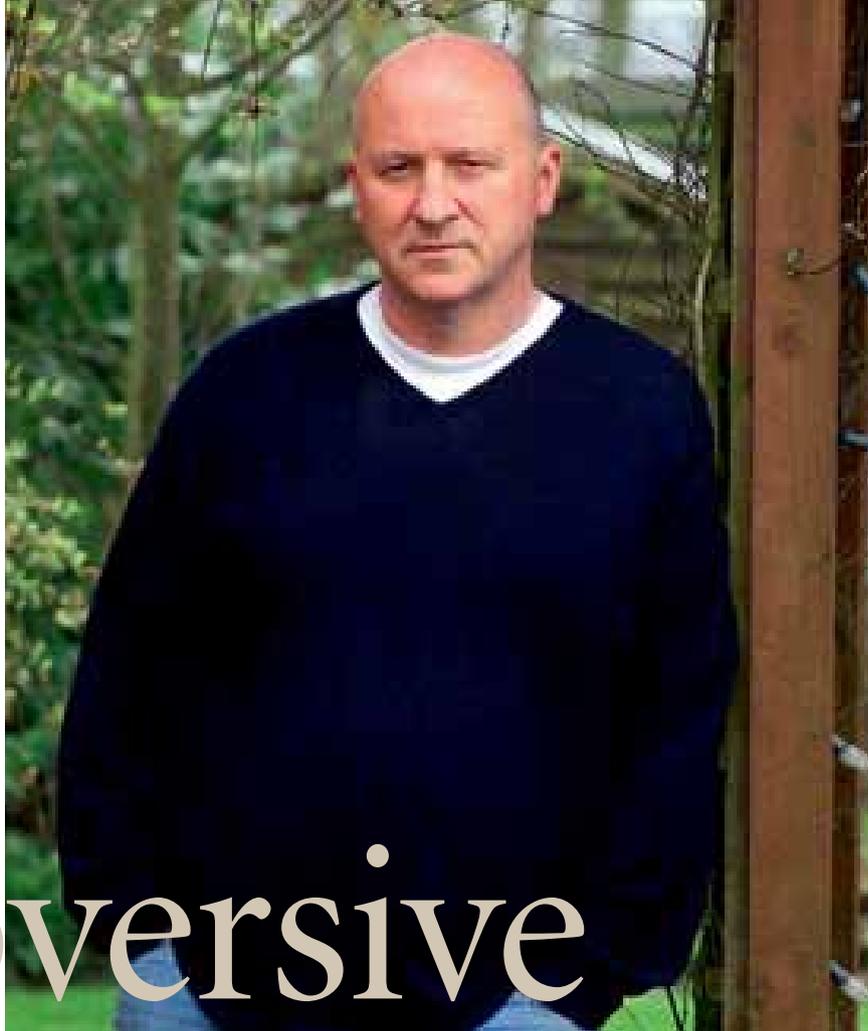


With his large and varied output, Gavin Bryars is not normally thought of as a choral composer. Yet his canon holds much of interest for enterprising choirs to explore, argues **David Wordsworth**



# A subversive conventionalist

It is perhaps unlikely that many composers profiled by *Choir & Organ* can list such a varied and diverse collection of collaborators as Gavin Bryars. Avant-garde director and playwright Robert Wilson; choreographer Merce Cunningham; leading figures from the world of jazz such as Holly Cole and Charlie Haden; writer Blake Morrison; and film-director Atom Egoyan – names like these crop up in Bryars’s catalogue as frequently as the Hilliard Ensemble and the Latvian Radio Choir. But for those who know the work of Gavin Bryars or the man himself, none of this comes as any real surprise: here is someone whose background is as much about visual art and philosophy as music and whose enthusiasm for the dusty corners of any conceivable subject inspires him to set notes on paper.

Some of the less inspired members of our critical fraternity label Bryars as a minimalist – but there is far more to him than that. He does count Steve Reich and Philip Glass among his friends and yes, one might recognise minimalist patterns. But what makes Bryars’s music so instantly recognisable is that, like all good composers, he cheerfully pilfers from a wide range of influences and what comes out – the broadly tonal harmonies (with the odd eyebrow-raising inflection), long melodic lines and tingling instrumentation (with a particular love for low strings and wind instruments) – sounds like, well, Gavin Bryars and nobody else. The Canadian novelist Michael Ondaatje sums him up rather better: ‘The music of Gavin Bryars falls under no category. It is mongrel, full of sensuality and wit ... He is one of the few composers who can set slapstick against primal emotion alongside each other.’

Although as a composer Bryars is a fairly recent convert to choral music in the conventional sense, recent years have seen a renewed interest in writing for choirs of all kinds. Born in the small Yorkshire town of Goole on 16 January 1943, Bryars remembers that for much of his early life he was surrounded by music for the church. His family were devout churchgoers and took the ‘old idea’ of a Sunday very seriously – he tells how he wasn’t allowed to even buy an ice cream on a Sunday! Although he describes himself as no longer religious in any ordinary sense, he still remembers the hymns, anthems and psalms from services he regularly attended with great affection, and he confesses a particular love for now rarely heard cornerstones of the repertoire, such as Balfour Gardiner’s *Evening Hymn* and Mendelssohn’s *Hear my Prayer*.

