

Sing choirs of schoolkids

The Diocese of Leeds is developing a remarkable programme in which the cathedral's musical staff are reaching out to schools to give them access to top-level tuition – and the results are there for all to hear, writes **Abigail Frymann**

Sing after me, 'La.' A "La" falters from a tall boy whose dreadlocks reach to the collar of his school uniform. Standing almost a foot shorter, the music director, Chris McElroy, sings another "La" a tone up. "La," comes the hesitant reply. This routine goes on up a scale, until the music director declares, to the boy's relief: "You've got a very nice high voice." Mr McElroy, 29, is finding out how many tenors and basses there are in the three-month-old choir of St Bede's Catholic Grammar School, a boys' comprehensive in Bradford whose GCSE performance falls below the national average. He suspects that one or two trebles may be trying to sing too low too soon because they're embarrassed that their voices haven't yet broken.

Mr McElroy is assistant director of music at Leeds Cathedral and overseer of 24 choirs in and around Bradford – 22 school choirs and the invitation-only Bradford Boys' Choir and Bradford Girls' Choir. Both are diocesan roles. Staff-run choirs in the diocese during lunchtime have dropped out of fashion, because teachers are overstretched, called on to run a rock band, or "just aren't interested", mutters Mr McElroy. In addition, Bradford's 19 per cent Asian (16 per cent Muslim) population doesn't relate culturally or spiritually to the European-Christian canon of classical music, so classical music-making in and around the city has slumped.

Now the Church has stepped in, with an innovative schools' outreach programme that enables Catholic schools to pay for one of the cathedral music staff to run a choir for an hour a week. It was the vision of Ben Saunders, Diocesan Director of Music, and often involves Mr McElroy or his assistant, Chris Johns, 31, starting a choir from scratch.

Back at St Bede's, Mr McElroy is pleased that 14-year-old James Oxford's voice is a genuine tenor. There are only a handful of broken voices in St Bede's choir, so he and Mr Johns are hunting for anyone willing to have a go. Ask any music teacher: it's not easy getting boys to sing in a choir, but James doesn't mind. "I love performing. All these people watching you – you feel part of something, feel proud of yourself."

Mr Johns can be heard through a wall teaching the choir's 40 or so members lines

from a two-part arrangement of "You'll never walk alone". Their sound is rough-hewn but after their first performance two days earlier at the boldly named Third Annual Gala Concert in the school hall, confidence and motivation are running high. Choirs from seven Catholic schools performed that evening, joining forces for a finale: a medley from the musical *Grease*.

Each school that joins the scheme gets an hour's specialist tuition a week, plus concert time. Primary schools pay £1,500 a year, secondaries such as St Bede's, £3,000. That covers half of Mr McElroy's salary (the diocese pays the other half) and all of Mr Johns'. "The tricky thing was getting



Choir practice at St Bede's.
Photo: Kippa Matthews

headteachers to commit funds," says Mr Saunders (whom Mr McElroy describes as "very persuasive – to my benefit"). "Schools are getting cathedral-quality trained musicians who can lift singing to a different level," Mr Saunders told me. He is eager to offer the scheme as a model for others. With Mr McElroy he gave a talk entitled "Outreach and getting funding for it" at a conference at Westminster Cathedral for

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Catholic cathedral music directors at the end of April. He is an eloquent ambassador for a vibrant singing culture, but he is also realistic about the need to think about the long term. "I went to headteachers' conferences and pitched ideas to them about running highly qualified singing programmes in schools. Coupling the work with cathedral work, we're able to attract a different sort of musician than a school could attract."

The programme costs £100,000 but he says it "is always expanding at a low cost". There are 99 Catholic schools and one Catholic Sixth Form College in the Diocese of Leeds, so there are 77 more to attract. Of the 10 or so musicians employed full-time in the Catholic Church in Britain, says Mr McElroy, four of them will then be working in the diocese. And local headteachers have welcomed Mr Saunders' idea. Maureen Cairns, head of St Winefride's Catholic Primary School, says that value for money is just one of the benefits the vocal training offers. Others include new repertoire to explore, and improved self-esteem and self-confidence. "If they've got self-esteem in one area, they'll bring it into other areas and further their learning generally."

