

SURE FOUNDATION

A foundation with roots in the heart of the city:
St Anne's Cathedral, Leeds

The Catholic Diocese of Leeds has the largest choral foundation in the country, and it keeps on growing, setting precedent after precedent. Daniel Potts reports

The Catholic Diocese of Leeds Music Education Program has, over the past decade, expanded enormously. It has played a major part in broadening horizons and raising aspirations for thousands of children in this major, though quietly modest, urban area, and is now the largest such music education program in the country. The model employed, initiated and designed by Leeds Catholic Diocese director of music Benjamin Saunders, the Schools Singing Programme (SSP) is now being emulated in other regions. Appointed in 2002, his brief was simply 'to expand the music education activities of the Catholic Diocese of Leeds'.

THE SCHOOLS SINGING PROGRAM

Currently, the SSP engages around 2,500 children and young people. The Diocese itself encompasses West Yorkshire, the East Riding, North Yorkshire and parts of Greater

Manchester and Lancashire. Forty-three schools, mainly primary schools with three secondary schools, are involved. In addition to the 43 school choirs there are six boys' and six girls' extra-curricular auditioned choirs. The opportunity to be auditioned for these 12 extra groups is presented to the most promising girls and boys in the school choirs. Some of the auditioned boys' and girls' choirs centre on Leeds Roman Catholic Cathedral; however, some are found in other major centres, including Bradford, Keighley, Harrogate and Huddersfield. When asked about the separation of the auditioned choirs into boys-only and girls-only choirs, Benjamin Saunders indicated that it was the best way to get the boys interested in joining a choir: 'Generally we have started the boys' choir first before the girls' choir. This normalises the experience for them and makes it their own. We did this in Bradford, where we first introduced the program.' He observed that 'we found 99 per cent girls in other programmes'.

An impressive level of engagement, I'm sure you'll agree. Especially when we consider that following his appointment in 2002, Saunders inherited only one girls' choir. The appointment in 2004 of the diocesan assistant director of music, Christopher McElroy, provided an important extra time resource. Following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the tradition of chant and polyphony was neglected. The responsibility for the see's music depended on the incumbent musical director's extensive list of priorities. The result was specific excellence at the expense of broad-ranging engagement and sustainability. In the SSP, that previously neglected Catholic tradition of Gregorian chant is incorporated into the pedagogy of the music specialists hired by the schools from the diocesan music service. Saunders explains that it is a good tool for introducing the general principles of reading musical notation. 'There is one less line on the staff, which simplifies things, and there is no rhythmic value given to the notes: only the order of notes from left to right is important at first.' SSP director Thomas Leech says that it is important 'to get the younger children used to handling scores and being around the music.' At the earliest stages, pitch-matching is employed to invoke musicality.



Huddersfield Girls' Choir on tour in Liverpool

Thomas Leech indicates that the choral directors like Lucy Appleyard, who provide music and singing lessons during regular school hours, are given a great deal of freedom in their choice of repertoire: 'It's about 50-50, secular and sacred'. The provision of school-hour music education sourced from the diocesan music service has, however, 'led perhaps inevitably to a reduction in music education provided directly by many of the schools'.

The SSP program is open to children from all backgrounds and faiths. Forty-five per cent of the children engaged by the Bradford part of the operation are either Muslim or Anglican. Where currently the 43 state schools buying in the service are Roman Catholic schools, the diocese is now beginning to engage state schools without any formal connection to the Catholic Church.

If you were to hear the phrase 'cathedral

choir school', you might imagine an exclusive, fee-paying school with a high degree of selection. Holy Rosary & St Anne's Catholic Primary serves Chapeltown, one of the most deprived areas of Leeds. In 2010 it became one of the country's newest cathedral choir schools. It is believed to be the first state primary to make the switch. Three quarters of the school's pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds. Twenty-six first languages are spoken at the school. Around one in ten pupils is from an asylum-seeker family. Every child is taught to sing and play instruments and to become fluent in reading and writing music. Thomas Leech said that, while it might be expected that the provision of musical education of this sort, and of that throughout the entirety of the Schools Singing Program, broadens the horizons of the children engaged, 'it also reflects the aspirations that we have for them'. ■

LEEDS: THE UK'S 'THIRD CITY'

Leeds: what do you know about it? The Leeds city region – an economic area with the city at the core – has a population of around 3,000,000. Population estimates indicate the city is the third largest in the UK. The urban economy is the fourth largest in the UK and it is considered the cultural, financial and commercial centre of the wider West Yorkshire area. During the Industrial Revolution wool was the dominant commodity. Now, Leeds is the largest legal centre in the UK outside London. Financial and insurance services, backed up with clusters of cavernous call centres, make Leeds the fifth in rank in these industries.

Its education infrastructure is



correspondingly large. The city is served by three universities, any number of further education colleges, and one conservatoire – Leeds College of Music. It has one of the largest student populations in the country and, in line with the national trend, further education students in the city are increasingly home-grown.

STAFF FOCUS: LUCY APPELYARD



“ I am one of three full-time choral directors working for the diocese of Leeds, and my job is mainly based in Huddersfield, where I run the Huddersfield Boys' and Girls' choirs. I also work in primary schools delivering singing lessons. A large part of what I do is helping children to discover and enjoy singing and to use their voices in a healthy way. I encourage good posture and breathing from the outset and help children to access and develop their upper register – their head voice. The repertoire includes sacred and secular songs in unison and two parts, rounds, Taizé chants and hymns as well as plenty of fun warm-ups and musical games. I find that children enjoy singing hymns and Latin motets just as much as simpler songs and often enjoy the challenge of this music much more. We can often underestimate what children are capable of and assume they will choose to sing a pop song over something more traditional and challenging, but in my experience this is not the case. I usually gauge the popularity of a song by the 'yes factor' – something that I heard most recently after announcing we were going to sing Laudate Dominum by Perosi (which prompted a resounding 'YESSSS' from the girls' choir!). ”