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A review of the cathedral music landscape in the United Kingdom

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Executive summary

Cathedral music has an importance in British national life that goes far beyond its place in daily worship. The UK's flagship cathedral choirs are renowned worldwide and consistently perform to the highest standards of excellence. Cathedral music is one of the UK's greatest and most distinctive cultural assets. The cathedral music landscape is changing rapidly, however, and cathedral music must evolve to meet the challenges of the context in which it now operates.

Executive summary (continued)

Cathedral music, and in particular the service of choral evensong, has seen a sustained surge in popularity, even at a time of decreasing church attendance overall.

Many people love cathedral music for its transcendent beauty and numinous quality, whether or not they are religiously active, and there is strong support and engagement for cathedral music from those interested in heritage, the artistic value of the music and its place in education.

But cathedral choirs are expensive to run and difficult to manage. The dilemma facing cathedral music is how to widen participation and increase affordability without compromising on excellence. There is a risk that cathedral music becomes polarised between well-endowed choral foundations with linked choir schools which produce music of the highest quality but are perceived as exclusive, and those cathedrals which recruit their choristers from local schools but struggle to find the time and money to reach similar standards of excellence. An issue with which all cathedrals must grapple is whether pathways to joining a cathedral choir offer sufficiently inclusive opportunities. Unless cathedral music faces up to these challenges, it risks losing credibility in the eyes of the public.

Much has already been achieved. Girl choristers were first introduced to major cathedrals 30 years ago. Now almost every cathedral recognises the importance and value not simply of making available opportunities for girl choristers, but doing so on a basis of parity with boy choristers. The number of cathedrals and major places of worship which do not make provision for girls is rapidly dwindling and their position looks increasingly untenable from a legal and moral point of view.

There is less evidence to show that cathedral choirs have made significant progress on increasing the socio-economic and ethnic diversity of their choirs to better reflect the makeup of the communities they serve – although in many cases the choirs may be more diverse than their congregations. This is particularly difficult for cathedrals with linked independent choir schools. Choir schools and cathedrals offer scholarships and bursaries, but as private schooling becomes increasingly unaffordable, so the pool of potential choristers may be drawn from an unacceptably narrow sector of society. In addition to the financial cost, there are cultural and societal barriers to entry which may deter potential applicants or their parents. It raises the question of whether the independent choir school model is ultimately sustainable or justifiable.

Executive summary

continued

Cathedrals which embrace the challenge of widening participation can play a significant role in the levelling-up agenda. Many cathedrals put considerable effort into community engagement and partnership activities to spread the joy of singing, to contribute to basic music education and to make cathedral music more accessible. At an individual level, the experience of being a chorister can be transformative and offer life-long benefits, including enhanced academic attainment and the acquisition of hard and soft transferable skills.

Cathedral choirs are proud to aspire to excellence. They are the elite of church music, and among the elite of choral music worldwide. The analogy with elite sport is apt, but cathedrals have to work hard to demonstrate that there is an equivalent route from the grass-roots to the pinnacle of singing, as there is with sport. Cathedrals need to be able to celebrate elite talent, without conflating elite performance with notions of elitism, and by implication, exclusion.

There is much for cathedrals to be proud of and build on. Cathedrals enjoy an enviable worldwide reputation for their music and a growing, appreciative attendance for their choral services. This review concludes by suggesting that the way ahead for cathedral music is in discovering a broader concept of excellence than that of purely musical perfection, where the interdependencies between

excellence (or quality), cost and diversity are fully worked through, and cathedrals find a way to offer a holistic, inclusive experience for their choirs which achieves a satisfactory compromise between the competing priorities cathedral music faces.

1. Introduction

1. Introduction

Context

- 1.1 This review explores the current landscape of choral music as sung in cathedrals, collegiate chapels, royal peculiars, abbeys and greater parish churches throughout the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, covering Anglican and Roman Catholic denominations. The scope encompasses places which have an established choral programme, in other words, they sing choral services on a regular basis, typically at least three services weekly.
- 1.2 The terms “cathedral” and “cathedral music” are used here to include all these elements. The review takes into account relevant academic and published literature but also draws on more anecdotal material where appropriate. Cathedral Music Trust commissioned this work in order to uncover and clarify issues currently facing cathedral music.
- 1.2 Cathedral music is defined for the purposes of this review as having been written for performance in a religious rite or worship and sung, normally in parts, by a choir; it is frequently referred to as sacred choral music. Choirs singing cathedral music normally comprise a front row of choristers or adult sopranos, and a back row of altos or counter-tenors, tenors and basses, known as lay clerks or choral scholars¹.
- 1.3 In 2019, the last year for which figures are available, the Church of England (CofE) reported that 1,500 choristers (770 girls, 730 boys) and 510 lay clerks/choral scholars provided choral music in its 42 cathedrals and Westminster Abbey. It noted that there

were 90 mixed choirs, 40 male choirs and 30 female choirs singing in cathedrals². Comparable figures are not available for other places where cathedral music is performed but the total will be significantly higher, given that the 42 Anglican cathedrals comprise only about one-third of the places of worship which are within the scope of this review.

- 1.4 This review considers the current context of cathedral music. It describes the rise in popularity of choral services in recent years, specifically choral evensong, and analyses explanations for this, both academic and anecdotal. It notes the focus of cathedral music on excellence, and asks how cathedrals can remain the elite of choral music while dealing with perceptions of elitism. Through the prism of excellence, it analyses the impact of cost and quality. It reviews the progress of cathedral music in seeking diversity in terms of gender and of ethnic and socio-economic background, and discusses the related role of cathedral choir schools. It notes that firm data are lacking in many instances, and concludes with suggestions of further research which will help guide the course of cathedral music in future.

¹ Lay clerks are sometimes referred to as lay vicars, songmen or vicars choral and are normally employed on a permanent part-time basis with leave and the ability to pursue additional musical commitments. A choral scholarship is often held in conjunction with a university degree course or by a gap-year student.

² *Cathedral Statistics 2019* Church of England, 2020

2. The English Choral Tradition

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- 2.1 Of all the performing arts, cathedral music is the most distinctive element in Britain's cultural life. Cathedral music was developed as an integral part of Christian worship in the western Church, but over the centuries it has developed a uniquely English choral music tradition within and beyond Anglican and Roman Catholic churches and cathedrals. It has become entwined with British heritage and culture. Choral evensong (choral vespers in the Roman Catholic tradition) remains today an act of worship that takes place on most evenings, in most cathedrals, on most days of the week in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Choral evensong is also offered throughout the world, including in America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. It is particularly vibrant in The Netherlands, but is also sung regularly in France, Norway and Germany³.
- 2.2 The centrality of music to Christian worship in England can be traced back at least as far as St Augustine, who is said to have proclaimed that "he who sings prays twice". Choral activity is believed to have formed part of the daily ritual in cathedrals, minsters, and major chapels since the foundation of the first Benedictine abbey by St Augustine at Canterbury in AD 597. The Reformation meant that choral music in Anglican worship developed its own unique flavour, with a hiatus during the

Commonwealth, when choirs were disbanded and music in church forbidden – the only time this occurred until singing in cathedrals was prohibited during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- 2.3 During the English Reformation, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer introduced the Book of Common Prayer, a liturgy in the vernacular for use by everyone in daily public worship, which included an order for evensong. It has remained largely unaltered since 1662. Cathedrals were important for the nurture and flourishing of evensong from its introduction. Standards fell to a low ebb in the nineteenth century, but recovered in the twentieth century: cathedral music, with its high-quality repertoire and professional performance, is now considered to be one of the glories of English cultural heritage.

³ For the Netherlands, see Rijken *My Soul Doth Magnify: The Appropriation of Choral Evensong in the Netherlands* 2020; for the place of choral evensong in Norway, see Coldicott Dalene *Anglican Choral Evensong and the Church of Norway: Aspects of Integration and Worship Practice* 2020.

⁴ Gant *O Sing unto the Lord: A history of English Church Music* 2015 (p142)

3. Attendance at choral evensong is rising while church attendance overall is falling

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- 3.1 In a context of growing secularism, Britain's cathedrals have reported increases in their congregations. In 2019, the CofE reported that a total of 37,300 people per week were attending usual cathedral services, 13% more than in 2009. This contrasts with a decline in average attendance at Sunday services across the CofE as whole, down from 740,000 in 2016 to 690,000 in 2019⁶.
- 3.2 There is considerable evidence that choral music is driving this increase in cathedral attendance. Congregations for choral evensong on weekdays, for example, increased by 35% between 2007 and 2017, although it appears that attendance has since levelled off⁷. There have also been increases in attendance among Roman Catholic congregations for traditional choral services, particularly among young people.
- 3.3 A 2013 report, Church Growth Research Programme Strand 3, noted that cathedral attendance was rising, and that cathedral Eucharist and choral evensong were especially popular and well attended⁸. Music was held to be particularly important in explaining weekday attendance; choral evensong was identified as the most consistently well attended weekday service in nearly half the cathedrals surveyed. One of the authors of the report commented that cathedrals' rising attendance figures owed much to music.

He explained, "Choirs are not the only engine of growth, but they're a key engine. Choirs have always been very important to why people attend cathedral services, and the music has always been of a very high standard."⁹ The report notes that 75% of worshippers consider the choir important; 65% say the same about the sermon.

- 3.4 The reach of cathedral music goes well beyond people attending services in person, however. Choral evensong has been broadcast live every week by the BBC since 1926 and is the BBC's longest-running outside broadcast programme. In its 90th anniversary year it had 308,000 listeners, its largest audience yet. This is at a time when listener figures for BBC Radio 3 as a whole remained flat¹⁰.

