

Acclaimed choral composer John Rutter talks exclusively to C Music TV about his career, passions & 2010 album, “A Song in Season”

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Interview transcribed by Hannah Roué at C Music TV

C MUSIC TV – Mark Forrest: It is great to see you again John. I'm interested to know how music first touched you when you were a youngster?

I suppose I'm unusual among composers in that I didn't come from a musical family. There was an old upright piano in my parents flat in London & the only reason why it was there was because the previous occupants could not get it down the stairs. It was out of tune and sat in a corner. Neither of my parents could play but I discovered it, I think I must have been 3-4 years old, & suddenly I found a world of magic. I didn't know how to play myself but I sat down & began to poke away at these keys. A visitor to the house said “do you realise that young John is perfectly playing the tune he heard on the radio” a signature tune to some radio comedy I think it was, & they said “He must be musical” & “can he sing?” In fact, I was singing the whole time. They told me, I don't remember this, I'd be playing away at the piano & singing in my little piping treble voice.

So music was always going to be very important to me from an early age. I was sent to a school where we had assembly every day & we sang things like “All things bright and beautiful” & I just remember being thrilled by that because that was the first time I sang with anyone else. I thought, this is more than exciting! Singing on your own & playing the piano is fine but when I started to sing with all my nursery school together I thought, this is what I want, this is what I want to do & be involved with the rest of my life.

What about your secondary school & the development of those musical ambitions?

Another important step was when my parents sent me to Highgate in North London (England) which at the time had a very strong reputation for its choir & music in general. The Director of music there was someone who studied at Cambridge University, which is where I ended up of course, & he had been a pupil of Charles Wood, who in the world of choral music is a very well respected name. In the 1920s he had taught a number of people who went onto musical careers, he taught my Director of music & he kind of gave him a grounding in the grammar of composition. How to do it.

Composition is something where, yes, you can just sit & make a tune but you actually have to know how to do it. I was taught how to compose, from a really quite an early age, how to put my ideas together, how to string them into something coherent, a 3 minute piece or perhaps something longer. It wasn't long until I was filling my exercise books with my early efforts. I wrote a piece called daybreak, I think I must have been about 10 or 11. I put it in big round blobby notes in my exercise book. Of course I didn't know that Maurice Ravel had already written Daybreak as part of his ballet. I think if I was told I wouldn't have written my one. It was in B flat major, 2 flats! I was very pleased with myself.

Was there a lot of competition around this time because you were within a mix of great musical brains?

Well I'm not a competitive person & the nice thing about being a composer is that you're not trying to outdo someone from their job, every composer is different. That said, at Highgate school there was an extraordinary array of musicians including John Tavener who was one of my closest friends there. He was busy scribbling compositions into his exercise books & I should have been intimidated by that, I wasn't.

I think it was the best advice I've been given in my life, don't worry about what everyone else is writing, the world has got room for everyone's talents. It doesn't matter whether you think you're not as good as somebody else or the same field.

Of course in composition you've got some competition because from the dead you've got Beethoven, Bach and Mozart, you'd never write a note if you worried about that!

Actually I was spurred on so it was competitive in the sense that I had some remarkable talents, not just John Tavener, but there was Brian Chapel who has become a very active composer and David Cullum who became Andrew Lloyd Webber's right hand man, he was with us at Highgate. We were all doing something which the rest of world might think was quite weird. We thought it was normal, there was nothing odd about writing music at all. Just like most boys play football & that's normal, we thought oh well I've written a new song this week & that's perfectly normal!

The second best thing that ever happened to me there was that I was never told what a difficult and precarious profession music is. My parents, because they weren't musicians, they didn't stop me. Maybe if they'd known more they would have stopped me! They would have said, 'No John don't go there.' But they were just kind & encouraging. At school nobody said that composition is risky or precarious, its insecure, you will probably starve. I don't think it would of put me off actually but luckily nobody ever said that so I just sailed on & really that's all I've been doing ever since.

That's really quite unusual because when you talk to people who used to study in choirs or even people who did acting at school, it sounds like their parents did everything to dissuade them to do that course. So for you to do music at Cambridge which was the next step was just the obvious thing to do...?

