

Speakers celebrating the work of Stephen King, outgoing organist at Brentwood Cathedral, plus recollections of his time by Stephen himself

June 2026

Vincent Thompson, a former High Sheriff of Essex, former Deputy Lieutenant and Vice Lord-Lieutenant of Essex and a trustee of the Brentwood Cathedral and Choral Trust for over 25 years, began by recalling Bishop Thomas's vision for the new Cathedral, its dedication, and the subsequent arrival of Stephen as organist a year later.

"Now, not only are your skills recognised on a national basis, but they are recognised internationally. Very few have had the honour of playing the organ in Notre Dame, Paris, as you have. And that is testament to your extraordinary skills. But in addition to those skills that are widely known and recognised, it is the dedication that you have given to the vision over your 33 years. It is quite remarkable. I'm sure Andrew would agree with me on that. On top of that, it is your personality, it's your sense of humour, the relationship that you have with the choir, your bonding with the choir, whose membership is all ages, that all makes you such a wonderful trainer. I was just talking to Sue Gray, whose kids were both in the choir, about that. There's so much talk about NEETs (young people Not in Education, Employment or Training) at the moment, and what better training, if you look at the Cathedral Choir, for people to learn discipline, interrelationship with different generations, working together, a sense of community. And there's no doubt in my mind that your personality, your warmth, and your generosity, your humour, in addition to your technical musical skills, have contributed enormously to that. And when one looks back on the vision of Bishop Thomas, and his Requiem - and what an extraordinary celebration that was: 800 people, cardinals, and a boatload of bishops, and the most wonderful music throughout - it was a real testimony to his vision, to which you have contributed so much. So, I would just like you all to raise a glass to Stephen, and to thank him for all he has contributed."

Canon John Harvey, Dean of Brentwood Cathedral:

"As I said at the end of Mass, we're so uniquely privileged every Sunday to have such a great quality of music, and, of course, through Stephen, for the past 33 years and eight months. You have been a mainstay of the cathedral parish, even before I came as parish priest, I would often see you engaging on those diocesan occasions. But it's a great honour to have been part of your history and the cathedral history. And so on behalf of the parish, we'd just like to give you a little gift to say a very big thank you, for incredible live music."

Stephen King:

Coming from an Anglican background, having been raised in the Church of England, and attended an Anglican primary school, I could never have imagined that, as at the end of 2025, I would, for half my life up until then, have been organist of a Roman Catholic cathedral. Had anyone made that prediction in my younger days, I'm not quite sure how I would have reacted, but I know how my immediate family would have felt – not happy, to say the least.

But my first encounter with the Roman Catholic Church was extremely profitable. Aged 17, I played for a funeral at Holy Cross, Warley. It was then the norm to request one's fee in guineas, and not pounds. (If you don't know, or have forgotten, a guinea equals one pound and five pence – it's not often used these days). I asked for two guineas and was absolutely flabbergasted to open an envelope and find a five pound note. I was paid more than double the amount I requested. "Gosh", I thought, "Roman Catholics are extremely generous people".

Fast forward a decade, to the mid-1980s. By then I had played for concerts in the old cathedral, with Hutton and Shenfield Choral Society, but the first service I played for there was the Chrism Mass in 1985 or 1986. That was also the first time I had met Bishop Thomas, who came up to me afterwards, thanked me and, not knowing me, asked where I was from, what I did, etc. I mentioned I was an Anglican, to which he replied: "it's wonderful you're playing for us. We're delighted to have you here. We're very ecumenical here in Brentwood".

Within two years, he had unveiled plans to rebuild the cathedral. Until the new cathedral opened, I did sometimes play for Andrew in concerts here and there, and I suppose I might have said things like "what are you going to do about music without a cathedral? What will you do when you've got one?" – I can't remember. But the first indication I had of coming here permanently was in December 1990, six months before the cathedral opened, thanks to a lady who sang in various local choirs, was a reliable source of gossip about the Brentwood musical scene and knew all that was going on long before anyone else did – the late Mavis Brown. After a Christmas concert, she took me aside and said "*There's something you need to know. They're talking about having a cathedral organist, and your name is being mentioned*". On the way home, I thought to myself "that's **very** interesting, Something's going on".

