

Beware the wrath of the church organist – musical revenge is sweet

They are the stalwart pillars of the community whose week-in, week-out dedication has kept the country's choral traditions alive for generations.



A survey of churchgoers found that at least half have noticed their organist straying from the path of musical orthodoxy
Photo: Getty Images

By John Bingham, Religious Affairs Editor

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But, if new research is to be believed, behind the quiet exterior the humble church organist is not someone to be crossed.

While charged with providing spiritually uplifting music to worshippers, it seems many also seize the opportunity to extract subtle revenge on clerics who have displeased them or simply play pranks on congregations.

A survey of churchgoers found that at least half have noticed their organist straying from the path of musical orthodoxy at some point – slipping snippets of heavy metal classics, advertising jingles and even nursery rhymes into hymns and anthems.

In some cases it can be a means of waging musical war with clerics while in others it is simply an effort by bored organists to make the choir laugh.

Christian Research, a polling and research group asked its 2,000 strong “Resonate” panel of churchgoers for their views on church music and organists.

Of those who responded, half said they had noticed an organist slipping unexpected tunes into services.

Among examples cited was that of the organist in Scotland who had fallen out with some of the elders in the Kirk but got his own back by inserting a thinly disguised rendition of “Send in the Clowns” as they processed in for a Sunday service.

Elsewhere, a vicar sacked an organist after he played “Roll out the Barrel” at the funeral of a man known to have been fond of a drink.

In one decidedly high church congregation, an organist punctured the mood of reverence as an elaborately dressed clergyman processed back after the gospel reading – by playing the theme tune to *The Simpsons*.

Another congregation found themselves passing around the collection plate to the strains of “Money, Money, Money” by Abba.

The survey uncovered examples of Eucharist celebrations livened up with renditions of Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer”; the theme tunes from *The Magic Roundabout*, *Blackadder* and *Harry Potter* and even “I’ve Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts”.

Sung Evensong – widely regarded as the jewel in the crown of English choral music – has been spiced up such unexpected offerings as “I’m a Barbie Girl” and “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles”

One organist who responded confessed to playing hits by Oasis, Billy Bragg and even Kylie Minogue in services but added: “Nobody notices – I do it all the time.”

But when an organist played a slowed-down version of *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* from *Mary Poppins*, even the most tone deaf members of the congregation eventually recognised, sending them into gales of laughter.

An older bridegroom took it in good humour when the organist played “No one loves a fairy when

she's 40" at his wedding" while candidates at a confirmation service were left perplexed to hear the strains of "I'm a Little Teapot" from the organ loft.

Stephen Goddard, of Christian Research, said: "It's an oft-repeated adage in church circles – 'What's the difference between an organist and a terrorist? -you can negotiate with a terrorist'.

"Hidden from view, your local church organist may appear unassuming and self-deprecating, but like any true artist, he or she can be eccentric, mischievous and very opinionated.

"Mess with him at your peril – he will pull out all the stops to get his own back."

The poll was conducted ahead of the Christian Resources Exhibition, a trade fair for all things ecclesiastical in London later this month, which will be showpiecing new organs among other things.

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