

THE American Organist

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS AND THE ASSOCIATED PIPE ORGAN BUILDERS OF AMERICA

OCTOBER 2025



Coffee Break

with Stephen Layton



Stephen Layton
(photo: Keith Saunders)

Stephen Layton stands among the world's most celebrated choral conductors, acclaimed for his visionary programming as well as the technical precision and expressive depth he draws from his ensembles. Since founding Polyphony in 1986, he has reshaped the choral landscape, particularly through an expansive and influential recording catalog. His tenure as director of music at Trinity College, Cambridge, further cemented his reputation as a defining force in choral music. Polyphony tours the United States later this month.

ALEX HODGKINSON

My dad was organist at a Pentecostal church in Derby, an industrial city in the north of England, so I was brought up in that tradition. I started piano lessons at home, and I'd also started to sing a little bit, so my father saw that I had a decent voice and that I was musical. Although my parents were at first unsure about sending me away to a boarding school far from home, they understood the significance of music—especially music in church. So when I was eight years old, I became a chorister at Winchester Cathedral.

This was a massive game-changer, not least because I came under the influence of two extraordinary musicians: Martin Neary [director of music, 1972–88] and James Lancelot [assistant organist, 1974–84]. I remember vividly the sensation I got in the first choir practice. We were rehearsing Wesley's *Ascribe unto the Lord*. Of course, the older choristers knew how it went, and this whole new sound completely enveloped me. You know the feeling we all get as musicians, when we're really excited by something? I was getting that feeling on a daily basis. I knew very quickly that *this* was what I wanted to do.

As well as the daily round of services at the cathedral, we did a lot of large-scale pieces with orchestra and toured all over the world. There's a great documentary about our tour to the United States and Canada in 1979, which included performances at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center. You can still find it on YouTube. You see Martin in his tails, bouncing onto the stage, full of vigor and flair.

I remember Martin singing a bit of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* during a rehearsal one day. As he sang, he was visibly moved. That really showed me what a profound influence somebody in front of a choir or orchestra can have, if they're prepared to bare their soul as they make music. It liberates people and inspires them to follow. Time after time, he was prepared to show something of himself, which encouraged me to open myself up musically too.

I was influenced equally by James Lancelot, but in a quieter, more didactic way. He is a fantastic organist. He never played any wrong notes, and Martin, you could see, worshiped him as this magnificent accompanist. James taught me piano and theory and toward the end of my time as a chorister gave me my first opportunities to play the organ. After Winchester I went to Eton College, where I was lucky enough to learn with other remarkable musicians, and then up to King's College, Cambridge, working under Stephen Cleobury [director of music, 1982–2019].



Truth be told, I found my first year in Cambridge a bit tricky. Stephen Cleobury, understandably, wanted only the best, so it needed to be absolutely 100 percent accurate, and he didn't want much mucking around with rubato. It was different from the incredibly impulsive, intuitive music-making I'd experienced with Alastair Sampson, my brilliant organ teacher at Eton, and from Martin as well. So I had to really work hard to make sure it was right and exactly as Stephen wanted, always practicing with a metronome. I didn't want to let the team down.

And it was a good lesson to learn: I can now see both sides; I can see how both approaches have influenced me. When I'm conducting, I like it to be absolutely fantastically together, I don't suffer poor ensemble, and it's got to be bang in tune, all those things. But I'm also a highly emotional musician—I let it all hang out.

As a teenager, I had become more and more interested in organ improvisation. On a tour to France with Winchester, I'd heard Cochereau improvise at Notre-Dame. And I remember thinking it was pretty cosmic; it was kind of like Messiaen's *Apparition de l'église éternelle*. In 1985, just before I went up to Cambridge, I spent three weeks in Paris and managed to get into the organ loft at Notre-Dame. Yves Devernay was playing that weekend, and he was a phenomenal improviser. An outpouring of emotion through clouds of cigarette smoke!

I had improvised a bit at school, but at Cambridge I started inhabiting this French "garlic" sound in a big way. Stephen Cleobury really encouraged me in this. We had the International Congress of Organists in Cambridge in 1987, which included an AGO delegation. St. Thomas Fifth Avenue gave a concert at King's led by Gerre and Judith Hancock, and I met many other great American players. I will never forget Joyce Jones playing *The Flight of the Bumblebee* in King's Chapel late one evening!

Rather unexpectedly, Stephen suggested that I improvise during Communion at two of the congress services. This became a turning point in my time at King's. He encouraged me to improvise more and more. He was celebrating the thing I could really excel at, and it meant that I finished my last two years in a very positive way.

Cambridge was—still is!—a vibrant place, and I founded Polyphony during my time there. It's funny, in our early days of recording, in the '90s, I didn't go looking for repertoire; things just sort of happened. In the late '90s, early 2000s, I was conductor of the Nederlands Kamerkoor, so I spent a lot of time in Amsterdam. There was a famous music shop, right next to the Concertgebouw, where you could find lots of interesting scores. I came across *Water Night* by Eric Whitacre. I hadn't heard of him before, but I bought it and then found a recording by the Brigham Young University Singers with Ron Staheli. It was really

good. I felt I could do something with this music, and that thought led to *Cloudburst* [Polyphony's Whitacre album, released in 2006].

Another example was [Polish composer] Paweł Łukaszewski. I met him when we were both on the jury of a composition competition in Warsaw—it was February and absolutely freezing! On one of our free days, we visited a monastery called Jasna Góra, in Paweł's hometown. We saw the Black Madonna icon in the chapel as well as the Stations of the Cross, 14 paintings by Duda-Gracz that were the inspiration for Paweł's piece *Via Crucis*. I listened to it on the way back to Warsaw and, having seen where Paweł came from, seen the icon, seen the paintings, I decided I was going to record it. I had to do it. It was an exciting time, a time when CD recordings were still the main vehicle. I feel very grateful to have started my career in that era.

We have a really interesting program lined up for Polyphony's U.S. tour in October. I have tried to bring together music of England, Europe, and America, including Randall Thompson's much-loved "Alleluia." We also have "Contre qui, rose," from Lauridsen's *Les Chansons des roses*, and Whitacre's "Go, Lovely Rose." I'm deliberately not doing the absolute obvious, and both of those pieces are exquisite and beautiful. My interest in the music of the Baltics comes through with Arvo Pärt's "The Deer's Cry," and I've always had a love of French music, so there's Poulenc and Duruflé and Villette. From England we have Byrd and Tallis, and the very famous *Ave Maria* by Robert Parsons.

I've done quite a few U.S. tours in the past, and what seems to work well is a real cross-cultural musical tasting box. People are interested to hear a group that can turn its art to quite a few different things, rather than, say, a concert of just English music. I'm a great evangelist for the music that I love, but also an evangelist for the sound, a sound so particular to English choirs. There are superb choirs across the world, especially in the United States, of course, and each tradition has its own special sound. It's exciting to share our particular sound.

Why is the sound different? Well, we're all different, aren't we? The world is different. It's different because of language, dialects, accents, pronunciation, yes. But also different because of the cultures we come from, the musical traditions we inherit and inhabit.

Perhaps the best advice I have ever received came from Stephen Cleobury in those Cambridge days: Practice it, practice it, and practice it again until you can do it in your sleep.

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