

Many Voices: The New Polyphony in Anglo-American Choral Music of the Twenty-First Century, Part Two

Graham Lack

composer

(head photo: image reproduced by kind permission of the Chapter of Wells Cathedral)

Abstract

Part One of this article provided a short history of the earliest vocal polyphony used in the Western church, from organum up to and including the works of John Dunstaple, discussed the rise of imitation and counterpoint, and demonstrated how this past can act as a foil to continuations and developments in the choral music of our times. As the twenty-first century progresses, a number of eminent composers of choral music continue to write in an avowedly polyphonic vein, and several younger exponents of the art of counterpoint have come to the fore. A clear distinction has always existed between polyphony and counterpoint: all counterpoint is polyphonic; but not all polyphony is contrapuntal. Part Two of the article examines choral works written by British composers John McCabe, David Mathews, Alec Roth, and Judith Weir. For want of any stronger criterion, these prominent figures are dealt with in the order of their dates of birth in the hope that some pronounced trends might nevertheless be discerned. All pitch classes are given in Helmholtz.

A sense of excitement is rarely engendered, gentle reader, when the term analytical methodology is encountered at the very outset. Nonetheless, please persevere, be resolute, and dwell awhile on what follows here. In order better to understand the role of voices and voice parts within what we have called the New Polyphony in contemporary choral music, various established compositional techniques have been

extrapolated as parameters with which to measure exactly what is going on within a particular score. These tools are best articulated as a simple list, and are as follows: tension and release arising from suspension techniques, recognisable motifs, motivic variation, melodically rewarding contours, the role of voice-leading, elliptical meaning, dyadic and triadic harmony, wrong-note harmony, dissonance treatment (hierarchy of dissonance, dissonance as an avoidance of monotony, semi-dissonance, eclectic symphonic dissonance), timbral exploration, contrapuntist versus homophonist approaches, canon and heterophony, imitation both free and strict, homage and pastiche, block chord keyboard formations, the new simplicity, and text desynchronisation. Now, there is no need baulk at the one term or the other: most of these categories are either well known, or self-explanatory, or both. As for coinages with which one is not yet familiar, they become clear in the context of the discourse below. Now do read on...

If ever there were a work that demonstrates in the present context to what extent composers write music about music, then it would be *Christ's Nativity* by John McCabe (1939–2015) for SATB double choir and organ. We glimpse here immediately and exactly that which sets the composer apart from many contemporaries: a musical language that is tonal and to some extent serial, but which remains lyrical in its avowed constructivism. The composer describes how he had “spent considerable time listening to much early English church music” and mentions as his mentors, as it were, William Byrd, Thomas Tallis, Christopher Tye and Robert Whyte, adding that this may well have influenced the “texture of the music, notably the contrapuntal aspects”.

John McCabe was a composer of works in many forms, virtuoso pianist, writer, and former Director of the London College of Music. He trained as a musician at Manchester University, the “old” Royal Manchester College of Music, where he was in the next college generation after Birtwistle, Goehr, Ogdon and

Maxwell Davies, and at Munich's Hochschule für Musik und Theater. Early on, it was obvious that here was a composer who was in touch with the major trends of 20th century music, including jazz, but was not bewitched by avant-garde fashions.

In *Christ's Nativity*, McCabe sets two poems by Henry Vaughan that describe the glory of Jesus and its effect on the mortal realm. The composer exhibits no qualms about using bold and dramatic contrasts to achieve direct polyphonic effects. These include the block fortissimo chords at "The Sun" in b. 34, and, in bb. 35-37, the quaver duplet figures in the prevailing 9/8 time at "doth shake": a remarkable example of word painting worthy of Handel.

This musical score is for a SATB choir and piano accompaniment. It consists of nine staves. The top eight staves are for the vocal parts: Soprano 1 (S.1), Soprano 2 (S.2), Alto 1 (A.1), Alto 2 (A.2), Tenor 1 (T.1), Tenor 2 (T.2), Bass 1 (B.1), and Bass 2 (B.2). The bottom two staves are for the piano accompaniment, with the right hand on top and the left hand on the bottom. The score is divided into three measures. The first measure contains the vocal entries and accompaniment. The second measure continues the vocal lines and accompaniment. The third measure concludes the piece with a final chord and a fermata over the vocal lines. Dynamics markings include *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *f* (forte). The piano part features a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth and sixteenth notes.

