



# Front stalls

English cathedral music is riding a wave of popularity in the Netherlands. **Graeme Kay** visits one choir which is nurturing the tradition across several generations

**I**n the same way that a properly prepared empty hive will attract a swarm of bees, it seems that in the Netherlands, if you bolt a songschool on to your house, a choir will immediately show up to sing in it. And sing English cathedral music, to boot. Strange as it may seem, that's pretty much how Kampen Boys Choir (KBC) started back in 2000. Kampen is a town on the banks of the River IJssel, just a short shuttle-train ride from Zwolle in the north-east of the country.

The man with the vision to create this rehearsal space was Henk Stoel, whose sale of a successful finance business, built up over many years, provided the capital to bankroll the building and also to provide continuing support for the Choir today. How did his interest in choral music – and specifically, English cathedral music – begin? 'It was many years ago when the first volume of the Psalms of David came out on record, conducted by

David Willcocks,' says Stoel. 'I was captivated by it, so much so that I travelled over to the UK on the first of many journeys to seek out and hear this music. And my vision grew into an ambition to make it possible for cathedral music to take root and be celebrated in the Netherlands too.'

Kampen is not the oldest such choir in the Netherlands – Roden Boys Choir near the northern city of Groningen was established in 1985, but the two choirs have a conductor in common: Rintje te Wies led the Roden choir from 2006 to 2022; beginning in Kampen in 2012, the Groningen Conservatory-trained te Wies now concentrates his efforts on the KBC. 'I knew Henk, because he was part of the Choir School in Roden, and I'd heard about the rehearsal room with its lovely grand piano. I was invited down one Sunday afternoon and to my surprise I found there

were other people there – this turned out to be members of the board and during dinner they offered me the post of director of music. I hadn't come for that and it was rather unexpected!

'I became absorbed in English church music through my son, who became head soloist at Roden. It was a steep learning curve, helped along by visits to the UK and workshops with Andrew Nethsingha, Sarah MacDonald and others; and Daniel Hyde came over to Roden for a weekend, too.'

Another of the talents spotted by Henk Stoel is Sander van der Houten, the choir's organist. A long-standing accompanist of the choir, Van der Houten was appointed organist in 2016; he combines the role with that of titular organist of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in The Hague, where he has charge of the famous Bätz organ of 1762, also spending time as permanent





◀ Kampen Boys Choir give a socially distanced performance in a motorhome garage during Covid under the direction of Rintje te Wies

choir screens from the 14th century, its venerable Hinz organ from 1743, and a 1999 choir organ by Orgelmakerij Reil of Heerde – the II/29 instrument donated once again by super-sponsor Henk Stoel. Religious services stopped in this giant building in 2017, so as well as employing their lector, the choir also has to get in and strike its temporary choirstalls for every event: tucked out of sight at Evensong are the heavy-duty flight cases in which the Choir's kit is stored – and toured, not least when Kampen boys are seconded to the Netherlands Bach Society for its annual *St Matthew Passion* performances round the country.

## In the Bovenkerk, the choir has to strike temporary choirstalls for every event

The order of the service I attended – Purcell's *Thou knowest, Lord*; Michael Walsh's Responses; Psalm 147 (Stanford); Bairstow in D; *Let the people praise thee, O God* (Mathias) – unabashedly lists the costs of Choral Evensong which in this case was enjoyed by over 140 people, more than just doting choir parents. Church hire was €650; heating €350; organist, conductor, lector and choir €775; travel expenses and orders of service €100; total €1,875. Even with tax breaks for donors, that's a lot of money – one wonders how such a granular approach to costing Choral Evensong would go down in British cathedrals; KBC is lucky to have such a committed benefactor as Henk Stoel, and the formally constituted Kampen

Boys Choir Foundation provides weighty managerial oversight.

But talk of costs is quickly left behind when we get on to the subject of the boys and their music. How do they meet to rehearse? 'By bicycle', is te Wies's quick-as-a-flash response. 'Seriously, once a year we advertise for singers – we found that approaching schools didn't work. We rehearse the boys and men in two sessions a week each; the men in the back rows have generally started out as our own boy trebles.' It takes a month of rehearsals to prepare a Choral Evensong. Committed parental support is essential as the boys are rehearsing after the school day and peer pressure will always pull them in the direction of playing football.

accompanist of the Roder Boys Choir, and as titular organist of the Burgwalkerk and Broederkerk and second organist of the Bovenkerk – all in Kampen.