It seemed to just follow on. Edward Chapman my Director of music had been at Cambridge & said look, it's a nice place where people go punting along the river and all the rest of it. You've got choirs like Kings College & St. Johns College, really those were the only two famous choirs at that time, the boys & men's choirs of those two ancient colleges. I thought, look this is where I can be happy. While I was busy studying music I would sometimes slip into Kings College Chapel and have a treat really, where centuries of choral music were there day by day for any of us to go in & enjoy. It was a wonderful place to grow up musically. The sound of those Cambridge choirs & of Kings College Chapel are part of my mental furniture that have been part of me ever since. I was immensely happy there as a student, so happy in fact I've never really left, I've lived in Cambridge ever since.

...& Clare college is your college, in which you were taught and in which you run the choir...

I somehow didn't want to go to Kings College because I thought I'd be overwhelmed. The history is so distinguished I might of drowned so I went next door. Clare college stands next to Kings College along the river. It didn't have a very strong musical tradition at that time, it does now. That's where I studied for my degree under a very wonderful composition teacher called Patrick Gowers who is mainly known for his Sherlock Holmes music that he wrote for many years. He was a very good mentor to me because he said, rather as Edward Chapman had, "Don't worry about the approved styles, write what you want to write, be true to yourself". So he never tried to stop me doing what I wanted to do either. I stayed on at Clare's & was invited in the 1970's to become their Director of music, which was really exciting because the first mixed colleges had just come to our ancient university where for 700 years there had never been any women in the men's colleges. Suddenly they were and of course that transformed the music making in our chapel choir at Clare's which (previously) just had groaning tenors & bass' like the red army choir on vodka! You wouldn't of wanted to hear us, and suddenly we had lovely soaring female sopranos & that's the period I became Director of music & I thought this is a wonderful opportunity to work with a mixed choir & show the world there's no reason why a mixed choir can't do all the same sort of music that a boys and men's choir can do. There we were next door to Kings, not in competition, doing something different but still making choral music & meanwhile I was composing choral music like mad by night.

John how old were you when you wrote your first piece of music that was successful?

I was still at school when I wrote my first published competitions & they were two little Christmas carols. One called 'Nativity Carol' & the other called 'Sheppard's Pipe Carol'. I wrote them & I think the school choir tried them through in chapel. I then put them in a drawer & forgot about them.

It must of been a couple of years after that when I was a student at Cambridge when Sir David Wilcox, who was Director of Kings College Choir, wrote me a note saying, "I hear you have been composing some carols". Now of course that could have been politically very difficult because David's Christmas Carol arrangements were renowned & the Kings Christmas Eve service was a national institution broadcast around the world. There he was asking about the carols of an upstart undergraduate. I was terrified & I had to present myself at his rooms in Kings College.

So I climbed his stairs & knocked at this vast oak door & this voice said “come in!”. There he was behind a desk piled with music scores & letters, his secretary rushing in & out. So I shyly passed him these manuscripts across the table, he looked at them & he didn't say a word. I thought goodness what is he going to say? He said “Excuse me, would you mind if these got published?” That's not an offer you refuse I don't think!

He was & is an Editorial advisor for Oxford University Press, who over night became my publisher. He took them down to the music editor the next day, I received an application for an annual retainer for £25 if I gave them first referral with anything I wrote.

I was absolutely thrilled, it was an extremely lucky break. Anybody talking about their career as a composer would always have to acknowledge luck we might like to think we've done it on our own, none of us have, generally there's a lucky break we could point to. Somebody who has spotted us, who was there at the right place & right time. Somebody kind and generous perhaps who just wants to help a young composer. So I made a leap in really, a space of a 1 minute interview between being an aspired composer to a published composer.

Those carols & along with others I'd written in that early period were put into print and choirs began to perform them. Not just in Britain, internationally. Especially in America, and it wasn't long until the 'Sheppard's Pipe Carol' became a Christmas hit.

This all happened to a young student who didn't quite know what he was doing but knew he wanted to compose. I certainly had no idea you could earn a living being a composer. That only came home to me when, wonderful moment, the royalty cheques started arriving & you think 'goodness me! someone has actually bought this piece of music and has performed it.'

It was a thrilling moment & it really set me on my path because I thought I was going to be an academic. Someone who might teach at a school or university & composition would just be a sideline. It became apparent within the space of 3-4 years that I was beginning to make a living writing music. The wonderful thing was when people began to ask me to write more of it. When people say, 'I listened to your carol & wept' you can take it in a nice way I suppose,' would you now write us something to celebrate the anniversary of our church' or whatever it might be. Bit by bit in my 20s I found the pieces of my career were coming together.

