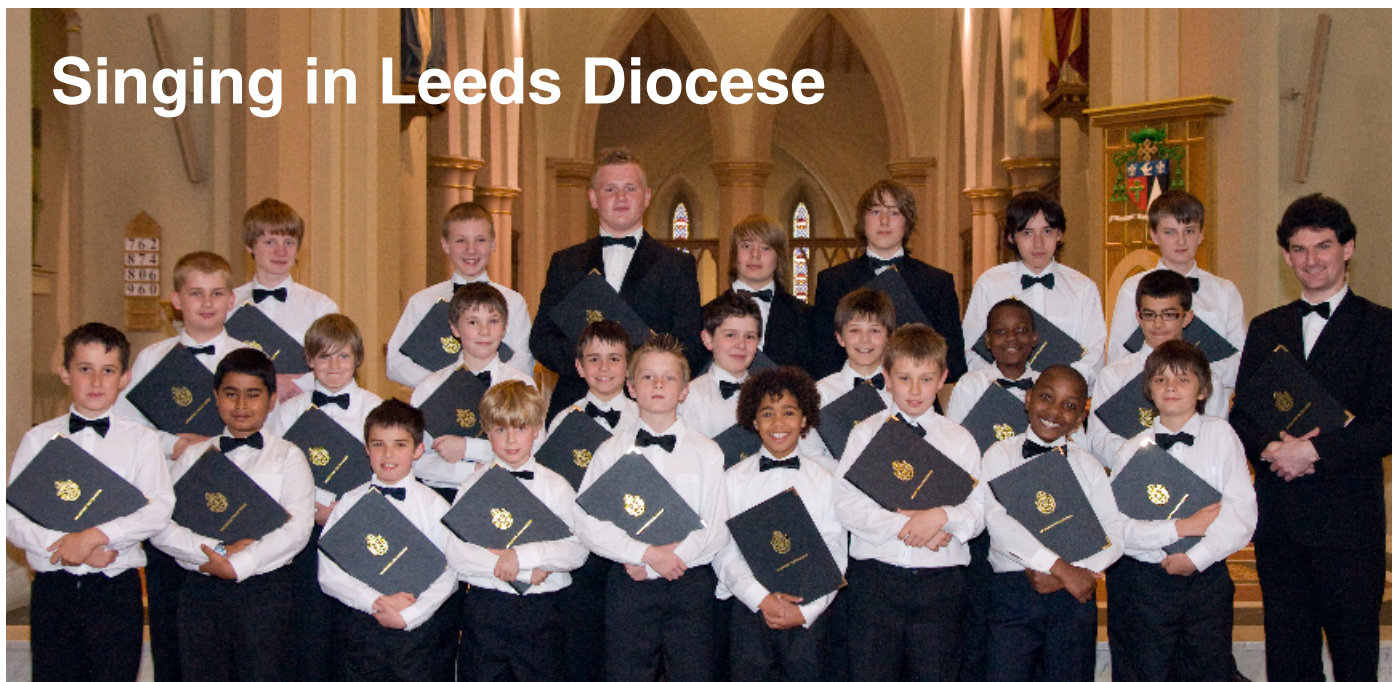


Singing in Leeds Diocese



Until I saw my present job advertised, I was completely ignorant of the existence of the Diocese of Leeds and certainly had not heard anything about any musical activity it might be home to. That was in February 2006 and when I joined the department the following October I was one of three full-time musicians. Two and a half years on, there are seven of us on the staff (not including the Cathedral Organ Scholar and 18 Choral Scholars) and it's been a while since anyone's responded 'Oh, does Leeds have a cathedral?' when I've told them where I work.

Despite the fact that five of us were students at Cambridge, we are a remarkably diverse team and certainly one of the strengths of the department is the breadth of skills and experience we bring to our common task. Ben Saunders came to his current position as Diocesan Director of Music in 2002 via the traditional route, having been Assistant Organist at Edinburgh, Blackburn and Chester Cathedrals and Organ Scholar at Downing College, Cambridge, prior to that. Similarly, Tom Leech, the most recent addition to the team, was until Christmas Assistant Director of Music at Ripon Cathedral, following organ scholarships at Norwich Cathedral and, as coincidence would have it, also Downing



Mark Keyworth

College, Cambridge. Assistant Diocesan Director of Music Chris McElroy, having been Organ Scholar at Leeds, Wakefield and Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedrals, spent a number of years working in a large parish in New Jersey before returning to Leeds in 2004.

The greater part of my own formative involvement with choral music, on the other hand, has been as a singer rather than an organist, first as a chorister at Derby Cathedral and then as a Choral Exhibitioner at Jesus College, Cambridge. After a period living, working and studying in Germany, I spent three years as a post-graduate student in Durham, the last also as Cathedral Organ Scholar. Keith Roberts and Sally Egan likewise have a singing background. Keith was a chorister at Westminster Cathedral and countertenor Choral Scholar at King's College, Cambridge and, prior to taking up his position in the Diocese of Leeds at the beginning of this academic year, worked as a freelance singer, conductor, composer and arranger in and

around London. Sally was also a student at Cambridge and studied singing in Paris and London. In addition to her career in opera and oratorio, she brings to her work in Leeds extensive experience of training trebles,

including the choristers of Westminster Cathedral and Westminster Abbey.

