

A DETAILED EXPLORATION OF CHORAL EVENSONG AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN 2024

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Abstract

This paper explores the performance of identity in a service of choral evensong. Using Pierre Bourdieu's writing on cultural capital as a framework, I investigate how the concept of habitus can be applied to identify the performed behaviours of members of clergy, musicians, cathedral staff, and members of congregation within the service of choral evensong. Using semi-structured interviews and fieldnotes collected as an observer of choral evensong, I identify the intricacies of the relationships at play during the service. I explore the internalising and externalising of codified behaviours. My ethnographic study of a clearly defined institutional structure unpicks the mismatch between how an institution appears from the outside and the reality of what happens within. I place my findings within larger narratives and ongoing discussions within the Church of England relating to falling attendance at choral evensong following the Covid-19 pandemic. I take Bristol Cathedral's Festival of Evensong as a case study to discuss the value, if any, that events such as these have on ensuring that choral evensong is accessible to a wider audience. Exploring the performance of identity in the service of choral evensong is important because it offers insight into how religious practices shape the musical and extramusical behaviour witnessed within religious institutions.

Introduction

Attendance at cathedral services across the UK has decreased, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Conversely, a report published by the Cathedral Music Trust (Ashley *et al.* 2022) showed that attendance at choral evensong has increased since then. Even so, overall attendance is below pre-pandemic level. The Church of England has committed to doubling the number of young people attending services by 2030 (Church of England 2024). This announcement falls alongside 2021 census data which shows that 50% of individuals in their 20s in England and Wales identify as non-religious. Choral evensong has been referred to as 'the atheists' favourite service' (Ashley *et al.* 2022); so, a closer look at the elements of choral evensong can help unpick what the service can offer. Choral evensong is precisely choreographed and relies upon different roles being performed by different individuals. In the Autumn of 2023 Bristol Cathedral attempted to reinvigorate the number of people who attend services of choral evensong at their institution with their week-long event the *Bristol Cathedral Festival of Evensong*. I conducted ethnographic research surrounding this festival, attending the services and events as a member of the congregation and observer. Drawing on my ethnographic research, I open this paper using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus to identify how the service of choral evensong is a socially constructed environment. I pinpoint the roles being performed by musicians, clergy, cathedral staff, and members of the congregation. My paper concludes with a discussion of the Bristol Festival to identify what value, if any, such initiatives have on broadening participation at choral evensong.

According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977), habitus is ‘the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality.’ We internalise societal structures and expectations, and this internalisation shapes our thoughts, feelings, and perception of society. These thoughts and feelings inform a set of codified behaviours. This learnt set of behaviours is then externalised. For Bourdieu, externalising means performing codified behaviours through verbal and non-verbal communication. These processes of habitus often occur subconsciously. Choral evensong is an example of a tightly choreographed and orchestrated performance of music and worship. The application of the theoretical framework of habitus is productive because performance and the externalisation of learnt behaviours are an integral element of the service of choral evensong. Choral evensong is bound up in the act of ritual and live musical performance: clergy, the choir, service staff, and congregation all adhere to their different roles. These musical and non-musical behaviours may be performed unknowingly. Either way, identifying those behaviours and how they are programmed helps to pinpoint the power structures in place that enable certain behaviours to be performed.

My analysis is based both on qualitative observations and on my own background and detailed knowledge of the service as a musician and member of congregation. The ethnographic basis for this paper draws on my attendance at services between December 2023 and September 2024. I explored the performances behaviour of members of the congregation from the perspective of an observer. In addition, I observed the behaviours of service staff such as vergers and stewards. I also conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the habitus of members of clergy, directors of music, and musicians to determine their role in the service of choral evensong.

The performance of habitus in choral evensong

Members of clergy are legally obliged to lead and participate in Morning and Evening Prayer according to Canon Law. When asked about their motivations behind attending choral evensong in our interview, the Revd. Dr Kathryn Goldsmith of Bristol Cathedral shared that a member of clergy’s presence and engagement in the service of choral evensong goes beyond this idea that they simply have to be there (Goldsmith 2023). In cathedrals where there is a regular schedule of both spoken and sung prayer, Revd. Goldsmith explained that ‘evensong takes on that sense that we are joined together and that it’s not just praying as individuals.’ Goldsmith’s comments suggest that the legal and historical significance of performing the service of choral evensong is internalised by members of clergy and is externalised through their regular engagement with the service because ‘you have this sense that you’re praying with people physically there and also people throughout history.’ The wording chosen here by Revd. Goldsmith is an example of her externalising lessons from the Bible. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, verse 20 reads, ‘For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’ The internalising of passages from the Bible, along with the significance of the canon law, influences not only the externalisation of a member of clergy participating in choral evensong, but also the way in which they reflect on why they attend the service.

