

Cantus in Choro

A GLOBAL VIEW OF CHORAL SINGING

‘Singing is cool’. It must be so if 300 boys came forward to audition for 20 places in the Leeds Cathedral Boys’ Choir! Much is heard of the physical regeneration of England’s post-industrial cities. Leeds is no exception, with its shining new commercial buildings alongside its remaining Victorian and Edwardian architecture, not to mention its new Stasi-like Government Benefits building. But what of its cultural and spiritual regeneration? It is in musical and spiritual regeneration that the musicians of Leeds Cathedral are setting a spanking pace, not just in the cathedral, but also in the schools and parishes of the diocese.

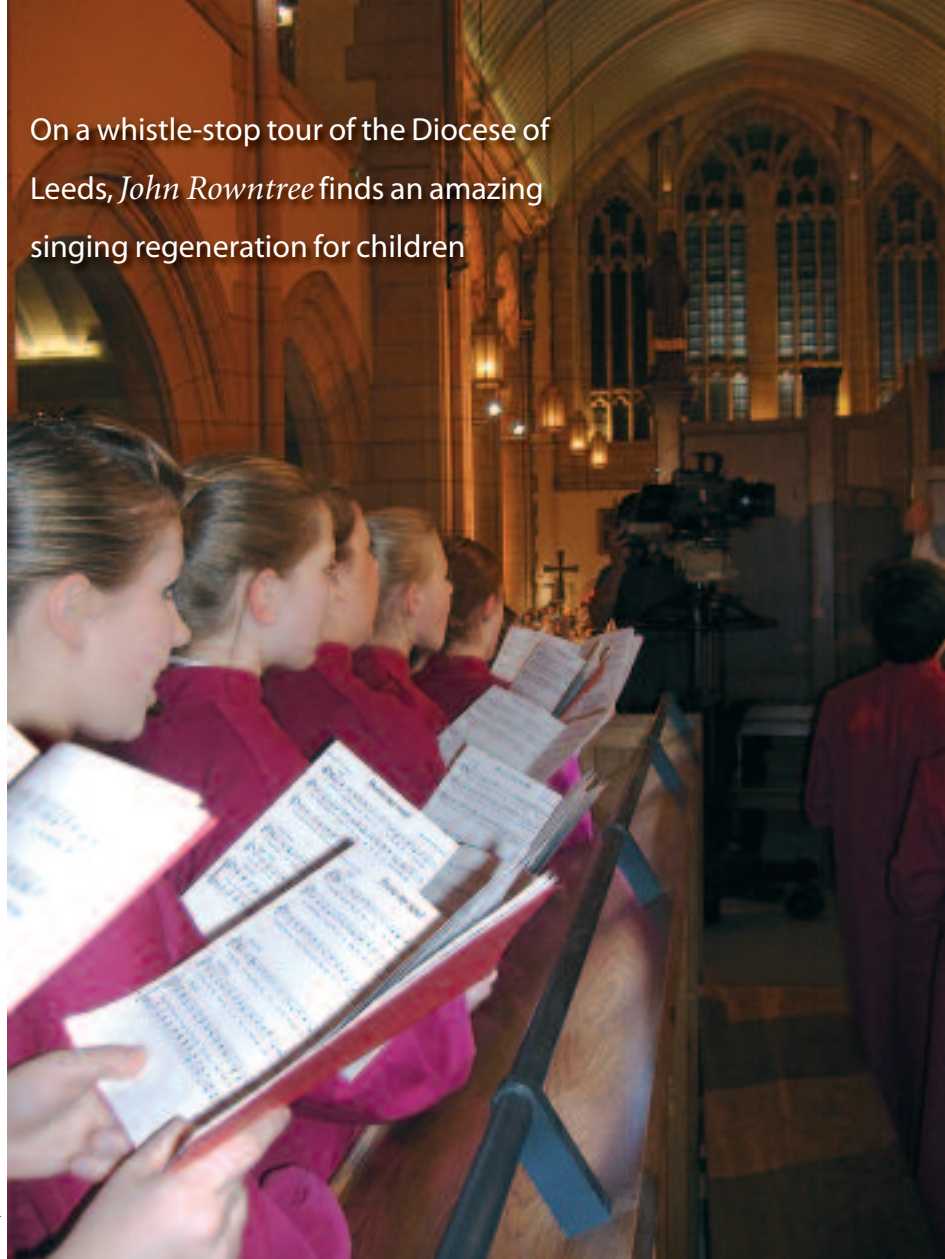
Leeds Diocese has the largest church music programme for young people in Britain. Benjamin Saunders, director of music for cathedral and diocese, is responsible for no fewer than 43 choirs: three in the cathedral; two in parishes; two youth choirs in Bradford; 21 primary school choirs and five secondary school choirs; together with ten outreach groups in schools in Leeds. The cathedral musicians come into contact with some 1,500 to 2,000 children each week.

