

# The Heart of Cathedral **A WIDE-RANGI**



# Music in Leeds *Thomas Leech* NG APPROACH

The past decade has seen an explosion in choral foundations' appreciation of the need to work with a community wider than their worshipping congregation and feeder schools.

This work comes in many admirable designs and is doubtless enriching to all who take part, but I would wager that there are very few institutions that place school singing at the heart of their choral programme. Since January of this year I have had the great privilege of, and responsibility for, managing the Diocese of Leeds' Schools Singing Programme - choral provision wholly integrated with its cathedral, with a proven record of success and, I hope, a bright and sustainable future.

Why do we see thousands of children, visit scores of schools, employ a substantial team of dedicated staff and run - in addition to the cathedral - five auditioned youth choirs?

The Diocese of Leeds stretches from the densely populated heart of West Yorkshire to parishes in the East Riding, North Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Lancashire, encompassing extremely diverse populations. Leeds Cathedral, hosts a substantial worshipping congregation, second only to Westminster in size. Typically, the period following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) saw the tradition of chant and polyphony neglected, and a culture in which the see's music was entirely reliant on the priorities of its incumbent musical director, resulting in very specific excellence at the cost of a broader and sustainable programme.

In 2002 Ben Saunders inherited an excellent girls' choir as he stepped into his new role as diocesan Director of Music. One superb choir and an otherwise blank slate. With only limited financial resources, and without the institutional musical tradition found in many Anglican cathedrals, it was clear that a new model of cathedral music was required, concentrating not on limited opportunity and closely focused

excellence but on a sweeping programme involving children across the diocese, based on the unquestionable potential to use music as an educational, social and catechetical instrument. Christopher McElroy's appointment as the diocesan Assistant Director of Music in 2004 provided the vital time resource to develop this programme, and the result of his work is the strikingly impressive structure we see today. We strive to provide a service where highly skilled professional musicians deliver quality singing provision that is educationally appropriate, whether playing pitch-matching games in a Year Three class or preparing the cathedral choirs for broadcasts.

The heart of our music-making is found not in the glorious reverberation of polyphony around Leeds Cathedral but in classrooms across the diocese, as our team of choral directors seek to light the spark in an astonishingly diverse range of schools. Forty-three schools buy choral provision from the diocese as they do any other external service, giving them at least thirty hours of provision per year and access to numerous performance opportunities, from small school-cluster concerts to national broadcasts. Secondary school partners, together with two parishes, help to fund the auditioned youth choirs and in addition host their rehearsals. In return the schools enjoy opportunities for their gifted singers, receive assistance with school worship and participate in various projects - at the moment including most of a sixth form rugby team preparing medieval Spanish songs for a gala concert!

The five auditioned youth choirs provide the musical pinnacle of the schools system, offering lasting opportunities across the primary/secondary school transition

and demonstrating the excellence achievable with such firm foundations. Resident at St Joseph's Church, Bradford Boys' Choir sing both mass and vespers regularly, and maintain a substantial secular repertoire for concerts and competitions. In its early days a thriving SATB choir might have been difficult to imagine, but founder members (now on the verge of leaving for university) currently provide the core of a strong tenor and bass team. The parallel Girls' Choir fulfils a complementary function, singing fewer services but maintaining a busy schedule of concert and competition performances. In Huddersfield, the Parish of the Holy Redeemer supports two similar choirs, aspiring to the model of the Bradford choirs, and already providing music of commendable quality. In addition, a boys' choir runs in Harrogate, drawing its members from





schools in the north of the diocese.

But what of the cathedral? Since 2010 two junior choirs, boys and girls directed by Lucy Haigh, feed recruitment to two cathedral choirs, with potential choristers drawn from Leeds schools participating in our singing programme, ultimately leading to the ‘outreach’ supplying the majority of the cathedral choristers. The cathedral choirs sing vespers and mass daily, Sunday to Thursday (one of the delights of working here is having something almost approaching a normal weekend!), with girls’ and boys’ choirs sharing the rota with choral scholars and a volunteer adult choir of vibrant quality.

In a bold and socially radical move, the diocese has committed substantial resources to developing a state-sector choir school in Holy Rosary and St Anne’s school in Chapeltown, an inner-city district of extremely varied ethnicity and one which faces much deprivation. The cathedral choir school project continues to go from strength to strength. Five months ago things were looking financially precarious to say the least, but thanks to generous donations from the Holbeck Trust, Leeds

Christian Charitable Trust and a growing number of private donors, the project is now on a sound financial footing for at least the next three years. This is a great relief for everyone involved and we are all grateful for the chance to concentrate on the real business of the choir school: the development of excellent singers across the entire school.

Recently, Leeds Cathedral School Choir won first prize in the Novice Class at this year’s Mrs Sunderland Festival in Huddersfield. The children were more than delighted to win their first trophy, but more significant from Choir School Choral Director Sally Egan’s point of view was the other prize that the choir won at the Festival, for ‘Choir with the most Potential’. Ms Egan, a former vocal coach at Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral (and a past pupil of HRSA School) says, “These children are bursting with potential, as everyone knows who has the pleasure of working with them, and it is lovely to have that confirmed by other musicians.” The choir will make its first live broadcast on national radio later this year, when they sing Morning

Worship on Radio 4 from Holy Rosary and St Anne’s Church in Chapeltown on 17 June. The children are already hard at work learning Jehan Alain’s *Messe Modale*, which they will perform with the original orchestration of string quartet and flute.

