

# Sacred song, and where to find it

Rupert Sheldrake reports on an online guide to a great tradition

**C**horal evensong is one of the great cultural and religious treasures of the Anglican Church. At the Reformation, in the 16th century, when services were for the first time conducted in English instead of Latin, Archbishop Cranmer developed the format for this service by combining two of the evening services in the monastic tradition, vespers and compline. Great Elizabethan musicians such as Thomas Tallis and William Byrd developed exquisite polyphonic choral music for this service, and with its 16th-century language and wealth of musical settings it has been performed by choirs in cathedrals, abbeys,

churches and chapels ever since.

Now a new online portal for choral evensong services has just been launched at [www.choralevensong.org](http://www.choralevensong.org) to enable anyone to find the details of choral evensong services anywhere in Britain and Ireland. Hopefully it will soon include the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the English-speaking world.

The website – declaration of interest: I have been involved in its creation – reveals just how flourishing this tradition still is. In both Oxford and Cambridge, for example, choirs in more than 20 colleges sing choral evensong in addition to the widely known services at

Oxford's Christ Church Cathedral, and King's College Chapel in Cambridge. These services are open to all. This contemplative, restful, peace-inducing service also takes place on Sundays in hundreds of parish churches throughout Britain, and often on weekdays too.

In cathedrals such as those at Lincoln or Wells, wonderfully trained choirs sing extraordinarily beautiful music echoing around great sacred spaces, and the 45-minute candlelit service is followed by the playing of the organ, often one of the great works of Bach. Yet while there may be more than 30 people in the choir, and three priests officiating, on weekdays the congregation may number only half a dozen. Most people simply do not know that these services are happening. But they happen anyway, not for money, or for human glory, but truly for the glory of God.

I was an atheist when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge and for several years afterwards, yet I still went to choral evensong because I found it so inspiring and uplifting. Whatever your religious faith, or lack of it, no one is going to question you about your beliefs or your motives when you attend.

This website, for the first time, makes it easy to find where services are happening, when they begin, and what music will be sung. The initiative has been widely welcomed. Dermot Dunne, the Dean of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, said: "Choral evensong opens the person to a transcendent space into which the divine enters in radiant beauty. I am grateful for this new initiative."

If you are in Britain or Ireland, try out the website, and go to a nearby choral evensong. And if you are planning to visit a cathedral, church or chapel, try to time your visit so that you can be in the building's sacred space as it is meant to be experienced: enchanted through chanting.

Rupert Sheldrake's many books include *The Presence of the Past*.



From the Book of Hours of Louis d'Orléans, 1469  
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# Sacred Song Repertoire

**Marco Cascella**



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