Staffing for the programme consists of the director of music Benjamin Saunders, assistant director Christopher McElroy, and two choral directors, Dr Christopher Johns and Michael Wynne. In addition there are three part-time musicians: organist, organ scholar and choral conducting scholar.

At the cathedral there are ten sung services a week; Vespers and Mass are sung daily from Sunday to Thursday, leaving Friday and Saturday as free days for the music staff. The services are sung on a rota basis by the choral scholars (18, male and female), the boys’ and girls’ choirs, and additional adult singers on Wednesdays and Sundays. The choirs combine for specific occasions. Directing and playing are undertaken on a team basis, with ‘space’ for each professional musician to utilise and develop skills and interests in areas of repertory or vocal groups.

Away from the cathedral are two boys’ choirs based at St Joseph’s, Bradford and St Patrick’s, Huddersfield. These sing on specific occasions and are trained by the choral directors. Their members are selected from the schools in which the choral directors take singing groups. Each director is responsible for a cluster of schools. Their repertoire draws on liturgical music from plainchant to music of today. It is here that the solid foundations of singing in school and church are laid. This sustained

On a whistle-stop tour of the Diocese of Leeds, *John Rowntree* finds an amazing singing regeneration for children



Courtesy Leeds Diocese

Laying solid foundations

contact is the antithesis of the ‘hit and run’, ‘one-off’ music sessions which are often provided in schools. Without follow up, such stimulus is a poor use of valuable educational resources. The combination of work in schools and parishes, alongside work in the cathedral, provides the choral directors with a very fulfilling professional life.

The choral directors receive a full-time salary from the diocese and the schools pay the diocese for their services, as they would for an LEA peripatetic. This provides about half the music budget; the

above Leeds Diocese has developed such a successful singing outreach programme that girls and boys from throughout the diocese audition for the cathedral choirs

remainder comes from the diocese. At present the diocese also receives funding for its work in schools through the Government Singing Programme. Hopefully this will continue and not just be an eye-catching flash in the pan. Additional income comes from choir-parent support groups. Recently, St Bede's Catholic Grammar School, Bradford and All Saints Catholic High School, Huddersfield received a grant from a building firm, Opal, to

develop 'choirs from scratch' to enter the World Choir Games.