⁶ Reported in *The Times* 20 September 2021

⁷ See: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/22-february/news/uk/popularity-of-choral-evensong-inspires-survey>

⁸ *Church Growth Research Programme Strand 3: Structures* Cranmer Hall, Durham, 2013

⁹ *The Economist*, 4 March 2014 <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2014/03/04/sing-and-they-will-come>

¹⁰ Figures from Radio Joint Audience Research, reported at https://www.rhinegold.co.uk/classical_music/record-reach-radio-3s-choral-evensong/

3. Attendance at choral evensong is rising while church attendance overall is falling

- 3.5 Special or occasional broadcast choral services reach millions. It is estimated that King's College Cambridge has a global audience of 30 million for its broadcasts, of which by far the most high-profile is the annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols broadcast live on radio (with a curtailed service recorded for television broadcast)¹¹. Reporting on King's College's quest for choral perfection, the *New York Times* commented: "One geeky choral scholar calculated that if you made a mistake on Christmas Eve, the combined number of people listening on radio with the chapel echo would be like one person hearing that mistake continuously for 24 years."¹²
- 3.6 Over 13 million people in the UK watched the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral in April 2021 at which a pared-down choir of four (for Covid-19 reasons) performed the choral music from St George's Chapel¹³, and Leicester cathedral choir provided the music at the three principal services around the Reinterment of King Richard III in 2015, which it claimed were watched by some 350 million people worldwide¹⁴.
- 3.7 The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic saw cathedrals across the country adapt quickly to live streaming of services, gaining viewers from across the world. The trend to stream evensong continues even as the pandemic abates. Choralevensong.org, for example, listed 148 live streams of evensong from 53 cathedrals,

greater churches and Oxbridge chapels in the one-week period 23 February to 1 March 2022¹⁵. The webcast services of choral evensong from Canterbury cathedral regularly attracted between 2,500 and 3,500 online viewers in the period December 2021 to February 2022.

¹¹ See: <https://www.ft.com/content/81849068-1c30-11ea-97df-cc63de1d73f4>

¹² Reported in the *New York Times*, 23 December 2018

¹³ See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-56792086#:~:text=The%20Duke%20of%20Edinburgh's%20funeral,and%20around%20450%2C000%20on%20Sky>

¹⁴ See: <https://leicestercathedral.org/choirs/>

¹⁵ See: <https://www.choralevensong.org/uk/upcoming-livestreams-910.php>

4. Why do people attend choral evensong and other sung services?

4. Why do people attend choral evensong and other sung services?

- 4.1 Choral evensong has a central place in worshipping communities, but many people who love cathedral music and attend sung services do so without subscribing to the religious experience from which it springs. The paradox of higher attendance at choral evensong services in an increasingly secular society has been explained on the basis that choral music offers a sense of the numinous and transcendent. Arnold, for example, argued that the intrinsically theological and spiritual nature of sacred music reflects our inherent need to express our humanity and search for the mystical or the transcendent¹⁶.
- 4.2 Examining the popularity of choral evensong in the Netherlands through participant observation and interviews¹⁷, Rijken identified a list of qualities which attract people to choral evensong: the high vocal quality and the rich musical repertory on offer; the concept of rituality or the syntax of symbolic language and acts involved in the service; tradition and the connection to the past; and the flow and spirituality of the service. A current research project at the University of Oxford investigates the motives and experiences of people attending choral evensong and considers how these can add to our understanding of the role of cathedral music in the 21st century¹⁸. As part of her research, King has carried out a survey to explore the religious beliefs and identities, and socio-cultural, educational, and musical backgrounds of respondents, besides asking about their reasons for attending evensong. The findings

of King's research are not yet published, although it appears that music is a significant factor encouraging attendance at cathedral services.

- 4.3 Noting that a significant proportion of people attending choral evensong are under 40 years old and many others are at or beyond the fringes of the church, Reynolds argued that evensong provides “a place of sanctuary for people seeking space for reflection in a frenetic world....It is ‘worship without strings’”¹⁹. Listening to cathedral music can evoke a very emotional response. Bob Geldof acknowledged that he cried when he listened to the choir practising at Canterbury cathedral, saying that “the articulation of sense and soul must be the supreme achievement of the human being”²⁰.

¹⁶ Arnold *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, 2014

¹⁷ Rijken *My Soul Doth Magnify: The Appropriation of Choral Evensong in the Netherlands*, 2020

¹⁸ King *More than just a song at twilight?* In *Cathedral Voice*, February 2019

¹⁹ Reynolds *Lighten Our Darkness: A Celebration of Choral Evensong*, 2021

²⁰ See: <https://www.austinchronicle.com/music/2011-03-18/bob-geldof-sxsw-friday>

4. Why do people attend choral evensong and other sung services?

- 4.4 Turning to more anecdotal evidence, informal research reported in the Church Times in 2018 suggested that people who attend evensong were “often people who like to attend church on their own. They don’t want to be jollied along, made to shake awkward hands with their neighbours, or sway their bodies or clap their hands. They are not looking for sermons or for instruction in the Christian faith. They come for God, I think, relieved that no one is going to get at them. The music is important, of course, but so is what the rhythm of speech and music does for them: that slowing of the heart rate and breathing, the quietening of the mind, the sense of space and mystery and presence”²¹.
- 4.5 Asked why they were attending a weekday evensong service at Westminster Abbey, a visitor from Australia said, “I am not really religious. I came for the music and the history.” A Spanish family explained that for them, the church service did matter: “We are Christians. It was important to my parents to be at a church service, and this is very beautiful.” A couple from America commented that the spirituality of the service appealed to them rather than the religious aspects: “There is a reverence about it. It is a moment when you can pause in your daily life. When you can stop. The choral music is so important for that.”²²
- 4.6 An alternative perspective argues that evensong is the “atheist’s favourite service because it is essentially a free choral concert with very little demanded of the worshipper. It allows God/Source to move people in their own way, gently, without any perceived pressure. It is a service that gives much and asks for almost nothing in return.”²³ Even the atheist Richard Dawkins admitted to “a certain love” for evensong²⁴. The then Dean of Durham commented in 2014, “to put it bluntly, evensong across the country offers a free daily recital. It’s a wonderful cultural offering.”²⁵

²¹ See: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/2-november/comment/columnists/why-choral-evensong-is-so-popular>

²² *Evensong sees a surge even as British church attendance declines*, Religious News Service, August 2017

²³ See: <https://www.englandcast.com/2015/10/evensong>

²⁴ Quoted in *The Spectator*, 14 September 2013: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/richard-dawkins-interview-i-have-a-certain-love-for-the-anglican-tradition->

²⁵ *The Economist*, 4 March 2014 <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2014/03/04/sing-and-they-will-come>

4. Why do people attend choral evensong and other sung services?

- 4.7 Given the emphasis placed on the holistic experience of choral evensong in a cathedral setting, the question arises why people tune into streamed choral services and what they get out of the online experience. Some listeners will be displaced from in-person services as a result of the pandemic. But many more watch a live-streamed service by choice. An issue for cathedrals is how to engage with this new audience, and how to encourage occasional listeners to tune in more regularly or to step inside their local cathedral for a service.
- 4.8 An analysis of listeners' experiences of Choral Evensong broadcasts on BBC Radio 3 was published in 2019²⁶. Using material from The New Radio 3 Forum, the researchers found, firstly, that listeners treated the broadcast as a musical experience worthy of detailed critique. Second, listeners considered it as a religious experience, commenting on liturgical aspects of the broadcast. The researchers found that engagement with the broadcast on a spiritual level was less common. This is a highly engaged audience, however, and the results may not be typical.
- 4.9 In summary, then, it appears that both religious and cultural factors account for an increased interest and participation in cathedral music in general and choral evensong in particular. Cathedral music brings alive biblical text and liturgy as being at

the core of worship, and offers an opportunity to engage with sacred music and spirituality without any demands being placed on the individual. It also enables congregations to experience peace and serenity in a place of transcendental beauty and to listen, without charge, to a high-quality musical performance.

²⁶ Clarke "O Lord, open thou our lips': listeners' experiences of BBC Radio 3's Choral Evensong on The New Radio 3 Forum". From *The Experience of Listening to Music: Methodologies, Identities, Histories* ed Barlow & Rowland, 2019

5. Cathedral choirs are expensive

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5.1 Determining the costs of cathedral choirs is difficult partly because there is no consistent way in which cathedrals report on their cost. Friends of Cathedral Music, the predecessor charity to Cathedral Music Trust, estimated in 2014 that the average annual cost of running a cathedral choir was £250,000, but the range varies hugely²⁷. The annual report of Westminster Abbey for 2020, for example, showed that £3.3 million was spent on “choir and music”²⁸. At the other end of the scale, Coventry cathedral budgeted to spend just over £50,000 on music in 2022²⁹. In its recruitment material for new choristers, Southwark cathedral notes that “membership of the Choirs is free; the Choristers receive an excellent musical education that their parents may not otherwise be able to afford. However, the costs of the Choirs to the Cathedral are considerable, approximately £180,000 per year, including the salary costs of the Director of Music and the Assistant Director of Music, the costs of the Lay Clerks, travel costs, costs of foreign tours, laundry of robes and purchase of music.”³⁰

5.2 The biggest predictor of the cost of a cathedral choir is whether the cathedral has a linked independent (fee-paying) choir school. Cathedrals typically provide generous financial subsidies to their choir schools to support scholarships for choristers, accounting for between 35% and 40% of their music department’s budget.³¹

²⁷ Peter Toyne, Chairman of FCM, speaking on the BBC’s Today Programme, 27 February 2014

²⁸ See: <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/media/14623/westminster-abbey-annual-report-2020.pdf>

²⁹ Spend on music outside the major cathedrals may be considerably lower

³⁰ See: <https://cathedral.southwark.anglican.org/worship-and-music/music/the-choir/supporting-the-choir>

³¹ Figures calculated from information provided to Cathedral Music Trust by 44 cathedrals and major places of worship as part of the 2022 grant application process.