This musical score is for the piece "Christ's Nativity" by John McCabe, specifically measures 31 through 38. It is a choral setting for SATB (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) voices. The score is written in a single system with eight staves. The first four staves are for the vocal parts: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (B.). The next four staves are for the piano accompaniment, with the first two staves for the right hand and the last two for the left hand. The music is in a common time signature (C) and features a variety of rhythmic values, including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests. The vocal lines are often marked with slurs and phrasing slurs, indicating long, sustained phrases. The piano accompaniment provides a harmonic and rhythmic foundation for the vocal parts. The score is presented in a clean, black-and-white format, typical of a printed musical score.

Music Example One: "Christ's Nativity", John McCabe, bb. 31-38

The dissonance treatment is hierarchical: the second chord in b. 31 (to the “-wake” of “awake”) superimposes perfect fourths $g\#-c\#-f\#$ on the bass E , the added $d\#$ in the soprano being understood by way of ellipsis as a perfect fourth lower than any implicit $g\#$. The bare octave $a-a'$ at “The” in b. 33 frames a perfect fourth and perfect fifth, the $d\#$ shifting its function to become a Lydian augmented fourth against the bass, and at “Sun”, in the following bar, the pure E minor harmony is symphonic in intent and acts as a foil to the forgoing mixed chords.

The compositional response, then, to the magical imagery of Vaughan's words evinces a sense of immediacy and ensures this 12-minute work resounds in the minds of audiences for a while after. As David Lindley notes in the September 2015 issue of *Organists' Review*, the “harmonic language is...astringent, the vocal lines often rhythmically complex, and melodically angular”. As for the organ, it provides a commentary all its own, and enhances the contrapuntal activity by setting off those duplets in the voices with a relentless brocade of compound time quavers. *Christ's Nativity* was commissioned by the Hallé Choir and premiered in 2014 at Hallé St Peter's with Madeleine Venner conducting.

For readers not familiar with the choral music of David Matthews (b. 1943), a few bare facts will put his music into perspective. He worked from the mid-1960s as an apprentice in the studio of Benjamin Britten, and benefited from an invaluable training, even though he did not feel bold enough to show Britten his own music. Britten did not teach, and nor did Matthews' “real hero at the time”, Michael Tippett, who did at least recommend as a teacher a younger composer, Anthony Milner. Matthews subsequently studied with Nicholas

Maw, whose music he also greatly admired, and explains how he started to gain the confidence to write as he wanted instead of feeling that he should “try to compose like Boulez or Stockhausen, who dominated the musical scene at the time”. He adds that he did not feel “destined to follow the current avant-garde, but to continue along a path similar to that which Britten and Tippett were following, one also rooted in the Viennese Classics, Mahler and the early 20th-century modernists Stravinsky, Schönberg, Berg and Bartók”. Matthews, then, had always known that he should never forsake tonality, but try to reconcile the present with the past. His music, and his choral works in particular, are cast in ripe traditional forms, the musical language mature but not yet starting to rot. He has always maintained a firm commitment to a music that is grounded in song and dance, and is connected to the vernacular.

A fine example of this is his *The Key of the Kingdom*, a setting of the anonymous nursery rhyme ‘This is the Key of the Kingdom’ for SATB Chorus with organ ad libitum and the first poem in Walter de la Mare’s anthology for children called *Come Hither*. This is mysterious verse indeed, and acts as a kind of spell, or mandala; its cumulative lines gradually leading to a discovery at its centre of a moment of stillness, before the spell goes into reverse. Matthew indulges here in weighty blocks of polyphony, here taken to mean many sounds as opposed to the more literal many voices *per se*, pitting in a straightforward 4/4 metre rising triplet crotchet figures in the upper voices, with falling crotchet and two quaver motifs in the lower ones, these ending on long pedal chords, before the sopranos and altos once again take flight.

The first system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top four staves are vocal parts, each with lyrics underneath. The fifth staff is a piano accompaniment. The lyrics for the vocal parts are: "The key of the kingdom", "The key of the kingdom", "The key of the kingdom", and "The key of the kingdom". The piano part features a melodic line in the right hand and a harmonic accompaniment in the left hand.

The second system of the musical score also consists of five staves. The top four staves are vocal parts with lyrics: "The key of the kingdom", "The key of the kingdom", "The key of the kingdom", and "The key of the kingdom". The fifth staff is the piano accompaniment. The musical notation continues from the first system, showing the vocal lines and piano accompaniment for the second system.

Music Example Two: "The Key of the Kingdom", David Matthews, bb. 10-19

What points up the text so effectively is, in polyphonic terms, the use of similar, parallel, and contrary motion in the voices, clearly seen at bars 10, 11, and 12 respectively. And by employing vocalise passages to “ah”, a certain desynchronisation of text is achieved. The work was commissioned by Barbara Wakelyn and given its first performance in 2007 at St Mary of Charity, Faversham, UK by the City of Canterbury Chamber Choir conducted by George Vass.