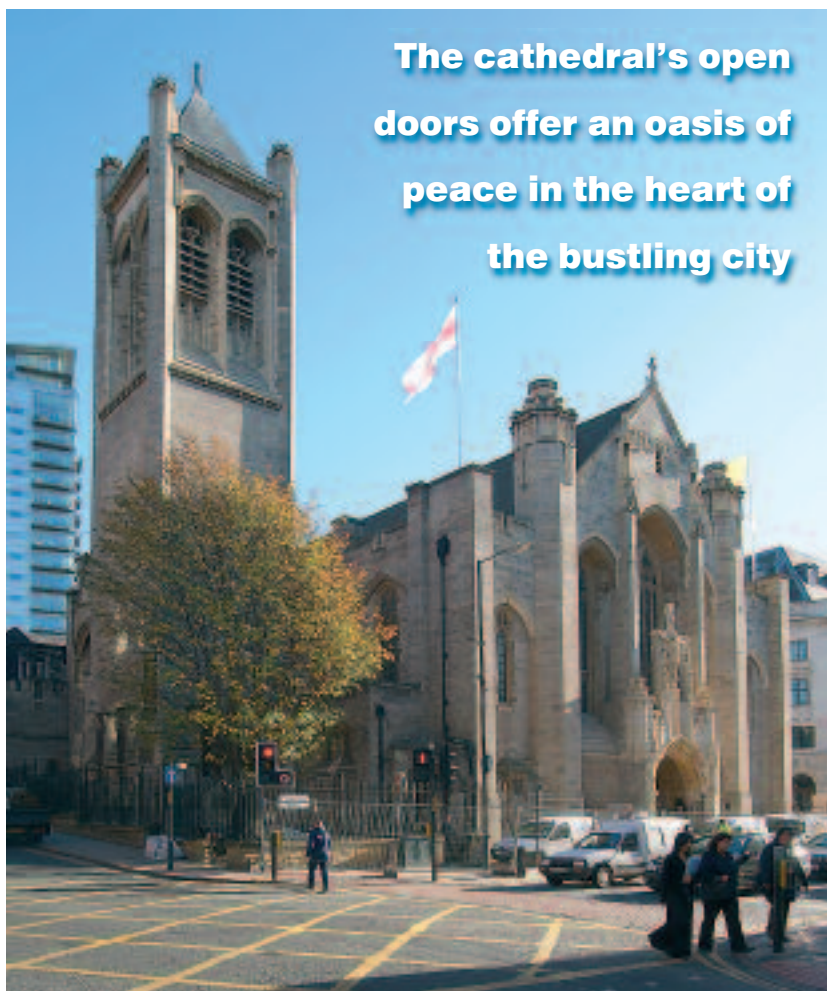
The establishment of high-quality choral work, produced by committed professionals, has gained the full support of Bishop Arthur Roche, the diocese, parishes, schools, parents, firms and government. The overall result financially is that for every £1 put in by the diocese there is £3 of music provision.

Over several days I was fortunate to see the result of this investment in action. On a whistle-stop tour (encompassing Leeds, Bradford, Huddersfield, Keighley and Shipley) I visited four primary schools and one secondary school. I was in the cathedral for Vespers and Mass for the Vigil of All Saints, at Mass on All Saints Day in Trinity and All Saints University College Chapel, and later at Mass in the cathedral with the girls' choir.

When sending me my schedule, Benjamin Saunders made it clear that it was 'warts and all!' First in action was choral director Michael Wynne with Year 4 children in a primary school in Keighley, a bubbly group with many volunteering to sing solo or in pairs. The head teacher, whose supportiveness was very evident, commented on the growing musical relationships between school, parents and the local parish. Next was Dr Johns working with two combined primary classes, some 70 children; then, for 30 minutes after school, the school choir of 24 boys and girls who were preparing enthusiastically, with many others, for a forthcoming recording of a BBC TV *Songs of Praise* programme in the cathedral. The sense of shared purpose and fun was infectious, the quality of tone and intonation a delight.

Then to the cathedral, now beautifully restored and re-ordered. It is light, spacious and airy, its open doors offering an oasis of peace in the heart of the bustling city. Here on Wednesday, the Vigil of All Saints, a 4.30pm rehearsal was followed by Vespers at 5.10pm (English psalmody and a Latin Magnificat by Perosi), Mass at 5.30pm (in English with a Gloria by Haydn and 16th-century Portuguese polyphony). The combined choral scholars and boys' choir, directed by Saunders, sang with a beautiful sense of line and the solo boy treble cantor who sang the responsorial psalm from the ambo was outstanding. Wednesday is a busy evening: the boys left after Mass, the choral scholars and adults remaining for rehearsal until 8pm – a solid three and a half hours of work. In Leeds children, parents, choral scholars and any others involved all have to sort out their time-management and travel.