I wasn't present at the Dedication Mass, but in December 1991 I played for a Christmas Celebration, by which time I was well aware of what – hopefully – was just round the corner. In anticipation, I thought "I've got to tread very carefully this evening. I can't afford to put a foot wrong" – and I don't recall playing any wrong pedal notes. Andrew will realise that that cannot be said of the organ playing at the end of the Dedication Mass!

What I thought might happen did indeed do so, and I came here in May 1992, when: John Paul II was Pope, Basil Hume Archbishop of Westminster, George Carey Archbishop of Canterbury, John Waine Bishop of Chelmsford, and John Major Prime Minister; the Church of England only ordained women to the diaconate, not the priesthood; and it was three and half years before Queen Elizabeth attended Vespers at Westminster Cathedral.

Besides getting used to the regular week by week routine, there were also some special events, as one would expect of a cathedral. Two in my first year were the Essex County Justice Service, and the BBC broadcast of Songs of Praise. If the Justice Service cemented Brentwood Cathedral's position on the map of Essex, Songs of Praise brought it to a wider audience, including a gentleman in Harrow, who wrote to say that until the previous Sunday evening, he had never heard of Brentwood Cathedral. (He did say some very complimentary things about the music, too).

But if he had heard of Brentwood Cathedral, someone else, who, coincidentally, lived near Harrow, had not. I was involved with a choir in London at that time, which was going to perform Benjamin Britten's cantata Saint Nicolas, which needs some solo boys. There was a discussion as to where to approach about that – Westminster Abbey? Westminster Cathedral? St Paul's Cathedral? Trying to be helpful, I said I was sure that choristers from Brentwood Cathedral would be available, and innocently, naively, or stupidly, I added that perhaps the Bishop might

like to come to the concert, if he were free. The choir's secretary, who was an Anglican, gave me a very puzzled look and said: "*where's he the Bishop of?*"

Please don't ask me how I kept a straight face – I don't know.

Back to special events – Justice Services (five or six of them), BBC broadcasts, two Royal visits, Bishop Alan's episcopal ordination, and the funerals of his two predecessors. The choir sang in Notre Dame; in St Peter's Basilica in Rome, and, in my early years here, in a church in Holland. An occupational hazard of playing the organ in a large building is that you don't hear the organ how everyone else hears it, and it can sometimes sound rather louder, or quieter, than you think. In this particular church I didn't realise how the organ sounded, until a gentleman came up to me and said "You play too loud. You play like Protestant organist. You come here, you must play like Roman Catholic organist". I will leave my reply to your imagination, but it was short, and to the point.

Those are just a few special events from over the years, and there were, of course, many more. Of the many concerts, I wouldn't be human if I didn't mention two of them. When I'd been here ten years, I conducted Bach's B Minor Mass, and a few years later, Vaughan Williams' Christmas cantata, *Hodie*. That was the first time the Southend Girls Choir had sung here, and since then we have had a very productive relationship with the Southend Boys and Girls Choirs, which has enabled our choristers to sing at the Royal Albert Hall.

Several composers have come here over the years, some of whom wrote music for us. John Rutter; Colin Mawby; Diana Burrell; Philip Ledger; and Philip Moore (formerly Master of the Music at York Minster, who wrote the organ piece I played at the end of Mass today). Many of the pieces that were first heard here have been taken up by other cathedral and collegiate choirs. John Rutter's arrangement of *Christ is made the sure foundation* – written for the Dedication Mass in 1991, and sung at St Paul's Cathedral at Queen Elizabeth's Platinum Jubilee service: of the several pieces written by Colin Mawby, *A Fun Gloria* is included on a CD of his music from the choir of Selwyn College, Cambridge, and his jaunty setting of *Regina Coeli* features on another CD of his music, from the choir of Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral. Philip Ledger's carol *A great and might wonder* is included on a CD of Christmas music from St Mary's Collegiate Church, Warwick; and Diana Burrell's *Missa Brevis* was sung at Gloucester Cathedral during the Three Choirs Festival.

