



## Merton in America

**Benjamin Nicholas and the Choir of Merton College, Oxford head stateside in September for concerts at St. Ignatius Loyola, New York and other historic venues**  
**Tour programme includes Vaughan Williams' Mass in G minor and works with strong royal connections in honour of Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee**



Sacred choral music from both sides of the Atlantic will travel with the Choir of Merton College, Oxford on its first tour since before the Covid pandemic. Merton's choral scholars and their Director of Music Benjamin Nicholas are bound for the United States this autumn to perform at the New York City Church of St. Ignatius Loyola on Park Avenue (15 September 2022). Their itinerary opens with Choral Evensong given jointly with Harvard University Choir at the Memorial Church of Harvard University (11 September), followed by a concert (12 September), and also includes performances at Trinity Church on the Green in New Haven (13 September) and Princeton University Chapel (16 September).

"Touring is very important to us on so many levels," comments Benjamin Nicholas. "Our university terms are quite short, so working together in a concentrated way outside those three eight-week periods is invaluable to the choir's musical development. It's also hugely important socially for this age group. I think any of our choral scholars would say that touring is one of the advantages of being in a collegiate choir. We've missed that enormously since we last toured in December 2018. The new generation of Merton singers, who joined us in autumn 2019, has never been on tour as a group. That makes this US trip doubly important."

Nicholas has chosen works that bring out the best from his singers and are sure to connect with the choir's American audience. His compelling programme includes the motet *Senex pueram portabat* and *again (after ecclesiastes)*, respectively by New York-based composers Nico Muhly and David Lang. The latter work, a setting of Hebrew verses freely adapted by the composer from the Book of Ecclesiastes, unfolds as a short meditation on the strands of hope and futility woven into the pattern of natural and human cycles. The choir is also set to perform English sacred works with impeccable royal connections, chosen to mark the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II.

Merton College Choir's concert bill opens with the Mass in G minor by Ralph Vaughan Williams, the Creed from which was performed at the Queen's coronation service in 1953. *O Lord, make thy servant Elizabeth* and *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei*, majestic masterworks by William Byrd and Henry Purcell, evoke the golden age of music from England's Chapel Royal. They are prefaced by *Ave Regina caelorum*, originally written in 2014 by

today's Master of the Queen's Music, Judith Weir, to celebrate the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Merton College and included in the *Merton Choirbook*, a compendious collection of new choral compositions. The royal theme runs through the programme's second half in the form of *Bring us, O Lord* by William Harris, organist of St George's Chapel Windsor, who taught piano to the young Princess Elizabeth and was assistant conductor at her coronation, and Hubert Parry's *I was glad*, performed at every coronation since Edward VII's in 1902.

Nicholas and his choir recorded an album of contemporary American music shortly before the pandemic began. It is scheduled for future release on the Delphian label. "We haven't had the chance to sing our new American repertoire in concert, so I chose two representative, neatly contrasting pieces from the recording for our tour," comments Merton's Director of Music. "The Muhly and Lang works make a very good fit with the rest of the programme."

The next Merton College Choir album, scheduled for release by Delphian on Armistice Day, 11 November 2022, couples Ian Venables' *Requiem* with anthems for choir and orchestra by Herbert Howells. Venables added orchestral parts to his *Requiem* setting, first performed two years ago with organ accompaniment, which receives its debut recording here in company with the world premiere recording of his anthem *God be merciful*. The album also includes the first recording of Howells' *The House of the Mind* in its version for choir and orchestra, and premiere recordings of newly orchestrated versions of *O pray for the peace of Jerusalem* and *Like as the hart desireth the waterbrooks*.

"This is an exciting time for Merton College Choir," says Benjamin Nicholas. "We're busy making recordings and looking forward to our tour to the States. This is on top of our regular work of singing Evensong every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday in Merton Chapel. This will be the choir's fourth tour to the USA since its formation in 2008. I know from past experience that they are a great way to build morale, raise standards and reach new audiences."

[www.merton.ox.ac.uk/choir](http://www.merton.ox.ac.uk/choir) - [Facebook](#) - [Instagram](#) - [Twitter](#) - [YouTube](#)

**The information in this press release was correct at the time of sending. Please check the choir's website and social media for the latest updates.**

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**US TOUR 11-16 September 2022**

**Sunday 11 September 2022, 4pm**

**Memorial Church of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA**

(Choral Evensong sung jointly with Harvard University Choir)

[Event link](#)

**Monday 12 September 2022, 12.15pm**

**Memorial Church of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA**

[Event link](#)

**Tuesday 13 September 2022, 7.30pm**

**Trinity Church on the Green, New Haven, CT**

[Event link](#)

**Thursday 15 September 2022, 7pm**

**Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, New York City (also to be live-streamed)**

[Event link](#)

**Friday 16 September 2022, 8pm**

**Princeton University Chapel, NJ**

**Benjamin Nicholas** conductor, organ | **Choir of Merton College, Oxford**

**Vaughan Williams** Mass in G minor (Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus & Benedictus, Agnus Dei)

**Lionel Rogg** *Air from Homage to Takemitsu* (organ solo)

**Judith Weir** *Ave Regina Caelorum*

**Byrd** *O Lord, make thy servant Elizabeth*

**Purcell** *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei*

**David Lang** *again*

**Durufié** *Fugue sur le thème du Carillon des Heures de la Cathédrale de Soissons* (organ solo)

**Nico Muhly** *Senex pueram portabat*

**William Harris** *Bring us, O Lord*

**Parry** *I was glad*

## **THE CHOIR OF MERTON COLLEGE, OXFORD**

The Choir of Merton College consists of 30 undergraduate and graduate students at Oxford University reading for degrees in a variety of subjects. The choir's primary duty is singing regular services in the famous 13th-century Chapel.

Since the establishment of Merton's Choral Foundation in 2008, the choir has gained an international reputation for offering the best of choral music through tours, recordings and broadcasts. The choir won the 2020 award for best choral album at the BBC Music Magazine Awards for its recording of Gabriel Jackson's *The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ*. The choir's discography on the Delphian label has seen numerous five-star reviews and many recordings have been named 'Editor's Choice' by Gramophone magazine.

The choir has recently appeared at The Three Choirs Festival, the Cheltenham Music Festival, the concert series at St John's Smith Square, Cadogan Hall and The Temple Church. The choir is regularly heard in concert with orchestra: recent collaborations have seen the choir perform with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (Elgar's *The Apostles*), Instruments of Time and Truth (Bach's *St Matthew Passion*) and Oxford Baroque (Bach's *Mass in B minor*). The choir's annual festival, Passiontide at Merton, has an established place in Oxford's musical calendar, and has led to exciting collaborations with such groups as The Cardinal's Musick and The Marian Consort.

Merton College Choir regularly tours overseas, recently visiting the USA, Hong Kong and Singapore, France, Italy and Sweden. In 2017, the choir sang the first Anglican Service in St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

The choir's commitment to contemporary music has seen numerous composers write for the choir. It has premiered works by Kerry Andrew, Birtwistle, Chilcott, Dove, Ešenvalds, Frances-Hoad, Kendall, MacMillan, McDowall, Rutter, Tabakova and Weir. In 2021, the choir gave the world premiere of a new work by Daniel Kidane.