

Yorkshire's angelic voices

The Diocese of Leeds has pioneered a change in the way children in state schools are taught music and is showing how singing in a choir promotes wellbeing and learning development across the curriculum / **By SIMON SCOTT PLUMMER**

DIOCESE OF LEEDS MUSIC, SAMMIE ROSE



IT IS LUNCHTIME on Thursday, the last day of the full working week for Thomas Leech, director of the schools singing programme in the diocese of Leeds. We stop at St Nicholas Catholic Primary School in the east Leeds suburb of Gipton and he takes two classes in the school hall. He tells them about posture, gets them to make “big” and “scrunchy” faces and has them clapping and stamping in rhythm. The girls are generally more enthusiastic than the boys. They sing about foods they would like to eat and then, in an abrupt change of subject matter which makes me smile, they chant “Christus surrexit, Alleluia”.

These two classes are the cutting edge of a structure which began in 2003 and now embraces nearly 7,000 children in 75 Catholic state schools across the Leeds diocese and, through the National Schools Singing Programme (NSSP) started in 2021, has spread to 34 other Catholic dioceses and some Anglican cathedrals. Across the country the programme now involves nearly 40,000 children in 425 schools.

I ask Leech whether any of the children at St Nicholas’ will one day join the singers aged between seven and their early twenties

who take part in eight services a week, from Sunday to Thursday, at St Anne’s Cathedral. He says he doesn’t know. The important thing for him is to give these primary-school children the opportunity to make music.

Where this could lead had become clear that morning when the chamber choir of another inner-city Catholic primary, St Anthony’s in the southern suburb of Beeston, sang at the annual Celebration of Priesthood in the cathedral. The principal celebrant at the Mass was Cardinal Arthur Roche, born in nearby Batley, a former Bishop of Leeds and the prefect of the Dicastery for Divine Worship, assisted by Archbishop John Wilson of Southwark, the current Bishop of Leeds Marcus Stock, the preacher, Robert Igo, the Abbot of Ampleforth, and more than 60 priests of the diocese. Among the congregation was the Lord-Lieutenant of West Yorkshire, Ed Anderson.

THANKS TO Tom Leech’s weekly visits to their school, the children had the chance to play a key part in a great civic and religious occasion. They sang the *Missa de Angelis* “Kyrie” from neumes, the old plainchant notation, and the rest of the Ordinary from a combination of

Choristers at St Anne’s Cathedral, Leeds, come from a wide range of state schools

treble clef and tonic solfa. Their head teacher, Lisa Leonard, has no doubt of the educational value of singing and loves the sound the choir makes. She pointed to the ethnic diversity of her school, where nearly half the pupils have English as a second language.

Funding for the Leeds programme comes from the participating schools, the diocese and private donors. Its excellence and scope have been illustrated by two recent BBC broadcasts from the cathedral. The first, in March, was Choral Vespers, part of the long-running *Choral Evensong* series, in which four of the choirs sang Monteverdi with a captivating purity of tone and vocal agility. The second was Sunday Worship on the feast of Pentecost in June in which 600 pupils from 39 schools across Yorkshire took part.

It is all a far cry from my experience as an Anglican chorister in the 1950s. St George’s, Windsor was a private boys’ boarding school. One of the lay clerks had been at the chapel since the reign of Queen Victoria and all of them had free grace-and-favour lodgings in

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the castle. Social changes since then have profoundly affected the nature of church choirs. The reluctance of parents to send young children to board, the financial costs of maintaining choir schools, exacerbated by the closure of churches during the Covid pandemic and the 20 per cent VAT now payable on private-school fees, the reduced space given to music in primary education, the demise of parish choirs, all have shrunk the pool from which choristers were traditionally chosen. On the credit side has been the recruitment of girls, which has gathered such momentum over the past 30 years that in cathedral choirs they now outnumber boys.

Aiming for high standards in liturgical singing can become an end in itself. Benjamin

Saunders believes that mixed gender groups would rapidly turn into choirs with only girls

Saunders, director of music for the Leeds diocese and the founder of its schools singing programme, sees it as a means of evangelisation and quotes St Thomas Aquinas on the human soul's thirst for beauty, truth and goodness. The bedrock of the cathedral repertoire is Latin plainchant and Renaissance polyphony, though the schedule for the summer term also included works by Johann Ludwig Bach and Rheinberger, Haydn and Mozart, Fauré and Duruflé, and the Tudor masters Tallis and Philips.

With choristers at Leeds coming from a wide range of state schools, rather than from the more tightly controlled structure of a private choir school, Saunders believes in separate boys' and girls' choirs on the grounds that mixed gender groups would rapidly turn into choirs

with only girls. He is anxious to retain the boys when their voices break, easing their transition into the lower parts rather than giving up on them. While I was in Leeds, I went to Vespers, followed by a Mass with plainchant and motets by Victoria and the contemporary English composer Daniel Justin. The next day I heard Langlais' *Missa in simplicitate*, a demanding setting, a motet by the Spanish Renaissance composer Francisco Correa de Arauxo and the "Agnus Dei" from the Tallis' *Mass for Four Voices*. The standard of the various choirs involved was high.

Saunders, who is also the lead consultant for the NSSP, put me in touch with Alexander Binns, director of music at the Anglican cathedral in Derby. With the backing of the new dean, Peter Robinson, singing lessons were started in one school in 2021. The next year saw membership of the NSSP and seed funding from the Vinehill Trust, one of whose aims is to support choirs and organists. A choral director was appointed for the programme, which now involves more than 900 pupils in 18 state primary and secondary schools.

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For our appeal this year, we asked some of our contributors, Board members and trustees to reflect on how, in this Jubilee year, *The Tablet* helps them to be pilgrims of hope.



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Rachel Billington is an author and journalist, and a trustee of *The Tablet*

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HAVING INHERITED a mediocre cathedral choir when he came to Derby six years ago, Binns now has 23 girls and 21 boys plus a seven-strong junior choir and professional lay clerks who sing five services a week. He speaks with pride of a performance of Bach's *St John Passion* during Lent this year in which all the soloists were choir members. But he is concerned that the music in schools programme through which the singing has been transformed will require a significant injection of cash over the next two years if it is to continue to expand.

My visit to Leeds was to hear the cathedral's choirs. But the diocese's outreach also involves instrumental tuition on the melodica, classical accordion, violin, piano and organ, and the teaching of counterpoint. Giving piano lessons to primary-school pupils will be one of the responsibilities of Benjamin Newlove when he takes up the position of organist at the cathedral in September. A fellow of the Royal College of Organists since the age of 20 and until recently director of music at the Anglican church of St Alfege in Greenwich, he is looking forward to working with what he calls "normal kids" in the comprehensive system in which he himself was educated. The organ which he will play is a 1904 Norman and Beard instrument reconstructed by the German organ builder Klais in 2009. He will also organise the annual international organ festival in the cathedral. Newlove will take on a multi-faceted role in a diocese which has pioneered a change in the way music is brought to schools, and cathedral and church choirs are recruited. It promises to be a most rewarding experience.

Simon Scott Plummer was the foreign leader-writer at *The Daily Telegraph*. He still sings in a choir.