



Boris Ord's King's College Carols
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1928 had been an *annus mirabilis* for the Christmas Carol. Not only was the *Oxford Book of Carols* published, but the BBC broadcast the *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* live from King's College, Cambridge for the first time. The BBC repeated its experiment a year later, on 24 December 1929 (this time under the choir's new conductor, Boris Ord) by which time 2LO London was broadcasting on 356 metres and 5XX Daventry on 1554 metres. But all was not well in the ether, and Colonel Sir Stuart Sankey of Little Hampden in Buckinghamshire was so distressed by the gremlins within his wireless that he set aside his turkey to write to the Editor of *The Times* on Christmas Day:

"Sir,—The B.B.C. has recently contrived that the programmes from London and Daventry should be delivered simultaneously into our receiving sets, and in this neighbourhood no mere three-valve set seems able to divorce them. On Christmas Eve the choir of King's College Chapel gave us carols, which would have been delightful had they not been accompanied by banalities from 2LO; and the Bidding Prayer and Lord's Prayer from Daventry were punctuated by the dance music of the Wireless Orchestra from London."

Disgusted of Little Hampden, claiming that his 'three-light hearkener-in' (as the three-valve radio set was quaintly known in some English dialects) wasn't up to the job. In fact, as King's was broadcasting and the sun was setting, Colonel Sankey was probably experiencing interference from a foreign radio station but might have been confused into thinking that he was hearing Jack Payne and his B.B.C. Dance Orchestra, who were broadcasting on 5GB Daventry Experimental at the time. What is now clear is that Sir Stuart should have been more careful in what he wished for. In the following year, 1930, the BBC did not broadcast the *Nine Lessons* from King's at all. King's choir was in transition and recovering from the passing of Arthur 'Daddy' Mann on 19 November 1929. Two days prior to his death, on Sunday 17 November, Mann had played the organ for the service of Mattins in King's, had sung in the choir at Evensong, and gave his usual tea party for the choral scholars. Daddy died two days later, six months short of his 80th birthday, but choral worship continued as usual, including the broadcast of *Nine Lessons* on Christmas Eve, under the direction of Bernhard 'Boris' Ord (1867 - 1961). Boris Ord had been appointed a Fellow at King's in 1923 and had gently assumed control of Chapel music at the end of Mann's life. From our point of view, it is difficult to imagine why Boris Ord wouldn't want the 1930 service to be broadcast, or indeed why the BBC wouldn't want to do so. Had Mr Ord or Rev. Milner White known that the 1930 service would otherwise be the only one not to be broadcast from 1928 until now, things might have been different and interested parties might have worked harder to make it happen. In retrospect the BBC regretted not having broadcast the 1930 service, a fact made clear by the wistful *Radio Times* billing of 24 December 1931:

“This is a welcome reappearance of the Christmas Eve Carol Service from King’s College, which was broadcast in 1928 and 1929. It is one of the loveliest services to be heard anywhere.”

‘B. Ord’ was billed as ‘Organist’, whereas in 1928 and 1929 the musical direction had remained anonymous.

The broadcast of the *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* quickly became a tradition, aided and abetted by the listening public’s heart growing fonder through the absence of the 1930 service. Indeed the broadcast became such a well-respected tradition that the BBC invented a history for it that is jaw-dropping in its fabrication. The announcement that prefaced the 1939 radio broadcast included this:

“The Festival has been held since the Chapel was built nearly 500 years ago, and the atmosphere of tradition is preserved by ranks of lighted candles glowing in the scarlet cassocks of the choristers.”

In fact, the Festival was only celebrating its 21st birthday on 24 December 1939, a coming-of-age nicety that could have been turned into a cute continuity announcement. But it’s easy to see why such grotesque sexing-up of the facts might have been undertaken at the end of 1939. As Rebecca Frost wrote in 2010:

“The desire to promote English customs had of course been heightened by the outbreak of war in September. The King’s College carol service fulfilled an important need for programmes which boosted national pride at home and abroad. By calling on a fivehundred year pedigree, the programme-makers were hoping to validate their claim that the service formed an integral and important part of English national life.”