Lest accusers vent their wrath when a composer other than Olivier Messiaen uses birdsong as an inspiration, allow the present writer to defuse any ‘situation’ regarding another work by David Matthews, his *Dawn Chorus*. As is clear by the title, the composer seeks inspiration here in what humankind has presumably always regarded with awe, the gradually quickening and oft quite tumultuous sound of feathered members of the Aves community that usually starts well before sunrise. But music history is strewn with examples of works based on the sounds, and on occasion clear tunes, uttered by birds, from Clément Janequin’s *Le chant des oiseaux* to the *Swan of Tuonela* by Jean Sibelius (who once commented that the “call of the crane” was the “leitmotif” of his life), to name but two.

In the Matthews work, scored for mixed voice choir SATB with soloists a cappella, it is tempting to see the extended tenuto chords – note that these are marked *pp*– in the chorus as an imaginary landscape, over which are projected solo bird songs, an almost Ivesian technique. These fragmentary calls are not exact transcriptions à la Messiaen, but approximations that use precise pitches, the composer’s aim being merely to conjure up each particular species in the mind’s ear. The first solo soprano three bars after letter ‘C’ in the score is a clear example, and note must be made of the falling perfect

fourths (which surely would be closer to tritones in the natural environment), as well as the rising perfect fifths enclosing a diminished fifth and major third.

Harmonically, the chord at letter 'C' defies meaningful intervallic analysis and therefore must be understood as non-functional. What can be said, however, is that it combines E minor and A major in some type of tonic/dominant or tonic/subdominant relationship. To add rhythmic edge to the bird song, acciaccature are used (e.g. at six bars after 'C') and precede each insistent, main pitch class. Some sections in *Dawn Chorus*, we note, are if not aleatoric, then at least allow repeats of material ad libitum.

Dissonance treatment admits two discrete scopes, local and global. The birdsongs are sporadic: hardly has a soloist uttered a call than the next one is audible, there being little chance to perceive clangour or concord; whereas the eight-part chords are so attenuated that specific internal frictions may be heard out at will along a time line as the score is realised as choral sound. This is of course a quite direct mimetic response to the natural sound-world, but the polyphony must be understood as not the bird calls *in campo aperto*, but their abstract relationship to the almost stationary background harmonies.

11

System 11: Treble clef, 2/4 time. The melody consists of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The bass line consists of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2. A dashed line above the staff indicates a continuation of the melody.

12

System 12: Treble clef, 2/4 time. The melody consists of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The bass line consists of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2.

13

System 13: Treble clef, 2/4 time. The melody consists of quarter notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The bass line consists of quarter notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, B2, A2, G2.

The image displays two systems of a musical score for "Dawn Chorus" by David Matthews. Each system consists of seven staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics written below it. The second staff is a piano accompaniment. The third and fourth staves are for a string quartet (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello). The fifth and sixth staves are for a woodwind section (Flute and Clarinet). The seventh staff is the double bass line. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The lyrics for the first system are: "The dawn chorus is a beautiful sight / The birds are singing in the trees / The sun is rising and the world is bright / The dawn chorus is a beautiful sight". The lyrics for the second system are: "The dawn chorus is a beautiful sight / The birds are singing in the trees / The sun is rising and the world is bright / The dawn chorus is a beautiful sight".

Music Example Three: "Dawn Chorus", David Matthews, pp. 2 & 7

For *Dawn Chorus*, Matthews recorded “many calls during the spring, particularly blackbirds and song thrushes” from his house in North London, deriving “singable phrases” from it. Nine soloists are spread around the performance space, their vocal material based on the calls of a song thrush, blackcap, great tit, blackbirds, woodpigeon, collared dove, and finally a cuckoo. The song thrush begins the piece with a lone solo, and Matthews relates how “on a number of May mornings” he was constantly “woken up at 4 a.m.” As he explains, at the close of this short piece redolent with the sonance of the natural word, “all the birds, before they are cut off to leave a final quiet chord from the chorus, sing together for about a minute”. These are many voices indeed.

Richard Bratby, writing in the May 2018 issue of *The Spectator* claims that this is “four minutes of the art that conceals art, in which human voices imitate birdsong with hallucinatory precision.” The work was commissioned by the Lichfield Festival and Arts Council England, receiving its first performance in 2015 by Ex Cathedra under Jeffrey Skidmore at Lichfield Cathedral.

