

Cotswold Life 5-minute interview:

Gloucester Mystery Plays

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Gloucester Mystery Plays: March 21-April 11

The mystery of music

Following on from the success of the Advent Cycle in November and December last year, *Gloucester Mystery Plays* will be bringing its Easter Cycle to Gloucester and Worcester Cathedrals.

Composer **Robert Perry** has been a part of the project since inception, so we spoke to him to find out more

How did the Gloucester Mystery Plays project come about?

Our artistic director, Rachel Murray, and producer Phil McCormick had worked together previously with the Rococo Players and had performed at Gloucester Cathedral. The Cathedral then approached Phil to ask whether he thought there would be any interest in the mystery plays. At the time he didn't know what they were so we all headed up to York for their Mystery Plays Festival and there we spent a day learning all about how they are put together, before watching a couple of them in the evening. Then Worcester Cathedral heard about the *Gloucester Mystery Plays* project on the grapevine and said they'd like to be involved we did wonder at one point whether Hereford were going to come on board too!

What was it about the project that appealed to you?

For some years now I've been exploring poetry and music; I love working with poets and I've had the opportunity to work with Anna Saunders. We met in 2008

at a mixed media event at Meantime Arts Space and we went on to work on various projects together.

The music for the cycles is distinctly Middle Eastern in feel. Why is this?

It was actually Rachels idea. There was all sorts of cross-fertilisation going on with music in medieval times, and, as the original mystery plays came from the Middle East, we wanted to reflect this in the sound.

Have you composed using Middle Eastern scales before?

I found I surprised myself, actually. I've always explored different tonalities in the compositions that I've created, but this was something rather different. I created a scale that gave the flavour of Middle Eastern music, and when I checked my reference source it turned out that the Byzantines had come up with it hundreds of years ago I guess there's only so much you can do with 12 notes.

Where did you find inspiration?

I was looking for words before I met a real poet to challenge my music writing, as I had to work with the rhythm of the words. Music I used to listen to in my youth was always very word-driven; the lyricist from Van der Graaf Generator was always one of my heroes, so all these years later it felt like I was almost coming full circle.

Tell me about the instrumentation, and who will be performing the music.

One of my favourite mediums is the string quartet; I love the sense of four musicians all working together for the same goal, but all getting there in a slightly different way. Middle Eastern music is very melody-driven with most of the instruments playing different variations of the tune together, so it was a challenge, but I managed to indulge my passion for layering instruments. The musicians Helen Terry on flute, Ben Lewis on violin, Matthew Morris on clarinet and Sam Gerard on percussion hadn't performed as a quartet before, so they have come together as the *Company of Friends* for this project.

You also composed music for the Advent Cycle in November and December. How was this received?

We had been rehearsing behind closed doors and didn't hear the choir perform until about a month before the shows so I was completely blown away by the performance when I did hear them. The audience was incredibly appreciative too, with people coming up to me afterwards to say how much they'd enjoyed it.

You have Rick Wakeman on board too

Yes, he didn't need much persuasion at all, and in fact volunteered to play for two nights instead of one [June 15 & 16]. He will be performing his *Myths and Legends of King Arthur*, which he has performed live in 30 years. He will be supported by Cheltenham Symphony Orchestra and Gloucester and Worcester Cathedral choirs.

What can we expect from the Mystery Play Festival weekend in Gloucester in June?

We shall be travelling around the city, performing the plays and music to the public in the streets. Its also getting a huge amount of support and interest from businesses and performers local, national and overseas to be a part of the festival, so its growing all the time and becoming a huge logistical monster!