

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Northampton		
Unit of Assessment: 27: English		
Title of case study: Making a Difference: Poet/Composer collaboration to enhance cultural and education capacity in young people through song.		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007 - 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Charles Bennett	Reader in Poetry	2007 – 2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		

1. Summary of the impact

Dr Charles Bennett's research into poetry, and specifically the use of poetry in choral settings, has contributed to the growing interest in, and recognition of song and music as aids to wellbeing. Through an ongoing collaboration with composer Bob Chilcott his work has:

1. increased youth participation in the experience of live-music making;
2. enhanced educational and cultural capacity through involvement with schools and other organisations; and
3. engaged participants with the texts of songs as ways of generating meaning.

2. Underpinning research

As a founding member of the University's Research Centre for Critical & Creative Writing, **Bennett** has contributed significant research outputs in poetry. A core component of **Bennett's** outputs has included librettos commissioned by pre-eminent composer Bob Chilcott. **Bennett** writes the lyric first, and Chilcott's composition, and subsequent rehearsals and performances, are dedicated to conveying its meaning. This case study focuses on the work he created for young voices.

Each output, particularly the song-cycles [3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6], are meticulously crafted and created in dialogue with the commissioners. Writing takes place over several months, and demands a deep understanding of the issues and aims of individual commissions. In each case, a desire to write powerfully, meaningfully and emotively informs **Bennett's** work. A key aim of the selected projects is to create choral music specifically for young people which incorporates exciting elements, memorable melody and an underlying seriousness of intent. In these works, **Bennett** respects and honours young people's levels of comprehension, as opposed to 'writing down' in a condescending way.

Magdalen College School, Oxford, commissioned two works by **Bennett** and Chilcott for their choir: *Five Days that Changed the World* [3.1] and *The Miracle of the Spring* [3.2]. *Five Days that Changed the World* a song-cycle framed as a series of dramatic monologues pinpointing significant dates in history such as the invention of printing, the abolition of slavery, the invention of powered flight, the discovery of penicillin and the first man in space. Meanwhile, *The Miracle of the Spring*, is a series of reflections on the significance and meaning of water as a valuable resource. Both were especially designed for young voices.

In 2016, Age UK commissioned **Bennett** to produce a libretto for the Campaign to End Loneliness, supported by Arts Council England and charitable trusts. Age UK requested a text

Impact case study (REF3)

which examined aspects of separation and elderliness. **Bennett's** response was to create a libretto which, in a series of symbolic allegories, examined progress through time, and levels of connectedness, especially the vital reinvigoration of the elderly through generational contact with the young. The resulting work, *The Voyage* [3.3], is a song cycle exploring aspects of ageing; its première performances were in March 2016: at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford and at Reading Concert Hall. In performance, the work combines older and younger voices, to create evocative music about a journey through life which all can access and enjoy at whatever stage of singing ability.

Similar commissions followed. This included three children's choirs in the United Kingdom and United States who commissioned *The Midnight of Your Birth* a song cycle for upper voices [3.4], and the Heinz Chapel Choir University, Pittsburgh, who commissioned *When Spring Comes Walking*. [3.5]. The success of *The Midnight of Your Birth* led to the United States' Pacific International Choral Festival (PIC Fest) commissioning *Lightwaves*, a song cycle of five poems connected by the theme of light, aimed specifically at young performers [3.6]. The song was performed as part of PicFest's virtual festival (6th August 2020), when the festival shifted online after the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. References to the research

[3.1] **Bennett, C.** & Chilcott, B. (Composer). (2013). *Five Days that Changed the World*. Composition, Oxford University Press.

[3.2] **Bennett, C.** & (Author), & Chilcott, B. (Composer). (2019). *The Miracle of the Spring*. Composition, Oxford University Press.

[3.3] **Bennett, C.** (Author), & Chilcott, B. (Composer). (2016). *The Voyage*. Composition, Oxford University Press.

[3.4] **Bennett, C.** (Author) & Chilcott, B. (Composer). 2017. Composition, Oxford University Press. Commissioned by Parkinson's UK, Oxford; Oxford High Junior School; Kyoto Ladies Singers; Cleveland Orchestra Children's Chorus; St Louis Children's Choirs [one carol each]

[3.5] **Bennett, C.** (Author) & Chilcott, B. (Composer). (2019). *When Spring Comes Walking*, Composition, Oxford University Press. Commissioned by Heinz Chapel Choir University of Pittsburgh.

[3.6] **Bennett, C.** & (Author) & Chilcott, B. (Composer). (2020). *Lightwaves*, 2020, Composition, Oxford University Press. Commissioned by Pacific International Choral Festival.