During the service of choral evensong, the choir must internalise their role as representatives of the cathedral. As director of music Mark Lee from Bristol Cathedral

explained in our discussion, ‘The role of the choir is not just musical, it is to lead other aspects of the service as well’ (Lee 2024). The choir externalises these ‘other aspects of the service’ that Lee is referring to, including leading moments of movement, reciting the words of the Apostles Creed, and responding to the prayers of the clergy with affirmations such as the Grace and Amen. This expectation is externalised by members of the choir through tightly knit moments of choreography. For example, when observing services of choral evensong at Wells Cathedral, the choir followed the indication from the director of music to sit down at the appropriate moments and when required to stand again, they made eye contact with one another to ensure they were stood by the time the director of music had reached the stand. At St Davids Cathedral, when reciting the Apostles Creed the choir were the first to turn and position themselves East towards the high altar before accompanying members of clergy to begin the text, and this was quickly copied by members of the congregation. From my rehearsal observations at choral foundations, I found that these expected behaviours are not explicitly taught to new members of the choir: it is more the case of following the collective action. The choir’s responsibility to lead moments of worship in the service of choral evensong is externalised by their confidence when performing the same choreography that is expected of the congregation. The choir is expected to lead by example.

Service staff known as stewards and vergers are responsible for the administrative organisation of the service. Vergers ensure that the logistical needs of the choir and clergy are met, and stewards help members of congregation to participate in worship. In the institutions that I have visited, a steward would welcome members of congregation upon arrival. At Bristol Cathedral and at York Minster, this happened at the front door of the building, and at St Davids and Wells Cathedral, at the entrance of the Quire. Stewards in this instance are internalising the institutional values to ensure members of the public feel welcome when entering the building. The responsibility to help those who enter the building for the service is externalised through the sharing of important documents such as an order of service, Book of Common Prayer, and hymn book, which they give to all members of the congregation.

The motivations behind attending a service of choral evensong as a member of congregation differ. For some, the service is part of their regular worship pattern, whilst others hear beautiful music coming from a grand building and decide to go inside. The different elements of the service are explained in the documents shared with them by stewards upon arrival. Equipped with these documents, members of congregation can follow the different elements and perform the behaviours necessary to participate such as standing up, sitting down, reciting words of affirmation, and singing using the texts found in the hymn book. Choral evensong is deliberately set up in a way that members of the congregation do not have to participate very much at all. The report published by the Cathedral Music Trust (Ashley *et al.* 2022) explains that choral evensong is ‘a service that gives so much and asks for almost nothing in return.’ This idea was also supported by my interview with the Canon Precentor Rowan Williams of Peterborough Cathedral who explained, ‘I think it’s easier to give yourself time and space to reflect [in choral evensong] because if it’s a said service you’re expected to do some work and join in. When it’s a choral service, the choir mostly do that for you’ (Williams 2024). When attending services

of choral evensong myself there were occasions where members of the congregation did not stand up or sit down with others, didn't recite the Apostles Creed or sing the hymn, or left the cathedral building after attending for only part of the service. These moments were not checked or policed by members of clergy or cathedral staff. That isn't to say that attentive participation from members of the congregation isn't important. The internalising of the Christian message in a service of choral evensong can be bound up in a whole-body experience, even if members of congregation aren't singing or speaking themselves. Whilst attending a service of choral evensong at York Minster, a member of the congregation was observed who closed their eyes and mouthed the words whilst the choir was singing.

Bristol Cathedral Festival of Evensong

In an attempt to bolster the number of people who attend choral evensong, Bristol Cathedral hosted a week-long *Bristol Cathedral Festival of Evensong* in October 2023 which showcased the musical excellence that accompanies liturgical services at the cathedral, as well as highlighting the significance of choral evensong and moments of worship in people's lives. I attended the event as an observer.

Bristol Cathedral programmed services for this festival that centred around music from different time periods. This decision represents the longevity of the Anglican choral tradition as a musical practice that has existed for centuries, and the large body of repertoire. The festival showcased different musical styles to members of the congregation. This was further supported by the decision to assign a different choir to each service. This represented the multitude of voices one can hear in a weekly service pattern at Bristol Cathedral, aligning with the narrative that the cathedral wishes for choral evensong to be more accessible to a broader demographic.