Eclectic is the best way to describe the heritage and musical education of Alec Roth (b. 1948). Born near Manchester, he is of German/Irish descent and studied music at the University of Durham, conducting with Diego Masson and Rafael Kubelik. He also studied gamelan at the Academy of Indonesian Performing Arts in Surakarta, Central Java. His collaborations with the Indian writer Vikram Seth include the song cycles *Chinese Gardens* (Chester Festival commission 1998) and *Romantic Residues* (Bury St Edmunds Festival commission 2003).

In *Night Prayer* (*Te lucis ante terminum*) for SSATBB voices a

cappella, Roth sets the venerable 7th century Ambrosian hymn for the close of day at Compline, a text which has inspired so many composers, from Thomas Tallis to Peter Maxwell Davies. According to Alec Roth, the Tallis setting held him “under its spell” since he first sang it in his youth, adding that its “plainsong melody has been a recurring obsession” and appears in many of his works, “usually hidden beneath the surface”. A monophonic chant can be a blessing in disguise: it is remarkably resilient melodically and remains immediately recognizable however arcane any cantus firmus treatment might be; but it will prove a stubborn beast when attempts are made to tease out new harmonic implications. Assuming one adheres to the Solesmes rather than the mensural school of plainsong interpretation, *Te lucis ante terminum* offers in its quiet beauty but little scope for rhythmic development. Roth solves these issues by drawing – fairly obviously, one could argue – on his gamelan training (he held the post as Artistic Director of the Royal Festival Hall Gamelan Programme 1987-91). In bb. 10-11 of *Night Prayer* the polyrhythms between the upper voices and the lower ones are strongly reminiscent of gamelan music, proving to be similar melodic motifs rendered in different tempi: at b. 11, the four dotted quavers in 3/4 time in the sopranos and altos could of course be notated as a crotchet quadruplet 4:3, if perhaps not quite as effectively in visual terms. The motifs are recognisable, and admit strict imitation, even if this borders on simple heterophony, as at bb. 16-17 and bb. 18-19. The practice is inverted at b. 25, with the dotted values in the tenors and bases, and regular quavers in the two alto voices. A strong sense of contrapuntal activity is engendered in performance, but remains within a tight harmonic framework that wilfully borders on stasis. *Night Prayer* was commissioned by ORA100 for Suzi Digby and her ORA Singers, who gave the first public performance at Cutty Sark, Greenwich, in 2017.

10

Two staves of music with lyrics: "I have been blind, but now I see, I have been in darkness, but now I see the light. I have been in the shadow of death, but now I see the light of life." The score includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line.

11

Two staves of music with lyrics: "I have been blind, but now I see, I have been in darkness, but now I see the light. I have been in the shadow of death, but now I see the light of life." The score includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line.

Music Example Four: "Night Prayer", Alec Roth, bb. 10-27

The music of Judith Weir (b. 1954) will hopefully need no lengthy introduction. Born to Scottish parents in Cambridge, England, she studied composition with John Tavener, Robin Holloway, and Gunther Schuller. In the mid-1990s she became Associate Composer with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Artistic Director of the Spitalfields Festival, and was later a Visiting Professor at Princeton, Harvard, and Cardiff universities. In 2014 Weir was appointed Master of the Queen's Music, the first female composer to hold the post. She is the composer of several operas, most notably *A Night at the Chinese Opera* (1987) and *Blond Eckbert* (1993). Her *Two Human Hymns* are a mainstay of many a choir around the world.

“Sing” from *The Song Sung True*, for chorus SSAATBB a cappella, is No.1 of “four songs about singing”. It is marked “direct and forthright”. The work is a bequest of the late Helen Sibthorp, apparently a rather direct and lively person who would have wished any memorial made to her to be spirited and unusual. Although Weir never knew her personally, the composer felt that the “link between us all is the life-giving activity of singing”, and so all four movements of *The Song Sung True* are “about singing, and lay particular musical emphasis on the words ‘sing’, ‘sang’ and ‘song’”.

From the very outset, “Sing” does prove immensely singable. The triplet motif in b. 1 presented as octave unisons moves off its final note immediately to form major seconds, thus creating a level of semi-dissonance and a moment of micro-polyphony. In b. 2 it is repeated a perfect fifth higher, before falling by a descending minor third. This archetypal interval is found in children's songs around the world and is a kind of universal chant of “Ur-Song” that lies somewhere

between speech and song and which is strongly imitative of nature sounds such as birdsong and animal calls. There follows some canny motivic variation with melodically rewarding contours, the leading voice of which is characterised by, for example, the strongly denoted Lydian mode moving $b'-c''$ for the sopranos and $b-c'$ for the tenors in b. 5.

