

Generous funding transforms singing in schools



picture by permission from the Diocese of Leeds

Tim Harrison retired from his post as Director of Music at Middlesbrough Cathedral in November last year, at a time when the damage from eighteen months of Covid restrictions on schools singing and cathedral music was only too evident. However he had reasons to be cheerful. A major investment in schools singing by the Hamish Ogston Foundation is allowing Catholic Dioceses around the country to revive singing in

schools and foster the next generation of potential church choristers, and Tim can hand over a well-funded new programme of choral development to Steven Maxson, who moves from Grimsby Minster to take over as Director of Music in Middlesbrough this year.

The original 19th-century Cathedral Church of St Mary in Middlesbrough served the community of mainly immigrant industrial workers in the heart of the town. This area of Middlesbrough hollowed out through the twentieth century, the Cathedral itself standing empty for many years, before succumbing to fire in 2000. In the 1980s the Diocese built the new St Mary's Catholic Cathedral in Coulby Newham, an area of modern housing which had grown up on the outskirts of Middlesbrough with a large catholic community.

Middlesbrough Cathedral has four choirs, singing at different times and days throughout the week, with three sung services a week on average, including sung Vespers on Wednesday evenings. 'We couldn't keep the junior choirs going during the pandemic, and the experience for youngsters of singing together in schools was also brought to an abrupt halt,' said Tim. Like many other choral directors he maintained choir activity over the internet, but along with them faced the monumental task of finding new junior choristers to fill the ranks as church singing got 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 once more. 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 eighteen after-school choirs as well as organ, piano, classical accordion and melodica teaching across the Diocese, with over twelve full-time positions for choral directors and instrumental tutors.

Under the NSSP, Catholic Dioceses in the UK can apply for an individual grant of £75,000 to enhance or create their music programmes for children educated in Catholic state schools. 'It's a wonderfully organised scheme,' said Tim. 'As a Diocese we were able to employ two full-time choral directors, and extend the programme that was in place already, pre-Covid. NSSP have resources to help provide training to staff, and we began on 1st November 2021.'

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 the Biblical stories, liturgical music, and basic music theory and notation so they learned to read music. So we were supporting both the RE and music teachers there. 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.'

With the new appointments under the NSSP, Tim has been able not only to restore a schools singing programme, but extend it to around sixteen 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!'

'Not all the singing is liturgical. Children enjoy Benjamin Britten's Friday Afternoons, and songs by Aubrey Beswick, along with folk songs, and the traditional songs we used to sing in the Scouts and Guides. What I have noticed is that children's voices seem not to be so high now, generally speaking, and we have to transpose down a tone and a half at first – though of course with training they can get the high notes. If we think a child would benefit and rise to the challenge, they are offered offer a trial half term taster in the Cathedral choir, and we take it from there.'

'We are blessed with a hugely supportive and enthusiastic Bishop in Terence Draine, who from the start has been highly influential in getting music off the ground in the Diocese, and understands its importance. Middlesbrough Cathedral can't offer a nine-to-five daily chorister schooling in the way a foundation such as Durham Cathedral can, but we can offer a musical and religious education to children from diverse communities, with all the social and personal benefits this brings.'

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. More information: www.nssp.org.uk

The NSSP was founded and supported by [The Hamish Ogston Foundation](#)

More on the Diocese of Leeds Schools Singing Programme
here: www.dioceseofleedsmusic.org.uk/schools-singing-programme/

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