

The Hancock Internship: A Collaborative Tale

WOOSUG KANG and ABRAHAM WALLACE

IN A WORSHIP SERVICE, an organist is first and foremost a collaborator. Their duties might involve accompanying a choir, leading congregational singing, or playing music to cover liturgical movements, all of which are collaborative. Outside of worship, too, we find ourselves often collaborating with our colleagues as we plan liturgies, run rehearsals, prepare an area for a future hospitality hour, or (everyone’s favorite extra duty) move chairs, stands, and risers, so that the next appointed liturgy can be executed in such a way as to bring people ever-slightly closer to an experience of holiness. Even outside of our weekly posts, we host concerts and attend ones that our friends and colleagues present. We offer support and novel ideas to our musical colleagues around the country. All of this is to say that our work is deeply collaborative in its nature.

And yet, there are many times when working in music ministry can feel quite isolating. We spend a fair amount of our working lives refining our skills as organists and choir directors. Refining those skills is often best done in solitude — in a place where distractions are few and one is truly alone.

But the fact of the matter is that the hours we spend in solitude are not about being alone at all; it is just the preparatory work needed for good collaboration. And, in fact, the vast majority of our work is meaningful precisely *because* it is a collaboration with people around us: the choir, the congregation, and the clergy.

When we were approached about writing an article through the lens of “collaboration” about our experiences together as Organ Scholar and Director of Music at St. George’s Episcopal Church, Nashville during the 2023–2024 program year, we were keen to say yes, especially since we are no longer organ scholar and director of music but are now junior and senior colleagues working in separate churches, connected professionally via guild networks. In preparing to write this article, we both independently recounted our experiences at St. George’s during the 2023–2024 program year. We were delighted to see just how similarly — and with similar fondness — we both remembered that year. In recognizing these similar accounts as a strength, we decided to present both accounts here to the reader, and to conclude the article by ruminating on some of the more general (and therefore more applicable) aspects of our collaborations at St. George’s and beyond.

The word “collaboration” holds a strong meaning. Our choirs work to follow the instructions of the conductor directly, but their work would not be successful without each choir member’s collaborative spirit. Congregational hymn singing would not be successful without the collaborative spirit of the congregation and the leadership of the organist. I benefited immensely from a mentorship program in New Zealand; I always saw myself as the beneficiary of that experience, and I did not actively

think of myself as a “collaborator.” But I think the spirit of collaboration enriches all of us in so many things we do. In my experience with our AAM Gerre Hancock Organ Intern, Dr. Abraham Wallace, collaboration took many forms at different stages of our program year.

The spirit of collaboration with the AAM Internship Committee and Patrick Fennig was exemplary and greatly appreciated as we applied to serve as the mentoring institution for the 2023–2024 Gerre Hancock Internship. They had a clear understanding of the importance of this program, and their dedication to and care for it, even as we were applying, were impressive. Their spirit of collaboration was evident in their clear, thoughtful communication, which had the candidates’ best interests in mind. I am especially grateful to Patrick, who, I know, all of us would agree, embodies the very idea of collaboration in furthering the mission of AAM.

Abe arrived at St. George’s with an unusual challenge. On his first Sunday, neither I nor our Associate Director of Music were in the country; we were in Canterbury with our choirs for a week-long choral residency. Following Canterbury, I was on sabbatical until October, during which Gerry Senechal (my associate) and Abe worked together. I asked Gerry to write about his experience with Abe during these two months, and he wrote:

Abe was thrown right into the thick of things upon arrival, as our Director of Music was taking the last of his sabbatical leave. Abe was immediately either playing or conducting a great deal more than would normally be expected of an organ scholar. Not only did he immediately rise to the task (only later admitting what a superhuman challenge it had been!), but he enriched our worship right from the start with beautiful, naturally flowing musicianship, lightning-quick mind, and wonderful personality. One of his many strengths is a tremendous capability for improvisation. On a few occasions, we’d swap on and off the bench on a weekday morning, improvising in response to what the other person had just done; this was both a great delight as well as a real learning experience for me. Although we miss him here, we are immensely proud of Abe’s subsequent work at the Cathedral and look forward to his continued contributions to Anglican worship.

I returned from my sabbatical to a professional and warm collegial spirit at St. George’s, which was such a wonderful environment to encounter. It was clear that Gerry and Abe had a flourishing symbiosis that led to a fruitful relationship.