Through specific advertisement decisions, Bristol Cathedral attempted to resonate with the secular portion of society. The festival was advertised using leaflets and posters left in areas around Bristol. An event was created on Facebook which accompanied an advertisement on the cathedral's website. The design on the leaflet and advertising material included musical images and silhouettes signifying a community of people. Some shapes represent the architecture that can be found around the cathedral building. There is, however, a lack of traditionally 'religious' images. The slogan 'Find perfect peace at Bristol Cathedral,' can be found on the back of the leaflet, with an emphasis that the festival is 'a celebration of *music* and *liturgy*.' The choice of images and language appeals to the potential for the service to contribute to an individual's wellbeing rather than their religious beliefs.

The opening service of the festival on Monday 9th October 2023 was titled a 'walking talking evensong' where members of clergy explained the purpose and religious significance of the different elements. The musical items during this service centred around the twenty-first century by composers from the Anglican choral canon. The service was well attended, with roughly one hundred and fifty members. By appearance, the majority of the congregation were between middle age and elderly, with only a small number of young adults. Despite the varied ethnic make-up of Bristol, the congregation who attended this event were mostly white. When the service ended, some individuals

walked towards the song school to collect their children who had been singing, and this indicated to me that a number of chorister parents were in the congregation. Whilst seats were full in the Quire during the service, the extent to which Bristol Cathedral had successfully invited new members of congregation into the building was difficult to tell.

Contrastingly at the service of choral evensong on Tuesday 10th October there were only around thirty individuals in the congregation. The decrease in the number of individuals who attended was both dramatic and noticeable. The music for this service centred around composers writing for the Anglican choral tradition in the twentieth century. The prayers led by members of clergy at Bristol centred around carrying out God's work which was the theme of the selected readings for the service. Prayers referenced peace and an end to the ongoing conflict between Hamas, Gaza, and Israel. On 7th October 2023, two days before the beginning of the festival, terrorist group Hamas crossed the border into Israel killing an estimated 1,200 people and taking 250 others to Gaza as hostages (BBC News article accessed 30th November 2023). The prayers did not specifically mention the hostages, instead using language such as 'the conflict in Israel,' to remain religiously and politically neutral. Alongside referencing lessons from the Bible, the prayers also encouraged members of the congregation to keep the globally turbulent times in their minds and to think of those who are suffering. The brutality of the attacks in Gaza were likely on the minds of those attending the service and so the prayers of clergy signified an act of unity at a time where individuals in the West have little control over global events.

The festival at Bristol Cathedral attempted to remove some of the barriers that may prevent individuals from participating in choral evensong. Bristol attempted to combat lack of education as a barrier to participation by explaining the purpose of the different sung and spoken elements of the service. Through their advertising, Bristol highlighted what evensong can offer an individual beyond the religious: peace, calm, and musical excellence. This was further supported by the multitude of musical voices on display during the event, and the encouragement for members of the congregation to reflect on globally hostile times during the prayers. There were few occasions where the repertoire programmed for the festival deviated from the Anglican choral canon. Whilst the events at the festival were well attended, the extent to which the event has had a lasting impact on broadening participation at evensong in Bristol is difficult to tell.

Conclusion

My ethnographic study of the service of choral evensong shows that the tightly choreographed performance is upheld by the internalising and externalising of different behaviours from the clergy, musicians, congregation, and cathedral staff. There are attempts being made by individuals in positions of power to remove barriers around choral evensong such as the Bristol Cathedral Festival of Evensong. Looking at the Bristol Festival through Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, however, shows that the traditional elements of choral evensong outweighed the changes that were made because habitus remained intact. The power hierarchy was largely maintained through the continuation of traditional elements, with some explanation offered for those elements that were changed. This is the root of the difficulty experienced by institutions who wish to broaden

participation in the service. On the one hand the musical excellence and the flexibility around the extent to which members of congregation can participate is appealing, however, the structure and repertoire of the service is rigid and fixed, and sharing the significance of choral evensong in terms of wellbeing to a younger demographic is challenging. Bourdieu argues that social interactions are transactional. When habitus is shared, then individuals receive cultural capital. In order for institutions to open up their tradition to a wider audience, they must relinquish that power.

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