



Sally Egan with pupils at Holy Rosary and St Anne's: 'Children who train at cathedral schools usually do so in elite private schools, but we will do it all here.'

First state primary turns choir school

Inner-city Chapeltown takes decision of great note to challenge elitist choral tradition

By David Marley

A STATE primary in a deprived area of Leeds and an elite private school attached to Westminster Cathedral may not appear to have much in common, but the gulf between them is about to narrow.

Holy Rosary and St Anne's Catholic Primary, which serves the inner-city area of Chapeltown, is to become the country's newest cathedral choir school. It is believed to be the first state primary ever to make the switch.

Three-quarters of its pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds. They speak 26 different first languages. And around one in 10 is from an asylum-seeker family.

It is a far cry from the rarefied atmosphere of Westminster Cathedral Choir School, which handpicks the country's top choristers and charges more than £13,500 a year.

But Sally Egan, who has worked as a vocal coach at Westminster Cathedral and Westminster Abbey, is set to revolutionise the timetable at Holy Rosary. From this September, every child will be taught to sing, play an instrument and become fluent in reading and writing music ready for it to become a choir school in September 2010.

"Children who train at cathedral schools usually do so in elite private

schools, but we will do it all here," said Ms Egan, who has sung opera and oratorio professionally all over the world and is now the choral director for the diocese of Leeds.

"At Westminster, they audition children aged six or seven, by which point many will already be playing musical instruments," she said. "We can't hope that will happen here, but that does not mean we can't turn the children into cathedral choristers. We'll just have to do it in a different way."

For Ms Egan, the decision to re-

turn to Leeds was an easy one – she is a former pupil of Holy Rosary who went on to read music at Cambridge University and study singing in Paris and London.

She will teach music at her old school two days a week. When children start full-time they will have two singing lessons per week. From Year 2, they will start playing an instrument. The aim is that by next summer, the choir will be good enough to perform weekly lunchtime masses at Leeds Cathedral.

Teachers at Holy Rosary will be given singing lessons and encouraged to give pupils instructions in song so they get used to hearing different pitches.

Ben Saunders, Leeds Cathedral's director of music, said creating the choir school would provide a "life-changing opportunity" for pupils.

"I have always been mystified by the association of many cathedral choirs with fee-paying schools, as it seems like giving more to those who already have plenty," he said.

Ms Egan worked with pupils from Holy Rosary on the nationwide Sing Up programme. The performance the pupils gave at Leeds Cathedral in March "blew teachers and parents away", she said.

And she has a warning for middle-class parents who fancy getting their child a free musical education. "If parents from leafy suburbs try to get their children in, the school will say no," she said. "This is just for the children of Chapeltown."

Echoes of privilege

There are 44 choir schools attached to cathedrals, churches and college chapels that offer pupils musical training.

Most are Church of England foundations, but the Roman Catholic, Scottish and Welsh churches are all represented.

Of the 21,500 pupils attending choir schools, around 1,200 are choristers. The majority are fee-paying schools, but nine out of 10 choristers qualify for financial help.

Bristol Cathedral Choir School, a former independent school, became a state school academy in September 2008.

Choir Schools' Association