

Samuel Sebastian Wesley

Winchester Cathedral organist 1849-1865 and composer

As the Cathedral launches an appeal to restore the organ, it is timely to consider the organist and composer whose influence and ‘maverick’ character¹ led to the purchase and installation of Henry Willis’ great organ first seen at the Great Exhibition of 1851.

The organist was Samuel Sebastian Wesley, whose career was known for conflicts with Deans & Chapters, and his preference for fishing over playing the organ. He was, however, regarded as the leading organist of his time. Samuel Sebastian was a grandson of the hymn writer Charles Wesley and a great-nephew of John Wesley, the evangelical church reformer. He was from less exalted beginnings and was born in 1810, the son of the musician and composer Samuel Wesley and his housekeeper, Sarah Suter.² He became a child chorister at the Chapel Royal and, on one occasion, was a fellow performer at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton with the Italian composer Gioachino Rossini and received a gold medal from King George IV.³ As a teenager, he held several appointments as organist in churches in and around London.

From 1832 to 1835, he was organist at Hereford Cathedral where he wrote some of his most celebrated works and married the Dean’s daughter. From 1835 to 1842, he was organist at Exeter Cathedral. Although his relationships with cathedral managements were ‘a little bumpy’, he developed a reputation as the finest organist in England.⁴ In 1842, he moved to Walter Hook’s new parish church in Leeds to take part in a project to introduce cathedral-standard music into a large parish church. Here he wrote more of his church music but injured his leg badly while rushing back from a fishing trip to an evening service. Wesley was laid up for six months and wrote an angry pamphlet in 1849 about the state of church music.

The essay, *A Few Words on Cathedral Music and the Musical System of the Church, with a Plan of Reform*, bluntly criticised cathedrals for their lack of well-trained male-voiced choirs: ‘no Cathedral in this country possesses, at this day, a musical force competent to embody and give effect to the evident intentions of the Church with

¹ Andrew Gant, *Oh Sing Unto The Lord* (London: Profile Books, 2015), 289. Gant’s full quote is: ‘Like everything associated with S.S. Wesley, the project had a touch of the maverick about it.

² Samuel Wesley left his wife and had at least seven children with Sarah Suter. The family lived in near poverty for much of Samuel Sebastian’s childhood due to his father’s maintenance payments to his estranged wife.

³ Peter Horton, “Wesley, Samuel Sebastian”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online), 2006, 2.

⁴ Gant, *Oh Sing*, 289.

regard to music'.⁵ The fault lay with the clergy who were 'less susceptible of musical impressions than any other class of the community'.⁶ More singers, paid well, were needed along with investment in music. This critique or rant, says church music historian Andrew Gant, was right but 'certainly wasn't the way to persuade people to do anything about it'.⁷

In 1849, Wesley moved to Winchester where he replaced an organist and master of choristers (George Chard) who had neglected his duties for hunting and fly-fishing.⁸ The cathedral found that the replacement was also to neglect his duties for fishing on the Itchen. An indicator of his indifferent commitment was 'a change to the organ loft stairs in 1851, allowing him to arrive late for service without the congregation seeing him'.⁹ The stairs, since removed, were installed in the Holy Sepulchre chapel.

He stayed in Winchester longer (fifteen years) than any other appointments and was also appointed organist of Winchester College, where his sons were educated,¹⁰ and pursued his love of fishing with great vigour. From 1858, he was often in conflict with the precentor Henry Wray who reprimanded him when his love of angling took precedence over organist's duties. Despite his Winchester difficulties, Wesley had national standing as the first professor of organ at the Royal Academy of Music from 1850 onwards and as a recitalist. [The engraving of Wesley (above) is dated to c. 1850].



Samuel Sebastian Wesley's enduring memorial in the cathedral is the Exhibition Organ which he persuaded Dean Garnier and Chapter to purchase at a cost of £2,350 after it was shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Although Queen Victoria and Prince Albert gave £150 and Dean Garnier, £200, the total amount took some

⁵ Samuel Sebastian Wesley, *A Few Words on Church Music*, p. 5, quoted in Gant, *Oh Sing*, 314.

⁶ Wesley, *A Few Words*, 11.

⁷ Gant, *Oh Sing*, 314-5.

⁸ George William Chard was organist and master of choristers at from 1802 to 1849. He died in post, aged 84. Chard held a concurrent post at Winchester College, which also suffered from his neglect of duties.

⁹ Gant, *Oh Sing*, 312.

