

# Roll out the choirs

*Youth choirs are springing up all over Leeds and West Yorkshire thanks to the pioneering work of the catholic cathedral. Ann Elise Smoot reports*

To be honest, when I moved to England 15 years ago, if I had been given three guesses to name the urban cathedral in the UK which would eventually establish a music and outreach programme so huge that it involves almost 2,000 children each week, I am not sure Leeds Cathedral would have featured on my list. Yet with the unstinting support of the diocese of Leeds, in financial partnership with its primary and secondary schools, that is precisely what Benjamin Saunders, Leeds Cathedral's director of music, and his staff has done.

The diocese of Leeds has now built up the largest church-driven programme of choral music for young people in the United Kingdom, a remarkable achievement. It maintains a staggering 45 choirs which meet weekly and at present involve about 1,800 children. There are two main elements to the system: auditioned choirs for boys and girls, and the diocesan schools' singing programme, where choral directors lead the development and training of choirs in regional clusters of primary and secondary schools. A staff of four full-time choral directors, one part-time director, an administrator and several part-time organists keeps the whole operation going.

Three of the choirs are based in the cathedral itself: a boys' choir, a girls' choir and an adult choir. Organ and choral scholarships worth £2,500 and £1,500 respectively per annum for local university students are also available, providing vital (and often overlooked) training and financial assistance for that age group. These choirs sing the ten sung weekly services in the cathedral on rotation, with the direction and organ playing undertaken by different combinations of staff as arranged. But in addition to the cathedral choirs, a huge outreach programme is carried out in primary and secondary schools across West Yorkshire, using the unique model of financial partnership between the schools and the cathedral. In Leeds itself, this part of the programme is run in accordance with the aims of Music Manifesto's national singing programme Sing Up. The work at present is funded through a grant from the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This funding is due to cease soon; Benjamin Saunders is not deterred by this, however. 'The funding from central government has been useful in extending the cathedral singing programme into more schools. As it is only of a short-term nature, though, the

diocese will bring all the current Sing Up schools into our own more sustainable outreach model in the next academic year.'

The outreach from the cathedral will soon be delivered in two strands. Currently, the singing classes in Leeds are supported by cathedral choristers who visit the primary schools. And now from January 2009, the new Leeds Children's Choir will rehearse weekly at the cathedral. Next year will also see the creation of the Diocese of Leeds Youth Choir (also to rehearse at the cathedral), for young people aged 15 to 21 – a particularly important development as choral opportunities for students in this age range are often difficult to find. (Sing Up, for example, is geared to primary school children; what happens to those children in whom a love of singing has been awakened but who have no choral opportunities available to them once they enter secondary school?)

The reach of the diocesan programme now extends far outside Leeds itself, and continues to grow. In September 2006, the provision for singing instruction expanded to cover every primary school in Bradford. (Secondary schools in Bradford had already entered into partnership with the diocese in 2003 to offer a plethora of choral opportunities for their students, with rehearsal actually taking place during – rather than after – school hours.) The result is that all Catholic school children in Bradford from the age of six to 18 now benefit from regular professional choral leadership. In addition to the school choirs, the Bradford Boys' and Girls' Choirs were formed in 2005 and 2007 respectively, and have already released a CD, following recent broadcasts on Radio 4 and BBC One.

Not content to rest there, the dio-

cese has recently launched a similar programme in Huddersfield schools. On top of that, an auditioned choir for boys, rehearsing after school, was established this autumn, and will be resident at St Patrick's in the town centre.

Two things are particularly inspiring about what Leeds has managed to establish. First, the myth that singing is no longer seen as 'cool' among boys has clearly been dispelled by the overwhelming response of boy singers; Benjamin Saunders pointed out that there are no fewer than four choirs launched in the past five years in the area which cater solely to boys. Second, anyone remotely sniffy about the standard of performance that a committed professional is able to coax out of children with little or no musical background needs to think again. The success of one of the choirs (All Saints Catholic College Choir in Huddersfield, which was formed only in 2007) at the World Choir Games in Austria last July is testament to the fact that what is happening in and around Leeds is special. In a competition that attracted over 400 choirs from 91 countries, many of which had been established for years, the All Saints choir came third overall. Young people in the diocese of Leeds are not just enjoying weekly singing (reason enough in itself for the programme to continue and thrive), but also producing musical performances of an extremely high standard. 'When we started this five years ago, I didn't expect that our school choirs would be broadcasting on the BBC and competing with some of the best choirs in the world,' says

Benjamin Saunders. Yet that is precisely what they are doing. Clearly with enough vision and determination and a gifted and committed staff, anything is possible.

[www.dioceseofleedsmusic.org.uk](http://www.dioceseofleedsmusic.org.uk)



Choral hub:  
Leeds Cathedral