How did you make the decisions that you have?

It just happened really. I didn't have a master plan. I think any composer or conductor that tells you that they have a plan, is probably telling you a bit of a fib!

Anyway events never plan out & I had no idea that choral music was going to become so important in my life. I had always loved singing but I never knew I'd write so much of it.

It came about that I started my own choir, I'd been director of music at Clare college & I resigned from that. Composition is a very jealous mistress, you have to give yourself to it & I thought, if I've got a day job trying to be a director of music in a Cambridge College which is always busy & where music is becoming increasingly important. I would probably never get enough written & I'll feel bad on my death bed. So what happened was I resigned, with tears in my eyes, in 1979. Then I found I had withdrawal symptoms I desperately missed having a choir of my own.

In 1981 I was invited to supply a choir for a Christmas television special from Salisbury Cathedral & I naturally presumed the Cathedral Choir would be the featured choir. Indeed they were in the program but the producer said, 'bring your own choir as well' & I thought, I haven't got a choir.

So I invented one. I got on the phone to one of the tenors in Clare choir in my period, who was by then running a very successful cabaret group called Harvey and The Wall Bangers, and I said "Harvey can you get 24 singers together by next week" & he said "yeah I can do that! I can call up the best of the people who sung for you." We needed a name, so we called ourselves 'The Cambridge Singers' since that's where we all started.

That was the way my choir was born & really the record label started completely by accident after that cause I thought, we need a home, somewhere we can make recordings of the music we want, in the settings we want with the cover designs we want. The nice thing about having your own label is that you are in control & it's nobody else's fault but yours.

This was the early 1980s which was a very exciting time in the history of the record industry because CDs came in. in 1983, the first compact disc, shiny and round. It was thrilling! Objects of desire. They were offering a whole new dimension of sound quality & it was a time in which quite a number of small labels started up, boutique labels. I thought there's hardly any model for this because this isn't something that happened in the LP era very much by large recordings were made my big labels with big resources. The idea of somebody starting their label really was born in the 1980s and I thought well, let's give it a try. We made our first album which was initially licensed to another label but after a short while, I thought well I could put this out on my own label.

Then I made an album of my own choral music called Gloria & we sold them from my garage. It started with these new compact disks & some LPS and cassettes, you had to have all three formats back then. I thought who on earth is going to want these so I said, lets sell them by mail order which is what we at first did. The orders flowed in & radio stations began to play them & requests came from record shops themselves.

So really something that began very small spread in a way that I could never have foreseen, there was really no game plan, we just stumbled from project to project. I was amazed at the reception we got from the public.

Choral music has always been a bit of a sleeping giant. People love singing, they love choirs, there's something in the sound of a choir that reaches into the heart of the listener. Choirs got better around this time. The repertoire that had never been recorded began to be recorded. Very obscure renaissance music which won the Gramophone record of the year in 1987 & I think every one of us in choral music said 'hallelujah', choral music has arrived on disc. It has stayed there ever since.

I think this is because it was something waiting to happen. It was only really when the smaller labels started backing it in the 1980s. People started to realise just how rewarding it is to listen to I was lucky to be around at the right time, the time CDS came in, when the standard of choirs began to improve, & when listeners worldwide began to appreciate the glories of choir.

How did this young man from Cambridge writing carols become so huge & successful in the US?

It's interesting that music is always potentially international but to break through those national boundaries can be quite tricky. In America there is a strong culture of choral music, every high school has a high school choir. Every church has at least one choir if not several. Youth choir, teenage choir, adult choir, some of them even have senior choirs. This is very different from here really so there are many people who come from a background of singing in America & at the time my music was being published over there. There was an appetite for newly written music. I began to get invitations to compose specially for American choirs.

In particular Gloria in 1974, which was my first larger pieces of work was specially written for a performance in America. I was invited over to conduct it which was my first visit to the states, so it was immensely exciting! It wasn't long after it was published that it exploded really. In a sense I could have deserted the UK & gone to live in the states. I did find my wife there, on a visit, which was lovely! she was in the alto section & I noticed she was watching the beat a little more closely than some of the other women in her section so that is something I did very much bring home from the states. I owe a great debt really to the generosity to the hosts that I had there & patrons that got me writing & got me meeting choirs of every single kind.

In the end my home and my routes are in England. I love to be somewhere near an old church & interestingly all my country homes have been next to country churches so that has become part of me in a way. So I love to visit all kinds of countries but I love to come home too.

I don't quite know why my music took off in the way that it did in the states but I'm awfully grateful for it.

So John tell me about a song season, these are works for various seasons in the church calendar but they weren't all composed as one commission there were a number of commissions?

One of the things you do as a composer is respond to invitations & suggestions from the outside world. Many of these from my own composing life have been from churches and cathedrals. I realise that's why I've written so much church music over the years for choirs great & small. Really in Britain & over the last 10 years I haven't actually made a recording of any of works in this area so I thought it's time to summon my Cambridge Singers & get in touch with my friends at the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. I'd say 'look can we catch up & record all of the things I've written'.

We had two tremendous happy days at the Gospel Oak in London which has glorious acoustics. Really it was like watching the past 10 years flash past me because I would go. I remember one was for Winchester Cathedral & oh gosh! This one was premiered in St. Pauls cathedral so many happy memories flooded back when we recorded this music & for quite a number of the Cambridge Singers came up to me afterwards & said, 'gosh I didn't know you had written that!'

So I think it's important to record your own work if you enjoy doing so because you may write something for an occasion which comes & goes, then the piece might get forgotten and it's nice to bring it back & give it a second chance.

How much do you regret not writing more non choral music?

Anyone has to make choices in their career & sometimes these choices are made for you. When I started being published many years ago now, the first pieces that got into print were for choir & that tended to lead to more commissions for choral music.

One thing leads to another, you can open every possible door. Maybe at some point I should have said I'm not going to write anymore choral music for the next 5 years, I'm going to concentrate on orchestral or chamber music or songs. I never did do that. One of the things that happens to freelance musicians is that you get short term in your thinking, that if you could just make it through to next Tuesday & get everything done you promised you'd do, that's the furthest you can really look.

I do have colleagues in the composing world that are much better at long term planning than I am. I never did take the bold step to say I'd really like to write a west end musical, which is something I'd always like to do and never got around to. I'd love to have written an opera, at this very moment I have promised a cello concerto to Julian Lloyd Webber, an organ concerto for Wayne Marshall, a viola concerto to Phillip Dukes, there is a list of these where performers have said, 'okay you've done choral music how about something quite different?'

On the other hand, it's no good having regrets, a nice thing about being a composer is that you're allowed to carry on till you drop & Vaughn & Verdi were arguably doing their best work until they were 70 or 80 which gives me great hope.

On that note though I'm going to ask you to pick the highlight of your career to date?

I've not really had one career, I've had two as composer and conductor and looking back there have been many high lights in both areas.

As a composer I suppose the first high light was the falcon which I wrote whilst I was still a student, that was performed by the Kings College Chapel in the university musical society, orchestra & kings college choir. I was just thrilled that something I had written, this piece was being performed in this wonderful historic building. I have never quite got over that excitement. There have been many other thrills being a composer since but that one is pretty hard to beat.

As a conductor, I suppose the first time I conducted in Carnegie Hall in New York was exceptional really because I walked on that stage thinking, this is the same stage where Toscanini conducted and where Leonard Bernstein, yeah, only just a few years ago. If I'd of worried about that I would never have got past the first four bars, I would've been paralysed with terror but luckily it has a wonderful atmosphere. It's a glorious hall built in 1981, Tchaikovsky conducted some of the first concert and its gone from there being home to all areas in performing arts not just classical, but jazz and show business.

I thought good lord tonight it's me, it's my turn to join this incredible procession of artists & it was very humbling but very exhilarating as well. I raised my baton. You know, I can't remember much of how that concert went, I think I was so overwhelmed by the experience of just being there.

so that has to be the conducting high light of my life. I've been back many time since but it's still a thrill each and every time I walk on that stage.

10 years ago I would have said you were more appreciated everywhere else but the UK, now it seems to have changed, it would appear to me, I don't know if you would agree, you are cherished now in the UK almost as much as elsewhere..?

Reputations a funny thing isn't it. When I started out I was swimming against the tide of contemporary music. I wrote tunes & in the 1960s & 1970s you pretty much had to ask for permission to do that. It would have been terribly frowned upon to want to reach out to a wide audience if you possibly can. The great changes I've seen in the years I've been around is that the climate now is very much more open to diversity in music. There seems to be room for us all & people seem to be willing to listen to us all.