Bryars's first professional musical experiences were a world away from choral music – as a jazz bass player. He left the world of jazz improvisation to work with experimental composers John Cage in America and Cornelius Cardew in the UK, which in turn led to his first big success in 1972 with his multi-media works *The Sinking of the Titanic* and *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet*. Indeed, although his opera *Medea* includes extensive passages of choral music, Bryars was 40 before writing his first 'official' choral work, *On Photography* (1983), which was itself rescued from an abandoned opera and not performed until some eleven years later. The work is unusually scored for chorus, with an accompaniment (inspired by Rossini's *Petite messe solennelle*, for which it makes an ideal concert companion) of piano and harmonium. A first real choral piece it may be – and as the composer ruefully admits having to wait so long to hear it he couldn't learn anything from the experience – but *On Photography* does have many of what have become recognisable Bryars fingerprints: a love of setting texts in languages other than English (Italian, French, German, Latin and even Greek), a habit that Bryars has only in recent years broken and the result he says of worrying about getting away from the 'Britten/Pears' sound, for which he has little sympathy; long, demanding lines that need considerable breath control; disconcerting enharmonic shifts that can take singers by surprise, but also a quietly ecstatic quality that makes the music hugely rewarding to sing. Not unlike the output of two of his closest composer friends, Arvo Pärt (whom Bryars acknowledges as a huge influence) and Howard Skempton, music which looks very simple on the page is in fact in its own way something of a challenge.

Again like Pärt, one of the most important collaborations of Bryars's creative life has been with the Hilliard Ensemble, whose unique sound and musicality has inspired many pieces which have gone on to enjoy a more extended life. Ever the practical composer, Bryars has gone on to arrange – or perhaps, in the words of another great hero, Percy Grainger, 'dish up' – versions of these pieces for stand-

ard choral forces. These new versions, of course encourage further performances but need a very particular approach to singing: careful attention to diction, intonation and balance, hardly surprising taking into account their original inspiration. Perhaps the most personal of these Hilliard pieces (later rescored for SATB choir) is the *Cadman Requiem* (1989). Written in memory of Bill Cadman, the composer's sound engineer and close friend who was killed in the Lockerbie air crash in 1988, the work takes fragments of text from the Requiem Mass, but also interweaves the Bede's paraphrase of Caedman's *Creation Hymn* in the original 7th-century Northumbrian. It is a touching memorial that is just as effective in its new choral guise as it is in the original version. *Glorious Hill* (1988), also originally a Hilliard piece, also works effectively for mixed or male voice choirs. Two pieces, the result of Bryars's work at the Hilliard Summer School in 1997, are written for a mixed group of tutors and students. *And so ended Kant's travelling in this world* is well within the capabilities of a good chamber choir and sets a text by Thomas de Quincey, described by the composer as partly an exercise in diction; *Three Poems of Cecco Angiolieri* is a more demanding proposition, written for all the small vocal groups that took part in the same summer school – 10 solo groups (effectively 49 solo voices) sing music that is, even for Bryars, incredibly rich and luxuriant.

More recent collaborations have been with choirs in the Baltic States, in particular the Latvian Radio Choir and perhaps rather more unusually the Estonian National Male Choir, for whom Bryars has written several settings of the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan. Vocal groups ranging from Trio Mediaeval, Red Byrd and Singer Pur to the amateur chamber choir The Addison Singers have premiered *Madrigals* (there are now five books) – settings in English and Italian for many different vocal combinations that echo the aesthetic and manner of composers such as Monteverdi and Gesualdo.

It is perhaps hard to imagine a composer like Gavin Bryars making any contribution to what might be called the 'British Choral Tradition' but *The War in Heaven*

(1993) seems to be just that, albeit a rather unique take within the tradition. Scored for soloists (a stratospheric soprano and counter-tenor), choruses and orchestra, the work sets texts from the Old English paraphrase of the opening books of the Bible (sung by the choruses) and a 20<sup>th</sup>-century monologue by US writer Sam Shepard (sung by the soloists). Not well received by critics at its first performance, it has recently been revived in the Netherlands and will be released on CD early in 2013. It is high time that this strikingly original piece was looked at again.

As for the future, Bryars plans to continue with a large set of pieces for children's voices and has been commissioned to write a large-scale work for The Crossing, the Philadelphia choir renowned for their performances of new music (see *Choir & Organ*, Jan/Feb 2012 issue). Whatever the choir, be it of the highest professional standing, amateur or even a small church choir (in 2007 Bryars wrote a charming set of *Billesdon Carols* for his own village choir) enterprising directors can find much in the music of Gavin Bryars – music that is somehow much more than the sum of its parts. ■

Gavin Bryars's music is published by Schott: [www.schott-music.com](http://www.schott-music.com). [www.gavinbryars.com](http://www.gavinbryars.com)

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Bryars's first musical experiences were as a jazz bass player