A cursory glance at the music department roster might suggest we have luxurious levels of staffing, with perhaps the largest team of full-time musicians employed by an English diocese. This would seriously underestimate the volume of work created by the schools programme. Our three choral directors average twelve school sessions per week, followed by youth choir or cathedral rehearsals/ services and Sunday duties. As anyone experiencing the unpredictable nature of class music-making will know, this is an exhilarating but demanding schedule! We strive to play to the strengths of our staff and attempt to ensure that flexibility is maintained, with choral directors able to work on specific projects with choirs, or to allow us to change staff duties to make best use of resources at any given moment. My work sees me coordinate this



programme, with responsibility for the overall management of staff, maintaining the income levels from the school provision, and ensuring that our partner schools are receiving an excellent and educationally relevant service. I spend plenty of time at the coalface, however, directing both Bradford Youth Choirs (assisted by our newest Choral Director, Charlotte Kitson), four regular school sessions and a number of secondary school project groups - it certainly prevents me from doubting the intensity with which our staff work! We maintain a part-time Assistant Organist position - an ideal postgraduate opportunity which allows its holder to develop not only their playing skills, but also provides as much experience in liturgy, planning and schools work as the post-holder (presently Daniel Justin, completing an MMus at Huddersfield University) wants. The team is completed by an organ scholar and of course, with overall responsibility for the department, the Diocesan Director of Music, Ben Saunders.

All of this would be but sound and fury if the content delivered was poor. The educational model puts appropriate repertoire at the heart of our schools work, combining this with meeting the liturgical needs of the school and simultaneously developing the spiritual life of the singers - 'he who

sings prays twice'. The majority of our primary schools have an hourly session every week, more often than not divided between two classes at the discretion of the school and choral director. While repertoire will often include relatively sophisticated and technically demanding music, we never impose an alien 'cathedral' ideal on the school environment; secular repertoire occupies at least half of our schools work and helps us bring imagination and spark to less readily accessible music. Our choral directors aren't given a set curriculum, although joint services and concerts will often dictate a core-shared repertoire, but we are always conscious of the requirements of the National Curriculum, and in many cases school staff are surprised at the levels their children can attain through vocal performance. Performance is at the core of all music-making, so naturally we aim to offer our classes as much of it as possible, a valuable experience whether this is leading an assembly, using a class to teach the school a new mass setting or singing to thousands on a BBC broadcast.

Amidst this plethora of choral music, the organ's 'high esteem' and 'wonderful splendour' might be readily forgotten. It is, in fact, confirmed; the cathedral's magnificent Norman & Beard Edwardian instrument was restored and enlarged by Klais, and inaugurated in 2010. A number of parishes have received high-quality second-hand instruments, and most recently Anton Skrabl installed an acclaimed new instrument in St Patrick's Church, Huddersfield, in addition to restoring the fine Hopkins & Son instrument in St Joseph's Church, Bradford, transforming it into what promises to be one of the region's finest instruments.

Assuming it exists, how can our

success, be defined? I would hope that any of our schools would reflect on our provision and affirm that we have enriched the Catholic life of their school, both for students and staff, both in collective worship and individual prayer. We see in our schools a growing recognition of singing as a central part of human expression - although I doubt it would be described in such portentous terms!

More obviously, a narrower definition of success can be measured by competition participation (a Senior Choirs Award at the National Festival of Music for Youth in Birmingham for their 'outstanding musicianship' and the top UK choir in the senior children's choir class at the Llangollen International Eisteddfod) or the frequency with which our choirs broadcast and record - most recently Radio 2's Christmas Day Sunday Half Hour special, several Radio 4 Daily Services, and most recently the recording of Duruflé's complete choral works for Brilliant Classics. The experience we provide staff with leads to excellent career progression, exemplified by the appointments of Christopher Johns as Director of Music at Leicester Cathedral, Christopher McElroy as Director of Music at Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral and, most recently, Keith Roberts as Head of Choral Music at St Aloysius' College, Glasgow.

Ultimately we would hope that our approach develops a lifelong love of singing in the children we work with, enhancing their faith and giving them all the acknowledged additional benefits that choral singing engenders. Perhaps the old adage that success is 95% perspiration holds true - our staff and singers certainly put the work in - but I hope we might admit to a little more than 5% inspiration!

**Further information can be found at [www.dioceseofleedsmusic.org.uk](http://www.dioceseofleedsmusic.org.uk)**

*Thomas Leech was appointed Director of the Schools Singing Programme in January of this year. Educated at Downing College, Cambridge, he was Organ Scholar at Norwich Cathedral and subsequently Assistant Director of Music at Ripon Cathedral. He holds the prestigious post of Musical Director for Bradford Festival Choral Society and enjoys a busy schedule as a recitalist. His playing has been broadcast on national radio and television and heard on a number of commercial recordings. His debut solo disc will be released later this year.*