

Christopher Gillett **A King's chorister recalls**



Tenor Christopher Gillett on the terrors and joys of singing in the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge



Just who will be chosen to sing that coveted 'Once in Royal' solo? The tenor reminisces about being a chorister on Christmas Eve.

At about 3 o'clock every Christmas Eve I become nervous, edgy and short of breath. This is not from a surfeit of mince pies or the sudden realisation that I've forgotten to buy my wife a Christmas present; it's because the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge is about to start. The response is Pavlovian. I can't help it. I was a tenor choral scholar at King's in the late 1970s, singing in three carol services, and so intense was the anticipation of this global event that the anxiety has stuck with me ever since. I've tried ignoring it, finding any excuse to be nowhere near a radio, but it hasn't worked. I still find myself looking at my watch and muttering 'uh oh, any minute now...'

Things kick off at King's well before Christmas Eve, starting with the Advent carol service in early December which marks the end of the university term. For the next three weeks the choir is on a heavy schedule of services and concerts, sometimes with a recording or two thrown in. There's usually a TV special; my first year we went down to the BBC to record a programme with André Previn and the LSO.

The night before Christmas Eve is when the enormity of the next day comes into focus. A queue starts forming outside King's College. There are very few tickets - it's a service for the city - and most of the congregation is there on a first come, first served basis. By breakfast on the day, the College gate has been opened and the queue is already bigger than the capacity of the Chapel.

There's a rehearsal in the morning and the Organist tests several of the trebles on the opening verse of *Once In Royal David's City*, which is famously sung as an unaccompanied solo at the start of the service. A soloist is not selected however. The Organist will leave that decision until much later, to prevent a surfeit of nerves.

Other solos are assigned. Traditionally, the adult solos are meted out to choral scholars in their third and final year; the sizeable solos being for baritone in *Three Kings* and for baritone or tenor in *In The Bleak Midwinter*. My last year, I'm assigned the latter.

At lunch we have no appetite. We're nervous. We're about to sing for an audience of many, many millions, a little statistic that is bound to pop into your head when it's least welcome. We return to the Chapel and put on our choir robes, the cassocks a bit whiffy from our heavy schedule. Outside it's chilly but we are hot with nerves. The choir processes and stops under the organ loft. The organ improvisation ends on a quiet chord of G major. The Chapel falls silent except for the odd cough and the pounding of our hearts in our chests. We wait. The Organist now decides who will open the proceedings and points at one of the trebles, who steps forward. A red light, visible through the organ loft door, illuminates. An upbeat and the boy starts: 'Once In Royal...'

The choir, unaccompanied, joins for the second verse. The acoustic of the Chapel feels odd, muffled by the winter coats of the congregation, who are jammed into every cranny of the glorious building. At the third verse the organ subtly joins, everyone straining to hear if we've stayed perfectly in tune, while we glide into the choir stalls. It's not until the congregation sings with the fourth verse that the breath comes easier, and when the trebles soar into descant on the last verse, Christmas finally arrives.

[christophergillett.co.uk \(http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm\)](http://www.christophergillett.co.uk/index.htm)
[saddoabroad.blogspot.com \(http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/\)](http://saddoabroad.blogspot.com/)

My favourite carols

Adam lay ybounden, arranged by Boris Ord, which always used to be the first carol (as opposed to a hymn) we sang.



Adam lay ybounden
Choir of King's College, C...

1:05

Jesus Christ the Apple Tree, by Elizabeth Poston. Somehow the perfect carol, melodically and harmonically.



Jesus Christ the Apple Tree
Choir of King's College, C...

2:31

Ding Dong! Merrily On High, arranged by Charles Wood. We sang this everywhere, even on a Boeing 747 shortly before landing in Tokyo.



My least favourite part of the carol service was singing the last two hymns, *O Come, All Ye Faithful* and *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. I always find them a bit samey and four-square, and they're exhausting and unrewarding to sing for the tenors, especially right at the end of a long service. I associate them with feeling very tired.

King's recordings I recommend can be found in the *Further Listening*, here: