

Candidate 3

Old Saint Paul's

Old Saint Paul's Church is a refuge for souls. Nestled, cave like, in the cliff of Edinburgh's Old Town, even in the fevered chaos of the Festival, it remains a rock of stability and calm. Time stands still inside those archaic walls. Sometimes you can hear the fierce east wind howling around the building with bitter intent, but it never breaks through to trouble our reverie. Instead it seems to sway the cradle and soothes those within.

When I first stepped into Old Saint Paul's, I was struck, not by the incredible gothic architecture that frames the place, but by the cloud of incense which billowed from the thurible swinging, pendulum like, in the priest's hand. The incense hugged me, filled me up. It was as if I was suddenly aware of my soul. The warmth of the time worn wood, the height of the lofty darkness above me, even the murkiness of the Sister Chapel, seem to trigger a sort of stillness in the bottom of my stomach. It's the feeling of contentment in nothingness, in other words, peace.

What initially drew me to this secluded haven was the choir. I was appointed as a choral scholar, a privilege which excites and challenges me still. The music there is like release, a stream of consciousness. It sweeps through the listener and down the aisle, past the golden alter, towards which the choir processes like floating Christmas decorations. The candles burn brightly as our music lulls the fiery sun to rest after a long summer's evening and gently coaxes the moon awake with meditative chant, as if that was the purpose of Evensong. For some, it is.

I coughed as the decadent smoke invaded my lungs, but still there was something sweetly intoxicating in the way it engulfed me, it enclosed me like a womb. We ascend to the choir stalls, perfectly placed for covert humour, and raise our eyebrows at the organist's latest unique and inventive improvisation. Whilst of extraordinary talent, restraint is not something that comes naturally to John, especially when toying with his new obsession - a "cymbal stern". This organ stop, which chimes melodies in a bell like tone, is his current excuse for escapist romanticism and is increasingly evident in his playing.

Between the winks and giggles, the choir brings an invisible art to the place. Their glorious sound is ungraspable, it floods the air for what feels like seconds, just like a new thought passing through the mind. It washes over everything, embracing all, sweeping back their cares, meditating in in the incense laden air and then, as an echo, is gone. But now something new awaits the listener. Another perspective, another thought. Another week is begun and as the sun's radiant rays burst and sink below the glowering castle, a better glow rekindles itself within.

Everyone hears something different. For me the silence is precious. The gaps between the notes, the quiet apathy after benediction. It stills the doubts and fears, halts racing thoughts. The febrile burn of feeling myself beginning to snap, to crack, to crumble. All fades away. I forget the need to say the right thing, to say anything really. There is no urgency to fit in, as a ghost in a fog. Like tumbling into a different world, a sacred hush, a new kind of blessed calm, broken only by the whispers of a friend or a pearl of wisdom waiting to impart. At the end of every service, the choir walks up the aisle singing. Unanimity, purpose, the uncanny beat as our feet hit the ground as one is almost tribal.

I met my friend Carolyn at Old St Paul's, a wispy haired widow of small stature and indeterminate age, but of ferocious musicality. Carolyn is well known to all. She has a tale of everyone and everywhere, often beginning with "now, this is no word of a lie...."

And although an enthusiastic gossip, she is always kind. To her many friends and dear ones, she is a caring figure, a sort of de facto grandmother. She insisted I come to her house if ever I missed the train home. So, I did. Sometimes on purpose.

The first time I went to Carolyn's tiny, jewel like flat in the heart of Edinburgh, it was October. "Apple time" as she fondly called it and her kitchen told me why. In between her well-loved books, art and scattered map tracings, the pale flame coloured walls and shelves were lined with hundreds of apples from her allotment. They cheered the room like little perching robins waiting for one of her infamous stories. A war time upbringing had left her indomitably frugal, one of the last of her kind. She was convinced of the importance of gathering windfalls and using up odd bits of wool to knit rainbow hued socks. As I troubled the decrepit piano for a tune, she sat in her only armchair, her face, shrunken by a lifetime's cares, hidden from me by musical memoirs on the stand. Sometimes her nose poked up into view and once with a tilted smile she muttered "Hmm, interesting interpretation", which was her only gentle comment on my terrible playing. Once I asked her how she had come to know so much about seventeenth century French harpsichord music. "Aha" she said, her eyes alive as she set her book down, determinedly making it clear that I was about to be treated to her insightful intellect and tales harvested from a lifetime's passion for music. I was late for choir that evening. The next morning, I left with six apples in my bag, countless anecdotes and perhaps a little of Carolyn's wisdom in the back of my mind. I had, at least, learned the basic knitting pattern for a pair of woolly socks.

It was Lent and a chill hung in the choir vestry. Above the stillness the pigeons nesting in the roof trilled a lullaby, calling their mates home to tap-dance their arrival on the tiles. As I stared, slightly bewildered at a booklet packed with plainsong, which was unlikely to warm us up, I began to wonder, no, marvel. John, our soft-eyed Director and organist had worked at Old St Paul's for over thirty years. Scholars like me come and go, but John is a fixture. He has seen thirty Lents, thirty Ascensions and Assumptions, thirty Advents and Christmases, each with their own liturgical, musical tradition. He's inspired innumerable singers, and probably terrified many more with unearthly expectations. He is constant, irreplaceable, our unconditional leader. Stubborn, but humble and jovial as his followers. Every year, we mark the passage of John's life with music. The advent carols, the new year concerts, the festival masses. Our frond waving, meandering, musical procession on Palm Sunday through the Old Town, past the bewildered tourists and the sleeping homeless bundled in doorways, irritated to be woken by our noise. The sunrise masses that lead up to Easter and the five am vigil on Easter Day. His gatherings with the choir at his colourful home, serving too much red wine between the Easter services. This is his life. The drum of our footsteps, his pulse. Fellowship keeps out the cold.

None of us are immune to time. All things must pass. Carolyn, especially, is aware of it creeping up on her. Apple time, blossom season, she knows each could be her last. She has survival parties every June, when you can't move for the crowd of folk. She knows the most extraordinary people and to them she is extraordinary too, but she now lives alone, marking every season, treasuring each moment, each experience, to the last. She is glad of company and I often come in to find strangers at her table. She seems to know everyone. She, like John, counts the days and weeks and still, comes to every Evensong to watch the thurible swinging like a pendulum.

For Carolyn, for John, for my fellow choir members, for me, evensong is a rare chance to reflect on each passing season. It gives us silence and music and hope that we are not alone. It is our shelter from the storm.