

**Interview of Dr Richard Shephard OBE, Director of Music, York Mystery Plays
2016.**

23 August 2016 at the National Centre for Early Music.

MAS: I'll start by introducing myself. I'm Margaret Scott, and I am the archivist at the National Centre for Early Music specially for the York Mystery Plays. We have a website and an archive. And this is a new interview for 2016 to celebrate the 2016 Mystery Plays which were in the Minster. And I've got with me Richard Shephard. Richard, do you want to introduce yourself?

RS: I'm Richard Shephard, I am a lay member of the Minster Chapter, I was the Chamberlain and Director of Development and before that I was the Headmaster of the Choir School. But I trained as a musician and I have been a composer for more years than I care to remember.

MAS: So you've lived in York a long time and you know York very well?

RS: No, I am a comparative newcomer, I've only been here 32 years! But I have been here 32 years and wouldn't wish to live anywhere else.

MAS: I quite agree. I have been here 10 years and I consider myself settled. So, this is not the first time you've been involved with the Mystery Plays, you were Director of Music in 2000, that is the Millennium Plays. [sound of phone]

RS: I'll just turn my phone off! Yes, I was. I was very lucky, in 2000 I wrote the score and directed the music, collaborating that year with Greg Doran, and with Mike Poulton, who wrote the script. So it was a great experience and a wonderful production, I think everybody agreed.

MAS: Mmm. And it was fantastic to have the Mystery Plays in the Minster, because they are normally on the streets, on the wagons.

RS: They are either on the streets, or of course they were historically in the Museum Gardens and they were of course they did them again in 2012 in the Museum Gardens. But the Minster is a very good place to have them, because of course by and large it doesn't rain inside!

MAS: You can get birds in there though, but it doesn't rain inside, you're quite right! So what are the advantages and disadvantages of knowing the Mystery Plays well – if any?

RS: Well, I don't know the, I mean I'm not a medievalist. I knew Mike Poulton's 2000 script very well, so there was that. By and large we used roughly the same

script this time although Mike did cut bits down and one or two scenes he wasn't keen on he excised. And then, so he and the new Director Philip Breen and I spent two days in Norfolk just reading through the script again and again and deciding where the music cues should be. Because to start with the idea was we should use exactly the same script and the same score, but of course theatrical directors rightly have their own ideas as to where they want music to be, and Philip's cues that he wanted were not the same as Greg Doran's. I did keep the final two choruses, one at the end of each Act but the rest, all, I had to rewrite, anew.

MAS: Oh!

RS: Well it was fun.

MAS: It sounds like a lot of extra work, but you say it was fun.

RS: Well it was extra, it's a huge amount of work, because I think there were something like I think 60-something cues and you've got to try and get it right. I said in the interview in the Programme [for the Plays] the important thing is that the music is incidental, it's there to assist rather than to make a statement about itself. And of course because the Mystery Plays are very episodic, you move from Biblical story to Biblical story, particularly in the first Act, you often need bits of music just to sort of bridge gaps and things, to allow them to change the scene and things. And so it's, I think the German term is *Gebrauchsmusik*, music which is of use.

MAS: *Gebrauchsmusik*, useful music, a brilliant term, yes! And 60 cues, you said?

RS: Yes, 66 I think, or probably more than that, sometimes it was cue 30 A, B, C, D and so on, a lot of different ones, some are only a few bars long, some are much longer.

MAS: And you decided not, therefore, to try medieval music?

RS: No, I mean, I did use some plainsong for certain bits, but I didn't want to just do pastiche or to just kind of prey on earlier people, there didn't seem any point in that.

MAS: Mmm. And when did you do the writing? You said you went to Norfolk and talked about it?

RS: Talked about that, and we had meetings in December 2015. I then went to America, at the end of December and started. I did a week's work over there, and finished it I suppose.... I wrote quite a lot during January and probably finished it in

February. Then we did a very sort of 'gash' recording of it all so that the Director could have some sort of idea of what he was going to be working with.

