

The National Schools Singing Programme is transforming church music across the UK

The experience for youngsters of singing together was brought to an abrupt halt as schools and church choirs closed down for the pandemic. Although many enterprising choral directors maintained choir activity over the internet, they still face a monumental task in finding new junior choristers to fill the ranks as church singing gets under way again.

However, thanks to the generous investment of the Hamish Ogston Foundation, the National Schools Singing Programme (NSSP) is making schools singing a reality again for many thousands of disadvantaged children.

The scheme is based on the award-winning model in the Diocese of Leeds, created by Diocesan Director of Music Benjamin Saunders. This programme works with over 6,000 children weekly in schools across West and North Yorkshire, offering choral opportunities for young people in 18 after-school choirs as well as organ, piano, classical accordion and melodica across the Diocese, with over twelve full-time positions for choral directors and instrumental tutors.

The NSSP is for all Catholic dioceses in the UK to create or enhance their own music programmes for children educated in Catholic state schools. At the time of writing 11 dioceses have made successful bids for the individual grants of £75,000. One of these is the Diocese of Middlesbrough, where Tim Harrison, Diocesan Director of

Music based at Middlesbrough Cathedral, was able to appoint two full-time choral directors and set up the new programme before he retired last November, ready for incoming Director of Music Steven Maxson, who joins Middlesbrough Cathedral from Grimsby Minster this January.

The scheme in Middlesbrough benefits hugely from the groundwork by Tim over the eleven years of his tenure at the Cathedral, when he developed a schools programme funded by the Diocese. 'But as the only member of staff, there was a limit to the number of schools I could support,' he said. 'I offered an hourly visit a week to six schools. We educated the children in liturgical music, and basic music theory and notation so they learned to read music. These youngsters could then feed into the cathedral choirs. Even after they grew up and went to university, they often came back and sang with us as when they were home, and we built up a good group of senior choristers over the eleven years.'

This all went online with the pandemic. However with the new appointments under the NSSP, Tim has been able not only to restore a schools singing programme, but extend it to around 16 primary schools in the first year. 'We are offering two hours a week to the schools, which could involve class singing, a lunchtime school choir, and assistance to music teachers in situ. We know it will help to maintain the current

breadth of music at the Cathedral, but it's also about building up other choirs in the area – the opportunity for children to sing is what this is all about!'

Details about the National Schools Singing Programme can be found at www.nssp.org.uk

Read more about the work of Tim Harrison and the Diocese of Middlesbrough in building and maintaining their children's choirs on the RCO's blog, *StopPress* <https://i.rco.org.uk/stoppres>



School singing is restored with the help of the Hamish Ogston Foundation (picture with permission from the Diocese of Leeds)