By this stage *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols in King’s College Chapel upon Christmas Eve* was not just broadcast nationally: in 1936 the BBC Empire Service (the predecessor to the World Service) broadcast a recording of the carol service; in 1937 the Mutual Broadcasting System, a new American radio network, took the whole service; and in 1939 French and Italian broadcasting networks spread the King’s net even wider. It had been less than ten years since Festivalgate, when the BBC had not broadcast the service on Christmas Eve of 1930, and which had resulted in dissatisfaction all round. Still only a teenager in 1939, the BBC was about to get it wrong again:

“Christmas Eve this year falls on a Sunday and we are bound to include on a Sunday the usual number of religious services. Thus, to take an hour and a quarter’s Carol Service in addition to the usual quota would overweight that day with this kind of programme.”

The BBC’s solution was to broadcast only half of the service from King’s. Graeme Williams, BBC Outside Broadcasts Executive, wrote to the Dean of King’s, Eric Milner-White, on 6 December. What is so revealing is that Williams doesn’t question the fact that many listeners are going to be irritated – that is apparently a given:

“We must lose some of the service and so irritate listeners who enjoy the carol service, but we believe that the irritation will be much less if we break into it and leave at its completion, rather than start when you start and then leave before the end. In the one case the beauty of the service will help to soothe the listeners’ initial irritation at having missed its beginning, in

the other the irritation will come at the end and so be more likely to persist and thereby neutralise the earlier enjoyment.”

Eric Milner-White proved himself to be more attuned to the requirements of public service broadcasting than anyone causing the fracas at the BBC. Milner-White wrote back to Williams by return:

“If you take the first half hour of the Service, not only is the timing exact, but you get those sections which the outside world loves most to hear; the boy’s opening solo, the beautiful Christmas Bidding Prayer, the lesson read by the Chorister as well as one other, and no fewer than five of the best and loveliest carols, the whole ending with a great congregational carol, God rest you merry, gentlemen, which will serve admirably as a climax for this first section...If I say finally that the College insists on this, it is only to save the B. B. C. from making a bad mistake!”

Notwithstanding the fact that Milner-White describes his own Bidding Prayer as beautiful (but then it really is!), the force of the Dean’s argument was accepted by the BBC. Indeed, just one week later we learn that ‘Mr Williams has now left this Department’. The BBC’s Director of Outside Broadcasting was Seymour de Lotbinière, known affectionately as ‘Lobby’:

“I am only sorry that we gave you and the College authorities so much trouble in bringing us – and myself in particular – to our senses.”

A thoroughly gracious response, and one that, as a BBC employee, I find characteristic of all my dealings with the corporation.

Inevitably the Second World War had a profound effect on musical life in Britain. In Cambridge it meant finding a deputy for Boris Ord, as recollected by Philip Radcliffe, Ord’s colleague at King’s College from 1931:

“The impact made on the life of the University by the 1939 war was more gradual than that of its predecessor, and during its first year the Chapel services continued as usual. But soon, as the results of the increased call-up and constant changes of personnel, the number of week-day services was cut down, and during the spring of 1941 Boris, who had already served in the Home Guard, returned to the R.A.F. His place as organist of King’s was taken by Dr Harold Darke, to whom the college owes a lasting debt of gratitude.”

After the War, the 1945 *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* could have been conducted by Boris, but Ord graciously gave Darke his swansong on the grounds that Darke had set the carol service up and had chosen the music; so Boris played the organ and Darke conducted. Just days later, Harold Darke (known at King’s as ‘Dickie’) returned to London and Ord resumed his duties as organist at King’s. In spite of Dickie Darke’s safe pair of hands, there was some work to do in returning the choir to the tight-enssembled outfit that it had been before the War. But at least the BBC radio broadcast of the *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* had become an undisputed fixture. With Ord’s return to King’s, any other college or cathedral choir that might have had designs on wresting the service away from King’s now abandoned any such notion. The Christmas Eve radio slot belonged to King’s. The service would end with ‘Hark the herald’ and it would begin with ‘Once in royal’ (the first verse sung by a solo treble – an innovation dating from 1935).