MAS: Right. And did you do the recording inside the Minster?

RS: Yes.

MAS: So you'd get the same sound, as it were. So the music was all ready before people started rehearsing?

RS: Well, in theory it was. But of course in practice as rehearsals go on, the Director finds times where he wants more, or less, or different cues or something else, so there was an enormous amount of writing and re-writing as rehearsals progressed. Which is – I mean, that's how life is. But of course if you've got a band of ten players you've got to get all the orchestral parts ready. You don't want them to have lots of pieces of paper floating round the orchestra pit and all needing sorted out!

MAS: Yes, it's not fair on the players, obviously, they aren't expected to be impromptu, are they?

RS: No.

MAS: So you did continue to work closely right through the rehearsal process?

RS: Yes. I did. In fact Philip Breen lodged with me, he stayed at my house, so we saw each other every night, and he was here. As Greg Doran had done in 2000. Which was very enjoyable for me and is also extremely useful, we could go through things, as well.

MAS: Mmm. And Mike Poulton, was he also heavily involved at that point?

RS: Mike? Not hugely, once we'd had the meetings in December and the script had been decided. I think the script stayed absolutely the same, I think actually, once he'd done it. I did see Mike appear in rehearsals I think occasionally but he wasn't much involved.

MAS: And you mentioned 10 musicians, would you have liked any more?

RS: Well, I mean in a way. The ideal thing is to have a very big orchestra, and then you've got all the sort of options at hand. But I mean, certainly when you're looking at the cues you certainly need brass instruments for fanfare, for Herod and for Pilate, all that sort of thing. You need some instruments which you can play

quietly, which are for underscoring when people are speaking quietly. You need percussion really when you need to perform violent moments ...

MAS: Elephants coming on?

RS: Indeed! Or for angelic moments. It would have been very nice indeed to have a string orchestra and then some brass and some woodwind but you can't do that. So we used the Minster organ as a sort of backup, in a way, it can play very quietly underneath things if you need it, so we had....

MAS: And the choir? There was a lovely choir.

RS: Well, we used the choristers for some of the angels, and some of the actors sang. There's not a lot... When I was starting to do this and talking to the cast about what it was.... Philip and I spoke to the cast, and one of the women members of the cast looked me in the eye and suddenly started saying is there going to be much choir work? And I had to point out, this isn't going to be Miss Saigon, it's not a musical.

MAS: You mean she wanted to have lots of choir work?

RS: Oh, I think in 2012 there had been, they had put in a lot of extra bits of music.

MAS: Mmm. There were two choirs, one each side of the stage in 2012, weren't there? And the brass, the orchestra walked about, in 2012.

RS: They had a brass band, it was a very slightly, odd thing. I don't know if Mike had seen this. But I remember, he and I went to.....Greg Doran gave me the names of some possible Directors and I went to meet Philip Breen with Mike Poulton in London and Mike said "I want to make it perfectly clear to you that first of all we don't want an Archangel Gabriella, the disciples are not Greenham Common women and the Last Supper's not a Chinese takeaway!!" So he was very anxious that we shouldn't... I think some people might have thought that the 2012 production was very much geared to political correctness. If you remember there were quite a lot of the disciples who were women.

MAS: In a wheelchair, yes.

RS: There was a woman in a wheelchair, and people said "Well surely, Jesus would have healed her". And there was also.... the Slaughter of the Innocents was done to Kalashnikovs.

MAS: It was, yes. So this was a more traditional production?

RS: Well Mike's view, with which I heartily concur, was that the Plays speak for themselves, they don't need to be interpreted endlessly by us.

MAS: Mmm. And the Minster setting is different from an open air sunshine setting as well, you start with a different atmosphere. Mmm. Anyway, it did all turn out beautifully. It does sound as though you have had to give an awful lot of help to an awful lot of choristers and cast as well as musicians.