Two other key people in the organisation are the choir's singing teacher, Jasper Schweppe, an alumnus of the Netherlands Chamber Choir; and a bilingual lector, Alexandra van den Doel, who takes the role of the priest in the regular Choral Evensongs which form the backbone of the Choir's annual programme.

If you think that 'taking the role of the priest' has a slightly theatrical/performance vibe, you'd be right: crucial to understanding the structure of Kampen Boys Choir is that they are commercial clients of the Kampen Bovenkerk, an example of the estimated one in five Dutch churches – Protestant as well as Catholic – which are no longer in use as places of worship. An imposing town landmark, the Bovenkerk (or St Nicolaaskerk) is a Gothic cruciform basilica with a history dating back to the 12th century; it's noted for the early Renaissance

► The Bovenkerk in Kampen is an imposing landmark

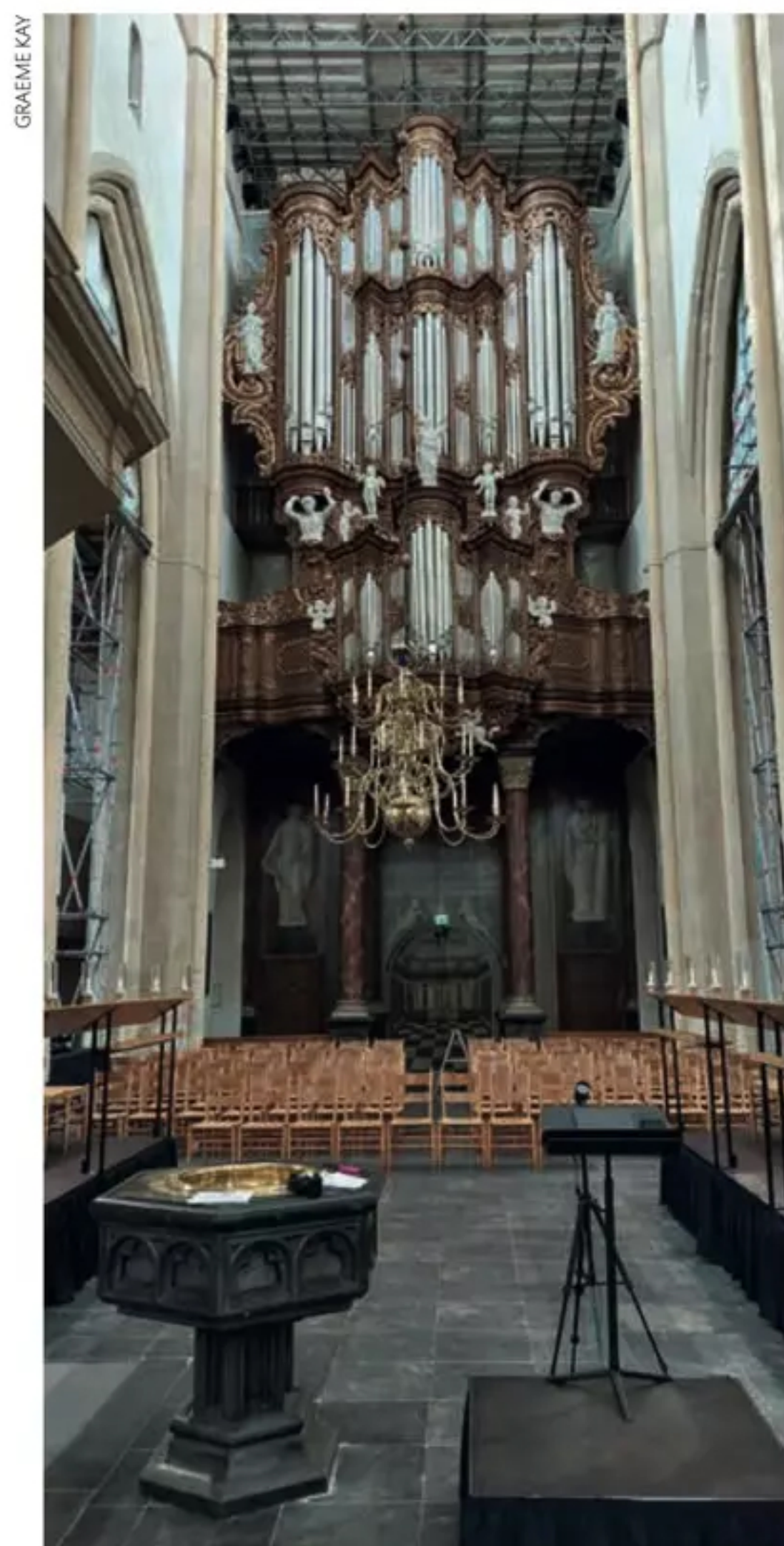
The Stam family offer a paradigm of KBC support. Upstairs in the organ loft, father Jasper, who began as a devoted attendee of Choral Evensongs in the early days, is burning calories fast, as he dances around pulling stops for Sander van den Houten. His three sons are downstairs getting their teeth into Bairstow; one is head chorister and one is acting as precentor. 'There is only one criterion for joining KBC: you must be able to read. So as soon as I could read, I joined KBC, at the age of five,' says head chorister Gijs. 'When I think of English cathedral music, I think of professional-level church singing by boys' choirs, and Evensongs. An Evensong really differs from a Dutch church service. In the Netherlands, everyone sings along in ►



