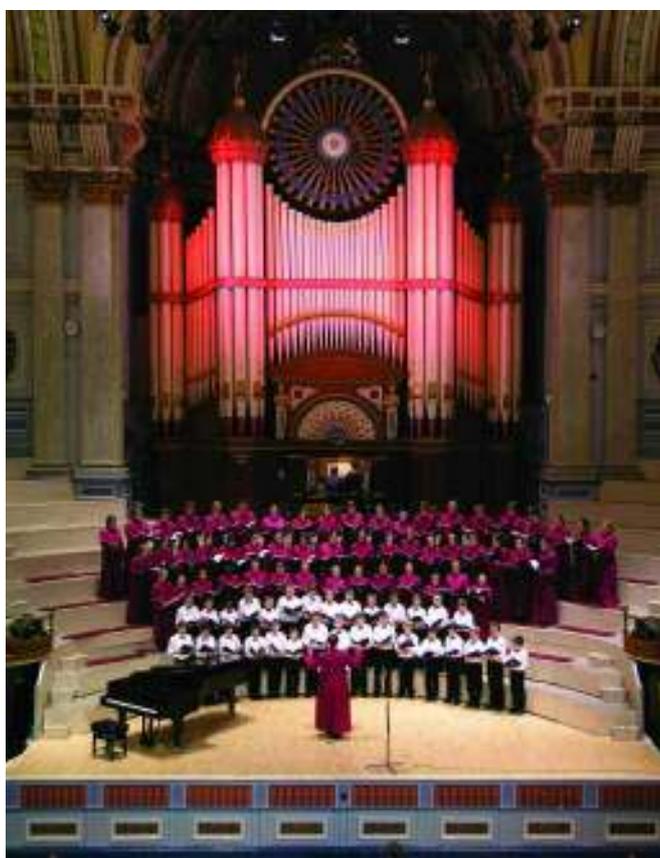


Redefining outreach: eighteen choir schools and growing

Benjamin Saunders, Director of Music, outlines
the singing outreach programme at Leeds Cathedral.



The four cathedral choirs giving a Christmas Concert at Huddersfield Town Hall with Gordon Stewart at the organ

The Diocese of Leeds maintains the largest sacred singing programme for young people in the country. It consists of two boys' choirs, three girls' choirs, a professional adult choir, fourteen primary school and four high schools choirs. The cathedral has no independent choir school but thanks to a central location and high Catholic population, it is the second busiest Catholic cathedral in the UK (after Westminster). During 2005 and 2006 it underwent a £2.5 million restoration programme and when it reopened in November 2006, a programme of daily sung Mass and Vespers was introduced along with a new lunchtime concert series

Choristers arrive at Leeds Cathedral for rehearsals each day from schools through a network of parental lifts, taxis and public transport. Each choir then sings around three choral

services each week, with the full complement of ten weekly sung services maintained by using the different treble sections in rotation. At the cathedral there are four distinct groups: a boys' choir, a professional adult choir and two girls' choirs. The girls' groups are spread over a wide age range so that the junior section of children (aged 8–13) forms a training group for the older girls' choir (aged 13–18). It is not unusual for three choirs to be rehearsing simultaneously in different parts of the building on any given weekday! Termly recruitment drives in state schools are important in maintaining a waiting list of potential choristers, and new applicants must already play one musical instrument and have some music reading ability.

What does a Diocesan Director of Music do?

The small numbers of new jobs that have been created for musicians in recent years in the Catholic Church tend to have been diocesan ones, where responsibility for the cathedral is included as the mother church of the diocese. These positions have some advantage over solely cathedral roles, as it is possible to exercise more influence within both the central church bureaucracy and its associated schools.

The Diocese of Leeds covers a large area, incorporating the cities of Leeds and Bradford, and also the smaller centres of Wakefield, Huddersfield, Harrogate, Halifax and Ripon. All three choral directors at Leeds Cathedral have previously held positions in the Church of England (at Chester, Durham and Wakefield Cathedrals). This inspired a shared deep conviction in the centrality of a children's treble line, firstly in the process of making music and secondly in its ability to inspire and communicate to the worshipper.

Serious about outreach

Outreach has been a buzz word in the arts for sometime, and encouraging amounts of government money have been made available for it. There are several excellent examples of junior choirs, especially in rural cathedral cities which have benefited from this approach. This is a well intentioned step in the right direction, but of course is not an all encompassing solution to address the wholesale decline of singing in schools.