5. Cathedral choirs are expensive

5.3 Unlike their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, UK cathedrals are self-financing and receive no regular state funding. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, cathedrals' music departments were under pressure to achieve financial savings (see “Llandaff Cathedral cuts choir to save money”) but the pandemic has had disastrous consequences for cathedral finances, and thus cathedrals' ability to fund their music. Some cathedrals rely heavily on income from visitors which virtually dried up in 2020 and 2021, and the absence of in-person congregations for much of this time also reduced income from collections and donations at services. In 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, emergency funding of £1 million was made available by the Cathedral Choirs Emergency Fund³², and match-funded by £1 million from the Church Commissioners, to ensure that no cathedral had to make redundancies among its professional musicians.

Llandaff Cathedral cuts choir to save money (2013)

In 2013 Llandaff Cathedral decided to make redundant five lay clerks, one choral scholar and the assistant organist, in order to save £45,000 from an expected deficit of £81,000. This was presented by the cathedral chapter as the “best way forward to enable us to save money while ensuring our choral tradition remains as good as it can be”.

This meant that the choir would consist of boy choristers only during the week while adults would be paid to sing with the choristers occasionally for weekend and seasonal services. A former member of the choir commented, “A cathedral without music loses its life, its spirituality, and its sacredness. It will become a museum”.

Llandaff has now re-established a full choral programme.

Sources

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-north-east-wales-25460945>

<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2013/8-november/news/uk/protest-at-llandaff-choir-cuts>

³² The Cathedral Choirs Emergency Fund was a partnership between Cathedral Music Trust, Ouseley Church Music Trust and the Choir Schools' Association to provide immediate support for cathedral choirs that were silenced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Cathedral choirs are expensive

St Paul's music provision "under threat" (2021)

Launching its music patron scheme, St Paul's cathedral noted that sustaining its world-class standard of music for all to enjoy requires an annual financial investment of £1.3 million. It commented, "financial pressures for the Cathedral are now even more acute in the wake of the COVID pandemic, and sadly our music provision is under threat". St Paul's is forecasting a £5 million deficit overall in 2022.

King's College Cambridge also seeks financial support to sustain its loss-making choir and music, ranging from £5 million to establish a dedicated choir endowment fund to £5,000 to sponsor a chorister for a year.

Sources

<https://www.stpauls.co.uk/support/st-pauls/become-a-music-patron>

<https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/members-and-friends/support/giving/enhancing-our-environment/choir-and-music>

5.4 The shock to cathedral finances caused by the pandemic has implications for the longer-term sustainability of cathedral music. Cathedrals may question whether they are getting an adequate return on their investment in music. The popularity of choral evensong may help justify associated costs on the basis that it builds congregations, although there is no direct relationship between numbers attending and revenue received, since services are free to attend (although worshippers are encouraged to donate). Despite the risk to cathedral finances in relying too heavily on certain sources of income such as income from tourists, as highlighted by the pandemic, there is a hard economic case to be made for cathedral music alongside its role in achieving international influence through soft power. Pre-Covid, cathedrals attracted about ten million tourist or leisure visitors annually and contributed about £235 million to the economy³³.

³³ Ecorys *The economic and social impact of England's cathedrals*, 2021

5. Cathedral choirs are expensive

5.5 The proportion of a cathedral's total spend allocated to its music varies considerably, ranging from 3% to 34%, with an average of around 10%³⁴. These figures must be treated with extreme caution, because cathedrals will differ in how they allocate costs. But they do pose a general question: can money buy quality? In other words, does the perceived standard of cathedral music rise the more a cathedral spends on it? It is perhaps not surprising that cathedrals with some of the highest profile choirs – St Pauls, Canterbury, Winchester, Westminster Abbey – spend more than £1 million per annum on their music³⁵ as does King's College Cambridge³⁶. A high-profile choir is a very indirect proxy for a high-quality choir; there is no objective measure of quality in cathedral choirs and many factors come into play, not least the impact of the Director of Music. But while opinions will vary, many will concur with Day's analysis of the choir of King's College Cambridge, in which he noted its pre-eminence throughout the last hundred years³⁷, and with a review of the "10 best choirs in the world" which included King's College Cambridge, Trinity College Cambridge and St Paul's Cathedral³⁸.

5.6 The financing and management of the 42 CofE cathedrals and their choirs is now situated within a new context for the governance of cathedrals as established in the Cathedrals Measure 2021. The Measure separates management from governance by requiring cathedral chapters to become Boards of

registered and accountable charity trustees. The intention is to bring about more professional control of finance, risk and audit, with the majority of Board members required to be non-executive. There is concern, however, that the Measure further distances directors of music and their choirs from governance. It will be important to ensure that the new Boards have a full understanding and appreciation of the fundamental place of music within the life and worship of a cathedral.

5.7 In brief, it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions on the cost of cathedral choirs because the figures are not easily comparable between cathedrals. Cathedrals differ in the number of choirs and choristers they support and whether or not they have a linked choir school. Nevertheless, this is an area which would benefit from further research, both to investigate any relationship between quality and cost and to provide a benchmark for the provision of cathedral music.

³⁴ Figures calculated from financial information supplied by 44 cathedrals and major places of worship which applied for a grant from Cathedral Music Trust in 2022

³⁵ Expenditure on "services and music" at Winchester fell below £1 million in its most recent financial statements as a result of Covid-19 cutbacks

³⁶ "Chapel expenditure" at King's College Cambridge was £1.5 million in 2019 (see <https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/pdfviewer/44702>). As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, chapel expenditure fell to just over £1 million in 2020 and 2021.

³⁷ *Day I saw eternity the other night: King's College Cambridge and an English Singing Style* 2018

³⁸ Classical Music, 9 November 2021 See: <https://www.classical-music.com/features/artists/worlds-best-choirs>

6. A focus on excellence

6. A focus on excellence

- 6.1 The UK is renowned worldwide for the level of excellence achieved by its cathedral choirs. Cathedral music is at the pinnacle of singing in places of worship. Its professional, dedicated choirs undergo intensive training in order to create performances of the highest quality: they are the elite of music in churches, and among the elite of choral music worldwide. Excellence in cathedral choirs is considered to be a function of natural ability, sustained musical training, sufficient practice and rehearsal, and ample opportunities to perform. In other words, excellent outcomes are a result of excellent processes, which in turn depend on excellent leadership. Excellence is within the reach of all cathedral choirs, with the UK's flagship choirs providing outstanding examples among a wide range of achievement.
- 6.2 There is a perception that because cathedral choirs are elite – or, to put it another way, they pursue excellence – they must also be elitist. The risk for cathedral music is that if it is seen as elitist, in other words if it is seen as unfairly exclusive and believes itself to be superior, it loses credibility with the public. This risk is greatest for cathedral choirs which are linked to an independent choir school, because the costs involved deter many potential choristers (despite the availability of scholarships and bursaries – see para 11.2.)

- 6.3 The portrayal of cathedral music in the media can feed this perception. Coldicott Dalene noted that a BBC documentary by Lucy Worsley presented choral evensong as a cultural, quintessentially English product. She commented that Worsley's interpretation of evensong was situated firmly in the educated and economically privileged upper classes, among those who have the cultural, social and economic capital to participate. Coldicott Dalene pointed out that other understandings of this culture may exist and be equally relevant, but an alternative narrative was not presented in the programme³⁹.

³⁹ Coldicott Dalene *Anglican Choral Evensong and the Church of Norway: Aspects of Integration and Worship Practice* 2020 (p58), analysing Lucy Worsley's 2017 broadcast *Elizabeth I's Battle for God's Music*

6. A focus on excellence

6.4 As an example of culture wars⁴⁰, some commentators claim that cathedral music is representative of high culture and is therefore inherently elitist and exclusive, while others argue that this is a classist notion in itself. Reynolds, for instance, argued that “the worship offered in cathedrals is predominantly structured, hierarchical, formalised and punctuated by a high level of musical and linguistic sophistication....It is not an immediately accessible form of worship. It makes mental and cultural demands on those who encounter it – not least through its music”⁴¹. But he went on to maintain that evensong has wide appeal for its undemanding anonymity which provides space for the congregation to stand back from busy lives, and that it is becoming a significant part of the Church of England's mission.

Beautiful choral music isn't elitist...it's how we approach the divine

“I used to have the privilege to sit in choral evensong every weekday evening at St Paul's Cathedral. The silence would stop me and calm me down. The prayers and readings would slowly format my thoughts. But it was the music that stole for me a glimpse of heaven. And it was often unspeakably beautiful. Contra Arnold, this is absolutely not a class thing. In fact, it's extremely patronising to suggest that it is. High culture is all about how we apprehend the divine — whether at Glyndebourne or in Sheffield city centre.”