¹⁰ By 1865, Wesley's sons had received their education at Winchester College, and he was ready to move on, see Betty Matthews, *Samuel Sebastian Wesley, 1810-1876* (Bournemouth: Kenneth Mummery, 1976), 17.

time to raise with the aid of a general appeal.¹¹ The organ, made by the young Henry Willis, needed 'considerable rearrangement' to fit into the existing space created by Edward Blore in 1824. The 70-stop three-manual organ became a 48-stop, four-manual instrument.¹² There was also delay over concerns about the weight of the organ to be borne by the Holy Sepulchre chapel beneath. One organ modification that had a lasting impact was the creation of a concave and radiating pedal board which Henry Willis credited to Wesley for its inspiration.¹³ Patented by Willis in 1855, this board design is still widely used in major organ installations.

After modifications, the organ was installed and Wesley played its opening service on June 3, 1854, the Eve of Whitsunday, to a congregation of 1,500. All the music was by Wesley, except for one chant of his father's, and included *The Wilderness* and *Ascribe unto the Lord* as well as a new anthem, *By the word of the Lord were the Heavens made*. The cathedral choir was augmented by fifty singers from St Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Durham, Chichester, Ely, Salisbury and Brighton. However, the organ's installation and tuning were not completed until November 28 that year when Wesley celebrated with a two-hour recital of works by Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Spöhr and himself.¹⁴

In 1865, Wesley moved for the final time to Gloucester Cathedral where his focus over the next decade was on the direction of Three Choirs Festivals, rather than composition. Wesley had been invited to Gloucester to adjudicate on candidates for the post of cathedral organist but offered to take it himself.¹⁵ The offer was quickly accepted, and Winchester was not unhappy to see him depart. In 1872, he issued his own massive collection of hymn tunes, *European Psalmist*, and died in 1876. The collection failed, however, to make much impact, not the least because, a full decade after *Hymns Ancient and Modern* was published, the days of the separate tune-book were over.¹⁶ Towards the end of his life, he was offered a knighthood but chose to accept a civil-list pension of £100 a year instead. And, like modern rock singers, he sold copyrights to his music for £750 (c. £45,000) to the music publisher Novello & Co

¹¹ Alan Rannie, "The Cathedral Organ". *Winchester Cathedral Record* 23 (1954), 4. Wesley later fell out with Dean Garnier.

¹² Andrew Parker, *Winchester Cathedral Organs – One Thousand Years*, 2nd edition (Winchester: Friends of Winchester Cathedral, 2002), 12.

¹³ Matthews, *Samuel Sebastian Wesley*, 13.

¹⁴ Rannie, *Cathedral Organ*, 5.

¹⁵ Horton, *Wesley*, 6.

¹⁶ Gant, *Oh Sing*, 316.

in 1868.¹⁷ Only in his last decade did he have the financial stability and recognition that he had sought from his poverty-stricken childhood.

Andrew Gant summarises Samuel Sebastian Wesley as ‘one of the great originals’ in the story of English church music’.¹⁸ Although there is division as to whether his work was little more than ‘tolerably good Mendelssohn’ or of greater quality, Gant argues that Wesley needs to be considered separately from his contemporaries, because his career was in provincial centres and away from London and thus distant from the main discourse of musical life.¹⁹ And also, because he ‘wasn’t really interested in what everyone else was doing’ and had little interest or engagement with churchmanship and the Oxford Movement’.²⁰ ‘All he cared about was good musical standards. Most of all, he stood out from the crowd as a composer of real, authentic genius’.²¹

There are two memorial plaques to Samuel Sebastian Wesley in Winchester, one in the cathedral’s north transept by the Pilgrim Steps (left) and the other in Kingsgate Street at his College lodgings in Kingsgate Street (right).



¹⁷ Horton, *Wesley*, 7.

¹⁸ Gant, *Oh Sing*, 312.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid*, 313.

Wesley was succeeded by one of his students, George Arnold, who served as organist and master of the choristers for thirty-seven years until his death in 1902. He, too, is commemorated with a cathedral memorial, opposite the Epiphany Chapel entrance.

Wesley and the 'Father Willis' organ were also commemorated by the Cathedral Broderers in the 1930s using an embroidery design by Sybil Blunt on a long bench cushion in the Quire, which shows (right) organ pipes wrapped in a banner that carries the organist's name.²²



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Photographs

- 1) Engraving, probably around 1850. Unknown author (Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons).
- 2) Memorial plaque in north transept, Winchester Cathedral. Photograph by author, 2021.
- 3) Plaque outside Wesley's Winchester College lodgings in Kingsgate Street. Photograph by author, 2021.
- 4) The organ portrayed on a Quire bench cushion. Photograph by Simon Newman.

²² Sheila Gray, *Stitched and Woven: The Embroideries of Winchester Cathedral* (Winchester: Friends of Winchester Cathedral, 2006), 9.