1.33

My name is Maureen Garratt Simpson.

I was born in 1945.

What drew you to this particular church?

We bought a house in the parish. At that stage I had got two children and everyone was saying, you must get their names down for the primary school, and one of the qualities was that you did need to go to church. Well, we were churchgoers anyway but that made us more determined to support St Margaret’s and for the children to go to St Margaret’s School, so it all just escalated from there.

What were your first impressions of St Margaret’s?

Very much a traditional church which really, I suppose, is exactly where I quite like to be. The sermons, they were very long. It was not unusual for a sermon to be 45 minutes long.

How did you get involved in the life of the church?

Really straightaway because my children then, the first two, were aged two and one when we moved here. And we had a playgroup at the church as well, and so you enrolled the children and you were meeting all the mums and dads, and instantly you are embraced into the family, if you like. And that’s where I made all my friends and they’re still friends.

How did you become a chorister?

I’ve always, always, done a lot of singing. I was a chorister from the age of 10 in Cambridgeshire where I used to live and learned all the Merbecke and original old fashioned settings, which I still absolutely love

Can you tell us something about your love of music, of singing?

I remember from the age of four, standing at the top of the stairs and trying to copy my mother because she was singing something from Lehar, The Merry Widow, actually. And there’s this lovely song ‘Vilja Oh Vilja’, the Witch of the Wood and she used to go around with her sweeper and ‘*sound of humming’*, as she was doing her cleaning. And while she was at work, while she was in the garden, I used to go to the top of the stairs where there was a really good echo and sing this out with all my heart. What with that and my grandmother, my father’s mother being very, very keen on singing and she used to entertain at what were called ‘bright hours’ in those days when ladies would come and take tea, and she would jump on her feet and sing to them, and so I suppose it has always been in my background. And not belonging to a church choir is something almost alien. I’ve always, always done it.

What is involved in being in the church choir?

If you’ve got a child who’s in the church choir, it is quite a commitment for the parents as well. So on a weekly basis at St Margaret’s, the children, in other words, the under 11s, they come for their own practice on a Tuesday after school. That’s probably for 45 minutes just to really getting them to knowing what they are going to face on the Thursday practice, which is a longer one. It’s in the church and it starts at seven and goes on until 8.30. Most of our young ones they leave at 8 o’clock to get home.

I found certainly with my own children, it is a tremendous discipline, not only are you learning music, you are also learning a bit of Latin, you are learning a lot about history, you’re learning about the lives of the composers, when the music was written and maybe for what association. And actually for what ceremonial occasion for example–‘Zadok the Priest’, that was sung at Her Majesty the Queen’s Coronation.

And when I mention discipline, that is where you actually have a responsibility to the other members of the choir so if one night, it’s five o’clock and you think I don’t want to go to church, I don’t want to go to choir, actually you are letting not only yourself down, but you are letting the choir down.

It is very much a choice that the members of the choir should read the music because thank goodness we don’t note bash – if music is given to us, we are expected to kind of know it pretty quickly and that actually is again a good discipline. And it’s teamwork as well. It behoves you to turn up and support your other singers so you are all very much part of a nice little group, an ensemble where you do listen to each other.

It sounds demanding. Are there auditions in finding the right people?

Well, yes and no. If a child wants to join they come along to their Tuesday practice after school and then to the main one on the Thursday and they go through a sort of probationary period and there is this lovely sort of ceremony where the vicar and the organist will take the child to the front of the church so everyone can see and they will say do you wish to be admitted to the choir, and adhere to the rules of the choir? And then the surplice is put on and then there is a ribbon that they wear with a medal on the end of it which is all to do with the Royal School of Church Music and it’s generally a pale blue ribbon to start with and then it could be a dark blue, and then they move to red and that’s how they progress through the choir.

What do they need to do to progress?

Showing that they’re prepared to come along each week. They need to show that they really can be trusted to be there. And can behave in church as well, because you know the youngest will be about six or seven maybe. My own child started when she was six so, but she could read and she was happy to sit there and actually she was facing me and I would say don’t do that with my finger if anything untoward were to happen. So really it is a matter of them feeling that they really belong. And that belongingness makes them actually want to behave and to really toe the line with everybody.