Giles Fraser in *Unherd*, July 2020: <https://unherd.com/2020/07/church-philistines-have-got-high-culture-all-wrong>

⁴⁰ The Policy Institute & Kings College London *Culture Wars in the UK*, 2021

⁴¹ Reynolds *Lighten Our Darkness: A Celebration of Choral Evensong*, 2021

6. A focus on excellence

6.5 In a wider context, there is ongoing discussion about classical music and elitism. Johnson is among those who has mounted a defence against claims that judgements of taste are arbitrary, in this case as applied to classical music⁴². He argued that music is more than a matter of taste, maintaining that while some music provides entertainment or serves as background noise, other music functions as art, and remains distinctive because it works in different ways to most of the other music that surrounds us. He sought to restore classical music's intrinsic aesthetic value so that it is no longer seen as merely a signifier of elitism. While his view that classical music is inherently distinctive is perhaps over simplistic, Johnson's arguments reflect Roger Scruton's, who also argued that high culture is an elaborate artefact which has value in and of itself. He commented, "Art makes us conscious of what we are and what we can hope to be, and it does so through moments of revelation in which all our being is aroused", concluding that "culture – which at first sight may seem to be a luxury – turns out, after all, to be an all-time necessity."⁴³

6.6 The analogy of sport is instructive. "Elite sport" is not at all a term of opprobrium. Rather, it describes those who through determination, hard work and talent reach the very top of their chosen field. It is a term to be celebrated and rewarded. It also attracts significant public funding. The idea behind the government's investment in elite sport is that elite sport success is seen to lead to international prestige, a 'feel-good factor' and an increase in participation among the general population⁴⁴. It is accepted that kicking a football around in the park with some friends is at the base of the same pyramid which has Manchester City or Liverpool players currently at its apex.

⁴² Johnson *Who needs classical music?: cultural choice and musical values*, 2002

⁴³ Scruton *Is High Culture a Luxury, or a Necessity?*, 2017
<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/beauty/is-high-culture-a-luxury-or-a-necessity.html>

⁴⁴ Grix & Carmichael, Why do governments invest in elite sport? A polemic, in *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 2012 (pp 73-90)

6. A focus on excellence

6.7 In the same way, cathedral choirs are at the apex of singing. In order to demonstrate that they are elite but not elitist, cathedrals must be able to demonstrate a pathway from the grass-roots of singing through to the excellence represented by cathedral choirs. This could be from different genres and standards of singing in parish churches,⁴⁵ but is more likely to be through partnerships with local schools or music hubs in the provision of music education.

Being proud of excellence

“I remember singing as a chorister in Peterborough Cathedral, having won a music scholarship to go to school there, and realising for the first time in my life what true excellence was.”

David Lammy, politician

“We are proud to foster excellence without elitism”

Southwark Cathedral Statement, February 2022

⁴⁵ A participant at Cathedral Music Trust's *Joining the Dots* conference in January 2022 described how she moved from a gospel choir at her local church to singing in the choir of a major cathedral. Ed Sheeran sang as a choirboy in his local church in Suffolk.

6. A focus on excellence

- 6.8 Through their community engagement and partnership work (see paras 12.1-12.7), many cathedrals support the basic foundations of singing in schools, and encourage talented children from the schools with which they work to join a cathedral choir, which might be a training choir before a child moves up to the main cathedral choir. Wakefield cathedral, for example, recently launched Byrd Song which is an opportunity for boys and girls in Years 2-4 to experience the world of the cathedral choir and offers a taster for the main choir⁴⁶. Leeds cathedral has five dedicated choirs, including a children's choir from which boys and girls can move up to the boys' or girls' choir, and a scholars' choir comprising young people and university students. The Leeds choirs perform in rotation, singing at a total of eight services each week.
- 6.9 This inclusive approach to excellence is more difficult for cathedrals which do not recruit directly from the local community but whose choristers are drawn from a linked independent choir school. Cathedrals have to work hard, therefore, to reposition cathedral music from current perception where "elite in music is an embarrassment, elite in sport is a celebration"⁴⁷.
- 6.10 The relationship between excellence on the one hand and diversity and inclusion on the other hand underscores many of the debates currently taking place in the cathedral music landscape and discussed in this review. For example, it was made relatively explicit in the debate about the introduction of girl choristers in the 1990s, in particular the claim (subsequently found to be unsubstantiated) that the introduction of girl choristers would compromise the quality of cathedral choirs (see para 8.6). It is an important issue in the continuing debate around boys-only choirs, which comprise most of the cathedral choirs which have the highest national and international profile and are consistently rated as of the highest quality, thereby reducing the opportunities for girls to sing with the most high-profile choirs (see para 11.6). It is inherent in current debates about socio-economic and minority ethnic diversity (see paras 10.1-10.7). The relationship between excellence and cost is touched on in para 5.5, and the issue of excellence and pathways to choristerships, particularly the role of choir schools, is covered in paras 11.1-11.10.

⁴⁶ See: <https://www.wakefieldcathedral.org.uk/worship-and-music/music-and-choir/the-choir>

⁴⁷ Comment made by participant at Cathedral Music Trust's *Joining the Dots* conference, January 2022

A case study on excellence and diversity: Sheffield cathedral choir

In July 2020 the Chapter of Sheffield Cathedral decided to disband its cathedral choir, arguing that a renewed ambition for engagement and inclusion in choral life was required. This decision received widespread coverage, and connections were drawn between the apparent lack of diversity of the choir in terms of social background (which was denied), the quality of the music (the Dean suggested that it was not sufficiently high and implied that making the choir more inclusive could address this) and the broader accessibility of choral music. In an interview, the Dean was quoted as saying, “we believe we should be raising our ambition and be the best choir we can be in Sheffield and South Yorkshire — and I don’t think we are there actually ... Cathedrals believe in excellence. We want the cathedral to be singing at a quality that is thrilling — and that’s not the case at the moment.”

A former lay clerk at Sheffield Cathedral underlined the organisation’s commitment to diversity and argued that “the more diverse a choir is, the better that choir is”. He said that the cathedral choir had worked with over 140 primary schools and thousands of children from a wide set of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, arguing that Sheffield cathedral had been at the forefront of widening engagement and diversity.

Press reports suggested that many people interpreted the Chapter’s decision as a judgement that “their white middle-class faces didn’t fit”. One chorister parent commented: “I find the suggestion of elitism particularly distressing ... Yes, a few of the children come from private schools but I don’t think it matters where children come from or what their background is.” It was pointed out that about two-thirds of choristers attended local state schools or were home educated, while attempts to recruit elsewhere had not always been successful.

The Dean resigned in October 2020. A report commissioned by the Bishop of Sheffield found that there had been a pattern of bullying and blaming at the cathedral and recommended an unreserved apology be given over the way the choir closure had been handled. Plans are under way in 2022 to rejuvenate music in the cathedral.

Sources

interview with BBC radio 4 today programme; Classic fM news 24 July 2020; Sheffield Cathedral website; [dailymail.co.uk/news](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news)

6. A focus on excellence

- 6.11 Cathedral music also faces the charge that its repertoire is irrelevant to modern congregations⁴⁸. Among the recommendations of the 1992 Archbishops' Commission on Church Music, which covered music from the grandest cathedral to the lowliest parish church, were that: clergy, musicians and congregations give fresh consideration to the place and value of music in the services of the church; that those responsible for the choice of music in churches take account of the varying tastes and preferences of their congregations; and that congregations be helped to explore and experiment with new music. The report observed that “the subject of music in worship arouses widespread interest and evokes a strong response in many people”.
- 6.12 The Commission's recommendations caused considerable controversy and led to attempts to vary the musical offering in cathedrals which were not always successful. A 2012 report noted that experiments with “modern music and instruments” in cathedrals, such as Sunderland Premier League football club's Carols of Light Service in December 2011 and a performance by Jools Holland and his band at Wells Cathedral in March 2007, elicited mixed responses, and that acoustics of cathedrals may not lend themselves to some modern music and instruments⁴⁹.

- 6.13 Less radically, but perhaps with greater impact, King's College Cambridge has deliberately chosen, in its annual carol commission, composers whose musical inspiration and experience is not primarily liturgical. King's explicit intention is to ensure that church music does not become a museum piece, stylistically isolated from developments elsewhere in the contemporary classical music tradition, but a legitimate contribution to it⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ *In Tune With Heaven: the Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Church Music*, 1992

⁴⁹ Theos & Grubb Institute *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals*, 2012 (p31)

⁵⁰ Williams, 'What sweeter music': *issues in choral church music c.1960 to 2017, with special reference to the Christmas Eve carol service at King's College Chapel, Cambridge, and its new commissions*, 2019

7. The experience and impact of being a chorister

7. The experience and impact of being a chorister

- 7.1 Cathedral choirs are unique in that children as young as eight years old work as professionals alongside and on equal terms with adults of all ages. There has to be mutual trust and respect between children in the front row and adults in the back row, because there is complete interdependence. As one former chorister said, “It is the only thing that I have come across where children and adults perform on the same level, doing the same thing”⁵¹.
- 7.2 Cathedrals and choir schools note that choristers benefit from receiving an excellent musical education and the ability to develop and practise soft skills, such as teamwork, communication and time management. Lichfield Cathedral School, for example, claims that being a chorister offers first class musical training, and leads to “valuable skills including teamwork, self-discipline, self-confidence, taking responsibility and the ability to concentrate on a task, which will benefit them throughout their education and for the rest of their lives.”⁵² The cathedral also underlines the chorister experience of taking part in uplifting concerts and radio and television broadcasts, and being part of a unique cultural heritage.