RS: Well, there's not a vast amount of singing. There were two big choruses which the whole cast sang and that takes some time to drum into people. They did fine. The choristers, the organist and his assistant taught them what they had to sing, which wasn't an enormous amount. There were I think 5 or 6 choristers each night, and they sat in the orchestral pit under the stage when they had to. And they all had Ipads and Iphones and God know what else, and they had an enjoyable time I think.

MAS: Because they are quite young, aren't they?

RS: Yes, 13 would be the oldest, I think 10 to 13.

MAS: So they were sitting in costume underneath the stage?

RS: Yes, under the stage.

MAS: Can you describe where you were situated? Because it was different from 2000, wasn't it?

RS: We were in a sort of padded cell! (Laughter) There was a huge raked stage and we were underneath. I mean all the instruments were all miked and the sound technicians controlled it from the back of the auditorium. So basically I never saw the production. I had a small screen where I could see the stage and I could just see bits going on. I had a camera on me so the cast could see me when I was conducting. I had a loudspeaker and I had a microphone because in the end I had to sing something at the end during the Ascension. It was written for the choristers to sing but because of licensing and some mess with not getting the license or it not being the right license, they weren't allowed to stay on till the end of the performance.

MAS: Oh! Because it was too late? It was after 11pm, wasn't it?

RS: So I had to sing it, which I duly did.

MAS: So you should be down as a performer as well as Director of Music?

RS: Happily not.

MAS: I can put you on the website as a performer if you like.

RS: Please don't!

MAS: (laughs) I won't! So, it was a significant amount of work, even though in theory it was the same script and a lot of the same music, in fact it was at least as much work as in 2000?

RS: Oh yes. I mean even the last two choruses, the choruses at the end of each Act, which I kept, I had to re-score because I changed the instrumentation. I had an oboe in 2000 and I changed that to two clarinets. And then re-scored it all, re-wrote it all. So in a different way....

MAS: Mmm So you were underneath in this rather stuffy place?

RS: No, it wasn't stuffy, it was quite cold there to start with, because the weather was very poor to start with. Yes, and so there were two clarinets on my right, two trumpets on my left, two French horns in front of me, a cello on the far right, two percussionists with a vast array of percussion instruments not far away and the console and the organ on the far left. We were all very close.

MAS: So you could point, directly?

RS: Oh, we could talk.

MAS: You could talk, yes. Do you regret you never managed to see a production?

RS: Yes, I'm very sorry that I didn't see it. I mean obviously I had an idea of what it was like but everybody has said how absolutely spectacular it was and I'm sorry I didn't see it, couldn't see it but it's one of those things.

MAS: Yes. I think there were more performances this time, 41, than any other play?

RS: Yes, I'm sure that's right, it was a lot, a lot.

MAS: Did you manage to conduct all 41?

RS: I did, I did.

MAS: Wow, exhausting.

RS: Well, yes. I mean....

MAS: I know you're a professional, but it must be exhausting.

RS: Well, it is exhausting because it is a long working day.

MAS: I've seen that all the actors and the crew went to St Williams College to have their meal beforehand, did you join in that?

RS: Not always. But the band certainly did.

MAS: Yes. Which made for a team spirit, perhaps?

RS: Well, I think orchestral players tend to work places together anyway, and they were all from the University of York and they said they all vaguely knew each other and they got on very well, it was fine. I was incredibly lucky, I had a brilliant assistant called Connor McLean [Music Administrator] who actually fixed the band, he booked the players..... He'd certainly be worth interviewing, he was... I could not have coped with it without his input, he was brilliant.

MAS: And he's at the University of York?

RS: Well, he has just graduated. He knew all the players. And obviously they didn't all play in it every night, so there were different people.

MAS: And that will go onto their CV, so it will help them?

RS: Yes, well I think so! They were extremely good.

MAS: And what difference does it make working in a huge space like the Minster, as compared to a normal musical venue or a hall?