In a Catholic cathedral, one has both the benefit and disadvantage of a fractured musical tradition. There is seldom an historic tradition to maintain, but this disadvantage is outweighed by the opportunity to think afresh, and to develop new solutions in response to the challenges of making music in the church and schools in the twenty-first century.

What do schools want?

In planning an outreach programme for a diocese with a total of 38,500 children in its church schools, we wanted to develop a second centre for excellence outside the cathedral in Leeds. The cathedral musicians therefore proposed to provide singing leadership to the schools in Bradford and Keighley. In setting up this new outreach programme, it was important to show each headteacher that the service represented good use of the school's budget, bringing educational value to their pupils, and opening up new paths in which the school could excel. Schools have a wide choice of where to spend their money, with Local Education Authority music provision or with the many private companies which seek to fulfil this role. In designing our new diocesan programme, any sense of fixed term 'outreach projects' was avoided, and instead provision was designed to be long term, sustainable and of sufficient quality to compete favourably against other providers.

Many primary schools had no regular choir and a collective frustration was expressed by headteachers in the difficulty of recruiting a teacher with the expertise necessary to develop one. In some schools, impressive results had been achieved with 'bought in' amateurs, where children had learnt a few pieces by rote each term. However, a new approach demanded a strong educational core, whereby children learnt to read music and sing in parts. As church primary and secondary schools, some time also needed to be directed towards developing a liturgical repertoire. It was therefore important to draw on the historic traditions of Latin and English church music in the educational process. As a practical tool, Gregorian chant proved to be invaluable in teaching music reading and developing language awareness.

When recruiting for these choral director posts, expertise was needed with both cathedral and school choirs, moreover the choir trainers would need to enjoy working with and be able to deliver musically with both types of group. While all the school rehearsals take place during the school timetable, two additional choirs, the Bradford Boys' and Girls' choirs were formed as auditioned after-school groups for the best and most enthusiastic singers. A third choir was also formed for older boys whose voices had begun to change, providing a vital link with secondary schools for the formation of a four part Bradford Youth Choir. The Bradford Boys' and Girls' choirs, together with the cathedral choirs, are important vehicles of outreach into schools. Sometimes they are called to sing alongside the school choirs and also periodically combine for annual concerts and major cathedral events.

A choral industry: the Bradford Youth Choir programme

Over the past three years, our outreach primary and secondary school choirs have more or less swept the board in music competitions, often holding all the top places! This has brought in cash prizes and silverware for school display cabinets. More importantly though, it has given children new experiences of culture and religion, a good example being the recent senior school choir tour to Lourdes and the Pyrenees. Closer to home, the Bradford Girls' Choir have sung in St George's Hall, Bradford under both John Rutter and Sir David Willcocks, and given their first national broadcast on BBC Radio in March 2007. The Bradford boys are not outshone by the girls however, and have participated in several large scale works, including the

Berlioz Te Deum with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under David Hill. Refreshingly, the children have a healthy appetite for contemporary music, and four new pieces have been commissioned from Colin Mawby and Giles Swayne.

Is this approach unique?

The Diocese of Leeds benefits from the guidance of a bishop and senior clergy who are passionate about outreach work with young people. Bradford and Keighley schools enjoy the leadership of headteachers who are ambitious and also enthusiastic for the development of singing within their schools and the wider community. The music programme is the largest youth organization in the diocese, and could in time be extended further through collaboration with more funding partners.

The benefits to Leeds Cathedral of the outreach have been enormous. The funding partnership enables three full time choir trainers to be employed, allowing the new programme of sung daily services. The gains of outreach are mutual: without the cathedral programme in place, it would probably have been hard to attract musicians of sufficient calibre to lift a conventional schools' outreach programme into something extraordinary. The special expertise and talents of using trained cathedral musicians in schools is therefore crucial in the attainment of quality. It is simply a case of adapting what we do as church musicians, taking a long term approach to music making, to give it both sustainability and vibrancy for the next generation.

◆ Benjamin Saunders was born in Warrington and educated at George Heriot's School, Edinburgh and at Cambridge University where he was Organ Scholar at Downing College. He has subsequently held the positions of sub organist at St Giles' Cathedral Edinburgh and Assistant Director of Music at Blackburn and Chester Cathedrals. He was appointed Director of Music for the Diocese of Leeds in June 2002.

Further information can be found at www.bradfordyouthchoir.org.



The Bradford Boys' Choir at St Joseph's Church Keighley with Christopher Johns (left) and Christopher McElroy (right)