



LET ALL THE WORLD IN EVERY CORNER SING DIVERSITY IN THE CHOIR

EMILIE BELS

Now more than ever, conversations about the survival of the UK's cherished choral tradition are taking place. Prominent figures warn that, while community choral singing is thriving, its sacred counterpart is struggling. A 2022 Cathedral Music Trust (CMT) report suggests that a lack of diversity and inclusivity may be its downfall.¹ Concurrently, music education in state schools is declining, with only a few enlightened headteachers making a difference. Coincidence? Absolutely not.

In response to the CMT report, Anna Lapwood highlighted that 'the lack of diversity in cathedral music is closely linked to the dwindling presence of music in schools', with the Voices Foundation being only the latest victim of an increasingly desolate music education landscape.² Despite initiatives such as the National Schools Singing Programme (NSSP) striving to reverse this trend, the report warns that

efforts may prove futile if we limit children's achievements in cathedral music.

Diversity is the key word: the report warns that ignoring issues of diversity and inclusivity risks eroding public credibility. The public response to the announcement regarding St John's Voices underscores this point. Diversity here means including and representing a wide range of voices, backgrounds and perspectives within a choir, from different cultures and genres to singers with diverse characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status and disability. The report's recommendations are clear: 'To demonstrate that they are elite but not elitist, cathedrals and major places of worship must be able to demonstrate a clear pathway from the grassroots of singing through to the pinnacle of cathedral choirs.' Tradition must evolve to ensure survival.

FISHING IN THE DEEP

I was acutely aware of this context when I was appointed as York Minster's Schools Singing Lead six months ago. Through conversations and reflections, I am starting to grasp the unique challenges of launching

¹ The report can be found online by searching for Cathedral Music Trust 'A Future for Cathedral Music'.

² Anna Lapwood quoted in 'Cathedral music is facing a sustainability crisis, report warns', by Pat Ashworth, *Church Times*, 4 October 2022.



Above: Emilie Bells (far right) leading some of the children at St Barnabas Primary school in York. Photos used by kind permission of York Minster.

the NSSP at one of the world's most renowned cathedrals against the backdrop of a choral tradition in turmoil.

Launched from Leeds Cathedral in 2003, the NSSP has become highly successful, engaging 27,224 children weekly in over 364 state schools. The programme has been rolled out across most Catholic dioceses and six Anglican cathedrals as of 2023. What makes it special is its aim for more than outreach: it strives for choral and musical excellence at every level, embedding musical tuition into the school day.

In *Cathedral Voice*, February 2021, Ben Saunders, lead consultant for the NSSP, criticized traditional outreach, which he likened to a 'fishing rod' aiming to catch only a few fish to tick diversity boxes without risking institutional traditions.³ In contrast, Ben writes that the NSSP aims for an 'industrial scale' ambition, seeking to fish 'in the deep ocean rather than the easy-to-reach shallows'.

The outcomes are impressive: choirs from Leeds Cathedral, recruited exclusively through the NSSP from state schools, have earned BBC Radio 3 broadcasts and critical acclaim for recordings. Moreover, participating schools report positive impacts on children's academic achievement, well-being, behaviour and aspirations. This success proves what music educators have always known: genuine efforts to cast a wide net, combined with quality music education and nurturing talent through regular singing opportunities, can lead to high-quality choral singing and raised aspirations among children in a state education system lacking such opportunities.

'Will you be recruiting for the choir at York Minster?'

³ www.dioceseofleedsmusic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Cathedral-Voice-February-2021-for-mailing.pdf

One thing has become clear: York Minster must make room within its walls for the voices of children beyond the 30 or so amazing choristers it currently trains

I have been asked this many times since starting, as most such programmes serve as recruitment strategies for their cathedral's treble line. Unlike most cathedrals, the choir of York Minster continues to thrive despite the combined impacts of Covid-19 and the national decline in choral singing. This resilience is partly due to its 1,000-year history and esteemed reputation. The choristers attend an independent school where they receive top-tier choral and musical training daily. Parental engagement and cultural understanding reflect the level of commitment required from both children and their families to attain such a remarkable standard. With chorister and back-row places usually filled and the standard exceptionally high, the choir's endurance and excellence are upheld. Consequently, York Minster does not rely on its schools singing programme to rejuvenate its choir, although it must remain open and creative to ensure successful recruitment in the future.

