

The Parochial, Collegiate and Cathedral Church of Manchester and its music

Manchester Cathedral grew out of the Collegiate Church of St Mary, St Denys and St George, which in turn was created from the parish church of St Mary. With each incarnation more is known about the music.

There is some evidence to suggest that St Mary's had an organ - certainly the size and status of the building would make this likely – but nothing is known of its music. From 1421, when the Collegiate Church was created, much more information has survived. The College made provision for music from the start, and early documents list four clerks and six choristers among the officers. This is a small number of singers, smaller than might be expected for such an establishment, and the consequences were far-reaching – both musically and legally. Numbers shrank further when the Elizabethan charter of 1578 confirmed the singers as four men and four boys. By then the choir was well-established, judging from the number of requests it received to sing at funerals 'after the old custom'. Sixty years later details of its business begin to emerge when appointments and dismissals are recorded, together with attempts by the College to impose order and raise musical standards. Commissions for new organs are noted, and the body responsible for each is named.

For the College had divided loyalties, being both a Collegiate and parish church. As a result the building was maintained by College and parish, with clear lines of demarcation between the two: goods and equipment were purchased exclusively for College or parish use (including an organ apiece), and a style of worship practised specific to each. Over the years the relationship became increasingly uneasy, and tensions surfaced from time to time. Each had an effect on music, and the type and choice of pieces for services, be they collegiate or parish, could and did provide a flashpoint for tensions – both from within and outside the church.

Evidence for what the choir sang is patchy, until well into the nineteenth century. No choir or organ book is known to have survived, and information rests on chance references and sporadic music publications. From 1863, when the Precentor's Registers begin, the situation was transformed. From then on all service music is identified, and the result is a record, unique to this Cathedral, of what was actually sung – far more useful, in that sense, than a venerable manuscript. Evidence for how the choir sang is also patchy, and not encouraging – if the occasional eye-witness account can be believed.

With the twentieth century came a sense that the Cathedral was drawing breath and taking stock, both of itself and its relationships with the city of Manchester and beyond: the twenty-first century is concerned with renewal, and at every stage music is involved. As a result provision for music, be it musicians, instruments or repertoire, can be seen as a mirror to this (and indeed any other choral) institution. Though driven in part by its own aesthetic, music presents an acutely sensitive indicator of an institution's health, wealth, standing, relationships and liturgical proclivities; and through it can be traced the changes to each.

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