

A week in the life of a Diocese of Leeds Choral Director

Ever wondered what your choir director does all week when they are not at your school?

Although in many ways there is no such thing as a typical working week for me, there are some constants, one of which is the cup of coffee I make myself when I get up in the morning. Unlike many people, I have to set my alarm earlier on a Sunday than for any other day of the week (usually for 7am, if I have to be at the cathedral for the early Mass or if the Bradford Boys are singing at St Joseph's) and it can be gone 1pm before I have the chance to stop for lunch, so I need that shot of caffeine to prepare me for the day. And it has to be real coffee, not instant. I was delighted a few years ago to discover on eBay a filter machine that makes a single cup, which I keep at home, and there's also a supply of one-cup filters in the back of my car, so that I can make myself a coffee if ever I have ten minutes to kill in a school between sessions. When I give it up for Lent, I really notice!

But that's where the routine ends. On a weekday, if the lesson in my first school of the day is at 9:30am, I need to be ready to leave the flat by about 8:50am in order to get through the rush-hour traffic in time, so I'll usually drink the coffee quickly before jumping in the shower and then, still in my bath robe, downloading my emails (there are usually a good number from Mr McElroy to deal with!) while shovelling a bowl of fruit and fibre into my mouth (if I've remembered to go shopping and have both cereal and milk in the flat). On days when my first session is later, I may check my email first, which can easily lead to my spending an hour or two in my pyjamas in front of the computer (and to a second cup of coffee) if there's lots of admin that needs doing and getting showered and dressed just in time to leave home at 11am or thereabouts.

Of course, once I'm on the road, every day is different, depending on which schools I'm going into. In most places I do singing with year 5 and/or year 6, but I do see some year 4 children and in one school I've even started working with a reception class, which is a new challenge (and huge fun!). When we're working on a project involving lots of schools, such as this evening's concert or the Radio Two 'Sunday Half Hour' and 'Songs of Praise' recordings, I'll find myself teaching the same songs in all the schools. At other times, different schools will be learning different pieces for different occasions, such as school assemblies, local music festivals and First Holy Communion services, or to tie in with work being done in other areas of the curriculum: I remember having a great time teaching a year 5 group to sing Beatles songs when they were learning about the 1960s at the end of the last school year.

When the bell goes at the end of afternoon school, I know that most of the children I've been teaching won't be thinking about music, but I nearly always have another practice or service (or both) to go on to. On Mondays, Wednesdays and those Tuesdays when the Bradford Boys aren't rehearsing, I have to hope that the A647 isn't so busy that I can't get over to Leeds in time to play the organ or conduct the choir at the evening services at the cathedral. On a Thursday, I don't have any immediate worries on that front, as the Bradford Boys rehearse at St Cuthbert and the First Martyrs' School, where I have my last lesson of the day, but Leeds Philharmonic Society also rehearses on a Thursday evening, so if it's one of the weeks when I'm working with them, I have to resist the temptation to go for a drink and a chinwag with Mr Roberts after the practice, if I'm going to get anything to eat before 10pm!

You might think, having read this far, that, come six o' clock, I'd be ready to go home and put my feet up, and sometimes you'd be right. But as any of you who learns an instrument will know, it's very important to practise regularly and that doesn't change just because you've been doing it as long as I have! So after Mass has finished, and the doors are locked, I'll often go into the cathedral and spend some time making sure that I'm on top of the music I have to play the following weekend or later in the week. Even if I am tired, I always enjoy having the place to myself for a couple of hours and always stop on my way out to say a quick prayer of thanks for the gift of music and the pleasure it gives to me and all whom I work with.

That's a lot of people, one way and another. More than you might realise, in fact, because in addition to the 500 or so singers in Bradford and Leeds that I work with, I'm also conductor of the Tees Valley Youth Orchestra, which meets in Middlesbrough on a Friday night. While there are some similarities between conducting an orchestra and conducting a choir, there are many differences, the most obvious one being that while a choir such as the Bradford Boys' Choir usually sings in four parts, a full-sized symphony orchestra has at least 24, and in most cases 30 or more. The pieces are also longer (one movement of a symphony can last over 20 minutes), so my Friday morning is usually spent (with a big mug of coffee) planning what we're going to rehearse writing a list of instructions for the instrumental tutors who sometimes work with the individual sections of the orchestra for the first half of the rehearsal. Usually I'm able to arrange things so that I don't have to be in Middlesbrough on the same day as I have things to do in Yorkshire, but I have been known to yo-yo up and down the A1 twice in a weekend in order to be in the right place at the right time!

According to the creation story in Genesis, God rested on the seventh day and on a Saturday, I endeavour to follow that good example. That said, it's not uncommon for extra rehearsals, concerts, organ practice, unfinished admin and the like to get in the way of these good intentions, but if at all possible, I like to laze around in bed for an hour or two, listening to the radio or reading and enjoying not having to get up.

Except, of course, to make that lovely steaming mug of coffee.

Christopher Johns



For me as a parent it's just been an incredible opportunity to hear my boys sing in such a great choir. Hearing Jake's solo part in their last performance at the Cathedral filled me with joy.

Mrs Street (Mother of Charlie and Jake Street, BYC Boys' Choir)

I was honoured to watch the concert at the Rosary Basilica in Lourdes when the girls received two standing ovations – it was so emotional and something I will never forget!

Mrs Pickard, (Mother of Amy and Megan Pickard, BYC Girls' Choir)