There are still many pressures on the curriculum despite the Government's recent initiative to encourage more singing in primary schools. And the Catholic factor goes a long way. "We're a Catholic school

and they prepare the children to learn things for the liturgy."

Frank Ashcroft, deputy head at the all-girls St Joseph's College, rates "that extra level of expertise" among the benefits of choir membership, which also include appreciation of the value of teamwork, of the need for self-discipline and delayed gratification, and the opportunity it provides for students and staff of neighbouring Catholic schools to work together.

Mr Saunders, Mr McElroy and Mr Johns know their roles are in part pastoral. Mr Johns tells with frustration of a talented boy he invited to join the Bradford Boys' Choir and who didn't show up to his first rehearsal because, as Mr McElroy discovered, he had been taken into care. Mr McElroy wants to track him down and keep him involved "so we don't lose him".

One level up from the schools' choirs, the Bradford Boys' Choir and Girls' Choir exist to cater for the area's most talented voices. Their rapid success has dragged Mr McElroy and Mr Johns into the territory of parents' committee meetings (fundraising, CRB checks, concert date clashes, how much to charge for the forthcoming CDs) and is getting parents more involved in their children's lives. Some day the two ensembles may rival the Leeds cathedral choirs. In their first year the Girls' Choir has sung for Radio 4's *Daily Service*, and given a performance under John Rutter. In

November two episodes of *Songs of Praise* will feature first the cathedral choirs and secondly members from all 24 Bradford choirs. How have they managed to secure such high-profile engagements?

"Reputation. Both Ben and I have played on Radio 4, 3 and 2," says Mr McElroy, who matter-of-factly steers his ensembles from one achievement to the next, "but I've been surprised they've got this far so quickly."

Over in Leeds the four cathedral choirs are likewise inclusive. No expensive single-sex choir school exists to limit their intake, so choristers – boys and girls as young as seven who get in by audition – come by taxi, car or bus from all over the city. The choirs take it in turns to sing for the four midweek Masses and vespers but boy trebles and girl sopranos are kept separate because of the differences in their voices. Non-Catholics, indeed non-Christians, are welcome.

Leeds is the first cathedral in Britain to offer choral scholarships to female students and the only one where women regularly sing during the week. Choral scholar and soprano Sarah Kelly, 19, says: "We [women] are holding our own in cathedrals. There's a shortage of trebles and male altos and if we can sing the notes well, I don't think God would care who's singing them." In the background the adult choir is racing through Mozart's *Requiem*. They'll perform it after six hours of rehearsals and the soloists are all choir members.

The Bishop of Leeds, Arthur Roche, who is also chairman of the International Commission for English in the Liturgy (ICEL), and chairman of the department for Christian life and worship for the bishops' conference, is "extremely proud" of the cathedral's music. He emphasises: "Catholics have a right to experience good liturgy in their cathedral," and it is vital for understanding the value of one's faith.

Apparently the Anglican cathedral in Bradford has been grumbling that Mr Saunders has been pinching all the good singers. One reason choristers might choose Leeds Catholic Cathedral, he says, is the repertoire. Anglican cathedrals stick mostly with their own Victorians and Edwardians – Howells, Stanford, Darke, Vaughan Williams – while Catholic ones make better use of the Renaissance writers – Lassus, Lotti, Taverner – and plainchant. That said, the choirs do sing services with Leeds Parish Church and the other Yorkshire cathedrals.

Finding the singers and cultivating them is a slog – Mr McElroy and Mr Johns work 60-hour weeks, drive 300 miles a week, and only part of their day is spent with polished voices, but the project is taking the cathedral with all its resources out to the diocese and achieving a rare combination of inclusivity and excellence. As Jenny Street, mother of 10-year-old Bradford Boys' Choir treble Jake, says: "You never lose that buzz; you nearly burst, you're so proud."

■ Bradford Boys' and Girls' Choirs:
www.bradfordyouthchoir.org

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