

Leeds RC Cathedral leads the way

Sarah Beedle

Although not directly related to organs the Diocese of Leeds Music Department's innovative system has cropped up often enough in Organists' Review for me to take an interest. Therefore in June I took a trip up to meet with Sally Egan to see how she worked with really young children at Holy Rosary and St Anne's Catholic Primary School and then discuss how the system was intended to work. Hindsight has made me wonder whether I was actually the right person to go: like many of you I know the power of music, particularly the power of singing, and I know that children are capable of great things – I have been involved with this for years. I don't believe I was blasé about children's abilities but I had a level of acceptance that this was normal. I suspect the interview would therefore have turned out very differently if a photographer hadn't also come along – seeing his wonder and amazement was eye-opening, and I think we all can benefit from this surprise.

Initially we were ushered into a reception class; during

this session everything was sung, nothing was spoken, even instructions, and this was accepted as the norm. The children were happy to sing alone and in a group, even with unknown people in the room. Their enthusiasm was such that I had to sit on my hands to

stop myself joining in. This was followed up with a similar session for a second class before we moved into the hall to hear the choir. This surprised me: a group of year sixes gladly, and joyfully, singing *Cuncti Simus Concanentes*



from the *Libre Vermell of Monserrat*. There was attitude as the children lined up but nothing too extreme, they were just filling time whilst they waited for the autoharp to be tuned. It was obvious that they were proud to be there and that they wanted to be there. The boy, Clinton, who sang the solo at the end nearly blew my socks off.

Talking to Sally afterwards was easy. Very few questions or interjections were needed: she is obviously passionately and wholeheartedly

behind the plan.

“Communally every child receives one hour of singing a week. We come in three days a week and teach 240 children, aged between three in nursery up to year six. If the children want to join the choir they spend even more time singing. At this school we offer 16 hours a week which is unique and we are currently viewed as the fifth or sixth Cathedral choir. This makes the Cathedral choir as inclusive as possible and allows as many children as possible to join whilst suiting their circumstances.

Everybody has to sing in reception. We attempt to establish a culture of singing, so that it’s as normal as breathing. We are three years into a long-term project. Early findings have shown that academic performance has improved: SATS results are up. Singing teaches the children to put themselves in a position to be ready to learn, it gives them the experience of being good at something and once they get used to being excellent at something this is what they come to expect. Music is changing their aspirations and lives. Anecdotally we all know that music improves study in all areas and now this is providing hard evidence.

The senior group has a vitality, an energy and a joy when they sing and it is vital to match this with repertoire. They are able to spin out a beautiful Brahmsian *legato* but relevance is necessary. For you they sang an *Ave Maria* and they love Gregorian chant, they fight to sing solos. We have found that as long as the music is top quality they love it; they quickly sniff out second-rate material. We have recently started to teach the

children how to read music. Initially all music was all taught by ear and we will keep this aural skill going. At this school 26 languages are spoken at home so music increases inclusivity. We sing a lot in Latin, and this isn’t viewed any differently to any other language. It is the act of singing together which is important as it helps the children to feel part of something. Individually they may not have the greatest of voices but together when they sing it blows your socks off.

Keeping boys motivated is sometimes hard; they want to kick footballs so we have had to build in a complicated system of rewards. They sing for us then they go outside to play whilst the rest of the school is working. If they don’t sing this doesn’t happen, they need this reward, it keeps them motivated, and as they start to improve they motivate themselves. Motivation runs throughout the school; I no longer have to ask: ‘Shall we do it again?’ The children now ask this themselves. These children are engaged and in the zone and they are aware of this. That’s the great thing about music, it teaches you to be single-minded and builds concentration, and these are really useful life skills.”

Photographer: “It’s nice to see young people being positive when they receive so much bad press.”

Sally: “That’s in a way why we are here. These kids were not turning up to audition for the Cathedral, plenty of choristers were coming from affluent areas but the inner-city children simply didn’t come. There are myriad reasons as to why not – singing in a Cathedral choir requires commitment: two rehearsals after school and Sunday and this is not always possible for families.

After looking at this situation, Benjamin Saunders decided to bring music to the children instead of waiting for it to happen the other way round. Therefore we sing services at the Cathedral during the school day; the children sing lunchtime Mass, and then return to school. There is usually a congregation of about 250; this sounds high, but I put this down to northern culture. People





here are more open to taking time for themselves – if an hour is available for lunch people will look for ways to use it well. The congregation is extremely appreciative when the children sing. Ben's great like that and is very creative. He will find new ways of going out and finding singers. However, we really are making it up as we go along. There is a steering committee, and we are in the third year now, so things are beginning to run smoothly.

We haven't yet got an instrumental programme running. The next stage is a capital appeal to build a proper song school: at the moment we work anywhere that's available, including in the kitchen. A song school would offer practice rooms, a library, and an instrumental school.

There have also been huge

knock-on effects with community engagement. We have been offered so many chances to sing in public. For example, the children sang at Gabby Logan's installation as Chancellor for Leeds University, last June they recorded Radio 4's *Sunday Worship* and at Christmas they sang Midnight Mass at the Cathedral. These services were lovely. Before the broadcast all the children spent the night in the school hall, partly so we knew they'd be there in the morning. They watched DVDs and ate pizza before bedding down for the night; the next morning people from the parish came and made breakfast. After Midnight Mass we delivered the children home by about 4am! This took the load off the parents. If you're a single parent you don't always have the time to make sure your children are at

extra-curricular activities. We took a huge great leap of faith, we weren't certain how it would work, but the children rose to the occasion and liked being part of something."

I was supremely lucky whilst at primary school to have been introduced to music by an inspirational teacher in a similar manner; everyone played the recorder and singing was considered normal. Although music is obviously in my family, it was school which introduced the need for music which has remained with me ever since. I have no doubt that this scheme will be creating a similar need and I therefore hope that the full programme is able to come to fruition sooner rather than later!

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