

Andrew Nethsingha

Andrew Nethsingha is Director of Music at St John's College, Cambridge. He is currently President of the Cathedral Organists' Association, a position he is particularly well qualified to hold, being the son of a cathedral organist (Lucien Nethsingha) and having had experience of music making at seven choral foundations. Here he gives a snapshot of the range of music he has enjoyed listening to and performing, from early childhood to the present day.

When I was a child my father was Organist and Choirmaster at St Michael's Tenbury (where they sang 13 services a week!) and then at Exeter Cathedral. My earliest musical influences date from that time. I love hearing the exquisite Tenbury Argo LP *Sing Joyfully*. I remember sitting with my parents around their splendid old wireless, listening to BBC broadcasts of my father's organ playing, including an inspiring performance of the *Durufle Suite*. My own musical debuts were playing percussion in *Captain Noah and his floating zoo* at primary school, and writing a song about a snail (the text was chosen by someone else). Becoming a chorister in Exeter had a great effect on my future musical career. I also got quite into *Buck's Fizz* (the group, not the drink!), when they won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1981, but being taken to see 'Grease' at the cinema wasn't really my thing!

When I was about 12, I started to become obsessed with the great Austro-Germanic masterpieces—especially the *Beethoven Symphonies*. My first organ cassettes were *Bach* played by Karl Richter, and *Jane Parker Smith* playing *Widor* at Salisbury. I went on to senior school at Clifton where my ears were opened to a whole new range of musical idioms, inspired not only by my teachers but also by the brilliant musicianship of *Charles Matthews*, who was two years above me at school. *Charles's* enthusiasm for *Messiaen* and *Jolivet* was infectious. Aged 13 I was

asked to play percussion in the orchestra at school. In charge of a pair of cymbals in *Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto*, I found it difficult not to hit the cymbals against the brass buttons on my smart new blazer. Never before had I attempted (unsuccessfully!) to count 48 bars rest, with rubato and changing tempi. I also managed to ruin an otherwise excellent performance of an *Elgar Pomp and Circumstance*. There was a wonderful record collection at Clifton and, from about the age of 15, I became hooked on *Bruckner, Mahler, Schumann, Brahms, Tippett symphonies*—to name but five.

When I was 16, I was privileged to join the County Youth Orchestra as an oboist. Having spent much of my time at school secluded away in an organ loft, far away from other performers, being in the midst of these orchestral sound worlds was an intoxicating experience, playing such works as *Brahms' Second Symphony* and *Elgar's Froissart*.

I went on to spend two years at the Royal College of Music and took this opportunity to attend concerts every few days where I was mesmerised by such great conductors as Haitink, Solti and the young Salonen and Rattle (both of whom gave performances of the *Turangalia Symphony*). One of the best things about being Organ Scholar at St George's, Windsor (whilst at the RCM) was the opportunity to watch and hear *Christopher Robinson* playing the piano and organ. Hearing *Christopher* play such works as the *Bach Dorian Fugue* and the *B minor Prelude* was a profound experience. Later, arriving as Organ Scholar at St John's College, Cambridge, I was immersed in the wonderfully moving sound world of *George Guest's* choir and a huge diverse choral repertoire.

After graduating I worked at Wells Cathedral for four years and was fortunate to make music with the exceptional students at the Cathedral School. Around this time my favourite recordings included *Brendel* playing *Schubert*, and *Anne Sophie Mutter* playing *Brahms*. My favourite Jazz discs include *Dave Brubeck* and *Jacques Loussier*. I also developed a passion for the piano playing of *Shura Cherkassky*; if I could take just one disc to a desert island then it would have to be him playing *Chopin's F minor Nocturne*. I know that the politically correct thing is to regard the performer as simply the intermediary through whom the music passes on its way from the printed score to the listener's ear, but I confess to a particular thrill when hearing the combination of a great composer and a great performer's distinctive personality.

Whilst in Wells I used to drive regularly to Birmingham to hear *Simon Rattle's* concerts in the new Symphony Hall. The acoustics of the new hall seemed exquisite. Even from the back one could hear a *pianissimo* note on an alto flute in *Webern* with the utmost clarity. I have always been excited by hearing familiar music re-created with new sound worlds. The issue of *Harnoncourt's Beethoven symphony cycle* on CD in the earlier 90s was a particularly special event. The balance and texture of *Rattle's CBSO Haydn symphonies* seemed miraculous.

My subsequent posts at Truro and Gloucester Cathedrals gave me the opportunity to conduct much of the great choral and orchestral repertoire for the first time. Sometimes I was studying works I had known and loved for many years; on other occasions (e.g. *Verdi Requiem, Britten War Requiem, Mahler's Eighth Symphony* and *Elgar The Kingdom*) I was starting from scratch. It was hugely exciting and enjoyable to spend hours, weeks, months in my sitting room gradually getting to know these huge full scores—constantly finding hidden depths and connections within the music. Having done that, getting subsequently to conduct the music with great performers is the icing on the cake!

Having moved on to St John's now, I am very fortunate to work with a choir which has an almost limitless appetite for expanding its repertoire. This is very stimulating and forces me to broaden my musical horizons ever further. I like to think that the older one gets, the greater the range of music one appreciates and becomes absorbed in. I continue to acquire new enthusiasms every month. My most recent crazes have been for *Lassus, Ligeti, Gesualdo* and *Abbado's* first ever period-instrument recording of *Mozart*. The wonderful voyage of musical discovery goes on! ■

