

Leeds Diocese Youth Choirs

The hills are alive with the sound of young Catholic voices. **Mairead Mahon** explains the singing opportunities for young people across the diocese

Music has always been important to the Catholic Church and one diocese in particular is making sure that the next generation is ready to carry the torch forward. The Diocese of Leeds Schools Singing Programme is the largest Church programme of choral music for children and young people in the UK and it has been such a success that some members have sung before the Pope, appeared at prestigious locations, have been broadcast on national radio and have recorded a series of well received CDs.

The Schools Singing Programme was established in 2003

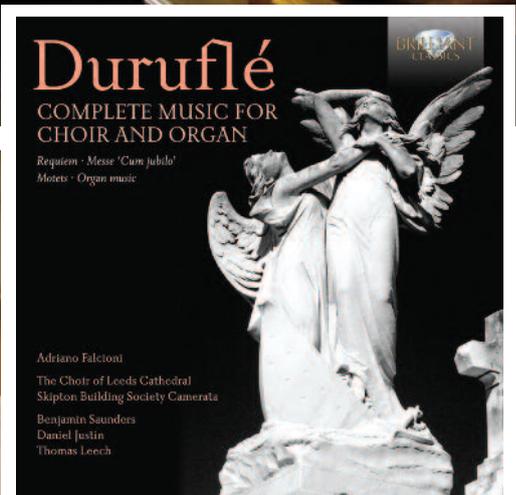
and has worked with over 10,000 children under the direction of Benjamin Saunders (*see right*). Benjamin, an organist, is a musician of high renown and is regularly invited to play all over the world. He has played in front of the Queen, Princess Anne and President Carter, as well as working with Carl Davis and jazz virtuoso Dick Hyman. However, successful as his own career has been, he is committed to music in the Catholic Church and he and members of his team, such as the dynamic and well known Thomas Leech, take their work with the young people in the diocese of Leeds very seriously indeed. As he explains:



“It is very important that the Church engages with the next generation: we have to constantly grow and refresh and one of the best ways to achieve this is through the use of music. The very fact that our work with young people has been so successful is proof of this: almost every child likes to sing!”

That is certainly the case in the diocese of Leeds. There are 45 school choirs, where children are led by choral directors, who train and direct regional clusters of children in primary and secondary schools. However, for those children who really get the bug, there is the opportunity to audition for one of the 12 boys or girls choirs: such as the Huddersfield Boys Choir or the Bradford Girls Choir. As Benjamin points out, “These two areas of work support each other. The catechetical, musical and educational rewards flow into the schools and the liturgical life of the diocese.”

One area which has attracted a great deal of attention is the



groundbreaking state cathedral school choir. Situated in Chapeltown, Leeds, The Holy Rosary and St Anne’s Catholic primary school is believed to be the UK’s first ever state primary to achieve this status.

“Children have singing lessons and learn to play an instrument: music is taken just as seriously as it would be at any fee paying cathedral school. It has been a life changing experience for many pupils and when they gave a concert at Leeds Cathedral, I wasn’t at all surprised, although I was very pleased, to hear several members of the public say that they had been blown away!”

However, it was the children themselves who were ‘blown away’ when they were informed that they were going to London to sing for Pope Benedict when he visited Britain>



in 2010. The 50 strong mixed choir sang *Jubilate Deo* and *Ave Maria*, as well as playing hand bells and drums. They were the only school primary school in the country to be given a solo spot to sing for the Pope and they brought great honour on themselves and all the other children and staff involved in Leeds' astonishingly successful programme, as they sang not only in front of His Holiness but a worldwide television audience of millions.

Performance opportunities abound for individual choirs: they have appeared on BBC television and radio and have performed at gala concerts in town halls and cathedrals. Some choirs have successfully participated in festivals, with one even appearing at the Royal Albert Hall in London, where they won an all expenses paid trip to the Choir Olympics in Austria: while they were there the winning streak continued and they picked up a bronze medal. Other choirs have travelled to Lourdes and to Llangollen International Eisteddfod.

It is hardly surprising that the Leeds Diocese youth programme has formed such an inspiring model for other dioceses throughout the United Kingdom. It is certainly inspiring to an increasing number of Catholics and music lovers, who regularly visit the website to find out where the choirs can be heard. Those in the know are looking forward to a special treat on Easter Sunday, when children from the Leeds' choirs can be heard on the BBC's *Songs of Praise*.

It is true that their beautiful sound lodges itself in the heart and, as a consequence, many Catholics are adding one or more of their eight CDs to their collection so they can hear them at any time.

The hills of the diocese are alive with the sound of young Catholic voices, a development which bodes well for the future of music in our Church. ■



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