4. Details of the impact

As music in the primary education curriculum has declined, a corresponding need has been established for schools with choirs to seek opportunities for performances through alternative means outside of school provision. To this end, schools and support organisations have commissioned **Bennett**, through his collaboration with Chilcott, to create texts specifically for school choirs. **Bennett's** work with Chilcott has led to a variety of performances and school workshops which have impacted those involved with creating choral music for younger voices, including students, choral directors, and the choral viewing public. Chilcott has attested to **Bennett's** vital contribution in this by claiming, 'Without his words, none of these commissions, performances or impacts would have occurred' [5.1]. The continuing popularity and success of these collaborations is testimony to the achievement of **Bennett's** aims to create poetry that resonates with young voices and encourages participation in choral music.

Impact case study (REF3)

The stakeholders who have participated in performances of **Bennett's** work have received the enhancements that accompany engaging in live music making, particularly in the following areas:

Increased opportunities for youth participation in the experience of live-music making through engagement with school choirs

When creating a piece for young voices, **Bennett & Chilcott** often work with educational establishments to bring these benefits to students. **Bennett's** work has generated an increase in capacity, ambition, and achievement for young people who have participated in performances and school workshops based on the commissions with Chilcott.

Three new carols, which comprise part of the song-cycle *The Midnight of your Birth*, were written specifically for Oxford High Junior School (UK), the Cleveland Orchestra Children's Chorus and the St Louis Children's Choirs (USA), and subsequently performed by around 150 children in the three choirs. The Director of the Chamber Choir of Oxford High Junior School commented on the importance of singing for the students, 'which is something they love' [5.2]. According to the Director, the bespoke carol's 'words fit so beautifully with the music that it [...] was a joy to teach' [5.2]. For some of the children in the Oxford choir it was their 'first time' performing [5.2].

Additionally, the entire carol sequence was both performed and recorded by Benenden School. The Director of Music at Benenden School commented that in 'coaching and then listening to the girls performing the five carols in your set, I have detected just the right level of understanding, respect, and desire to interpret the words'. Furthermore, he stated that he 'can't think of any modern carols which have the same kind of freshness and clarity about them, yet which are still tied to the traditions which choirs and their audiences find so reassuring year after year.' 'They strike the perfect balance between singable yet not without challenge', he added [5.3]. Overall, this resulted in 'accessible (in the best sense of the word!) music and lyrics [that] particularly resonate with young singers'. Of the 74 pupils who performed the carols, 34 recorded the sequence for CD in March 2019. The production of this successful CD raised the confidence of the pupils, provided them with the experience of participating in a professional recording, and created effective promotion for the school choir.

Similarly, *The Miracle of the Spring* was created for Magdalen College School, Oxford, in 2014. The school's Director of Music reported:

students who participated in *Miracle of the Spring* benefitted in ways which went way beyond the educational. It is a unique and amazing experience for a choir to give the first performance of a work. Although we had commissioned some carols before, *Miracle of the Spring* was the first commissioned work on a bigger scale that the choir had attempted. It increased their confidence and self-belief, and this had an impact not only academically, but also enabled growth of personality [5.4].

Performances of *The Voyage* also provided young singers the opportunity to participate in several large-scale live performances in Oxford and Reading. An international performance took place in Minneapolis, with VocalEssence performing the American premier in October 2016. To create the performance, the Artistic Director collaborated with the Minnesota Youth Chorus and two choirs for experienced singers, Vintage Voices and Voices of Experience, with participants ranging in age from 9-90. The Choir's Associate Director, who conducted the work, stated that

We are finding the older adults energized by the kids. The kids are going to be inspired to continue in music by the older adults. Everyone will learn from each other. The unifying force of music rings clear in their performance [5.5].

During the Covid-19 pandemic, **Bennett** and Chilcott's new commission *Lightwaves* was performed as part of the Picfest virtual festival in August 2020. Both **Bennett & Chilcott** participated live, and two songs from the cycle were featured and performed by choirs across

Impact case study (REF3)

Canada and the USA, and in the Philippines (Young Voices of the Philippines). The performances featured approximately 100 young people and filled a gap in provision for live-music opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring that the young singers still had the opportunity to perform [5.6].

Increased Community Participation and Cohesion through Live-Music Performance

Age UK Oxfordshire commissioned *The Voyage* as part of their Campaign to End Loneliness. The rehearsal process and performance united younger and older people in a joint performance. Each concert included three choirs of mixed ages and experience, and young musicians. For the Oxford performances, The Oxfordshire School's Singers, Berkshire Youth Choir and players from Oxfordshire County Youth Orchestra took part in this. Reading performances featured the Aeolian Choir, Dacorum Community Choir, Sandringham School Choir and musicians from St Albans School. Through these two performances, around 400 children of primary school age, many of whom were new to live performance, engaged in the process of live music making.

