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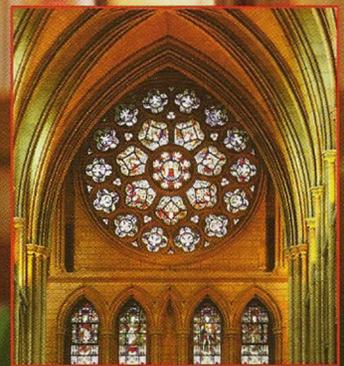
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# Barry Rose

Andrew Mellor salutes the organist and choir trainer, 80 this year, who came from nowhere to change procedures and standards in church music-making for ever

**O**n May 17, 1961, the first cathedral to be designed entirely to order in England since St Paul's was consecrated. Almost everything about the place and the event was unusual. The cathedral wasn't situated within the town it served, but overlooking it. It was encased in utilitarian red bricks instead of carved and cantilevered stonework. But inside it on that day – resounding through the pure, minimalist nave described by Pevsner as 'curvilinear gothic' – a choir sang that could stand comparison with the best of its kind. Its boys and men had been singing together not for seven centuries, but for seven months.

The next day, the composer Herbert Howells scribbled a handwritten note to Guildford Cathedral's organist, Barry Rose. 'So many of us, to whom music in the church and cathedral means so much, will wish you, as I do, constant support and happiness in your work at Guildford,' wrote Howells. As he did so, Rose was readying his choir to sing the new cathedral's inaugural Evensong – the very first in a cycle of daily sung services that continues to this day.

Guildford Cathedral was never supposed to have daily choral services. For a period, it wasn't even supposed to have a choir (one early concept was for a 'spoken word' cathedral; the interior of Sir Edward Maufe's building was to be lined with plaster designed acoustically to favour speech over music). But Rose had different ideas. As a 25-year-old insurance salesman turned jobbing choir trainer without a university education, he was interviewed for the Guildford job and stormed out – frustrated by the academic approach of the selection panel. But his insistence that the new building should have daily singing struck a chord with one of them. Walter Boulton, Guildford's provost, chased Rose into the street and persuaded him to visit Guildford the next day. Rose did, and was offered the job there and then. Immediately he set about establishing a choir that would change church music-making in Britain – both stylistically and logistically.

I first heard that choir on a 2001 episode of BBC Radio's *Choral Evensong* – the programme Rose went on to produce, exercising a significant influence on the sound of so many ecclesiastical choirs throughout the land. It was a retrospective episode marking 75 years of the programme, compiling archived excerpts from the best broadcasts down the years. All the Guildford choir sang was a chanted portion of Psalm 119, recorded in 1974. But that was enough. It told you exactly why these musicians had become the stuff of legend. There was the airy, ethereal tone of the famous Choir of King's College, Cambridge, but without any of their occasional manners, edge or strain. It was, to call on a horrendous cliché,

an utterly heavenly sound: floating, glowing, patient, rich, astoundingly blended yet rooted in the text.

Rose built it all on a wing and a prayer. His Guildford trebles began with minimal

experience and no senior boys to learn from by osmosis; his men were underpaid and itinerant but came to Guildford – often from the back rows of far more famous choirs – to be part of something special, something new. Technology was vital. Rose would record services and play the results back to keep the learning curve steep. Soon enough, the choir forged a relationship with EMI that saw it make what was, for over two decades, the best-selling church music recording in history: 'Christmas Carols from Guildford Cathedral' (1966, the first classical recording on the Music for Pleasure imprint). Around the same time, and long before the LSO and RLPO did the

same, the choir formed its own label (Guild Records), gifting itself autonomy and control in the process.

After a decade and a half in Guildford, Rose moved to St Paul's, and from there to St Albans. Both cathedral choirs felt the effects of his unrelenting high standards. Following his retirement in 1997 he became a frequent visitor to cathedral music departments (more often Chelmsfords and Blackburns than Winchester and Canterburys), imparting gentle wisdoms to choristers concealed in his endearing ordinary-bloke manner.

*'It was an utterly heavenly sound: floating, glowing, patient, rich and astoundingly blended'*

## DEFINING MOMENTS

### •1960

Rose is controversially appointed the first Organist at Guildford Cathedral – having walked out of the selection interview.

### •1964

Rose's Guildford choir makes its first recording for EMI; *Gramophone* concludes that 'the choir is ineffably smooth'.

### •1967

Rose and his right-hand Guildford lay clerk Roger Lowman form Guild Records – engineering, producing and editing recordings themselves.

### •1981

After seven years at St Paul's Cathedral, Rose masterminds the music for the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer.

### •1988

Rose takes his last cathedral music position: Master of the Music at St Alban's Abbey in Hertfordshire.



And in his 80th year, his legacy is palpable. The model of a permanent presence ‘downstairs’ – the ‘organist’ working with his choir, an assistant organist accompanying it – was nurtured by Rose. It was he who proved that an ensemble of children and adults could sing daily to the highest standards without the support of a choir school. His shepherding of the weekly *Choral Evensong* programme in the 1970s and ‘80s saw his ideas about blend, tone and text – particularly in psalm-singing (a homage to one of his great musical heroes, George Guest) – seep into choir stalls around the land. That, and *Choral Evensong* became a properly ‘produced’ entity: a programme in which individual musical and architectural characteristics were celebrated.

Appropriately, given the non-Establishment footing of the whole Guildford project, many of the choir’s recordings have been posted online (some on YouTube, some on Rose’s

own website, [barryrose.co.uk](http://barryrose.co.uk)). Even at their most homespun, you sense something special in them – a mixture of cohesion, zest and transcendence that calls to mind Rose’s famous, Fürtwangler-like remark to his singers that ‘the beat is irrelevant’. Rose wanted his musicians to *feel* the music they were singing just like he did. Only that way would choirs, congregations and listeners grow to love it like he did, too. **G**



#### THE ESSENTIAL RECORDING

**Vaughan Williams**

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John Barrow *bar*

Guildford Cathedral Choir / Barry Rose

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