We began Mass today with Andrew's marvellous arrangement of *Praise to the holiest in the height* (incidentally, I didn't know that tune until I came here, and I have to say it is the best one to those words – would the Church of England please take note). The arrangement was sung in Birmingham, at the Papal Mass there in 2010, and, further afield, in Texas, at the episcopal ordination of the bishop of the American ordinariate. So people in London, Cambridge, Warwick, Gloucester, Liverpool, York, Birmingham and Texas have all heard of Brentwood Cathedral. People in Brentwood, however, hear rather more about our "parish community". The work of promoting Brentwood as a cathedral is very important and needs to continue. Earlier this year we had a visit from the Chief Executive of the Cathedral Music Trust – a national charity that supports the music in cathedrals throughout the country. You might have heard it said that "a cathedral must be self-consciously proud of its own dignity and attract attention" – because those words are not mine. They were spoken at the Dedication Mass here, by Cardinal Hume. I leave that thought with you.

I want to end on some words of gratitude. A former member of the cathedral choir sometimes reminds me of something Bishop Thomas used to say in homilies – no, I don't mean quoting

Archbishop Ramsey, much as he often did that. He would sometimes wag a finger and say “there are three things”. And so, to finish, three rather personal things.

Firstly, I have had so many opportunities here, many of which I could never have dreamt about. So many people have helped me have them – singers, instrumentalists, worshippers, concert goers, and yes, the clergy as well. To all of them a huge and heartfelt thank you, and if you come into any of those categories, please give yourselves a round of applause.

Secondly, if I were to name colleagues past and present (apart, of course, from Andrew, who has put up with me for over 33 years), I would be sure to leave someone out. But I do want to mention one person, whose kindness to both my parents went way beyond the call of duty – the late Monsignor David Manson. In my early years here, my Mum and Dad would sometimes come here, initially out of curiosity, to find out what happened here, but they got to know David, and he them. I remember one Sunday morning in particular, when they came to the 11.30 Mass. David saw them beforehand, and had a friendly word with them. At the start of Mass, he said “I’d like to welcome any visitors here today, especially any who aren’t in full communion with the Catholic Church”. I wonder why he said that. And whom did he greet at the Peace – answers on a postcard, please. Mum and Dad were so deeply appreciative of the kindness shown to them here by so many people, and I know that they would wish me to acknowledge that today, which I’m very happy to do.

And the last word goes to a family friend, who was a veterinary surgeon. After retiring from his practice, he kept busy advising various animal charities, but he obviously missed his work rather a lot, because his wife once quoted him as saying: “I’ve come to one conclusion about this retirement business – I think it’s really meant for younger people”. Well, if that’s the case, I hope I’m not too old.

Thank you all very much.

Andrew Wright, Master of Music:

“Thank you all very much indeed for coming here today for the Mass and the Reception. On your behalf, I especially thank Vincent Thompson and his wife Diana for coming. It is a huge honour to have you both with us. Thank you for your very kind words about the choir, and the music in general. I concur entirely with what Vincent has said. I must especially thank all those who have helped organise today, including Nina How, who coordinates our lunchtime recitals, Jane Davenport, chair of Hutton & Shenfield Choral Society, and her team, former chorister parents and much valued organisers of hospitality and catering Mary Jeewoonarain and her team, and David Philipott of the Cathedral Music Group.

Stephen, we cannot thank you enough for your 33 years of service. Brentwood Cathedral would not be on the map internationally without all your hard work and your vision. I put at the bottom of my notes here – ‘Stephen’s talents: highly talented; totally reliable; very hard working, and very kind’. And then I thought of another one, and it’s energetic! And he doesn’t only show these for Brentwood Cathedral, for the people in the choirs and the Diocese, but also for a whole group of other organisations, Southend Boys and Girls Choirs, the Royal College of Organists, Bravissima, Hutton & Shenfield Choral Society, to name just a few. I don’t know how you get your energy, but it just goes on going!

