

Schools Singing Programme Diocese of Leeds

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Early on in my role for the Diocese of Leeds, I remember a somewhat jaded organist saying 'your programme's so complicated, it would be too much like hard work to dismantle it'. There's a grain of truth under that stony cynicism; purposeful and productive partnerships - be they with schools, higher education, parishes, or other musical organisations - have created a system with results that are compelling to existing and new participants alike. With opportunities for participation far broader than a typical cathedral choir there is real diversity - social, racial and developmental. With that breadth comes organisational relevance and resilience, both feeding into the personal growth and achievements that Josh and Gabrielle describe in their quotes.

Is there a reason why a school could not be part of such a programme? Is there a good reason for cathedrals to continue so much short term, project-based 'outreach' work rather than create sustained school-centred work in state schools? Perhaps it's been easier for a cathedral outside of the traditional Church of England model to innovate - the absence of perceived tradition and quality is surely liberating.

Back in 2002, Leeds Cathedral had a reasonably good Girls' Choir but little else musically. Initial expansion was modest and incremental. Beginning in Bradford, not in the leafy suburbs of north Leeds, it was emphatically not centred on supporting a cathedral choir, but rather on developing a set of choirs that drew from in-school provision and removed as many barriers to participation as possible. An early decision was made to focus efforts on primary schools, a strategy which paid enormous dividends reflected by the number of children who then sang in one of our choirs from the age of 7 or 8 through to 18.'

“ My experiences with the Bradford Catholic Boys' Choir have shaped me as a person. Growing up in inner-city Bradford with limited options, the choir gave me the confidence to aspire to more. From singing weekly vespers at the local church to performing on TV in front of millions, each experience has proven invaluable in my life journey and I will continue to draw on the lessons of resilience and perseverance gained here as I move on to my next chapter at the University of Oxford.



Josh - member BCBC

The positive and sustained impact on the children and schools taking part was - and remains - the most persuasive argument for schools joining the programme; those early participants saw rapid rewards with quality after-school groups providing opportunities to build on the whole-class singing. After only a couple of years the Bradford choirs had sung at the Royal Albert Hall, toured, broadcast liturgies for the BBC and enjoyed competition success. Expansion continued, with partnerships between schools and parish in Huddersfield, only then followed by Leeds where the cathedral choirs were enlarged and a system of junior choirs introduced. As academisation gained pace, we were able to begin a partnership with the largest of the Diocese's multi-academy trusts, and have continued local expansion, most recently developing our provision in and around Halifax.

What looks like a behemoth (at least compared to many church music programmes) began with that blank sheet of A3 paper, and nothing has been as critical as the building of true partnerships with many of the Diocese's schools. I'll try to extract a coherent set of ingredients and method:

Need: For us, the centrality of faith arguably makes working with the Diocese's schools easier (although there's sometimes a misconception that we're force-feeding children neumes...); whatever the context, the case for singing in schools is extremely strong. It is essential to articulate the power, the positive immediacy and long-term impact of music-making

Money: Most cathedral choirs cost a lot of money per child chorister and this presents a huge risk. In many ways we've removed this, with schools buying in our provision at rates similar to other providers, and as a result the Diocese's financial input is one of the smaller elements of the system. This means what you're offering needs to be worth paying for, particularly when many schools remain under enormous financial pressure.

Quality: The quality of teaching has to be outstanding - the days of maverick, disorganised but brilliant musicians blundering into classrooms without any planning is long gone (sadly the tendency to send young musicians - be they organ scholars or recent graduates - into the same environment without support or training is still rather too prevalent). While the professional jargon can be off-putting, for those 30 minutes our staff are brilliant musicians AND classroom teachers. In short, musical quality is not enough. The framework for further achievement must also exist - the after-school offer that extends the classroom work.

Relationships: What do the schools need? What do they think about our delivery? We need to listen, and also guide (providing clear advice on singing alongside Covid-19 being an obvious example). Headteachers need to know we have the interests of the children at the centre of our work, not abstract notions of musical excellence or cheap ways to fund a cathedral choir.

Diversity: Excellent whole-class singing naturally removes many barriers - you remove self-selection, children who would dismiss 'choir' or 'singing' have the chance to engage, most will be enjoying it and, by providing such open access, a diverse cohort will join after-school choirs year in, year out. Choirs (with appropriate support for access) then provide role models and the cycle continues.

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“ I'll be going to Trinity College, Cambridge, to study Natural Sciences. I have been part of Bradford Catholic Youth Choir for seven years and I have gained so much from it, from the once in a lifetime opportunity to sing in the Vatican, to the many friends I have made along the way. One of the highlights for me was singing live on TV for the Christmas Day mass. I've had such an incredible time in choir, none of which would be possible without the Diocese's Schools Singing Programme, it really has been a rewarding and enriching experience which I will cherish for the rest of my life!



Gabrielle - member of BCYC

Our team has to combine excellent vocal ability with superb teaching, at the same time having the musicianship to stretch our best choirs and rise to the challenges that fresh opportunities bring. Without that quality I suspect we wouldn't enjoy a fruitful relationship with Gabrieli Roar for instance - a programme that has pushed the Bradford groups further (and indeed provided Josh and Gabrielle with a hugely positive experience of Cambridge) - or have our choirs regularly singing for BBC broadcasts.

It's not all about singing - our keyboard programme partners with the Royal College of Organists and continues to innovate, together with a new classical accordion based programme underway - and it's not about sitting back on our progress so far.

Do we provide enough for our most able singers? How do we equip the children with the confidence and tools to continue engaging with choral music when they move on? Is our all-white choral staff a barrier to the aspirations of our many black and brown choristers? There's no one size fits all approach - without doubt I can say that meaningful and equal partnerships are at the heart of our programme, enabling its impact on thousands of young lives.