There are some composers who's task it is to explore new areas of music to go into unexplored realms. I'm not like that. I was probably brought into the world to cheer people up & to try & touch people's hearts through the music, to reach out to them. Possibly because my parents weren't musical I've always wanted to write the same music that they & their friends might have enjoyed & just felt better from & so in a sense the music world has come around to where I was & I've been very lucky to have lived to see that, most composers don't get to see they are appreciated until they are dead. I was sometimes despairing in my earlier years to get a hearing in this country for the sort of music I wanted write. Now I'm very much not the only one, inclusiveness is ok. I don't think people think the worst of you if you write a tune, it might bring a tear to a person's eye . I think that's been a great change & I'm very much fortunate to be part of that. To have enjoyed the fact that it has happened.

Somebody who knew I was coming to chat to you today said that, because of that attitude, you are not Sir John Rutter...

I did get a CBE! Pinned on me personally by her Maj'! (Her Royal Highness Elizabeth II, Queen of England) Yeah, I had my day at the palace you know!

Honours for anyone in the Arts are always lovely and I was fortunate to have been given a CBE a couple of years back. I had a very happy morning at Buckingham Palace. I went home amazed and delighted and I never thought something like that would happen to me. If I had any regrets is that my Mum and Dad weren't still alive to enjoy that beautiful sunlit morning in Buckingham Palace with me.

Do you have any advice for any young C Music TV viewers who adore music & would love a career in writing music?

I think my advice to any young composer would be to be the best composer you can be technically. To learn every possible technique of your craft, because it is a craft. You can't just rely on raw genius. You do actually have to learn how to do it.

The second piece of advice would be to be true to yourself. Write the kind of music you really want to write & you believe in because if you're not passionate about it, you can't expect anyone else to be.

What kind of music are you passionate about aside from your choral career?

My own musical tastes are very eclectic. Over dinner I might be enjoying a jazz trio or I might be listening to Gregorian chant, or I might be enjoying a new recording from a vocal group, whether it's very much vocal jazz or vocal classics.

So I enjoy almost anything. I have to say as a composer I have to narrow my focus, that I haven't written anything fiercely contemporary. Not because I don't enjoy it, I'm very interested in contemporary music actually and I think we have a wonderful generation of young British contemporary composers.

You sometimes have to say, I enjoyed that very, very much as a private citizen but that's not what I think I can write professionally. I would say the same with Jazz and rock music, much as I enjoy them, that's not my particular skill.

I could pretty much tell you every date, name & line up of every broad way flop from 1940 to 1980 probably. That's an era I would of loved to work in but that's a particular enthusiasm of mine, so if there's a trivia quiz about broad way musicals I would like to be on the panel.

So John I wander what you think about C Music TV and the channel's aim of bringing classical music to new younger international audiences?

I think that the classical music world has been slow to recognise the whole communications revolution. Younger people find out about music in all kinds of ways which were undreamed of when I was a kid, I was taken to the Royal Festival Hall & probably would've seen a little advertisement in black and white in the times. It's not like that now. I think the use of television to bring music of every kind to a younger audience in particular is very, very important & I am absolutely behind it. It's one of the most exciting new developments. We find out about music we want to listen to in so many different ways & television has to be one of the most important of them.

The amazing thing about classical audiences, & indeed every music audience, is just how international it is. C Music TV is at the forefront of this and it's a wonderful development, all kinds of people will realise that we, the musicians, are normal people! We are passionate about we do & are now able to communicate this passion through television. I think C Music TV is just doing a tremendous service to music and the world of musicians.

And finally why is music important to you?

Music has been at the centre of my life since I was a kid, a small child. I just knew it opened the gates to a world of magic & the imagination. It took me somewhere else from the mundane world that I was in day by day. As I grew to be an adult I realised that music was making me whole as a human being. With mind & body, with spirit, with soul. Music puts you in touch with your soul. It's actually very intellectual as well. You can't listen to music without your mind being engaged but your body gets engaged too when you want to tap your feet, dancing & singing. Music brings together all the different bits of us in a way I don't think any other art quite does. With words you are pinned down to a meaning, music can have any kind of meaning you would like to give it. It speaks to everybody in a different way & I can't imagine one single day of my life without it.