

A new model for children's singing in English Cathedrals

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*The Cathedral Choirs in concert at Huddersfield Town Hall.
All photographs taken by and courtesy of John Bertalot.*



At the heart of Yorkshire's biggest and busiest city, Leeds Cathedral provides a peaceful spiritual refuge. It is also one of the finest examples in this country of Edwardian Arts & Crafts Architecture. The eminent architectural historian, the late Patrick Nuttgens, described it as 'one of the best of all the Catholic cathedrals in the country, and probably the most outstanding after Westminster'. It was built at the turn of the last century and was largely paid for by the poor Catholics of the Diocese, who raised the equivalent of £10 million in today's money.

At the beginning of August 2005 the Cathedral finally closed to allow a £2 million programme of major internal repairs and restoration work to begin. Today, the building can be found surrounded by portakabins, earth-moving machines and cement mixers. The Cathedral congregation has relocated temporarily to Holy Trinity Anglican Church, where the daily liturgies are maintained for the city's large Catholic population.

Since its foundation in 1904, the Cathedral has enjoyed a fine tradition of liturgical music based on Gregorian chant. Historically, this was led by a large choir of boys and men, singing the chant largely from memory. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-64), music in the Roman Catholic Church faced a number of serious and new challenges. Regrettably, with one or two exceptions, the quality of Catholic church music in England sank to new depths in the immediate aftermath of the Council, when congregational participation and populism became the watchwords.

In 1988, the then Bishop of Leeds, David Konstant, took steps to address this decline with the appointment of a professional musician to form a new boys' choir. The first Director of Music was Joseph Cullen, appointed in 1988, and well known nationally today as the chorus master of both the London Symphony Chorus and the Huddersfield Choral Society. He took up a similar post at Westminster Cathedral in 1993 and was succeeded by Stuart Thompson, who established the first girls' choir in a Catholic cathedral.

Today, the Diocese of Leeds has developed one of the fastest growing and largest programmes of choral music for young people in the United



The new Bradford Boys' Choir with Director Christopher McElroy and Assistant Caroline Robinson

Kingdom. It includes two boys' choirs, three girls', and a professional adult choir, with eighteen choral scholars. During the past 12 months the choirs have broadcast seven times on BBC Radio including *Choral Vespers* live on Radio 3 for the election of Pope Benedict XVI, and Midnight Mass on Radio 4. They have also produced three commercial CD recordings and attracted record audiences to lunchtime concerts at Huddersfield and Leeds Town Halls.

Singing in Schools

At present there are three full-time and four part-time members of the music department staff. The choral programme is on a larger scale than other UK cathedrals because the Director of Music is also responsible for liturgical music in the 98 schools of the Diocese. This large geographical area includes Leeds, Huddersfield, Wakefield, Harrogate, Halifax and Ripon. Bradford and Keighley have enjoyed special musical provision since 2003 when a consortium of local high entered in to a funding partnership with the Diocese to offer an exceptional level of choral provision for their students. The Assistant Director of Music, Christopher McElroy, carries delegated responsibility for the delivery of this unique programme. Special school choirs benefit from timetabled rehearsal slots during the normal school day – much like at a cathedral choir school.

In addition to the school choirs, Christopher McElroy founded a Bradford Boys' Choir in February 2005. Eighteen boys rehearse weekly after school and have already made a first CD with the choirs at Leeds Cathedral. In

May they are looking forward to performing the Berlioz *Te Deum* at Leeds Town Hall with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, under David Hill.

Future plans at Leeds Cathedral

The Bradford schools programme operates independently from that of the Cathedral. Currently the four cathedral choirs are preparing for the challenges of the reopened building in November 2006 when they will have to sing ten services between them each week. The choirs (and choir directors!) will operate on a rotation basis, singing Choral Vespers and Mass every weekday (except Friday) alongside the two principal Sunday services. Two new Latin settings of the *Magnificat* have been commissioned from Colin Mawby, forming the centrepiece of the musical celebrations in November.

It is a sad fact that many English cathedrals now struggle to fill chorister places, and choirmasters invariably cite the general deterioration of singing in schools as the underlying cause. As a response to this challenge, the music department in Leeds Cathedral has chosen to take over responsibility for a large part of the music curriculum within the schools of the Diocese. A well-resourced programme and generous funding partnership has laid strong foundations for future generations and today every cathedral chorister place is oversubscribed by talented applicants.

For further information about Cathedral and Diocesan music, please visit the website www.leedscathedral.org.uk