

# Evensong – come and hear!

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My memories of Evensong go back to childhood when I went mainly because everyone else was going and I was too young to be left in the house on my own. I never minded. In that church everybody joined in the chanting of the psalm and canticles and I liked singing. I also happily recited the archaic words of the Prayer Book, which became familiar and yet remained other-worldly. As I grew up, I understood them better, found the sermons more enlightening and liked the peaceful atmosphere of the church with its mostly elderly congregation.

Although the choir sang an occasional anthem and I was taken to St. George's Chapel, Windsor once or twice, I was not aware of the choral side of Evensong until I became a student in Cambridge. Cambridge was a fantastic place for Choral Evensong. As well as the famous choirs at Kings' and St. John's, all of the other colleges except mine (Newnham) had competent student choirs which sang Evensong two or three times a week.

By stepping across the road to Selwyn on Sunday evenings, I was introduced to the glories of the English choral tradition in which Choral Evensong was a central part.

I can vividly remember sitting in rapture on the first Sunday in Lent as the choir sang Allegri's *Miserere*. By the time I left Cambridge and moved to Hertford I knew I wanted to join in and was lucky enough to find myself in a Parish with a good choir who sang Evensong regularly. Michael Frith auditioned me for the choir and I have been here ever since.

As a church choir, we are privileged to have over four hundred years of Choral Evensong behind us, with the best English composers providing numerous choral settings of the two canticles, the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis, and the responses. So we have no excuse to be bored with so much music written specifically for this service.

At All Saints' we sing a Choral Eucharist on the first Sunday evening of the month. This allows even more scope as we can draw also on the mass settings written for the Roman Catholic Church over an even longer period of time. On the third Sunday we sing Compline, an opportunity to experience plainsong chanting.

As choristers, instead of the gentle peace and relaxation I remember from childhood, Evensong means using our minds and voices and working together to create something uplifting, both for us and for the congregation worshipping with us. It also means letting God use us to communicate his message.

It can be tiring, or a bit nerve-wracking, but is also exhilarating, especially when the music comes out right. On a recent Sunday, after fighting dragons in the morning<sup>1</sup>, we were back in the evening in the guise of a terrifying Babylonian army whose "horses also are swifter than leopards"<sup>2</sup>.

Did I say evensong was peaceful and relaxing? Do come along. You never know what you might find!

1. R. Dering (c1580 – 1630) *Factum est silentium (St Matthew)*  
2. C.V. Stanford (1852 – 1924) *For lo, I raise up (Habbakuk)*