

THE DIOCESE OF LEEDS SINGING PROGRAM

Thomas Leech



Chancing on the inner-city sanctuary of Leeds Cathedral during weekday vespers, its chant and polyphony eclipsing rush-hour commotion, you might imagine a historic choral institution, a select group of choristers educated in an exclusive school. For our team, the heart of our work isn't found here amid musical, architectural, and

liturgical splendor; indeed even the cathedral choirs could be described as a by-product of our core mission as the Diocesan music department.

For a recent conference paper, I spent some happy hours looking at how English cathedral choirs defined themselves publicly via their websites. The choir that devoted 13 words to faith, and the remaining 462 to a list of past concert engagements, broadcasts, recordings, and Gramophone accolades was typical: A sentence or two about worship, a competitive reference to the age of the foundation, explanation of the education choristership provides, and lengthy evidence of professional brilliance. This is reinforced by many cathedral and collegiate choirs' social media presence, where the "music list" and quality of performance hold sway.

These self-portrayals seem to seek confidence from temporal factors and betray nervousness, ambivalence even, in the relationship between the church and its mission, the professional musicians, the children they work with, and the outside world. We often hear that choirs bring the ancient buildings to life; while they are clearly less expensive to maintain than a building they are nevertheless a costly enterprise. Is it sustainable or even desirable to spend upwards of £250,000 [\$329,375] annually on a music program that works with between 32 and 50 children and employs ten adults? I wonder if cathedral choirs—like the buildings themselves so often appear—are for many more of a middle-class heritage product than "living stones."

This brings us to our program at the Diocese of Leeds, a model that retains those self-proclaimed assets of cathedral choirs (musical excellence, education, tradition) with both worship and evangelization on a very substantial scale.

Our formal charitable objectives charge us to support the mission of the Catholic Church through "the advancement of the Catholic religion" and "the promotion of Catholic Teaching in the Diocese and beyond." The Diocese's latest annual report summarizes our efforts thus: "Central to the program of youth evangelization is the Diocese's Music Department. The core program of the musical and liturgical education is the Schools Singing Program."

So our choirs have at their core the evangelization and subsequent catechesis of the participants; most of this work takes place not in the rarefied atmosphere of our beautiful cathedral but in the noise, energy (and occasional chaos) of numerous schools. Musical achievement, educational benefits, and social outcomes are all real and very welcome, but necessarily secondary.

Our choral directors race across Yorkshire during the day,

working with some 3,500 children weekly (over 100 groups across 53 schools), returning to their bases to run our elite choirs: 6 boys' choirs, 6 girls' choirs, 5 mixed children's choirs, 2 youth choirs, 3 university choirs, and an adult choir, all drawing their membership from our school sessions. We are staffed by six full-time (and one part-time) musicians, a development administrator, two organ scholars, one choral conducting scholar, and twelve choral scholars. Our choirs are hugely diverse both socially and culturally—much of our work takes place in some of the UK's most deprived areas. Funding comes from schools, parishes, the Diocese, and a number of key partnerships (including Leeds Trinity University and Leeds College of Music), and our horizons are broadened through international links, including Notre Dame University and the University of El Paso, whose students and staff have made a number of visits to observe, study, and participate in our programs.

The choirs draw families into the church. We know that improved singing in the school environment enriches school worship, and it's wonderful to see children who have started work with us aged six in a noisy classroom now singing at some of the 350 sung liturgies at the cathedral, representing the Catholic voice on national BBC broadcasts and making acclaimed recordings of sacred music. We can safely say that these are children who would not have these opportunities if we weren't doing this work. Similarly, it takes special staff to have weeks that encompass singing games with five-year-olds, teenage youth choirs learning Tomkins for a performance with the Gabrieli Consort, solemn Mass in Latin, and preparing the Knabenchor part for Mahler 8!

If the clergy, the altar servers, and the choir all have gray hair, then we are running the church into the ground. A liturgical music program worthy of investment must prioritize evangelization and young people on an industrial scale—surely expenditure on exclusively adult professional choirs is a shortsighted waste of precious resource and willful neglect of the future of both children and church.

Let's be brave enough to question the existence and rationale of cathedral choirs, let's question what our motives as church musicians are, and in a society that seems so dangerously fractured let's make sure that the church can respond in a way that isn't exclusive or retrograde. We talk so much about children being the future—they are also the present and they deserve the very best we can bring them. Let's give some of ours the last word here:

"Choir improves my belief in God."

"Everyone has different backgrounds and we all sing together in unison."

"I'd like to stay in choir for a really long time!"

Thomas Leech is the director of the Diocese of Leeds' Schools Singing Program. Educated at Downing College, Cambridge, he has numerous broadcast and recording credits and has received the Worshipful Company of Educators Masters' Award in recognition of his work for the Diocese.