MAKING ROOM

So, what is my purpose? How can the programme have as much impact in York if the programme is not directly sending children on the traditional chorister route? What pathways can we offer them? How can I contribute to the evolution and survival of the Anglican choral tradition I have come to love?

Through many conversations, one answer has become clear: York Minster must make room *within*

its walls for the voices of children beyond the 30 or so amazing choristers it currently trains, and part of my job is to help the organization create and nurture that space. The children we reach may not all become choristers, but they can still contribute to cathedral music. First, children with aptitude and interest, supported by their families, could become choristers at the Minster or local church choirs. Second, musical education can open doors to various church-adjacent singing and musical opportunities, from organ playing to conducting or joining associate choirs. Third, choral scholarships and lay clerk positions are open to all, allowing these children to enhance worship as they grow into confident musicians. Finally, specific singing opportunities can be created for these children. For instance, this July, children from three local schools provided music for the daily 12:30 Eucharist, and more initiatives are being planned to include them in the Minster's music and worship. Instilling a love of choral singing and nurturing skills in children outside the specialized world of choir schools is a sure-fire way to enrich the musical heritage of both the church and the nation. Expanding the range of music in our cathedrals and churches to include works from diverse composers can increase youth engagement, attract funding and offer genuine inclusion for children in prestigious spaces.

York Minster's is demonstrating a willingness to implement the NSSP creatively within its traditions without limiting state-educated children's achievements. While the results may not be immediate, the message is clear: opening doors to new young voices is valuable both musically and liturgically in the short and long term.

If we succeed, York Minster could lead other cathedrals to recognize the value of Schools Singing Programmes. This recognition would be driven not solely by recruitment objectives or the pursuit of ticking outreach boxes, but by acknowledging the invaluable contributions all children's voices can make to cathedral music and the enriching experiences choral singing offers.

LOOKING BEYOND THE PERCENTAGES

Running the NSSP at York Minster could also challenge the common notion that only programmes operating in the most deprived areas have an impact, while those situated in areas of perceived affluence (such as York) are less influential and perhaps less necessary. I am guilty of having thought along those lines, imagining I was in some way abandoning the children of Hull and that I would have minimal impact at best. Yet York, despite being the wealthiest city in the north of England, has poorly funded local authorities and areas ranking in

the 10% most deprived for children's attainment. Disregarding such places, on the baseless assumption that they have less need for a programme like the NSSP, would result in children within those areas missing out on an opportunity for social and cultural advancement.

Additionally, by presuming that children from slightly higher socioeconomic backgrounds do not need or deserve our programmes, we risk neglecting the 'precarious middle class'. Despite achieving a certain income level, these households often face significant financial instability which limits cultural and educational opportunities for their children. Raw musical talent exists across all social strata, and our net must be wide enough to catch and nurture it. As the CMT report notes, 'excellence [is] a function of natural ability, sustained music tuition, sufficient practice and rehearsals, and ample opportunities to perform.' The Church serves all, not exclusively the richest or poorest, and our programmes should follow its example. Including, but not limiting ourselves to, areas of high deprivation is essential to increase social mobility and enrich the nation's cultural capital. If our aim is truly to widen access to choral singing, our programme should therefore improve provision for *all* children, including those who fall outside the extreme categories: 20% most deprived and 20% most privileged. Only then will we be able to say we are being inclusive and aiming for excellence.

LEAVING A MARK

In the last six months, I have crystallized a clear objective: to demonstrate that Schools Singing Programmes are relevant not only in cathedrals with near-empty choir stalls or in the most disadvantaged areas but across all regions of the country; they can benefit even the most esteemed institutions with robust choral foundations, provided they embrace genuine inclusivity.

The programme at York Minster must also show that enhancing access through inclusivity does not compromise the quality of music and services, nor alienate existing choristers. Our cathedrals must embrace the voices of all children, whether they receive extensive vocal training daily or sing for just a brief period each week.

This is what makes my job so exciting: the children with whom I work have the power to shape the trajectory of cathedral worship and music, influence future singing programmes, and leave an indelible mark on the Anglican choral tradition. It is an honour to join the ranks of dedicated music educators working to reignite the country's choral traditions from the grass roots up.