

LETTER TO THE AUDIENCE

From the concert programme of To Bethlehem With Kings 2014, December 2014

Dear Friends,

Perhaps you've had the experience recently: You're in a restaurant, or a pub, and it's someone's birthday (December seeming to be a particularly popular birthday month, for mortals and immortals alike). The table next to you erupts into a joyous chorus of "Happy Birthday". It *is* joyous and generally a fun thing to behold. But one has to admit that so often – perhaps more often than not – the tune is barely recognizable. If it weren't for the words, you may not be able to distinguish it from any other melody.

Was this the case 100 years ago? Has our ability to "carry a tune" diminished in the last century? I don't know, but as a great user and appreciator of recorded music, I do sometimes wonder what sort of impact recordings have had on amateur, homegrown, joyous music-making. If the only way we were going to hear singing was to sing ourselves, well then we might just be tempted to do it an awful lot. Singing is an extremely fulfilling form of music-making – the most basic, personal, and direct musical expression.

I was at a party last Saturday with the King's Chapel Choir, where my father Paul had gotten particularly organized and produced a number of Christmas songbooks, out of which we were all singing songs, sacred and secular, and generally making merry into the wee hours. These parties still exist, it is true. But I got talking to a wonderful lady there; she was sitting in a chair by the fire and watching us all carrying on. She is about to turn 100 years old and in reminiscing about her upbringing in Newfoundland she said this party – a bunch of people, young and old, singing and dancing with someone guiding the way on the piano – was a *normal* part of her childhood. Special too, of course, but *normal* – a part of everyday life. She was so happy to be in the midst of it again.

This is what I hope to achieve with Capella Regalis. Of course we want the boys and men to learn extraordinary music. But I wish for it to become a part of their normal, everyday life. Why should 'normal everyday' be boring, disenchanted, banal? I think my wish is already something of a reality: the boys of Capella Regalis, regardless of who they are or where they come from, begin their experience of Evensongs in the King's College Chapel, with all the strange Shakespearean language, the foreign smells, sights, and certainly music, and at first they are somewhat awestruck; usually bewildered enough for me to not expect much out of them in the singing department for a little while. But it is a little while – within a short time, this experience feels quite normal to them; they have become a part of the fabric of a place and they are there to do what has in some mysterious way always been done in that space.

My concern goes beyond whether we can carry a tune as well as we could 100 years ago. It is about what we could easily lose from our future if we are not careful stewards of our heritage. Music is one vehicle, one language through which we can learn so much, and I am developing an ever-increasing appreciation of this choir as an educational model. Learning what the notes on the page mean, how to produce them, and how to stand up, read, sing, and look at the conductor simultaneously sharpens a mind. Being suddenly cast in a leadership role hones the character. (Perhaps you've noticed that a few of the older, seasoned choristers have recently taken up positions in the men's section, forcing their younger colleagues to step up smartly.) Learning, as a boy, that you share equal responsibility with the men of the choir for the quality of the presentation, and that you *can* achieve miraculous results if you *try*, builds awareness and

skill. None of this is easy, but whatever it is that brings these courageous boys back to rehearsal every week, we have all decided it is worth it.

I have felt immensely rewarded in working with this choir for the last five years. And I feel an enormous gratitude to you, our audience, for supporting the men, boys, and parents in their efforts to make the most of this education. I hope the fruits of this effort will sweeten your holiday season.

Yours,
Nick