

# What's the score



**MAGNUM OPUS:** Composer of Chester Mystery Plays Matt Baker, at Chester Cathedral organ, with brother Jim on electric guitar. Pictures by Adrian Nickisson.

IF music really is the food of love, then Chester composer Matt Baker must be the guardian of Cupid's arrow in the city.

Be it an Olympic anthem, the Big Sing, a First World War commemoration or a Dickens classic, you will find Baker at the piano or with an accordion strapped to his front, inspiring people to sing or play.

But now and again, in fact every five years since 2003, Matt Baker has sat down at his piano to create an opus – an original score for the Chester Mystery Plays.

In 2003 and 2008, the plays were produced outside on Chester Cathedral Green, but this time around they are being presented in the magnificent nave of Chester Cathedral for the first time and Baker is delighted.

He said: "Because this performance is taking

place inside, I have been able to use a wealth of instruments that would have been impossible in 2003 and 2008."

And that list of instruments is vast – as well as the usual violins, flutes and trombones it includes a didgeridoo, a hurdy gurdy, a concertina, Chester Cathedral's mighty organ and the Karamba Samba band.

He said: "The music in this cycle of plays is exceptionally varied – there is some medieval music, a 1940's Frank Sinatra-style number, a gospel piece and a sea shanty."

I have been privileged to hear some of Baker's music at rehearsals for the plays and anyone who is not moved to tears by the choral piece *Yet Hope I* during The Crucifixion play must have a heart of stone.

"When I first started working with some of the choir at the end of last year, a singer came up to me and told me I had 'a gift', said Matt.

"I must say I was thrilled. I am then confident that I am creating works that people love to sing."

And people like to hear.

Matt's orchestra will not be hidden in a pit in the bowels of the cathedral – many of the musicians have quite substantial parts in the action.

He said: "Jonathan Sharps, who plays Jesus in Act II, makes an early appearance in *The Creation*, playing his didgeridoo.

"Tim Bolam puts down his bass guitar to become

King Herod and Caiaphas (John Fryett) has a lovely moment when he accompanies his own appearance in one of the films in the production."

And Chester's Karamba Samba band have a special role to play in this year's mystery cycle.

"The band will play in a very different way from the one you hear when they are out in the city streets," said Matt. "They create a beautiful percussive sound during the Trial of Jesus."

Two years ago Matt visited the German city of Oberammergau to watch their famous Passion.

"The score was written in the 18th century by a local composer and has been adapted and added to ever since," he said.

I asked if he would like his music to still be heard in 300 years time.

He said: "My music may or may not live in perpetuity. I am just happy that I am reflecting what is happening in Chester today."

■ The Chester Mystery Plays were originally written by Benedictine monks at the Abbey of St Werburgh (now Chester Cathedral). They were revived in 1951 to celebrate the Festival of Britain and have been performed approximately every five years since.

■ The Chester Mystery Plays are at Chester Cathedral from June 26-July 13. Tickets are available from 01244 500959, [www.chestermysteryplays.com](http://www.chestermysteryplays.com) or in person at Chester Cathedral.