Sally, Tom, Keith and I all share the title 'Choral Director' and it is our work in the Catholic primary schools of the diocese, alongside Chris McElroy's work in the Bradford and Keighley secondary schools, that distinguishes our day-to-day routine from that of cathedral musicians elsewhere. That is not for one moment to say that other music departments haven't got involved in classroom singing. Quite the contrary, the recent government singing initiative has seen successful cathedral outreach projects spring up the length and breadth of the country, one of which was featured in the last edition of *MasterSinger*, and this enthusiasm is hardly surprising, given that cathedral choirmasters are immediately affected by any drop in the standard of singer coming forward at chorister trials. Indeed, I know from my own experience of the early days of the Durham outreach scheme that visits by the choristers to local primary schools encouraged a number of boys to audition for places in the cathedral choir, including one who went on to become Deputy-Head Chorister. The principle difference between schemes of this kind and our schools' singing programme is that our relationship with the schools is ongoing and permanent. I have now been teaching singing in each of the schools I visit weekly for well over two years and while there is only a handful of children who have been in my lessons for all that time, the improvement in the standard of singing, the children's reading ability and general musicianship is palpable. I remember in my first term working hard with a school to get everyone in the

class able to sing a clean, supported top E-flat in the chorus of Bernadette Farrell's *Christ be our Light* for an Advent concert. Earlier this term, I handed out copies of Bob Chilcott's *Can you hear me?* for the first time and children at the same school were confident at reading the upper part of the verse and instinctively supported the rising lines through to the high notes at the end. This scenario is not an isolated case and neither is it, encouragingly, limited to schools in well-to-do middle-class areas. The next school I visited a couple of miles down the road did exactly the same (one child even pulled me up for not breathing properly at the ticks!).

Quite apart from the inherent benefits to children of acquiring a sound vocal technique and learning to sing as a member of a choir (of which I assume the readership of this magazine will need no persuasion!), sustained involvement of the diocesan musicians in the musical life of a school provides exciting performance opportunities, even for those children who are not members of our extra-curricular choirs. A little over a year ago, some 450 children from Bradford and Keighley appeared on BBC One's *Songs of Praise*, in November; around 600 children recorded music for two 'Sunday Half Hour' programmes (the second of which was broadcast on 29th March, 2009), and in May, to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the schools' programme in Bradford, all



children currently involved will take part in a gala concert at St George's Hall, Bradford's premier concert venue. Individual school choirs have also participated in (and won prizes at) local festivals and two took part in the Opal Foundation's 'Magic of Music' competition for newly founded choirs at the Royal Albert Hall last year, at which one won an all-expenses-paid trip to the Choir Olympics in Graz, Austria, where they picked up a bronze medal.

For the past few years, then, singing has very much been part of the curriculum in many of the diocesan schools and we can now say with confidence that no child completing Key Stage Two in the Catholic education system in Bradford this summer can claim never to have been taught how to sing. As with any activity, some will decide that it isn't for them and not pursue it further when they get to secondary school. Equally though, there are others who 'get the bug' early and aren't content with just an hour's singing a week and it's for these children that our auditioned choirs cater. The most recent of these is the Huddersfield Boys' Choir, based at St Patrick's Church in Huddersfield and directed by Keith Roberts. They had their first rehearsal last November and have already sung at a number of services, including Mass on Christmas Day. Chris McElroy recruited the first members of the Bradford Girls' Choir in the summer of 2006

and has quickly steered them to concert and competition success, including a tour to Lourdes and an appearance at the Llangollen International Eisteddfodd last summer. The oldest such choir is the Bradford Boys' Choir (founded in 2005), of which I took over the direction when I joined the department. Since then, it has more than doubled in size from around 15 trebles to over 30 and, as nature has taken its course, seen the lower voices group grow from two (whose voices began to change at the end of my first term in the job) to seven. It won't come as a surprise to learn that the choir is, as a consequence, rather top-heavy at present, but the fact that there are six trebles in each of years seven and eight means that it probably won't be long until the balance is redressed. The choir started a residency at St Joseph's Church in Bradford a year and a half ago and sings Mass and Vespers there once a month, which has given them routine and focus. To help them keep up with the pace of learning new music, they now have half an hour's theory tuition (in two groups, one for beginners, one for the more advanced) before the full rehearsal on a Thursday and the upper voices also rehearse fortnightly on a Tuesday. There are some fine soloists coming through and it was a particular pleasure to hear one of the founder members of the changing voices group (who, as a treble, was also a founder member of the choir) sing the baritone solos in Schubert's *Mass in G* on a recent Sunday, one of the pieces that we will be performing on tour in Germany this summer. For some of the boys this will be the first time they will have travelled abroad.

One of the delights of being part of a large team is the ability to draw on colleagues' experience and areas of expertise in the development of our individual areas of responsibility. With each of us being so busy with our own projects, it would be easy to let this fall by the wayside and it is usually in quick ten-minute chats driving from one school to the next (thank goodness for hands-free headsets!) or impromptu trips to one of Bradford's many fine curry houses after a boys' choir rehearsal that we take time out to talk over ideas. Precisely which of these are put into practice and in which order is difficult to predict, but I take it as the sign of a healthy department that we are limited only by the number of hours in the day and not by lack of inspiration.

Christopher Johns
Choral Director
Diocese of Leeds



inspiring choral leadership