RS: Well none at all really, because in the Minster all the sound was amplified and controlled by sound technicians so it's, I mean you don't have to play loud or soft or anything else, it's all done electronically.

MAS: Mmm. I've interviewed two actors and they talked about learning to deal with the resonance of the space.

RS: Well, some did and some didn't. Yes, I think with actors it's very different, one thing you have to learn, it's not a very difficult thing for them to understand, is that if you shout into a microphone it echoes round, so you don't, you don't do it.

And the sound technicians were very professional, so they knew how to do things, but there were certain actors – who shall be nameless! Who....

MAS: (laughs) Who did shout!

RS: Who insisted on shouting. Because they – well, I don't know why they did, but they did.

MAS: Mmm. I saw it twice, but at the beginning of the run, and I understand that that improved as the run went along. Which sadly I didn't get the benefit of!

RS: I think so, yes. And I think probably speaking into microphones and things is more complicated. But again, I think the sound technicians were able to, if there was some irritating person who always shouted, I think they could always turn them down.

MAS: Mmm. Well that is very interesting, because most people will think it is exceptionally difficult in the Minster. But if you are electronically organised, that does compensate for it.

RS: Yes.

MAS: Did you notice any technological advances since 2000 that made it easier to work, to compose or perform?

RS: Well, I think the sound system was more sophisticated, I think that had moved forward a lot. I think the lighting system, everything on that side has developed. But from my point of view, no there is nothing particularly different, that made it easier or more difficult. I think it was much the same, really.

MAS: I have to say, the stage was a lot higher, I felt that the actors were climbing up and down the whole time.

RS: Yes, I think that certainly was the case. I know of one person, anyway, who got vertigo and couldn't go onto the top step, or so I am told.

MAS: Oh! Yes, difficult. So by comparison your little padded cell underneath was

RS: Well, yes. In 2000 we were by the side and I could actually see the stage. This time we couldn't, but I mean it worked perfectly well.

MAS: Mmm, it certainly did, it certainly did, yes but in 2000 if you could see the production that must have been helpful.

RS: Yes, but it was rather harder on the orchestral players in a way because the screen was facing me, and I think first trumpet and first clarinet could probably see a bit of the screen. I did try to turn it so that the orchestral people could see bits. But at times in the second Act when there are enormous gaps...

MAS: Gaps without sound, without music, you mean?

RS: Yes. Certainly people could go for a walk around, and I think even a couple go off to the pub. [laughter]. They could go and watch, there was a screen out at the back so they could watch it from there, they could see a screen. [indistinct]

MAS: So they could take their cue as to when to come back in?

RS: Yes, there is a big, probably for most players there was a 20 minute gap at some stage.

MAS: I see, that's a lot. I hadn't realised that, I was focussing on the drama. So in 2016 there was much more music in the first half than the second half?

RS: It was the same in 2000. Because I would say in the first half you've got all the Old Testament style things and you go up to the Entry into Jerusalem, and you've got the Nativity, and you have the Baptism of Christ and all that, up to Jerusalem. The second Act is very much more concerned with the Passion and everything else. There aren't so many jokes in the second half.

MAS: No, it is quite solemn, the second half, yes.

RS: Until you get indeed to the Last Judgement, and then you've got the fanfares and things like that. But it's, erm, I think Mike Poulton did a brilliant job, trying to balance it, but it is problematic.

MAS: Mmm. It is. The two actors I spoke to about their taking part were the two who understudied, who had to stand in when Christ, Philip McGinley, was taken ill. That's partly why we interviewed them. And I had described to me the evening of the illness, when there was a sort of, ten minute, perhaps only five minute, pause in the performance. Did you have to react, at that point, as well?

RS: Yes. I had a telephone to the backstage, which was right at the top of the seating. Yes, so I had to put different cues in and say 'Do this, do this' [clicks fingers] very quickly. But, yes, that's what you have to do. I mean, very hard on

poor Philip, I felt really sorry for him because of it. He was around at the last night, but the doctors said 'Don't do it'. He sent me an email the other day saying "I decided it would be a terrible mistake if I came in and dropped the Cross on the front row."