The CEO of Age UK Oxfordshire noted that the process allowed both groups to 'help each other' by 'creating new relationships, new singing opportunities for those society has forgotten' [5.7]. In addition to the performances, there were outreach programs to combat loneliness in the community, which led to further connections between younger and older community members, the establishment of new singing groups in the county, and writing groups that explicitly drew on the themes **Bennett** presented in his text [5.7]. He noted that 'Bob Chilcott's sublime music and Charles **Bennett's** evocative text' [5.7] was essential in creating meaningful community outreach activities, ultimately leading to the Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards (the highest recognition for live classical music in the UK) shortlisting *The Voyage* under its Learning & Participation category for 'an outstanding initiative or organisation which set out to engage and have a lasting positive impact on the lives of people who may not otherwise experience classical music' [5.7]. Its position on the shortlist was a testament to the project's innovative approach to youth participation, education and intergenerational collaboration.

Singers who participated in the United States premier of the Voyage in Minnesota, also reported increased community cohesion and connections through the process of performing the piece. One of the younger members of the choir stated that 'the community [they] built' through the rehearsal process was 'just wonderful' [5.5]; something that was confirmed by an older member, who stated that 'Working together on this piece makes us feel like we are reaching out and embracing the community' [5.5].

Engaged participants and audiences with the texts of songs as ways of generating meaning and reflection.

Performers, commissioners and conductors often express a profound connection with the lyric.

Participants in *The Voyage* reflected that their experience of Charles **Bennett's** poetry inspired them to think differently about aging and 'the cycle of life' [5.8]. One singer noted that the text 'made me think about my own grandmother. She lives alone, and we do what we can, but certain passages - most of The Fortunate Isles, for instance - really hit home that loneliness can be physically painful, as well as emotionally'. Another participant mentioned that the 'words are meaningful so as to inspire thoughts and consideration for the elderly people and their wish to enjoy life as all others, feeling entitled to as much fulfilment as they had in their youth. Having elderly parents, I especially connected to this.' While another commented that it had increased their thinking about 'loneliness and growing older'. Some of the younger participants noted that it brought their attention to the aging process in new ways, with one stating that it helped them 'identify with aspects of aging [they] wouldn't otherwise consider (as a "younger" person). Another participant testified that engagement with **Bennett's** poetry was 'quite compelling' and inspired them to enquire about further volunteer opportunities at Age UK [5.8].

Impact case study (REF3)

The Director of the Heinz Chapel Choir at the University of Pittsburgh commented that their 14 April 2019 performance of *When Spring Comes Walking* had ‘a profound impact’ on the 45 singers aged below 21. Their discussions of the text resulted in ‘an emotional conversation’ which fed into the ‘importance they placed on singing your words with sincere depth of emotion’. Additionally, she reflected that ‘the music and poetry were perfectly matched and played beautifully to the musical and emotional strengths of the choir’ [5.9]. When touring with the choir, she testified that this piece received ‘the greatest observable emotional response by the audience members at both the "home" performances and "on the road"’. She believes

that these four performances of *When Spring Comes Walking*, in particular, are testament to the genuine connection each choir member felt to the piece, to one another, and to each member of every audience in singing it [5.9].

Continued impacts through subsequent sales of the music and their use in choral settings:

Bennett’s works continue to involve young performers around the world, through sales of the works and subsequent performances by choirs. Figures provided by Oxford University Press show that, as of September 2020, **Bennett’s** works have sold over 12,842 copies since publication. *Five Days that Changed the World* has achieved 7,500 international sales (over and above the 2,800 copies sold in the UK) [5.10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] Testimonial from Bob Chilcott; Choral Director and Composer

[5.2] Testimonials and Responses from *Midnight of Your Birth*

[5.3] Testimonial Director of Music at Benenden School

[5.4] Testimonial from Director of Music, Magdalen College School, Oxford.

[5.5] *Minnesota Post*, “New Choral Work Combats Elder Loneliness with Community,” October 5, 2016. <https://www.minnpost.com/mental-health-addiction/2016/10/new-choral-work-combats-elder-loneliness-community/>.

[5.6] *Lightwaves* at Picfest

[5.7] Oxford University Press, Bob Chilcott's choral work, *The Voyage*, shortlisted for Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards (RPS)

[5.8] Participant feedback from *The Voyage*

[5.9] Testimonial from Director, Heinz Chapel Choir

[5.10] Oxford University Press Sales Figures