

## ***Meet the Accompanist***

***What/who inspired you to get into music; were you from a musical family; has the tradition been passed on to the next generation?***

As a child, every Sunday afternoon we would visit my rather severe grandmother and somewhat eccentric collection of aunts. As was common in those days, they all smoked, and so I would escape the boring conversation and toxic atmosphere and experiment on the upright piano in the dining room. This led to piano lessons and the rest is history. My mother had “had her voice trained” as a young woman but I think it had subsequently escaped. My maternal grandfather, whom I never knew, was an organist, so perhaps there is something in the genes after all! Our two boys both wisely chose non-musical careers but are nevertheless accomplished musicians; Thomas is a singer, clarinettist and saxophonist, while Benedict was a choral scholar at Exeter College, Oxford and has sung in many prestigious London groups since.

- ***You are an organist/pianist/accompanist/conductor/singer, which do you find the most challenging and which do you find the most rewarding. If you had to choose only one of these, which would it be and why?***

If I'm talking to an organist, I claim to be a pianist, and vice versa! All these roles are challenging but all come with their own rewards. I have had unforgettable experiences playing the organ, conducting and singing in many wonderful venues although perhaps the organ is most stressful as so much can go wrong. I remember once playing a very quiet improvisation before Choral Evensong at Norwich Cathedral when suddenly every stop on the organ came on with thunderous effect and, worse still, would not go back in again!

- ***What are the particular challenges of accompanying a choir as opposed to playing a piano solo?***

Accompanying is a very different skill from solo performance, whether it be a choir or the hundreds of pupils of all abilities I have played for over the years. The most important thing is to make the choir or soloist feel secure and to be ready to adapt to whatever they might unexpectedly do! Actually, I used to be far more nervous on behalf of solo pianists in school concerts, because I knew that there was nothing I could do to help them if all went wrong!

- ***Favourite genre of music?***

I like to think I have a very wide interest of all kinds of music but I would always come back to the cathedral repertoire if pushed. There's nothing like Evensong in a darkening cathedral on an October evening with very few in the congregation but the choir still maintaining the highest standards as part of the 'Opus Dei'.

- ***Your 15 minutes of fame experience.***

Where I came from, in the heart of the Black Country, it was even then quite unusual for a child to be learning the piano, let alone gaining a distinction in grade 1, so I suppose it wasn't surprising that the local paper picked it up and printed my 8 year old photo on the front page. Somewhat more surprising was when the local BBC television sent a reporter to interview me, but it was pretty extraordinary that the interview was then featured as the final human interest story on the national tv news! Being 8 I naturally assumed this was because of my precocious pianistic prowess, although I suspect it was more to do with my broad Black Country accent than my musical ability!

- ***Music qualifications and highlights of your musical career.***

Well after leaving school I won an organ scholarship to Keble College Oxford and subsequently ended up with an MA in music and the Fellowship diploma of the Royal College of Organists. I have been extremely fortunate to have been involved in some wonderful music making but two highlights from my career at The Grange stand out - conducting my wonderful school choir in front of 2,000 people in the Madeleine church in Paris, and directing the music for our production of Les Misérables which some compared favourably to the West End - after all, our children could *sing!*