GRAEME KAY



# KAMPEN BOYS CHOIR



▲ (clockwise from left) The 1743 Hinze organ in the Bovenkerk; chorister parent Jasper Stam handles registration for organist and choir accompanist Sander van der Houten; sponsor Henk Stoel (seated) watches Rintje te Wies take a rehearsal

◁ church, in England the congregation only sings the hymns. The high level of music in England attracts me. In the Netherlands you can never make it sound as pure and clean as in an English church service if everyone sings along. In addition, English choral music is often performed in cathedrals with great acoustics, while in the Netherlands the intelligibility of the preacher is considered more important. As a result, in the Netherlands church services are held in churches where the acoustics are often poor. That is why English choral music attracts me so much.

'I entered the choir school on the open day as a 6-year-old boy,' says Gijs's brother Nicolaas. 'After a year of preparatory training, we moved on to the Training Choir. There we practised our skills in solfeggio and rhythm, and we were also prepared to become part of the Concert Choir. That meant practising a lot of pieces of music and speaking a lot of English lyrics. At the end of that year I took the test. I passed, and from then on I was a full member. The rehearsals

together are wonderful. Together with all boys and men we form a diverse but still very close group where I always feel at home. In singing together I experience music as the purest form of human connection, which always makes me very happy. Besides, a wise man once said: if you really love music, you will never be completely unhappy.'

'I think Rintje is doing a very good job as choir director,' adds Gijs. 'What I admire most about him is his ability to work with any level of singer. He can teach both boys who are just starting out in the choir and the most highly trained singers. He does this for the boys in a very understandable way and he also uses humour. Few people use that combination as effectively as he does, and it makes the boys enjoy singing, and keeps it fun for everyone to keep singing.'

'I definitely intend to sing with the men as soon as my voice change is over! I don't know yet if I will be alto, tenor or bass, but that doesn't really matter to me. The most important thing is that I continue to enjoy singing.'

It is no exaggeration to say that, on the evidence of YouTube and my own ears in Kampen, the holistic KBC approach to training is producing performances of English cathedral music at benchmark standards. I would defy any members of the congregations at St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey (the choir's biennial UK tours are a highlight of the calendar – the next one is in 2024) to recognise that the choir is Dutch. At both venues last year, Gijs Stam sang the solo in Samuel Wesley's *Blessed be the God and Father*: 'Especially in St Paul's, with the enormous acoustics, it was a spectacular experience to sing that solo. But not only the solo singing was fun, it also sounded fantastic with the whole choir. It's great to sing such beautiful music in the place where it belongs.' ■  
[kampenboyschoir.nl](http://kampenboyschoir.nl)

Graeme Kay is a former editor of Classical Music, Opera Now and BBC Music magazines. He is a digital platforms producer for BBC Radio 3, 4 and 4 Extra.