step inside and listen?



Andrew has joined the choir twice



Charlotte joined in 2023



St. Martin's organ is perfectly balanced for the building in which it is played

Sunday choral services:

11.15am	Parish Mass (sung Common Worship)
6.30pm	Sung Evensong (1st Sunday of the month)

Some regular events at St Martin's

- Board game coffee mornings: Wednesdays during term time, 10am-12 noon
- Churchyard tidy-ups: March-October, third Saturday of the month, 10am-12 noon
- Children's Crafternoons – craft afternoons: Sunday afternoons, 2-4pm, 5 times a year
- St. Martin's Heritage Trust – talk on Arts & heritage: Saturday afternoons, 2.30-4pm, once a month

Important information

- For more information about St. Martin's visit the website: www.stmartins-lowmarple.co.uk
- Features on St. Martin's are planned to continue throughout 2026 with a focus on Community & Wellbeing in the Autumn *Marple Review*.
- For Baptisms, Christenings, Confirmations, Funerals, Weddings or to book the parish hall, please call 0161 511 0060 or email: vicar@stmartins-lowmarple.co.uk
- For all other enquiries please call Alan Ashurst on 0161 456 9693 or email churchwarden@stmartins-lowmarple.co.uk, or by post to 15 Brabyns Brow, Marple Bridge, SK6 5DT