

THE CHORISTER

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INNER CITY CHORISTRY REVIVAL

Tim Penn reports on a vibrant approach to reviving the chorister tradition in West Yorkshire

In the eight years since **Benjamin Saunders** arrived as **Director of Music** at the **Roman Catholic Diocese of Leeds**, children's music in West Yorkshire has flourished. He has helped to create one of the biggest children's choral singing programmes in the country. Large numbers of children are singing again in earnest, and to an increasingly high standard; as well as fulfilling a vital role in the daily life of Leeds Cathedral and other city churches around the diocese, the choirs are succeeding in national and international competition, and appearing regularly in BBC broadcasts.

Benjamin was in Bath for an organ recital tour on May Day. Leeds has provided much of the inspiration for Bath Abbey's new choral programme, so Benjamin was kind enough to give an interview to *The Chorister* during a window in his rehearsal schedule. He spoke about his team's extraordinary success in widening community participation in choral and classical music. It emerged that if Benjamin is part-organist and part-choir director, he is also a large part social entrepreneur.

When Benjamin arrived in Leeds in 2002, the long-term decline of parish choirs was affecting how many children were able to move to the higher challenge of cathedral choristry. He rapidly realised that unless he did something

about it the cathedral chorister tradition could disappear over the course of his career and, bluntly, there would be nothing left to conduct.

But rather than start his revival in the leafy suburbs, Benjamin went directly to the schools of inner-city Bradford: "What I want to see is children who might have ended up underachieving instead going on to music scholarships at university... I thought, if we can do it in Bradford, in a multicultural environment, where only 45% of the children are Catholic and the rest Anglican or Muslim (and we have Muslims in our choirs too) then we can do it anywhere."

Many primary and senior school heads (and not just in Bradford) have difficulty securing sufficient staff expertise to support music education at any level. As a consequence of this decline in the availability of music teaching skills, communal singing has dropped off, with schools increasingly having to rely upon sing-along CDs or popular music which is pitched below children's natural singing register: "Children are not taught to sing high," says

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Benjamin. This is particularly true among boys, where the culture, sometimes sadly reinforced by teachers, is that it's a girls' thing. Indeed, when Benjamin took over in Leeds, provision of singing in schools often focused on youth and kids' choirs outside lesson times, and these tended to comprise girls and very few boys: a hangover from the time when it was considered inappropriate - either sexist, elitist, or both - to separate boys and girls for such activities.

"I think it's understood now

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that in some circumstances boys do much better on their own, and singing is one of them," says Benjamin.

By offering schools access to the high level of musical professionalism which comes with the cathedral choir tradition, the diocese was able to solve that problem. And once the Bradford pilot cluster was working, it was much easier to persuade other school heads in the region. In fact, according to Benjamin, some were even clamouring to get started.

Benjamin's team has built a pyramid system with 45 school choirs (37 primary and eight secondary) in Leeds, Bradford, Huddersfield, Wakefield and Harrogate area reaching 1300 children for at least an hour a week. Crucially, these sessions take place in lesson times so that it creates no extra-curricula conflict for those parents who are particularly hard-pressed. From this talent pool are formed specialist city choirs: currently five for boys singing treble, and four girls-only. These attract the more able singers, those who feel they want to take their ability further. And then it is from these choirs that the top layer of talent is drawn to make the cathedral choirs.

Given that the deep pool of musical ability these days is going largely untapped, how many children actually have the capacity to join the ranks of cathedral choristers? "About one in twenty," asserts Benjamin.

But if 45 professionally-led choirs were not enough, from September the primary school of Holy Rosary and St Anne's (which serves the inner-city area of Chapel-town in Leeds) will be the first state primary to become an official cathedral choir school. This particular project is being run by one of Leeds' four choral directors, Sally Egan, who has swapped a former life as vocal coach to Westminster Cathedral and Westminster Abbey choirs, to return to a school where she was once a pupil.

Children will receive two singing lessons a week at the new Leeds cathedral choir school, and from Year 2 will also start playing an instrument. The expectation is that within a year the children will be good enough to perform weekly lunchtime masses at Leeds Cathedral. Singing will be used throughout the curriculum, with teachers learning how to give instructions in song to help children learn intonation.

This may be the team's toughest challenge yet: to create musical excellence in a school where there are 26 different first languages spoken, and one in 10 children is from an asylum-seeker family.

But it would also be wrong to see the scheme simply as a feeder into the church. The value to the schools in terms of improved academic performance, concentration and discipline has been fully appreciated. "And it's about re-establishing music as a corporate activity through

which a school gets to express its unity," says Benjamin. For example, in Huddersfield, All Saints Catholic College formed a choir in 2007 in conjunction with The Opal Foundation and Benjamin's assistant director of music, Chris McElroy, partly inspired by Gareth Malone's BBC TV series *The Choir*. Within a year it had taken first prize in Opal's Magic of Music competition at the Royal Albert Hall, thereby winning a place to compete in The World Choir Games in Graz, Austria, where the choir went on to win a bronze medal against many more long-established ensembles.

Competition and broadcast success has been crucial in demonstrating to school heads the value-for-money proposition of professionally-led choral teaching incorporated into the curriculum. While funding sources such as the government-backed Music Manifesto were helpful in getting some of the projects started, Benjamin expects that tighter central government budgets going forward will reinforce that direct collaboration between schools and the diocesan music team is a more sustainable model.

For details of the new Bath Abbey Schools Singing Programme, please contact Dr Peter King, the Abbey's Director of Music, on 01225 422462 or email pking@bathabbey.org