You mentioned family links, what friendships have evolved?

We all know each other quite well and although we probably only meet twice a week for choir practice and the services on the Sunday, there’s quite a, very much a warmth there, people understand each other and there is a very good support group.

You see each other quite a bit – are there other social occasions?

At the beginning of September, it’s always the second Sunday in September, we get in the car, all of us, and the children and we go to Thorpeness. We go for a paddle and then we transfer across the road and go for a nice row around the Meare.

The type of music you sing – what are your favourites and those that are more challenging?

My favourite music is early music. I like anything from Palestrina, Monteverdi, the early composers, the 16th century. But we also do the more Victorian solid hymns that everybody learned when they were at school. We do anthems by a man called Stanford who’s got a wonderful repertoire of English Church music and every month we have a service called Choral Evensong and at that service we really major on composers and do settings. There’s a lot of these beautiful settings and it’s the sort of thing that if you put on Radio Three on a Wednesday afternoon, you’ll hear one of the colleges choirs singing this kind of thing.

In fact every service I think, virtually, we do something called an Introit. Now the Introit is right at the very beginning of the service. The choir will walk into the back of the church and we’ll sing an Introit, which is a short, sacred piece of music. And then there are Psalms. We’ll sing to different settings, different chants, different tunes, and I love singing Psalms. Then we’ll sing an anthem which will be a longer piece of music leading into probably the sermon and the rest of the service which will be collections and that kind of thing before we all go home. So there is quite a lot that the choir has to do on their own.

Sounds traditional – there have been fashions in music, how has St Margaret’s adapted?

When it first started to adapt, it was tricky because there were quite a few people who really favoured, the much more, I’m going to call it the ‘happy clappy’ because people do clap a lot to that kind of music. You could see that some people favoured a different sort of music from the very traditional. But over the years, this has now begun to sort itself quite nicely because, we now have a variety of music to suit different services.

After each service we have a coffee at the back of the church, or a cup of tea or something, and the comments we get are really lovely, like ‘that was really lovely’, ‘that was so nice’. People do actually begin to enjoy things.

Every Christmas we do a big carol service on the last Sunday before Christmas. Two years ago I think we pulled out every stop possible, and it really was great! And some people who only come once a year said ‘I didn’t know the choir were like that!’ It was fantastic because we did some things that were just not all that easy

How many special occasions are there that you sing at?

Sometimes we sing at weddings, less so these days which is a shame, because we like to sing at weddings.

My Sunday routine is to arrive at the church about quarter past ten, start to put some of the music out that we need, with other people who are there as well, then we do a 20 minute practice and head off at 11 o’clock when the vicar comes in to fetch us. He leads a short prayer and then one of the children, generally, will take the cross which is on a long pole with this beautiful brass cross on the top of it. And we process round the church and when everyone’s assembled we walk quietly into church and that’s when we all stand and we do our Introit. Which is that short piece of music that starts the service off. And then we process down the aisle singing the first hymn and then we’re into the service.

How much has that procedure changed over the years?

When I was first in the choir, particularly at Christmas time we had this kind of choreography where we would do what we called the scissor movement. Everybody was in their cassocks and surpluses. This was generally at Advent which is four Sundays before Christmas, we would all have a candle as well, everyone, including the children, we’d be holding this candle, lit, and you’ve got your music and you’re trying not to fall over your cassock etc.

So you’re walking down the aisle and you never knew where your candle was going to go, so you’d walk down the aisle and then on the approach to the choir stalls you’d do this kind of scissor. So instead of walking straight up and going into your choir stall, you’d cross over, so it looked lovely! We had quite a lot of children in the choir then and I think the adults were all a little bit worried that someone might get their hair a little bit singed because it was a bit risky. So we’ve stopped all that. We don’t process with candles now. We do have candles at Christmas and they look lovely but they are actually firmly fixed to the choir stalls and the scissor movement has gone out of the window completely.

You mentioned the cassocks – tell us about what you wear?