If 1928 had been the Christmas carol’s first 20th-century *annus mirabilis*, then 1954 was its second. At 8.00 pm on 23 December 1954, the earliest televised broadcast of *A Festival of*

Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge was shown. This was three-quarters of an hour of television gold. It had been recorded the day before its transmission, and the *Nine Lessons* service was whittled down to six lessons, seven choir carols, and three congregational hymns. The service had a wholly satisfying form and (let it not be said too loudly) duration. In grainy black-and-white footage, the solemn-faced spectral figures of the choir processed deliberately and respectfully through the 500-year old stonework of one of Britain's architectural treasures. There was little levity or exuberance to be discerned on the faces of choir, clergy, or congregation. The Christmas message is one of hope and rejoicing, but the King's carol service is an impeccably serious and soberly choreographed event. In this context, human exultation is manifest not in smiles and bonhomie, but in the collaborative maintenance of high musical standards of solo and ensemble performance. This demonstration of choral excellence is witnessed in awestruck silence by the members of the congregation. But there are also designated congregational hymns 'in which they are asked to join heartily'; these are hallowed minutes during which the untrained singer is privileged enough to give voice within the most celebrated choral space in the world. In 1954, the carol service from King's College, Cambridge was transmitted to homes all around Europe, and the service began with the 20th *solo* rendition at King's of the opening verse of 'Once in royal David's city'. The man who, in 1935, had instituted the treble solo at the start of 'Once in royal' was Boris Ord, the choir's director of music from 1929 until 1957. And what more fitting way to start Mrs Alexander's children's carol than with the voice of a child. The 13year old soloist on the 1954 televised broadcast was Rodney Williams:

"What a privilege! Boris was so inspiring. I loved him and will till the day I die. I revere him like no other and I always say that I learned more in that 3½ years with him than I have in the rest of my life."

In 1954, when the choir joined in for the second verse of 'Once in royal', the harmony was by Arthur 'Daddy' Mann, who'd presided over the very first *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* at King's in 1918. Mann's harmonization takes elements of Henry Gauntlett's original harmony, but tweaks it for use while on the move in King's. The harmony grows from a small seed into something quietly majestic: the perfect musical accompaniment to the solemn eastward (as it then was) procession. Boris Ord described Mann's canny and sensitive harmonization of this carol as a 'closely guarded secret'; indeed it wasn't until Ord was in the last year of his life (and Mann had been dead for over 30 years) that it was published. There's something irretrievably quaint about the fact that the choir of King's College, Cambridge was run for 81 years by just three people – Daddy, Dickie, and Boris. Arthur, Harold, and Bernhard would have done a good job, of course, but not in anything like such an endearing manner as their nicknamed personas did.

The *Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* from King's is regarded as quintessentially British, nay English, by many around the world. Yet the repertoire of the 1954 television package is far-reaching in its choice of choir carols (at least in European terms). Germany is thrice represented: by a passage from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*; 'The Three Kings' by Peter Cornelius; and 'In dulci jubilo'. 'Hail, Blessed Virgin Mary' is an Italian tune, 'Sing lullaby' is a Basque melody, and 'Up! good Christen folk' is drawn from the Finnish *Piae Cantiones*. Only 'A virgin most pure' can lay claim to be British, and in King's in 1954, 'A virgin most pure' appeared in the 1919 arrangement by the Ulsterman Charles Wood.