MAS: I understand he did come in and try to carry it and found he couldn't.

RS: Yes, he was very wise. Anyway, I have got him to come back to the Minster in December to read for one of the Carol Concerts.

MAS: Oh wonderful!

RS: So he, - think it is Brian Kay and Miriam Margolyes on the first one and Phil McGinley and Glenda Jackson for the second.

MAS: What a line-up! So you'll be conducting?

RS: No, I just write the script! I choose the readings and book the readers. And Robert Sharpe will be conducting. We do this every year, as fund-raising for the Minster.

MAS: Yes, and it sells out immediately, as I understand it.

RS: I think a lot of Mystery Play staff will come to see Philip McGinley.

MAS: I understand that as you say he is well, but couldn't manage the last four nights, which was very sad.

RS: Yes, it was a heart thing, inflammation around the heart. But it could be quite dangerous.

MAS: And an actor needs to keep his health.

RS: And shouldn't take risks.

MAS: So are there any particular memories or incidents that you want to record?

RS: Quite a lot I'd rather not, I should think!!

MAS: That's fine, I am not trying to 'fish', I just wondered....

RS: I think..... I really enjoyed working with Philip Breen, who was terribly easy to work with, very co-operative, and we're planning to work together on another project at some stage, so that would be very nice to do.

MAS: In York or?

RS: No, we want to write a musical based around E F Benson's *Mapp and Lucia*. So that's what we're thinking of, it might be fun.

MAS: Oh, brilliant! I love *Mapp and Lucia*.

RS: Well so do I. I don't know whether that will happen, we've talked about it quite a lot, and so he's stayed in touch. So there was working with him, and there was Max Jones the designer.

MAS: Yes, the designs were fantastic.

RS: I think they were absolutely marvellous. And I've forgotten the girl's name who did the sound, but she was brilliant too. And they were terribly co-operative, easy to work with, and I enjoyed it very much. It was fun. And certainly working with students or graduates or whatever they were, from the University they were marvellously co-operative and I think it speaks volumes about the standard of the Music Department that you can produce a band like that.

MAS: Mmm. It does. [Paper rustles]. And I know, because I have seen you in the Minster, that the Minster are, have organised an exhibition about the Plays, to continue till October. Which is rather nice from my point of view. And the costumes are there. So what did you think of that exhibition, did you get the chance to....?

RS: I've seen it, yes. Well, it's fine. It is what it is.

MAS: I'm just looking for the name of the sound lady, who you....

RS: The sound lady.....Andrea Cox.

MAS: Andrea Cox.

RS: Yes, she was absolutely brilliant. And of course Tina McHugh who did the lighting, I mean the lighting was astonishing.

MAS: The lighting was wonderful, yes it was.

RS: Absolutely beautiful. I mean really, we were terribly lucky to have a team of that calibre. They really did a brilliant job.

MAS: Well I like to think York is special and the Minster is special and people do want to come and work here.

RS: I think that's true. I know that Greg Doran, when he was talking to Philip Breen about doing the Mystery Plays, apparently Greg said it was one of the pivotal moments of his career, it was an extraordinary experience. And certainly working with him was immense fun. And with Philip. Both of them of course are talented.

MAS: Yes, extremely talented, both of them, I can't imagine how they do it.

RS: Both of them were extremely good, extremely good at dealing with an amateur cast. Inevitably there are going to be difficulties about dealing with people's attitudes and things, but they coped absolutely brilliantly.

MAS: Yes, good, fine. Well, is there anything else you want to say?

RS: No, I don't think so.

MAS: I'm really grateful to you for coming and giving your time to the interview and indeed for being the Director of Music and making it so great. So thank you very much indeed. Thank you, Richard Shephard.

ENDS.