In our music ministry, we focus on a specific area of training for the organ scholar, for example, psalm accompaniment or improvisation. Of course, I assign what I believe is important to our organ scholar’s growth and will allow them to work on the

refinement of that skill, but I welcome input from the scholars to assess their needs and discuss their vision for the internship. I think it is a necessary practice to voice needs and vision clearly, skills that will be useful when they become the director of music or associate director at a place where they need to communicate their ideas and views in a clear, professional manner, especially in a large-staff environment. Clear, professional communication is particularly essential in pastoral conversations we hold and is a part of leadership experience that is difficult to teach. We do work in ministry, after all, and I am sure many of my colleagues would agree that being a pastoral presence to the members of our choir and choristers is a big part of our job. Being able to speak professionally while maintaining a clear message is such a vital part of collaboration, and practicing it every day in a ministry where you work with 30 other staff members is an invaluable experience.

Another aspect of our music ministry that fosters a strong collaborative spirit is the weekly individual lessons we provide for our choristers. These lessons involve me, our associate, the organ scholar, and several qualified staff singers, who work individually with our choristers to offer guidance and teach them what it takes to be a strong chorister. These lessons are a crucial portion of their growth and help them prepare for our weekly rehearsals, making our time together much more efficient and effective. I achieved excellent results doing this during my tenure at St. Philip's in the Hills in Tucson, so this has been an ongoing development here at St. George's. These lessons allow our organ scholars to work directly with choristers, and not just in a rehearsal setting. They provide an environment for the organ scholar to learn through personal interaction and determine how to help a young chorister aged 3rd–12th grade individually. One develops a strong mentorship bond with choristers, and constant check-ins with their teachers are crucial. Check-ins involve evaluations of how choristers are preparing for their ribbon tests and their growth in needed areas. The important collaborative aspect of this program is that, while I provide foundational guidelines for what I would like to happen in lessons generally, I must trust our teachers to build strong relationships and develop our choristers in ways they think are best for each chorister. This effort extends not only to the teacher and the chorister, but also to the chorister's parents. Abe established rapport with the choristers and parents to whom he was assigned and demonstrated an excellent example of collaborative effort toward the common goal of training our choristers.

The spring of 2024 was filled with great music at St. George's, including a hymn festival, where all three of us featured our own hymn playing. We had a great time creating social media posts to promote the event. We knew what we wanted to convey through the media: the excitement and joy of singing hymns, and Abe and Gerry were not afraid to bring the comical side we share to social media posts. It can be challenging to demonstrate lightheartedness on social media while conveying a clear message when people are not in sync on the goal and thoughts are not well communicated. I found this exercise to be a strong example of collaboration on many levels outside of our everyday ministry.

Spring is an interesting time, because it is then that our organ scholars often look for a new position or audition for their next academic chapter. This factor requires a great deal of planning, scheduling, and looking ahead. I hope Abe knew

that both Gerry and I had his best interests at heart and wanted to make sure we were there to support him as he took the next steps. This support was our crowning example of collaborative support.

As of 2026, Abe has left St. George's and is flourishing at Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati, Ohio. Gerry and I were at the Minnesota Conference where Abe played his recital, and we immensely enjoyed his playing at the Cincinnati Conference this past year. We were proud, for sure, but we were also marveling at his continued growth since he left St. George's. We were so proud of him as a colleague in our mutual work to bring the best sacred music to our worship services. It is wonderful to know there is another new colleague with a rich collaborative spirit amongst us; communication and sharing a common purpose allow us to grow together. Looking back, while Abe was with us, we had three distinct personalities on our organ bench. I am grateful that we took the time to communicate whatever was needed to build our mutual respect and trust and that, through that collegial spirit, we continue our spirit of collaboration now.

— Woosug Kang

IN THE SUMMER OF 2023, I moved to Nashville, Tennessee to begin a year-long internship as the Gerre Hancock Organ Intern at St. George's Episcopal Church. I was very nervous. I knew very few people in town and had no idea what to expect from the day-to-day rhythm of working in such a large church. That was, of course, why I was there. I very much *wanted* to know what it was like working in a place like St. George's, and fortunately for me, the music ministry staff at St. George's was very excited to show me what that daily work looked like. The director of music, Dr. Woosug Kang, was in the final month of his sabbatical when I began as organ scholar, and so I was left in the capable hands of his associate, Gerry Senechal. Working with Gerry was wonderful. He is both a phenomenal musician and extremely efficient with his time. He is easy-going and kind, yet he still held the choir and me to a high musical standard.