What it means to be a chorister

“I owe my entire career to my experience as a chorister. My background in choral music has meant everything to me. It’s a fantastic grounding in music but it’s a discipline as well. I think you learn gravitas as a chorister, there’s a great dignity to it. It brings you into contact with a colossal range of literature, it’s very good for your maths, it’s a grounding in performance. Any child who has been a chorister is destined to have an interesting and fulfilling life.”

Alexander Armstrong, TV and Radio presenter

“There is absolutely no doubt the experience [of being a chorister at St Paul’s Cathedral] made me the cricketer I became. We were expected to learn quickly about the power of concentration and performing under pressure ... There are parallels here with professional cricket ... You are expected to be a team player, to commit to a common creed of dedication and self-discipline. The world is often watching... Music was similar to cricket in that we were judged collectively, but vulnerable to individual error ...”

Alastair Cook, Cricketer

Sources:

https://cathedralmusictrust.org.uk/CMT/About/People-content/Our_Ambassador.aspx

Alastair Cook The Autobiography 2019

⁵¹ Quoted in Dong & Kokotsaki *Music achievements of being an English chorister* 2021

⁵² See: <https://www.lichfieldcathedralschool.com/why-be-a-chorister/457081.html>

7. The experience and impact of being a chorister

- 7.3 Advocates of cathedral music include former choristers who are confident about the life advantages their chorister training gave them. These are anecdotal but powerful statements about the positive experience of being a chorister. One material benefit claimed by choir schools is that choristers go on to leading independent schools at the age of 13 where, according to Westminster Abbey Choir School, most win “valuable music scholarships”⁵³.
- 7.4 A study recently published by Barrett and Zhukov followed the life trajectories of two former cathedral choristers⁵⁴. Both reported that their time as a chorister was “significant and life-changing”. Skills acquired as a chorister such as attention to detail, care of others, leadership and self-discipline were found to have a continuing impact many years later. The authors concluded that the rigorous demands and high-level musical training which cathedral choristers experience create habits and behaviours which translate into valuable life skills.

- 7.5 Preece, who is researching the lasting socio-cultural effects of chorister training, found that participants in her fieldwork interviews cited the experience of being a chorister as one of the biggest factors in their subsequent success⁵⁵. The former choristers in her study, who attended a mixture of state schools and independent choir schools, followed very different career pathways, from optometry to the Ministry of Defence. The majority of choristers have continued performing music as either a main career or alongside their careers.

⁵³ See: <https://www.abbeychoirschool.org/admissions/future-careers>

⁵⁴ Barrett & Zhukov *Enduring impacts of cathedral choral training on choristers' lives*, 2022

⁵⁵ Personal communication from Preece, researcher at Bristol University, whose thesis is in progress.

7. The experience and impact of being a chorister

7.6 From an academic perspective, Dong examined the experience of being a chorister through interviews with three cohorts of former choristers (the first still in education, the second in work and the third retired⁵⁶). She noted that choir schools offered a solid training in choral singing (especially sight-reading and vocal proficiency) and in academic subjects, and that they fostered the overall development of the individual, especially with regard to confidence, commitment and team spirit. Many interviewees believed that being a chorister demanded a level of professionalism that was unusual for children of a young age, including dedication, discipline, team spirit, leadership, independence and confidence. Dong pointed out that almost every choir school with what she termed a “sound reputation” is also a boarding school and claimed that boarding can damage family ties and prevent a normal childhood. This is however contrary to much modern experience of boarding; it should be noted that very few choir schools now require their choristers to be full or weekly boarders and the experience of being a chorister boarder in the 2020s is very different from that of the 1940s to 1970s (nearly half of Dong’s interview sample).

7.7 In a paper based on Dong’s fieldwork, Dong and Kokotsaki reported that the main musical outcomes achieved by choristers were the development of outstanding sight-reading skills; an all-round proficiency in musicianship and engagement with many genres of music; and a life-long appreciation of music⁵⁷. The authors noted that outcomes are not always positive, especially if the high musical expectations developed by choristers are not met by singing opportunities later in life, quoting one former chorister who said, “Now I sing in a very small church choir at a much lower standard. I find this really hard.... You are almost cursed by having a taste for brilliant music and if you don’t reach that level, you are forever thinking I would rather not sing at all than sing at a lower standard”.

⁵⁶ Dong *Lifelong influences of being a chorister: a phenomenological study*, 2018 (p202)

⁵⁷ Dong & Kokotsaki *Music achievements of being an English chorister* 2021

7. The experience and impact of being a chorister

7.8 Dong built on earlier work by Barrett, who explored how choristers manage a highly demanding musical life, based on interviews with 20 boy choristers and another 10 boys who were not choristers but were educated in the same school⁵⁸. Barrett found that environmental conditions such as early exposure and instruction and strong family support were key factors in the development of choristers' musical expertise. The research also found that choristers were selected in part on their musical potential and in part on their skills and capacity for self-sufficiency, which together with individual drive, focus, peer mentoring and structured practice, contributed towards a productive learning experience.

7.9 Studies have sought to discern the relationship between musical education and other academic skills. This literature is quite extensive, and findings are varied, although there is some evidence of positive effects. For example, one study in 2018 tested the effects of structured music education on cognitive sub-functions including planning, working memory, and inhibition⁵⁹. It found that test scores on inhibition, planning and verbal intelligence increased significantly in the two music groups over time (and more so than those involved with visual arts and a control group). A study published in 2020 which examined the school records of children in British Columbia found that children who participated in music activities

performed better in English, maths, and science, regardless of their socio-economic background and previous academic record⁶⁰.

7.10 Other studies have suggested that musical learning can assist with the processing of lexical skills, improving pitch discrimination abilities in both speech and reading among non-musical children; that detection of pitch patterns is predictive of performance on measures of phonological skills and reading ability; and that a link exists between musical abilities and phonological skills, although the bases of these links are not clear.

⁵⁸ Barrett "On being and becoming a cathedral chorister: a cultural psychology account of the acquisition of early musical expertise", in Barrett (ed.) *A cultural psychology of music education* 2011 (pp. 259-288)

⁵⁹ Jaschke, Honing & Scherder "Longitudinal analysis of music education on executive functions in primary school children", in *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 12, 2018 (p103)

⁶⁰ Guhn et al "A population-level analysis of associations between school music participation and academic achievement", in *Journal of Educational Psychology* 112(2), 2020

7. The experience and impact of being a chorister

7.11 Hallam and Himonides have recently reviewed and synthesised the evidence in neuroscience, psychology and education to better understand the effects of listening to and actively making music⁶¹. Their work considers music's relationship with literacy and numeracy and transferable skills and music's impact on social cohesion and personal wellbeing. They conclude that, taken together, the findings of the research they reviewed are mixed, but that there is evidence that music can enhance language skills and literacy, support creativity, academic progress and attainment, enhance fine motor skills, motivate disaffected students and contribute to health and wellbeing.

7.12 Research has also been carried out into the experience of singing, especially for boys, and how this impacts their identity, particularly at the point of adolescence when their voices change. Little research has been carried out on adolescent voice change in girls, although Gackle noted as a result of decades of professional observation that “although voice change in females is not as dramatic as that observed in males, it does occur”⁶². More extensive evidence is available on the impact of voice change in boys. On the basis of interviews with 85 boys from England, Greece, Ireland and Spain about voice change, school singing and choral music instruction, Freer found that boys experienced a sense of identity loss during voice change,

and encountered gender- and sexuality-based bullying⁶³. Interviewees offered recommendations for teachers, such as focusing on vocal technique specific to male changing voices, and supporting boys during the process of voice change and identity development. Freer has conducted a series of studies examining similar themes such as how choristers sense a loss of control and autonomy during the voice change process, and how choristers can be encouraged to continue in choirs⁶⁴. Choristers may feel discouraged from doing so as changes in the adolescent male voice occur at around the same time as major social, academic, and other physical changes⁶⁵.

⁶¹ Hallam & Himonides *The power of music: an exploration of the evidence*, 2021

⁶² See: <https://vocalprocess.co.uk/adolescent-voice-change-in-teenage-girls/#:~:text=Lynne%20Gackle%20in%20the%20exceptional,are%20found%20in%20both%20sexes.%E2%80%9D>. See also May & Williams “The girl's changing voice” in *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education*, 8(1), 1989

⁶³ Freer “Perspectives of European boys about their voice change and school choral singing: Developing the possible selves of adolescent male singers”, in *British Journal of Music Education*, 32(1), 2015 (pp 87- 106)

⁶⁴ Freer “The changing voices of male choristers: an enigma... to them”, in *Music Education Research*, 18(1), 2016 (pp 74-90)

⁶⁵ Freer “‘I'll sing with my buddies’—Fostering the possible selves of male choral singers”, in *International Journal of Music Education*, 27(4), 2009 (pp 341-355); See also: Freer “Two decades of research on possible selves and the ‘missing males’ problem in choral music”, in *International Journal of Music Education*, 28(1), 2010 (pp 17-30). And for a wider discussion on young male voices and singing, see: Ashley *How high should boys sing?: Gender, authenticity and credibility in the young male voice*, 2016

7. The experience and impact of being a chorister

7.13 The theme of loss as experienced by choristers in a wider sense has also been taken up by Liberatore⁶⁶. Liberatore's research focuses on the experience of choristers, current and past, in the English choral tradition. Interviewing choristers during the Covid-19 pandemic, he noted an "awareness of grief in choristers' otherwise enthusiastic, cheerful accounts" which he found difficult to ignore. Liberatore commented, "I have been struck over and over again by the deep sense of responsibility that these children and young people feel for the spiritual and emotional lives of others: for ensuring as best they know how the comfort of the lonely, the consolation of the bereaved and the peace of the dead ... I did not quite expect the clarity with which children would understand themselves not just as professional musicians, but as ritual actors in the management of this grief – not only for themselves, as they navigate what it means to be children and choristers in pandemic time, but for those to whom, for some perceived bond – humanity, Britishness, Christianity, music, history – they feel connected, and for whose benefit their vicarious worship continues day in and out".

