

# It's all about the music for Leeds choirs

Children and youth choirs from across the diocese of Leeds have released an inspiring collection of much-loved hymns under the leadership of the diocesan director of music, Benjamin Saunders. Benjamin speaks to *The Universe's* Nick Benson about the new album, entitled *Favourite Catholic Hymns*, the work put into it and the role of music within the diocese.

The diocese of Leeds has the largest Church music programme in the UK, involving 58 choirs, comprising over 2,500 children who meet every week. This includes 43 school choirs, four boys' and four girls' choirs, three mixed children's choirs, two youth choirs, a groundbreaking new choir school and a semi-professional adult choir.

Therefore, it comes as little surprise when Benjamin Saunders, diocesan director of music, reveals what he believes is special about the diocese's music initiative. "Our unique selling point, I suppose, is our size," he told *The Universe*. "We're the biggest Church music programme in the country, Catholic or Church of England."

The diocese has released a number of albums before. However, Benjamin, who has been in his role as director of music since 2002, admits that this latest album, *Favourite Catholic Hymns*, was a special project as it involved input from a large range of children's choirs. "The key thing was that it was a good way for us to be able to use all our different choirs, it was a way of involving all our children's choirs from Huddersfield, Bradford and Leeds together.

"We're slightly spoilt in terms of broadcasts and recordings because we probably broadcast more than any other Catholic cathedral because we have so many choirs," he added.



Bradford Catholic Girls Choir.

However, *Favourite Catholic Hymns*, released on Herald AV and sponsored by Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), has given the younger choirs an opportunity to showcase their talents following on from the releases of the Cathedral Choirs' 2013 critically acclaimed CD *Duruflé - Complete Choral & Organ Works* and its 2015 album, *Arvo Pärt - Choral and Organ Music*. "It was nice to do something more homegrown and that involved at least 500 children singing the tracks, not all together, but as different groups," noted Benjamin.

"The children are all at inner city state schools in Leeds, Bradford and Huddersfield," he explained. "We start them when they're about six and then we keep them all the way through the system. They start in the children's choir, then go to a junior choir, senior choir and then a youth choir so the sound does gradually change. You'll be able to hear boys' voices and girls' voices and you can hear all the different ages as well."

Brian Johnson, founder of Herald AV and executive producer of the album, praised Benjamin's work. "It really is a tribute to his very hard work and musicianship across the diocese that enabled this wonderful album to be released for Aid to the Church in Need," Brian told *The Universe*.

Herald AV, a Catholic recording company, is now entering its 40th year. Brian started the company from humble means, making his first recording of his own parish choir in 1976. "It really has been a labour of love ever since then," he admitted. "My main job is as television manager and engineer at the University of Surrey where I have been based for 38 years. I run Herald alongside this as an elaborate hobby ever since trying, wherever I could, to support Catholic choirs and their music throughout this country and abroad."

Brian added that he also felt privileged to work with ACN. "I have worked very closely with Neville at ACN ever since the mid-90s, supporting its

work through recordings of Catholic choirs," he said. "It has been a success story and a privilege to be involved in bringing to life our Catholic heritage through the power of music and liturgy, helping to raise funds for the Church overseas, particularly at this time in Syria and the surrounding regions, something I know Neville has been very much involved with on the front line."

Neville Kyrke-Smith, national director for Aid to the Church in Need UK, said his organisation was delighted to be supporting and promoting the album. "The choirs of the diocese of Leeds have produced an excellent and inspiring Catholic feast of hymns for everyone to enjoy," he told *The Universe*. "It is marvellous that every purchase of this CD will help Aid to the Church in Need and support Christians who are persecuted and oppressed for their faith."

Benjamin explained that the first and most important challenge was discussing what constitutes a Catholic hymn, which resulted in him sitting down with his colleagues and creating a list containing around 50 items. "You've also got this tension that in the guidance to Catholic music we're not particularly encouraged to sing too many hymns at Mass," he pointed out. "So many of the English hymns are ones that were brought in from the Church of England in the 70s, because our Catholic tradition is obviously based on chant and polyphony."

They chose hymns that had Catholic authorship in terms of the words or the music and then took the most popular ones. "You'll see that there's a lot of Latin hymns in there, which are the traditional Catholic plainchant hymns that we thought were important to put in. Those are actually the ones that the children sing, we don't really often do any of the other hymns that were recorded there, so some of them we had to learn specially," he said, adding that they also included some medieval Catholic music.

"The interesting thing is that very few of the hymns we would often sing are traditionally English, because in West Yorkshire the Catholic Church is very multicultural," he explained, pointing out the vast range of nationalities within the diocese, which include Filipinos, Africans, Polish, Spanish, Italians and native Brits. "So the English hymns are not common currency in a big multicultural city."

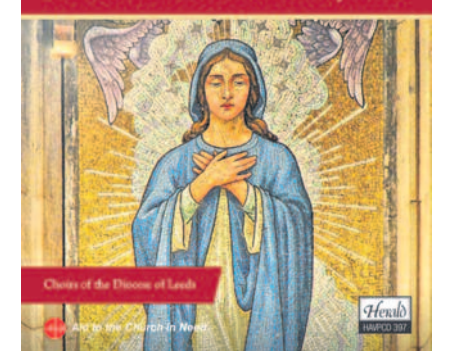
The album contains 26 tracks, ranging from *O Bread of Heaven* to *Los Set Goys* and *Holy Virgin*, by God's Decree to *Cuncti Simus Concanentes*. However, Benjamin revealed his

favourite of the tracks. "My favourite two would be *Ave Maris Stella* and *Hail Queen of Heaven* because they're both similar Marian texts. Those two would be alright for my funeral.

"*Ave Maris Stella* is a plainsong hymn, so that's *Hail Mary Star of the Sea*, and then you've got the English version, which is *Hail Queen of Heaven the Ocean Star*." He noted that there were a few instances of this on the album, such as the inclusion of *Sweet Heart of Jesus*, which is the English hymn, and *Jesu Dulcis Memoria*, which is in Latin.

Benjamin said that the positioning of the tracks was another important step in its creation, allowing the album to flow from one piece into another without jarring, while also leaving some variation and contrast. "It could be very dull if you just did a batch of ten

## Favourite Catholic Hymns



similar-sounding hymns so we ordered them in terms of musical interest and contrast rather than by the dates they were written or particular themes."

Benjamin recalled a fond memory from the recording of the album, which involved the use of a drum. "The children were obviously fascinated and when you record with a drum in a big building like the cathedral you have to put the drummer in a screen because otherwise it just echoes around and all you hear is a drum."

While the children were excited during the recording of the album, Benjamin stressed how professionally they acted during the recording. "It was recorded after school with four sessions. The youngest children would come at 6pm and then the older ones would arrive at 7:30pm, so it was a challenge to keep concentration going on a school night for everyone.

"It was just wonderful to get all of the children together in the same place and have them coming to the cathedral from all parts of the diocese."

**Favourite Catholic Hymns can be purchased at:** <http://www.acnuk.org/products.php/768/favourite-catholic-hymns-choirs-of-the-diocese-of-leeds>

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Huddersfield Girls Choir