All Saints morning saw some 40 boys of St Bede's rehearsing under Christopher McElroy for Mass celebrated by Bishop Roche in the Chapel of the University College of Trinity and All Saints. A recently formed SATB group, they were smartly



The cathedral's open doors offer an oasis of peace in the heart of the bustling city

Courtesy Leeds City Council



The music programme brings together young people from throughout Leeds Diocese

Courtesy Leeds Diocese

turned out with 'St Bede's Male Voice Choir' proudly emblazoned in gold on their green sweatshirts. I was greeted by the vibrant singing of an Alleluia from Africa, then a Gloria by Thompson, *Jubilate Deo* from Taizé, a plainchant Sanctus and Agnus and the 'golden oldie' Catholic hymn *Hail, Redeemer, King divine*, with its apt line 'guide the lowly, guide the youth'. The sheer commitment of these young singers was terrific. McElroy made his high expectations clear, and they responded accordingly. The solo intonations of the plainchant Agnus by one of the trebles from this group of adolescents were moments that neither he, nor those present, are likely to forget.

Later, I re-joined Dr Johns in two more primary schools. Here were more confident, sparkling children who responded with real interest to the development of a secure singing technique. It was evident that the choral directors were able to go into the schools as highly professional musicians bringing their skills in a totally un-stuffy manner. Not once on my visit did I hear an unsupported vocal sound. Staff in each school made clear that focused input, even though only for one or two classes, significantly raised the musical level throughout the whole school. One head teacher commented about the singing: 'It's got a buzz here'.

The school day may have finished, but the choral directors' day had not. Next was an after-school rehearsal of the Bradford Boys' Choir, a selected group of around 20 teenage boys. Their total commitment when singing was remarkable. Although the group started as trebles, they were developing into an SATB choir with at this point only three lower voices, one of which was away. This did not deter the remaining baritone from firmly reading his part in a Haydn Mass. Then back to the cathedral, where the girls' choir sang Vespers and Mass with a real sense of presence.

All this is about reclaiming a lost generation of singers, particularly for the liturgy. Following the Second Vatican Council, music in the Catholic Church in Britain slumped to a dismal level. The young singers with whom the choral directors currently work are the leaven of the future. Hopefully they will play their part in church life, whether in selected groups in Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield, in local parishes or far beyond. The programme is also developing future leaders for other dioceses. This is a real regeneration of the musical and liturgical life of the church: it is giving young people experiences and skills which will last them for life.

Throughout the schools support for the programme was unequivocal. As one teacher put it: 'The children in our primary school are benefiting from high-standard cathedral training'. A complementary view was that of Mgr McQuinn, Vicar



Girls from schools in Leeds Diocese rehearse for a BBC TV Songs of Praise

Courtesy Leeds Diocese



Members of Bradford Boys' Choir show a remarkable commitment

John Rowntree

General of the diocese, who saw the musicians 'as engaged in quality youth work, which is close to what the church is about'. He commented further that 'building the programme up slowly had made for very solid foundations'.

After spending three days with so many children and musicians whose faces and voices smiled, I am certain that every £1 put into this work of regeneration by the Diocese of Leeds may well be the best investment in young people, music and the liturgy it has ever made. The rest of the dioceses and Britain should take note. □

Warm thanks are due to Benjamin Saunders, his team, choirs, and all those staff and children I met on my visit.

BBC1 Television Broadcasts

6 January 2008 at 5.40pm
Bradford Youth Choirs in
Songs of Praise

30 March 2008 at 5.40pm
Leeds Cathedral Choirs in
Songs of Praise

www.leedscathedral.org.uk
www.bradfordyouthchoir.org