7.14 In summary, there is both academic and anecdotal evidence to suggest that children derive considerable qualitative and quantitative benefits from their time as choristers, which may be in terms of personal transferable skills (such as time management and confidence) or of academic skills (including skills which benefit those who choose to progress to a career as a professional musician). Research is also drawing out the internalised impact of being a cathedral chorister, particularly for boys as they approach adolescence, and more recently has highlighted the mature reflections of children on the effect their singing has on their audience.

⁶⁶ Liberatore *Sometimes people come because they just like listening to the music*, In Cathedral Voice, August 2021

8. Significant progress has been made towards gender equality

8. Significant progress has been made towards gender equality

- 8.1 The primary developments around diversity in cathedral choirs have focused on gender. In the 30 years since Salisbury Cathedral admitted girl choristers in 1991, almost every cathedral choir with choristers singing the top line has followed suit⁶⁷. By 2023 only Westminster Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, Hampton Court, King's College Cambridge, New College Oxford and Magdalen College Oxford will offer no opportunities for girls⁶⁸.
- 8.2 Different cathedrals offer different models for their choirs. Most cathedrals have separate boys' and girls' choirs (although the choirs often sing together at major festivals), while at St Mary's Edinburgh, Manchester and Rochester cathedrals (among others) the girls and boys sing together. Chichester announced in December 2021 that it would recruit girl choristers for the first time and integrate them fully into a single choir with its existing boy choristers, all of whom are educated at the linked independent choir school. Chichester's choristers sing with a back row of six lay vicars, all of whom are professional musicians. Nearby Arundel cathedral, on the other hand, has a 20-strong mixed top line of adults and children and a back row of choral scholars and volunteers. In 2022, Arundel's choristers came from eight different local schools (five in the state sector, three private)⁶⁹. Some cathedrals, for example York Minster, Peterborough, Gloucester and Salisbury, admit girls at the same

age as boys (usually 7 or 8 years old) while other cathedrals enrol girls at a later stage (for example Winchester, Canterbury, Truro and Ely, which have boys between the ages of 8 and 13 and girls at secondary school age).

⁶⁷ Girls' choirs had existed before 1991 at St Edmundsbury, St Davids, Bradford and Leicester cathedrals, in part because of the difficulty of recruiting boy choristers. Salisbury cathedral was however the first major choral foundation with existing daily choral services to admit girls. See: *Day I saw eternity the other night: King's College Cambridge and an English Singing Style* 2018

⁶⁸ St Paul's cathedral announced in May 2022 that girl choristers will be able to join its choir from 2025. See: <https://www.stpauls.co.uk/press-release/st-pauls-to-welcome-girls-to-its-choir>

⁶⁹ Information from a talk given by Arundel cathedral's Master of the Choristers to Cathedral Music Trust, May 2022

8. Significant progress has been made towards gender equality

8.3 Many cathedrals now have multiple choirs, for example a junior choir which feeds into the main choir or a young people's choir which enables boys whose voices have changed to continue singing. The models which cathedrals adopt for their choirs continue to evolve. Cathedrals are finding that it is difficult to offer equal opportunities to girls and boys when boys are recruited at primary school age and girls at secondary school age. They are also mindful of the need to offer opportunities to boys after their voices change. Worcester Cathedral, for example, changed its chorister and choral opportunities in 2021⁷⁰. It decided to admit girls at a younger age to the main Cathedral Choir, and to do so on the same basis as boys. At the same time, it set up a youth choir for teenage girls and boys which rehearses once a week and contributes to a range of services and events at the cathedral. It also has a voluntary choir which enables young children in Year 3 and above to be involved in music at the cathedral.

8.4 St John's College Cambridge announced in October 2021 that it would open up its choir to girls and women for the first time, becoming the first across both Oxford and Cambridge to combine male and female adults and children. The boy and girl choristers will be offered scholarships at St John's College School and the choir will grow in size, with the number of choristers increasing from 20 to 25. The college's director of music, Andrew Nethsingha, framed this development in relation

to social justice, diversity and gender equality saying: "I hope this small step will bring the day closer when there is gender equality amongst composers, organists and conductors, as well as among politicians, business leaders and in all other walks of life."⁷¹

8.5 A number of academic studies have examined the reasons for the move to gender diversity among choristers, which is now almost universal, and its implications for cathedral music. For example, Welch offered three broad reasons for the introduction of girl choristers⁷². The first was awareness of equal opportunities law, including a mother who took Salisbury cathedral to court when her daughter was excluded from the choir. Second, the continued recruitment of boys was becoming a more evident challenge, suggesting a practical or instrumental motivation. Third, the introduction of girl choristers could reduce the existing choir's high workload of up to eight services every week.

⁷⁰ See: <https://www.ksw.org.uk/worcester-cathedral-announce-exciting-changes-to-chorister-offering>

⁷¹ See: <https://www.classical-music.com/news/st-johns-college-cambridge-makes-history-as-it-opens-its-choir-to-girls-and-women-for-the-first-time/>

⁷² Welch "Culture and gender in a cathedral music context: An activity theory exploration", in Barrett (ed.) *A Cultural Psychology of Music Education*, 2010 (pp 225-258)

8. Significant progress has been made towards gender equality

8.6 Building on Welch's work, analyses of empirical data offered by Stewart suggested that there has generally been an "overwhelmingly positive response to the introduction of girl choristers. Furthermore, it appears not to have had any negative impact on the provision for boys, nor on the quality of the sacred music performance. Indeed, the innovation has been suggested to have led to benefits, in the sense that a slight reduction in the numbers of boy choristers' sung services each week has allowed additional time to be available for more in-depth rehearsal and the shaping of musical performance"⁷³.

8.7 Other studies have offered a more theoretical analysis. Doyle examined the barriers to inclusion in cathedral choirs and found that very few (if any) cathedrals could claim to foster a culture that eradicated persistent barriers based on gender⁷⁴. Doyle found four interconnecting barriers. First, opportunities for women and girls are shaped and restricted by institutional understandings of how to speak about gender, sex and sexuality as a result of the Anglican *via media*. Second, the traditional nature of cathedrals creates a situation where women are made to feel intrinsically different and perhaps lesser. Third, the bodies, spaces, and voices involved in cathedral worship are affected by the unequal approaches to gender built into the material and embodied practices of the CofE. Fourth, music leadership is constructed, assumed and enacted within a deeply gendered framework thereby creating and reinforcing obstacles

to participation for women and girls. In other words, the CofE has been at best ambivalent and at worst hostile towards opening up opportunities for women, whether as priests or choristers.

⁷³ Stewart *The impact of the introduction of girl choristers at Salisbury and its influence on other British Anglican cathedral choirs* 2020 (p4)

⁷⁴ Doyle *Let My Voice Be Heard: Barriers to Gender Diversity and Inclusion in Anglican Cathedral Music* 2020

8. Significant progress has been made towards gender equality

8.8 Although the role of girl choristers in cathedral choirs is now relatively uncontroversial, this was not the case in the early 1990s – at a time when the ordination of women as priests was also highly contested. There was concern, for example, that the distinctive tone of boy choristers would be lost. A number of blind test studies have shown, however, that even experts often cannot tell the difference between girl and boy choristers. One study noted that while there are sex-based differences in adolescent vocal anatomy, the trained chorister perceptual data is more equivocal and it can be difficult to distinguish between girl and boy choristers, depending on the choir and choice of repertoire⁷⁵. Another pointed out that, in a blind test, listeners liked what they heard, regardless of whether girls or boys were singing the top line, and concluded that much of the controversy over girls in choirs was based on factors other than the quality of the sound they made, indicating that opposition to girls' voices is based not so much on aesthetics as on sexism and a deep-rooted conservatism about the role of women in the church⁷⁶.

8.9 Others have expressed concerns that the addition of girls will reduce opportunities for boys. This is considered problematic given that cathedral music is one of the few places where boys are encouraged to sing and may also exacerbate problems with retention, leading to difficulties recruiting men for professional positions within cathedral choirs⁷⁷. These arguments are refuted by Stewart, however, who notes that any difficulties in the recruitment of lay clerks is more likely to be due to the historically low levels of financial remuneration⁷⁸; more anecdotally, it is believed that a large number of lay clerks do not in fact have prior experience as a chorister.

⁷⁵ Welch & Howard "Gendered voice in the cathedral choir", in *Psychology of Music* 30(1), 2002 (pp102-120)

⁷⁶ Howard & Szymanski, *Listener perception of girls and boys in an English cathedral choir* 2000

⁷⁷ An argument put forward by The Campaign for the Defence of the Traditional Cathedral Choir (now the Traditional Cathedral Choir Association)

⁷⁸ Stewart *The impact of the introduction of girl choristers at Salisbury and its influence on other British Anglican cathedral choirs* 2020 (p221)

8. Significant progress has been made towards gender equality

8.10 The need to retain the interest and enthusiasm of boys is another reason put forward for maintaining separate boys' and girls' choirs in many cathedrals. In an article in *The Times* in 2019, Adrian Partington of Gloucester cathedral noted that his cathedral has girls and boys singing separately, as when they are combined the boys lose interest⁷⁹. In the same article, Anna Lapwood, Director of Music at Pembroke College Cambridge, claimed that her institution is a supporter of women in music but that there is a wider concern about losing the choirboy tradition. She said: "There is a wariness of getting rid of the one place for boys to sing as something natural and fun. I think it is good that there are still some places that preserve and promote that." But concern that introducing girl choristers would make it more difficult to recruit boy choristers has not been borne out⁸⁰.