Boris Ord was a remarkable figure. Ord was christened Bernhard (his mother was German), but as an adult he was known to everyone as Boris. The nickname arose because the teenage Ord became bewitched by Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*. Ord witnessed the production of *Boris Godunov* when Thomas Beecham conducted the Russian masterpiece in London at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in 1913. And then came the First World War. For the last two years

of the Great War, the young Ord served first as a volunteer with the Artists' Rifles and then as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps (later the Royal Air Force). Ord was wounded twice. In the Second World War, Ord re-joined the Royal Air Force as a flight lieutenant, and he was active in the Normandy landings. By the time that Boris Ord appeared on the 1954 television broadcast from King's he was an ailing man in his late 50s, but he looked several years older. Yet Ord's minimalistic command of King's choir was astonishing. Not one single movement was wasted, and throughout the service Ord perched on the end of the choir stalls containing the Decani (south side) choristers. These days Ord would turn himself through ninety degrees and station himself behind a music stand placed on the floor of the chapel – in other words facing his singers and allowing for freedom of arm movement. But not Ord; and not then. Much of the time Ord gazed intently at the music in front of him, occasionally giving almost imperceptible nods of his head. Yet the synchronization of the choir's rhythm and articulation was noteworthy. Ord was a committed interpreter who drilled his singers in all of the important aspects of liturgical singing. One of the most impressive moments in that first television broadcast occurred during the last verse of the choir carol 'A virgin most pure'. Once the verse started, Ord unfussily left his post and picked his way carefully, but deliberately, between the choir stalls on a journey in the direction of the altar. As Ord performed a military about-turn at the east end of the lectern, the choir began an undirected *forte* refrain with total assurance. Ord gingerly mounted three shallow steps and focused on the Biblical words in front of him, seemingly oblivious to the unanimous slowing down of the carol's last phrase and its impeccably placed last chord. As the reverberation of the last chord died away, Boris Ord's quietly authoritative voice delivered words from St Luke's gospel. No television anchor could have timed the *segue* better, and few choir directors – then or now – would be confident enough to leave their forces to negotiate the ending of a piece without direction. It says so many things about Ord and about his priorities as a church musician. This was a man who had fought bravely in two World Wars; a man who had cut his teeth conducting opera; a man for whom drama and action were an integral part of his character. Yet Ord's gentility when leading his young charges to sing appropriately in church is humbling to watch. It is an apparent paradox that the most impressive piece of choral direction in the 1954 televised service is when Boris Ord is walking away from his singers. Let it stand as a definition of both musical charisma and liturgical humility.

In the year after Boris Ord's death, Philip Radcliffe, the Cambridge composer and musicologist, summed up Ord's demeanour within King's Chapel:

“As choir-trainer and conductor, Boris had an acute sense of detail; all the time, he seemed to be giving out something, yet also there was a sense of economy and reserve. All those who sang or played under him will remember how he could convey his meaning and obtain the results that he wanted with the minimum of movement. In all that he did, whether as performer or conductor, there was never the slightest suggestion of personal showmanship; the perfectionism that often made him a formidable and exacting choir-trainer resulted in equally severe demands upon himself.”

There are a few unwitting highlights in the video of the 1954 King's service: two choristers attempting (successfully, to their credit) to suppress sneezes during the solos that begin the excerpt from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*; the delighted smiles and gestures of affirmation from three admirers in the nave when the choristers launch into the descant by Alan Gray in the second verse of 'While shepherds watched'; and the scene where the surplice of one of the Cantoris (north side) choristers catches on the choir stalls during the closing procession – twice. But these are rare eddies of skittishness in the otherwise becalmed waters of English reserve.

Boris Ord bravely carried on running King's Choir for almost another three years, until sclerosis took its toll. One of Ord's last appointments to a choral scholarship was the Welsh Tenor Robert Tear.

Tear went on to become one of Britain's best loved and adaptable vocal soloists with a glittering professional career that spanned over four decades. And it all started at King's in the late 1950s:

Boris Ord: Have you had any singing lessons, Mr Tear?

Robert Tear: No, sir.

Boris Ord: Good. In that case you won't ruin my choir.

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Further Material

Book

Timothy Day *I Saw Eternity the Other Night – King's College, Cambridge, and an English Singing Style* (Allen Lane, 2018)

DVD

Carols from King's – Choir of King's College, Cambridge / Stephen Cleobury (Opus Arte, 2001) the 2000 and 1954 televised services

CD

English Church Music & Favourite Christmas Carols
Choir of King's College, Cambridge / Boris Ord (Testament, 1997)