



SARAH MACDONALD

▲ Selwyn College Choir will perform pieces from all three volumes during the launch Evensong in November

# Louder than words

In November, Selwyn College Choir will help launch a new sacred music anthology. The curator, Louise Stewart, speaks to **Harriet Clifford** about her social justice project and what it means for the future of church music

The invisibility of one half of the population within sacred music has gone relatively unnoticed, until now. Within the next year, a new sacred music anthology will be on our bookshelves. Like any other good collection, it will include pieces from historical, established and emerging composers, in a range of difficulties, accessible to all choirs which sing church music. However, this anthology, in its three separate volumes, will be the first of its kind: every piece of music will have been composed by a woman.

On International Women's Day three years ago, Louise Stewart and Olivia Sparkhall envisioned producing a church service written, led and composed entirely by women. However, this endeavour proved almost impossible through lack of existing

resources, so they decided to create the kind of material they had been hoping to find.

Stewart grew up as a chorister in her parish choir, before reading music at Exeter University. During these three years, she did not study a single piece of music by a female composer, although at the time found this entirely 'unsurprising'. She then went on to

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train in primary education, and worked with the first girl choristers in Salisbury Cathedral School. Since then, she has remained in music education and the church, and has engaged in social justice work within her community. Her passion for this evolved alongside her

community interest company, Multitude of Voyces, the aim of which is 'to support those who are under-represented, marginalised and vulnerable ... through church music.'

While researching music for their service, Stewart was confronted with the invisibility of women in the church music world: 'There are many women composers of church music,

but they are less easy to find, because they don't yet appear on the shelf.' Stewart and Sparkhall were driven by the realisation that women were 'grossly under-represented', as was the future for the girl choristers they have worked with. Having moved to

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▲ (l) Dame Judith Weir with project curator Louise Stewart: Stewart stresses the importance of including well-established living composers in the anthology; (r) Stewart's collaborator Olivia Sparkhall: the pair were spurred into action on International Women's Day 2016



▲ The cover art was designed by Caroline Grint

◀ Salisbury 25 years ago to work in a groundbreaking environment, Stewart has become increasingly aware that for these singers today 'the church music they come across does not reflect the roles that they, as middle-aged women, have in their society'. Sparkhall has acknowledged the stark reality that in her local cathedral, the cathedral choirs have not sung anything composed by a woman in the last five years.

The *Anthology of Sacred Music by Women Composers* aims to celebrate women's gifts of composition and fulfil the need for women to see themselves reflected in church music, while at the same time 'setting people up as role models' for younger generations. The youngest featured composer is Joanna Ward, a 21-year-old Cambridge graduate, who, thanks to an alphabetised content, will be beside Judith Weir in the anthology. Stewart believes this is one of the benefits of creating a hard-copy, as people will discover new music simply as a result of being exposed to work on the adjacent page: 'She might be the next Judith Weir, and now she might have a better chance.'

Ward believes strongly in the powerful impact of the anthology: 'Projects that let women work together for each other will ultimately be what allows us to break away from the current model of composing success, which ultimately keeps individualised women composers as a novelty among the male norm of composing, silencing the rest of us.' It is this silencing that Multitude of Voyces are working hard to undo, while also acknowledging that it is not the case that female composers cannot speak for themselves. Rather, they intend to produce something that is 'greater than all its parts.'

Referring to the current lack of resources available on the shelves and the gap this anthology will fill, Judith Weir said, 'I sometimes get the impression that, where contemporary music is concerned, church musicians don't know where to begin looking; this will be a place to start the exploration.'

Incorporating 55 works across three volumes, Stewart is aware that the anthology is 'only a fraction of what we could do', as there is enough content spanning the last 1,000 years for endless numbers of volumes. They have chosen the works carefully, ensuring that each volume can be used across the church year and that an overview of texts is offered. 'There's an element of not giving people an excuse, and a strong element of giving people lots of choice of difficulty.' As well as a variety of music, Stewart is acutely aware of the importance of maintaining a high quality of composition within the anthology. As the project is the first of its kind, 'if the music in the book is

sub-standard, the message given would not be that the book is sub-standard, but that women are sub-standard.' Therefore, they are not only introducing choirs to emerging talent and unpublished historical works, but have also included the likes of Judith Weir and Judith Bingham, along with June Nixon, the Australian organist-composer and the anthology's oldest living contributor.