One of the memories that sticks in my mind is from Notre Dame in 2003. Bishop Thomas had arranged our choir visit through a personal friend in Paris, and we were standing in the choir area near the altar. We looked up at the grand organ of Notre Dame Cathedral and we thought: 'Gracious, are we really here? This is a dream.' We sang the Widor Mass and Stephen was up in the organ gallery. I said: 'Stephen, if you can hear me, play a chord.' And this enormous chord, literally it was like a tidal wave, a D major chord, rolled down the Cathedral. I will never forget it!

And in general Stephen goes on doing more and more marvellous, fantastic things, and he is always looking for ways to help, improve and collaborate. For example, there is the Cathedral Music Trust, formerly the Friends of Cathedral Music. Stephen has done much to associate us with that organisation. We've received at least £17,000 of grants from the CMT. And only two weeks ago, Stephen was in the Cathedral - I wish I'd had a camera to take a picture of it - contributing to a new CMT national recording project of the Variations on a Theme by Paganini for organ by George Thalben-Ball. These are a group of pieces which are variations on the theme, but for the feet only! And one of the two variations Stephen played had two notes in each foot! And Stephen was juggling away, and filming it on his mobile phone, which was propped up with some hymn books, to contribute from Brentwood to this national recording project to help fundraise. Stephen, absolutely wonderful!

For today's Mass, Stephen chose much of the music all of which had a particular significance for him. This included the *Agnus Dei* from the Diana Burrell *Missa Brevis*. He raised all the money for this splendid new composition to be written and dedicated to us.

Finally, Stephen is a trustee of the RCO. As part of the RCO Organs in Schools Project, Stephen has helped us very recently obtain a wonderful three manual Digital Organ for one of our secondary schools and pupils there are now learning the organ. This is a scheme to put 600 organs in maintained schools around the country, in order that we can train organists, because we have not got enough of them. So, Stephen, congratulations from us all.

We are all hugely indebted to Bishop Thomas for his fantastic legacy, and Monsignor David Manson, as well as the Cathedral and Choral Trust, without which we would not be growing as a Cathedral, so thank you very much to Vincent, and to Philip Tolhurst and the other trustees, including Marianne and Nina, who are with us today. Fr John, can we thank you enormously for doing so much for so many areas in the parish and the Cathedral, not least for music: we really feel totally supported and affirmed, without which none of this would be possible. Thanks to everything that Stephen has done, and that you all have done, the cathedral is very much on the map. Being a cathedral, which has the beating heart of a parish, it is a very wide ministry that has huge work to do and huge responsibilities. When I look around here, the fact that so many of you, from so many areas, are here, is testament to how important today is, and how special Stephen is. I think, Stephen, you are impossible to follow, actually!

We have a couple of items to give you in recognition. So, on behalf of all the singers in the Cathedral Music Group, and also in the Cathedral Choir we want to present you with this special Certificate signed by Bishop Alan and also by Canon John Harvey, Dean of the Cathedral. This is what it says: '*This certificate is proudly presented to Stephen King in grateful recognition of your 33 years of faithful and dedicated service, as organist of Brentwood Cathedral (they missed out the eight months, Stephen!). Your commitment and kindness have enriched our cathedral and diocese, and our worship, uplifted our community and inspired countless individuals over three decades. Through your outstanding musical talent and steadfast service, you have played an integral role in the artistic and spiritual life of this cathedral. With sincere appreciation for your*

remarkable contribution, we honour and celebrate this milestone with gratitude and respect. Presented this 14th day of June, 2026, in recognition of your work, you are hereby appointed Organist Emeritus of Brentwood Cathedral.'

And finally, no celebration of thanks to Stephen would be complete without a bottle of gin!
Thank you very much indeed."