8.11 Finally, Freer reported in 2019 on choral music in relation to gender and sexuality, including a new awareness of the specific challenges of working with transgender singers. He argued that teacher-conductors face a dilemma of choosing "whether to respect the physiological capabilities of the student's vocal anatomy or to foreground their expression of gender identity," and how the former may impact on ensemble sound. He contended that teacher-conductors need to work through issues of gender and sexuality carefully in their choirs and classrooms, to understand needs and identify the best

approaches to relevant situations, communities and work environments⁸¹.

8.12 This issue has also been explored by Pullinger, a former chorister, who pointed out that using gendered assumptions in singing is problematic for transgender people and may prevent them from participating⁸². They argued that it is important to guard against the traditional choral setting being exclusionary in this regard and suggested that raising awareness among singing teachers and choir directors of transgender identities is vital, noting that more research on how transgender singers are treated in mainstream choral settings would be useful.

⁷⁹ *Joyful and triumphant, cathedral choirgirls finally overtake the boys*, in *The Times*, 20 December 2019

⁸⁰ See, for example, Mackey *New Voice: the patterns and provisions for girl choristers in the English cathedral choirs 2015* (p178)

⁸¹ Freer *An ethical response to "gender trouble" in choral music*, 2019

⁸² Pullinger *Facilitating the empowerment of transgender voices through singing*, 2020

9. There is more to do to achieve gender parity

9. There is more to do to achieve gender parity

9.1 While it is undoubtedly the case that gender diversity among choristers has made huge progress in the last 30 years, it is important to note that this is not the same as offering gender parity. For example, the historical pathway to choristership through an independent private school linked to a cathedral still favours boys. At Winchester and Guildford, boys are recruited from the linked independent single sex choir school (in Winchester's case, located in the cathedral close), while girls are recruited from a wide range of independent and state schools in the local area. The boys at Pilgrims' School in Winchester, who are all boarders at the school, benefit from much more intensive music training, including early morning practice. Despite the fact that Norwich School, the choir school for Norwich Cathedral, is co-ed, the boys' and girls' cathedral choirs have very different recruitment practices, with boy choristers all attending Norwich School and girl choristers recruited from different schools across Norwich and Norfolk. Even though some of the girl choristers also attend Norwich School, only boy choristers are eligible for a reduction in fees⁸³.

9.2 On the other hand, York Minster and Bristol, Salisbury and Durham cathedrals are among those which offer full gender parity, with boy and girl choristers coming equally from attached choir schools (in Bristol's case, a state-funded choir school), receiving equal funding and singing the same number of services. This has taken time to achieve. The girl choristers at Salisbury cathedral initially had no funds or scholarships available to them. They started to sing with the lay clerks on Mondays, then alone on Wednesdays, and then at one of the Sunday services. Gradually the girls took on an equal share of the services, and as of 2006 boy and girl choristers received equal chorister scholarships as well⁸⁴.

⁸³ Girl choristers at Norwich Cathedral receive an honorarium. They sing fewer services than the boy choristers.

⁸⁴ Mackey *New Voice: the patterns and provisions for girl choristers in the English cathedral choirs* 2015 (p59-60)

9. There is more to do to achieve gender parity

- 9.3 Other cathedrals are recognising the importance of achieving proper gender parity as opposed to simply providing opportunities for girl choristers. Boy choristers at Gloucester cathedral were offered subsidised school fees but girl choristers, first recruited in 2016, were not. The Director of Music was reported as saying that while it was not fair, “we are in a transitory phase ... it would cost tens of thousands of pounds for all 20 girl choristers to get their fees paid at King’s. The intention is to make boys and girls equal as soon as we can.”⁸⁵ Full equality of opportunity was achieved in September 2021.
- 9.4 At Ely cathedral, from September 2022, boys and girls in the cathedral choir will enjoy complete parity of workload and recognition. They will sing an equal number of services each week and will receive an identical percentage fee award throughout their time in the choir. Choristers will no longer be required to board at the cathedral school⁸⁶. Worcester cathedral is introducing a new model under which girl choristers undertake an equal workload to the boys and receive an equal scholarship; as a result, the value of scholarships for boys will be reduced, reflecting their reduced workload.

⁸⁵ *Discord over choirgirls’ school fees: Girls at cathedral schools are breaking centuries of tradition but are missing out on subsidies that are given to boy choristers*, The Times, 12 November 2017

⁸⁶ See: <https://www.choirschools.org.uk/news/equal-benefits-for-ely-choristers>

Different routes to parity at Bristol and Durham

Initially, Bristol cathedral’s girl choristers sang only when the boys were on holiday. The choir school at that time was an independent day school but was struggling financially. It was made co-educational, and in 2008 became a state-funded academy. Government regulations dictated equality between girls and boys and changes in the cathedrals’ choirs were implemented very quickly.

In Durham, according to the Chapter, the push for equality had a feminist slant. The goal was to create true equality at the cathedral. The girl choristers would not be tokenistic; there would not be merely a ‘sense’ of equality, but a true depth and purpose as an extension of the mission of the cathedral. Nothing less than exact parity would be acceptable.

Source

Mackey *New Voice: the patterns and provisions for girl choristers in the English cathedral choirs 2015* (pp182-3)

9. There is more to do to achieve gender parity

9.5 Cathedrals have been much slower to embrace female singers in the back row than to enrol girl choristers. St Mary’s Edinburgh was the first cathedral, which had previously only had male lay clerks, to admit a female alto in 2006, although a number of collegiate chapels have for many decades operated with soprano and alto choral scholars. In England, Peterborough cathedral appointed a female alto lay clerk in 2010 and in 2011 Lincoln cathedral appointed a female choral scholar⁸⁷. Other cathedrals have slowly followed suit: Christ Church Oxford, Ely cathedral and Bath Abbey appointed their first female lay clerks in 2019, for example, and St John’s College Cambridge has announced that both its choristers and its back row will be mixed from September 2022. Data for the 42 CofE cathedrals show that the proportion of female professional adult musicians (lay clerks and choral scholars) has increased somewhat, rising from about 1 in 10 in 2014 to under 1 in 6 (80 out of 510) in 2019⁸⁸.

9.6 Less progress has been made in appointing female directors of music. The first female Director of Music was appointed at Guildford cathedral in 2008 and currently only 3 of the 42 Anglican cathedrals in England have female directors of music (Guildford, Coventry and Peterborough)⁸⁹. In a mirror image to the argument put forward by opponents of girl choristers, Lesley Garratt argued that “cathedral choir schools are the last bastions of male privilege and must enrol more girl choristers to boost the number of female conductors and composers”⁹⁰.

9.7 Again, the comparison with sport is instructive. The Guardian commented in 2018, “In a lot of ways, singing is like sport. It boosts health, it’s fun to take part in and can be full of adventures. But all the talent in the world won’t make you an elite performer if you aren’t willing to commit to training and working hard. And, until recently, women’s involvement in professional sport has been severely limited. They have had to work very hard to prove that they are worthy of funding and that their performances are just as compelling and exciting and technically proficient as that of men. The tide is turning in sport: why not in singing?”⁹¹

⁸⁷ *Day I saw eternity the other night: King’s College Cambridge and an English Singing Style* 2018

⁸⁸ CofE Cathedral Statistics, reported annually. Figures before 2013 were not split between men and women. The CofE statistics imply that (roughly) half of the altos at the major cathedrals are female, given that the tenor and bass lines are not sung by women.

⁸⁹ There are also female Directors of Music at Arundel cathedral and at Selwyn College and Pembroke College Cambridge.

⁹⁰ Lesley Garrett reported in *The Times*, 18 May 2019: *It’s high time choir schools took on girls*

⁹¹ *Why do so many choirs exclude women? It’s time for this outdated practice to change* The Guardian, 24 December 2018

9. There is more to do to achieve gender parity

9.8 Many cathedrals have been deliberately broadening their repertoire to give more prominence to female and minority ethnic composers. The starting point was low. Research at Oxford found that in the 2018-19 academic year, just 2% of the music sung in their college chapels was by female composers – slightly lower than the percentage of works by William Byrd that were sung in the Michaelmas Term alone⁹². In response, Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford programmed one week when the music was almost entirely composed by women, including contemporary composers from Britain, the USA, and Canada, with the hope that the music would become part of the normal repertoire⁹³. Cathedrals also have the opportunity to commission new music. Every year, for example, King’s College Cambridge commissions a new carol to be sung at the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols; two out of the last three commissioned composers have been women⁹⁴.

9.9 In summary, there has been a sea change in practice surrounding gender diversity of choristers over the past thirty years. This has not contributed to complete parity between boys and girls as yet, in terms of access or opportunities, partly because some choir schools are single sex and boy choristerships may be better endowed. Progress to achieving gender diversity among adult professional cathedral musicians has been slower. This may partly be because the pipeline of girl choristers progressing to adult musicians is relatively recent, or because girl choristers who subsequently decide to enter the music

profession do so outside the cathedral music sector. The opportunities for girl choristers to progress as singers within cathedral choirs are limited, given that in the major cathedrals the top line is sung by children, so girl choristers have either to move on to a choir which operates with adult sopranos or to become an alto lay clerk.

