

How we built a top-flight Catholic choir

Children from inner-city Bradford are making sublime music, says Thomas Leech

When I was asked to plan the music for a live broadcast on BBC Radio 4 of Mass at St Joseph's Church in Bradford on November 5, I was naturally conscious of the resonance of the date. I was determined that the repertoire would be unequivocally Catholic. What better music than a chant setting of the Ordinary of the Mass, and who better to sing it than the 60 or so senior members of Bradford Catholic Youth Choir?

The 11th-century chant of the *Missa Cum Jubilo* featured alongside two of Newman's great hymns from *The Dream of Gerontius* and the hypnotically simple setting of *Anima Christi* by Mgr Marco Frisina.

There was no elite choir school in action, no well-resourced private school music department, but rather a host of children from inner-city Bradford. They are a group of true cultural and social diversity, and, I hope, true quality, too. With a full membership of more than 100 young singers, split across two junior choirs, a boys' choir and a girls' choir, they have enjoyed some extraordinary opportunities. These include appearances on BBC One, Radio 2, Radio 3 and Radio 4, medals at the World Choir Games in Riga and concerts ranging from Paco Peña's *Requiem por la Terra* to the children's choir part in Mahler's epic *Eighth Symphony*.

The singers have forged a fabulous partnership with the Gabrieli Consort, not only bringing the Gabrielis into the heart of Bradford for concerts at St Joseph's but also enabling choir members to benefit from the consort's superb vocal coaches and renowned artistic director, Paul McCreesh. Most important, though, are the regular Masses at churches in Bradford and Keighley: musical excellence is a byproduct of faith rather than an end in itself.

Where do these opportunities come from? How are the foundations for the children's achievement laid?

First and foremost, by quality of content. It would be ridiculous to remove challenge from the curriculum in literacy or maths. Great writers and complex problems are brought to life by inspiring teachers. Yet when it comes to music – and, even worse, the texts set to that music – children are so often robbed of inspiration and heritage by



Bradford Catholic Youth Choir performs with the Gabrieli Consort

a totally misplaced cultural nervousness. Quality is somehow equated with inaccessibility or the often fatuous tilting at whatever elitism is supposed to be.

With demanding content comes a corresponding demand on delivery. It takes a special quality in staff to move between singing games with five-year-olds, to teenagers learning Praetorius for the Gabrielis, polyphony and chant for Mass, and secular repertoire for competitions and concerts. Inspiration is the order of the day, and our choral directors – working with some 1,000 children every week in the Bradford district – are extraordinarily engaging.

A vague sense of worthiness doesn't cut much ice with trustees and governing bodies

Excellent content and delivery would be impossible without financial support. A sound structure – developed by Leeds diocese's director of music, Ben Saunders, and my predecessor Christopher McElroy – always holds our work in schools at the heart of the programme. Schools buy into this, and from the start St Bede's and St Joseph's Catholic College have supported our youth choirs in Bradford.

In such a challenging financial environment nothing can be taken for granted: we must prove our worth. The glamour and excitement of our headline events matter less than the child suddenly finding a means of self-expression in a session, the pupil with

multiple barriers to learning volunteering to sing a solo and astounding staff with her singing, or the boy moved to articulate his faith through song.

Careful curriculum-linked planning and reporting is essential. After all, schools are making decisions based on evidence and a vague sense of worthiness doesn't cut much ice with academy trustees and governing bodies. With the programme reaching more than 3,500 children every week, our choirs have at their core the evangelisation and then catechesis of the participants. This is recognised as a key part of the diocese's youth evangelisation.

Overseeing all this can feel relentless. Recently I arrived at St Joseph's for the patronal feast feeling exhausted, wishing I was heading home, nervous that the choirs were underprepared and might not turn up on an unfamiliar night. But the liturgy was beautiful, and we pushed our luck, keeping the children back for a couple of photographs. To my surprise, someone intoned the Sanctus, and suddenly the church was filled with the great hymn of praise. This glorious sound and wholly natural expression came from such a diverse group of children, singing in one of the most deprived wards in the country. They inspired me, filled me with optimism and revived determination in our mission.

Thomas Leech is the director of the Diocese of Leeds' schools singing programme. Alongside his colleagues Alex Kyle and Lucy Appleyard, he directs Bradford Catholic Youth Choir