

## To Experience the “Real”

Scott Shaw

June 20, 2011

I once gave an organ recital at a small church in rural Northern Kyushu. I was pleasantly surprised when I arrived for my practice to find a fine pipe organ in the balcony, stained glass in all the windows, and a real bell in the church tower. When I complimented the church organist about these things, she gave me an explanation I wish I could hear more often. She said that since the church ran a day school they felt it was important to expose children to real things, rather than imitations. This meant that for music the sounds of an organ should come from metal and wooden pipes, not speakers. The windows, if they were to be seen by children, should be artistically designed, real glass windows. The bell announcing the beginning and end of the children's day should ring out from true metal, rather than from a speaker. Naturally, financial limits may sometimes make this form of commitment difficult, but isn't it a goal that we should strive toward?

For similar reasons to these I plan a biannual tour to England with the Rikkyo University All Saints Chapel Choir and Organists' Guild. The most recent tour departed in February, 2011, and lasted for two weeks. Since the activities of these two student groups involves providing music for the daily and weekly services of an Anglican university chapel, I think it is important for them to “go to the source” every few years to see where the music and liturgies we use originate. A visit to England, the home base of Anglicanism, gives students an opportunity to hear music in the aural setting for which it was composed. Although we all listen to recordings of the music we are practicing, hearing and seeing it sung and played live in a worship service is an entirely different experience. One might even state that it is the difference between the “artificial” (recordings) and the “real” (music produced live in historical settings).

On this past tour, the choir and organ students attended many different services of Evensong, two Sunday morning services, as well as optional concerts. What did they learn by experiencing these performances with all their senses? Perhaps the most important aspect was for tour members to place the music in its liturgical context. Rather than simply enjoying a particular setting of the canticle Magnificat as an attractive piece of music, students heard it sung live in its historical position during the liturgy of Evensong. Not only this, but they were able to hear it twice, once in an intimate, candle-lit Cambridge college chapel setting, and then later in the grandeur of Evensong at Westminster Abbey. These two experiences told the tour members that a) the music they sing has a historical/liturgical context in which it exists, b) that there is no definitive performance – the music worked as well in a small chapel as in a cathedral-size space, c) and, finally, that the music is

sung by living, breathing human musicians.

Perhaps the most interesting evening of the tour for me, personally, was a study meeting held in our Cambridge hotel. Students were assigned to groups to make presentations on the music they had heard so far on the tour. As it happened, the group had just spent a full day at Ely Cathedral, attending the morning service of Eucharist, as well as the afternoon Evensong service. On that particular day the level of singing differed between the two services; the anthem at Evensong was very difficult, and somewhat roughly sung. Students seemed surprised, or even shocked, that a famous cathedral choir might have an off moment. Once the surprise wore off, though, I think, they were reassured. After all, if one only hears “artificial” performances (note-perfect recordings that have had all imperfections edited away), it would be easy to assume that British choirs are made of super musicians whose level is unattainable for all other groups. The reality, of course, is that the “real” performance will have its ups and downs, a fact that the Rikkyo choir, at least, probably found rather encouraging. Another bit of information they gleaned from the day was that a real working choir in the historical tradition is not so much a group that gathers to perform as much as it is an institution that exists to serve and beautify the Christian liturgy. Experiencing the drama of a historical liturgical service sung in a one-thousand year old building, performed by a choir that has been in existence for centuries gives one much to consider. Participants in these tours learn by seeing that they, too, are members of a long and broad historical flow of sacred music. After every one of these tours, the choir and organ students have returned to their normal duties with an enthusiasm and fire that no amount of explaining and encouraging could have accomplished. Perhaps an overseas tour should be mandatory for all Japanese choir members at least once in their singing career?