Each week, we would check in with each other and spend some time 'trading' improvisations. I can't speak for Gerry, but for me, it was a fantastic way to try out new musical tricks and to borrow ideas from my boss! Once Woosug came back, he and I had two lessons a week. Oftentimes, we would spend one of those lessons preparing for upcoming services, and the second lesson would focus on the administrative aspects of running a music program at a large parish. Meeting twice a week was a fairly large time commitment for Woosug, but I am glad that we had these regularly carved-out times to meet; it meant we had multiple times during the week to talk about whatever pressing issue was in front of us. I think that this exemplifies one of the more foundational aspects of good collaboration: check in with each other regularly. Having regularly scheduled meetings always means that there is time to give and receive feedback about what is and is not working in a professional context. That is not to say the answer is always to have more meetings, but rather that having a recurring meeting that lasts only as long as it needs to is a great way to give everyone time to communicate without (hopefully!) taking up all of the working hours in a day. In our case, if there were no pressing issues and the workload for the week was lighter than expected, our meetings could be as short as 15 minutes or happen over lunch.

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Beyond working well together, it was apparent that everyone in the music department — and indeed, everyone at St. George’s — was very much committed to the same larger goal. And every person had a good sense of how their work contributed toward that end. This does not mean that there was never any conflict, but rather that you could trust that everyone was operating in good faith and doing their job to the best of their ability. Having a unifying goal made working through conflict easier, partially because it was easier for all parties to see both sides of an issue and because both parties were keen to resolve it. Perhaps that is the second significant takeaway in terms of collaboration for me: life is easier when there is a common goal. When playing hymns, the goal is robust hymn-singing. When accompanying choirs, the goal is to make the best collective sound possible. And in the context of day-to-day work, the goal is the same as the mission of the church: worshipping God and being the Light of Christ in the World.

Now, two years on from that internship, I am the associate director of music at Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati, Ohio. I again find myself with good colleagues, and I think those tenets of good collaboration (regular communication, working in good faith, working towards the same larger goal) still hold true for me. As for Woosug’s and my working relationship, that has, of course, also changed. We talk regularly; most of the time, it is me writing to him and to Gerry for advice and puzzling through solutions. They are a part of my larger network of support, and I am a part of theirs.

— Abraham Wallace

In synthesizing our two accounts, it became apparent that perhaps the best advice for good collaboration is also the most trite. That which makes a collaboration work or fall apart is often based on how practiced the parties are at communicating with one another, how well each member can recognize their own strengths and that of their colleagues, and how unified the vision of the team is. Robust and open communication feels essential, as it requires each party to both speak and listen with a desire to understand a position different from their own. That communication is made much easier when all parties share a common goal, have regularly set times to converse, and have enough of a familial rapport with each other to respect and work through the differences of opinions that inevitably arise. That skill of effective communication — and by extension, effective collaboration — is one that, whether we acknowledge it or not, is something upon which we all constantly rely in our working lives as church musicians. ❖

Over the next three years, we will be releasing a series of articles that relate to a theme of “collaboration.” As we seek to be Anglican musicians in our ever-changing times, we hope to explore ways that working together towards a common goal strengthens our relationships with our choirs, clergy, colleagues, congregations, and communities.

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Dr. Woosug Kang enjoys a dynamic career as a concert organist, conductor, and church musician. He serves as the Director of Music Ministries at St. George’s Episcopal Church, Nashville, where he leads the nationally recognized sacred music program. Dr. Kang has performed throughout the United States, the United

Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia in various venues and on numerous instruments. He has been featured as a soloist with multiple ensembles and, as a liturgical organist, on television and live radio broadcasts during his time in New Zealand. Dr. Kang received his Master of Music at Yale University’s Institute of Sacred Music in organ performance while winning multiple scholarships and prizes, and earned his Doctor of Music degree from Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. He is passionate about training young musicians, and he initiated the organ scholar program at St. George’s in 2017–2018. In addition to leading the partnership between St. George’s and the Association of Anglican Musicians in 2023 for the Gerre Hancock Music Intern, he partnered with the American Guild of Organists to bring the AGO Organ Scholar for the 2024–2025 season to St. George’s.



Dr. Abraham Wallace holds Bachelor’s degrees in piano and Geophysics from the University of Oklahoma. He completed a Master’s degree in organ performance at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and recently completed a doctoral degree in the same field at the University of Michigan. He has served various churches in the

capacities of organ scholar, chorister, and director of music. He was selected to be the 2023–2024 AAM Gerre Hancock Organ Scholar at St. George’s Episcopal Church (Nashville), and is currently the Associate Director of Music at Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati, Ohio. Abe likes to spend most of his spare time outdoors, but can on occasion be found reading, making coffee, and baking sourdough bread.

2026–2027 GERRE HANCOCK INTERNSHIP

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