For Stewart, as undoubtedly for many, it seems remarkable that we have reached 2019 before anyone has thought to question the status quo. 'One of the reasons this hasn't been done before is because it does not come without challenge,' she explains, admitting that 'not all of this project has been a happy experience.' They have been unable to find a publisher who will go beyond the stage of acknowledging that the anthology is a good idea. As a result, they are self-publishing and self-funding with the added injection of sponsorship from supporters of the project, such as Sarah MacDonald, director of music at Selwyn College, Cambridge. Although the support from these individuals has been 'enormous', there is only a hint of irony in Stewart's tone when she says, 'If I were producing a book about the orchids of South America, I probably would have got more interest.'

From the dismissal of women's church music as 'niche' to the words 'I don't need women, I've got girls', the project has provoked a misogyny that Stewart feels is openly present within the church and would not be acceptable in an institution such as the council or government. It is 'allowed to happen because women remain hidden from



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our bookshelves. Once you are represented, people can't get away with those kinds of attitudes.'

Stewart's husband, Andrew, a professional counter-tenor who is very much involved in the project, poses what he calls 'the male point of view'. He suggests that some have questioned the necessity of the anthology because women are already represented in the church, as priests and in the front rows of choirs, so why should men be excluded? The opinion might be that one does not need to be negative about men to be positive about women. 'But of course,' Andrew explains, 'they are simply wrong. You only have to do the practical element of actually finding the music, and it's not there.' Besides, while the originators of the music are female, the text, translation and editing in the anthology have been carried out by both men and women.

The creators and supporters of the anthology believe that this project pushes

boundaries in a way that extends beyond the confines of the church: 'There is a strong element of speaking up for those who can no longer speak up for themselves, and that is a very important tool for readjusting our perspective on the past.' They hope that once the anthologies are printed, the books will generate their own interest, both through social media and word of mouth. Having pre-sold 540 copies (at the time of interviewing) on trust alone, this optimism seems justified. Engagement with young people is a key part of this interest, as it tends to be the younger demographic who notice and question these inequalities in society.

Next year, International Women's Day on 8 March falls on a Sunday, meaning that 'the church, universally, has very little excuse.' Multitude of Voyces are working to ensure that all three volumes are published by this date. The anthologies will launch on Tuesday 17 November 2019 at Evensong at Selwyn College, led by Sarah MacDonald. Works will

be performed from all three volumes, but only the first volume, *SATB Anthems*, will be available for sale by that time.

Funds from the anthology will be used towards their next social entrepreneurial project, the Makaton Mass, which endeavours to produce a resource pack for churches to hold a eucharistic service for those with cognitive impairments who might use Makaton sign language as their main form of communication. This virtuous circle is a significant part of Multitude of Voyces's *raison d'être*.

The hope is that eventually it will be 'completely normal' for a new anthology to be filled half-and-half with male and female composers, with a mixture of texts and translations. This project seems to be a giant leap in the right direction. ■

*The three volumes include SATB Anthems, Upper Voices Anthems and Liturgical Works. [multitudeofvoyces.co.uk](http://multitudeofvoyces.co.uk) @MulofVoy*

▼ (clockwise, from below) Judith Bingham, Joanna Ward, Anna Semple, Ethel Smyth, Cecilia McDowall, Alison Willis, and Janet Wheeler, are seven of the 22 women composers represented in the anthology



PATRICK DOUGLAS-HAMILTON



RUIARI PATERSON-JACHENBACH



HARRY FLYNN



ANDREW WILKINSON



ANDREW MCDOWALL



ADAM CUERDEN



JED WILLIS