Most of our cassocks are really quite elderly. They’re obviously black because that’s what St Margaret’s has, but so old, it began to go grey. I think the colour was disappearing and countless years of candle wax from the days when we did process with the candles, dripped down the front. So you wear that, it has loads of buttons all down the front. We have all spent a lot of time sewing up the buttons, so that has been quite an exercise. The cassocks, had a very faded label in the back of it from the people who had made it, like Ede and Ravenscroft in Cambridge. Aand then over the top of that, countless names had been written by Biro or something over the top. So you might be wearing one that maybe your sister had worn 10 years before, so ‘oh look I’ve got your cassock!’

Years ago, a group of ladies from the church got together a sewing party and they made a lot of new surplices for us which was fantastic and I am still using one of those today.

The surplice is a big thing, it’s like a shirt, it’s got big sleeves like big butterfly wings, like angels, I suppose really. And then you have your ribbon depending on your seniority in the choir. Most of us just wear a red one with this medal on the bottom saying RSCM, Royal School of Church Music and the children wear their blue ones.

But the children have to wear a ruff. And it does look very sweet and very pretty. Thankfully we don’t have to wear those.

So there’s a Director of Music, Christopher Tinker, who’s in charge. We have another chap, John Cooper, who is another very good organist. He will come and play the organ for our Choral Evensong services while Christopher, conducts. We have got a lot of talent and a lot of really good ability, there are professional musicians, so it’s good stuff. And that’s where it’s so good for the rest of us because we learn so much and we just learn not only how to interpret the music, but that’s the great educational side of music. And by singing you learn to listen. You have to respect these people because they do know what they’re on about.

Yes, I remember there was a young man called Joe, Joe Phibbs. He has gone on to write a lot of music, and it’s not unheard of to hear him on Radio Three.

I mustn’t forget Ben Parry. Ben Parry’s father, John Parry was organist and choirmaster at St Margaret’s Church for well over 30 years and it was really him who kept the music going which is why we have got such a fine tradition of music now.

His son Ben was a chorister and then went on to really great things. He studied music and now teaches music and he was Director of the Swingle Singers for quite a while and he’s well known now as a conductor and composer in his own right.

Can you sum up what it means to you to belong to the choir?

It actually means a great deal. When you are in the choir, I think, I must check that music. I must just see how that bit goes. You can’t say, ‘oh, I’ll leave that in the car and I’ll see to that next week’, you can’t do that. You kind of live it. It’s really ingrained. It’s in your system and it matters a great deal. I can’t even imagine being without it.

How does it infuse your own worship?

I think it does in an increasingly meaningful way. Some of the words that you sing, particularly at times when there have been difficulties nationally or locally, it is just as relevant now, so it is a great encouragement. Certainly for myself, you might sing the same piece, you might have sung it dozens of times but nearly always you’ll find another little nuance in that that you haven’t spotted before.

Kneelers! How are they used in the church?

Well, thank goodness we’ve got newish kneelers. They’ve been down I suppose since the 1980s, somewhere around then. The previous kneelers were that lovely sort of church red and they were a bit flat and they had that sort of black criss-cross design. You had to be careful what you knelt on because sometimes they had a bit of straw poking out and if you were in your 15 denier tights and you knelt down, you might well go home with a hole in your knee. The straw was quite prickly.

So a working party was called for and groups of people, men and women, got all very excited about making these kneelers.. They are very flat, a box shape, so that you can kneel on them and it really is quite comfortable. They’re in wool through the canvas where the tapestry is being done and they are actually very beautiful. They are all now pale blue.

Some time ago we used to have a blue carpet that went up the main aisle. That blue gave the colour to the kneelers. And not long after the church was issued with all these new kneelers, there was a group in the church that I was very involved with called Cabbage Club and someone had the bright idea of doing a Cabbage Club kneeler. And that kneeler is there – it’s got a bunny rabbit on it. It’s a group that I used to lead and the lady who actually began the group, she thought Cabbage Club would be a good idea for lots of mums who have got little children, they hadn’t really gone for a long time, and she thought the Cabbage Club would be a good way of reinvigorating them, getting them discussing things, and it actually was a very happy group for a good long time actually. But you go and look for that Cabbage Club kneeler!

End

*Highlights 3m 57s*