THE SONG SUNG TRUE

I. SING

(Always in Common Time)

Judith Weir
©1988

Allegretto

$\text{♩} = \text{The Duet and Fortnight}$

The first system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top four staves are for vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The fifth staff is for the Piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto' and the time signature is common time. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The music begins with a dynamic marking of *f*. The vocal parts have lyrics underneath them, which are partially obscured but appear to be 'I sing - the song'. The piano part features a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth and sixteenth notes.

The second system of the musical score continues the vocal and piano parts from the first system. It consists of five staves for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, and Piano. The lyrics continue, with the vocal parts showing some melodic variation. The piano accompaniment maintains its rhythmic pattern. The dynamic markings vary, including *f*, *mf*, and *ff*.

© Copyright 1988 by Thomas Nelson Ltd.

©1988 TNL

All rights reserved
Printed in England

Music Example Five: 'Sing' from "The Song Sung True", Judith Weir, bb. 1-7

The simple verse by Alan Spence (b. 1947) – a Scottish writer who has crossed genres and covered many themes, his output often falling somewhere between literature and philosophy, but always shot through with ideas of Zen and contemplative meditation – is married to straightforward music, which is no less effective thanks to telling imitative effects that lie somewhere between canon and heterophony, bb. 26-30 being a case in point. The word painting at “tell the bell”, with a new motif built from two descending perfect fourths, produces a resounding choral, quasi-campanological sound, the whole being greater than the sum of its four simple parts. (Weir is not a fan of *divisi*, it would seem.)

41 *♩ = 60* *Three voices* *mezzo-f / piano up / f mezzo up*

fall the fall the ring ring the ring ring

fall the fall the ring ring the ring ring

fall the fall the ring ring the ring ring

fall the fall the ring ring the ring ring

42 *♩ = 60* *Three voices* *mezzo-f / piano up / f mezzo up*

ring fall the fall fall the fall the ring ring ring

ring fall the fall fall the fall the ring ring ring

ring fall the fall the ring ring ring

ring fall the fall the ring ring ring

Music Example Five: 'Sing' from "The Song Sung True", Judith Weir, bb. 26-34

Clearly then, it is not only the voice pairing but also the urgency of the entries –first at two beats’ distance, and then at just one – that creates such a robust polyphony. This is a self-assured contrapuntist at work. The premiere of the cycle *The Song Sung True* was in 2013 at St Lawrence Jewry, London by the London Lawyers’ Chorus under Christopher Oakley.

Part Three of the present article will be a discussion of the choral music of Francis Pott, Gabriel Jackson, Howard Moody, Roxanna Panufnik, Matthew Martin, Cheryl Frances-Hoad, Owain Park, and Rhiannon Randle, with observations on the music of Thea Musgrave and Nico Muhly.



Graham Lack studied composition and musicology at King’s College and Goldsmiths College (University of London), the University of Chichester, and the Technical University of Berlin. From 1982–1994 he was Lecturer in Music at the University of Maryland. His breakthrough was with the 12-part *Sanctus*, commissioned by Queens’ College Cambridge in 1998 and broadcast live on German Radio from

Cologne. His *Two Madrigals for High Summer* (SSATB) have been performed worldwide. In 2008, *REFUGIUM*, based on texts by the Croatian poet Peter Hektorović, for choir, organ and three percussionists was premiered in London. Commissions include *Estraines* for The King’s Singers, *Lullabies* for VOCES8,

Demesnes for Quartonal, *A Sphere of Ether* for the Young Voices of Colorado, and *Wondrous Machine* for the multi-percussionist Martin Grubinger. The string trio *The Pencil of Nature* was premiered at *musica viva* in Munich. Orchestral works include *Nine Moons Dark* and *Five Inscapes*. The *Preludes* for piano solo were premiered by Lukáš Vondráček at the Queen Elizabeth Hall London, and the orchestral work *Sitherwood* by the Monteverdichor Würzburg. He is currently working on a violin concerto and orchestra for Benjamin Schmid, *The Windhover*. Winner of the 2015 Ortus International New Music Competition. *The Legend of Saint Wite* (SAA voices and string quartet) prize-winner BBC Music Magazine Competition 2009. CD *Missa Dominica* (with Candlemas) Gramophone Recording of the Month December 2017. American Record Guide Critic's Choice 2018, CD *REFUGIUM*. Since 2018, Composer Fellow Trinity Boys Choir London. graham-lack@t-online.de – www.graham-lack.com (Photo © Astrid Ackermann)

Edited by Karen Bradberry, Australia