⁹² Quoted by Sarah Macdonald in a February 2020 lecture *Silent in the Churches - Liturgical Choral Music by female composers*

⁹³ See: <https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/news/cathedral/women-composers-week-cathedral>

⁹⁴ See: <https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/chapel/a-festival-of-nine-lessons-and-carols/archive>

10. Not enough is known about the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of cathedral choirs

10. Not enough is known about the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of cathedral choirs

- 10.1 In contrast to the open debate about the role of girl choristers in cathedrals, there is very little publicly available information about the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of cathedral choirs. Most cathedral choirs are keen to demonstrate through published images on their websites that their choirs are ethnically diverse, and indeed the choir may often appear to be more diverse than the congregation it serves, but very few cathedrals make data on this available. Official CofE statistics provide a breakdown for cathedral choristers and musicians by gender but not by ethnicity. This is problematic, because public perception of cathedral music is often one of a bastion of white male privilege⁹⁵.
- 10.2 Information on ethnic diversity is available from Leeds, Leicester, Bradford and Southwark cathedrals, all of which recruit their choristers from the local community and local schools⁹⁶. Leeds cathedral notes that 74% of the membership of all its cathedral choirs in the 6-18 year old age range is black, Asian or minority ethnic and half of the schools from which their choristers are drawn are in the worst 1% of deprivation nationally; membership of its school scholars' and senior girls' choirs is over 90% black, Asian and minority ethnic. Leicester cathedral points out that its choirs fully reflect the city's ethnic diversity, with 92% of its junior girls' choir and 80% of its boys coming from a minority ethnic background. 45% of Bradford's 40-strong cathedral choir come from black, Asian or mixed

ethnic backgrounds. Bradford estimates that over 40% of its choristers live in "challenging circumstances"⁹⁷. Southwark cathedral comments that it provides cultural opportunities to children from different genders, minority ethnic groups and lower socio-economic backgrounds; currently 45% of choristers belong to ethnic minorities⁹⁸.

- 10.3 In October 2021, Bangor cathedral became the first cathedral to hold regular choral services in Welsh. The cathedral aims to put the Welsh language on an equal footing to English in its music and its services, to better reflect the Welsh-speaking community it serves. The cathedral intends to forge a liturgical and musical identity that is both "robustly Welsh and distinctively Anglican", and is commissioning new music settings for use at its Welsh-language Eucharist services⁹⁹.

⁹⁵ See, for example, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-53526684>

⁹⁶ Information supplied to Cathedral Music Trust as part of the cathedrals' 2022 grant application. Southwark is the only Anglican cathedral in London to recruit its choristers from the local community and local schools.

⁹⁷ Information supplied to Cathedral Music Trust in the cathedral's 2021 grant monitoring report.

⁹⁸ Information supplied to Cathedral Music Trust as part of the cathedral's 2022 grant application..

⁹⁹ See: <https://bangor.eglwysyngnghymru.org.uk/newyddion/2021/10/08/performiad-cyntaf-yn-y-gadeirlan>

10. Not enough is known about the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of cathedral choirs

- 10.4 While there is some indication that cathedrals recognise the importance of achieving ethnic and socio-economic diversity among their choristers and are taking steps to address imbalances, progress to achieving diversity among the back row and in particular among directors of music is less apparent. The identities of the directors of music of the 42 Anglican cathedrals in England are a matter of public record and none is known to come from a minority ethnic background. Leeds cathedral is tackling this issue by initiating a scheme targeted at encouraging a greater diversity in the choral directors of the future. Leeds offers a programme for organ scholars; of its four current organ scholars, three are state-school educated and one is from an ethnic minority background.
- 10.5 Einarsdottir is researching gender and socio-economic politics in the University of Oxford's collegiate choirs. She is mapping the demographical and social background of members of the collegiate choirs and studying the cultural-political issues at play in decision-making regarding issues such as the politics of admission, competition for musical talent, forms of musical direction, gender perspectives, financial distribution and inequalities, musical hierarchies and the possible impact of cuts in public funding to musical school activities in general. A full report has not yet been published, but Einarsdottir noted that around 45% of students at Oxford are private school educated (compared to 7% of all pupils in UK)¹⁰¹. Because state

schools have reduced provision for music education, private school educated students are better equipped to obtain choral scholarships or lay clerkships. Einarsdottir concluded that “scholarships and choral opportunities in Oxford, Cambridge and English cathedrals might be less available to students from poor socio-economic backgrounds”.

- 10.6 A report for the Arts Council on socio-economic diversity in the classical symphony orchestra tradition found that at the early learning stages there is a bias towards female instrumentalists and that people who are ethnically diverse are well represented, but that as the training stages progress, the overall intake becomes less ethnically diverse¹⁰². With respect to socio-economic indicators, young people from independent schools and higher income families are significantly overrepresented in elite training opportunities. This may partly stem from the significant drop in state schools offering music at A level and the additional investment required in music lessons and instruments beyond the early learning stages.

¹⁰¹ Einarsdottir undertook her research in 2016-17. The proportion of privately-educated students at the University of Oxford has fallen each year since then, to just over 30% in 2020.

¹⁰² Cox & Kilshaw *Creating a More Inclusive Classical Music*, 2019

10. Not enough is known about the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of cathedral choirs

- 10.7 The Incorporated Society of Musicians' 2022 music education report¹⁰³ noted that there was “decline and inequality in music provision across our [state] schools” and quoted the Child Poverty Action Group’s finding that “the cost of participating fully in musical opportunities at school is preventing pupils in low-income families from flourishing. Limited and stretched household incomes are directly having an impact on engagement and achievement in music for young people in England¹⁰⁴.”
- 10.8 The Arts Council report also found that participation in classical music is strongly influenced by family background. There has been little similar research into cathedral music, although Barrett suggested that environmental and cultural factors such as exposure to music at a young age and family support were important to a chorister’s musical development¹⁰⁵. Anecdotally it appears that knowing something (or someone) about cathedral music does help engagement. For example, a participant at a recent Cathedral Music Trust conference commented that she first tried the cathedral choir because a friend had encouraged her to come along. When carrying out interviews into the role of choral music in bringing people into cathedrals, Theos and the Grubb Institute noted that they were “time and again talking to someone who it turned out had been a chorister or was the parent of the chorister”¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰³ ISM Music: *A subject in peril?*, 2022

¹⁰⁴ Child Poverty Action Group *The cost of the school day in England*, 2022

¹⁰⁵ Barrett “On being and becoming a cathedral chorister: a cultural psychology account of the acquisition of early musical expertise”. In Barrett. (ed) *A cultural psychology of music education*, 2011

¹⁰⁶ Theos & Grubb Institute *Spiritual Capital: The Present and Future of English Cathedrals*, 2012

11. The role of cathedral choir schools

11. The role of cathedral choir schools

- 11.1 The issue of diversity particularly as it relates to socio-economic backgrounds comes to the fore when considering the role of cathedral choir schools. There are two distinct pathways to choristerships: either choristers attend a choir school attached to their cathedral; or choristers are recruited to the choir from a variety of local schools. Choristers at half of the 42 Anglican cathedrals in England plus Westminster Abbey attend an independent (fee-paying) school linked to their cathedral (21 cathedrals). Choristers at Bristol and Peterborough cathedrals and Southwell Minster attend state-funded choir schools. The 19 remaining cathedrals do not have attached choir schools and recruit their choristers from local schools. In other words, choristers at the major cathedrals in England are split almost equally between those who attend an independent school and those who attend local state schools. Of the 20 Roman Catholic cathedrals in England, three have choir schools: Westminster Cathedral (fee-paying), and The Brompton Oratory and Liverpool Metropolitan (state-funded).
- 11.2 These different pathways represent a significant dichotomy in the cathedral music landscape. Generous scholarships are available to choristers at independent choir schools, generally worth about 25% to 40% of the fees (100% in the case of St Paul's), and many cathedrals are keen to stress that bursaries are available for those who cannot afford the fees, up to the full fee amount. Figures are not available on the number of full

bursaries granted. But St George's Windsor, for example, notes that in 2020/21 it was able to offer three full scholarships and one 70% bursary to boys coming from areas of significant hardship who otherwise would not have been able to attend St George's School (out of a full complement of 23 choristers)¹⁰⁷. The Choir Schools Association also provides means-tested financial help to a limited number of choristers each year in its role as administrator of the government's choir school scholarship scheme.

¹⁰⁷ Information provided by The Queen's Choral Foundation at St George's Chapel Windsor Castle.

11. The role of cathedral choir schools

11.3 But fees are only part of the story. Social and cultural capital as well as economic capital are important factors¹⁰⁸. For example, many families may need help to become familiar with and feel comfortable in a cathedral setting. Conversely, the prospect of becoming a chorister is likely to be easier for families who already have an interest in music, a network which includes choristers and chorister parents, or experience of boarding. Other barriers to entry for children from less privileged backgrounds include the advantage given to those who can afford private music tuition; the intimidating nature of auditions for choristerships; the expectation that children will have appropriate social skills and capacity for self-sufficiency; challenging academic entry tests; and the attitude of peer groups. And attending an independent fee-paying school involves a commitment to a significant level of additional costs, for example travel to school, uniform and school trips. Moreover, independent schools have to work extremely hard to integrate children from very different socio-economic backgrounds, where many families' instinctive reaction is that private education is "not for people like us". As the cost of private schooling becomes increasingly unaffordable, so the pool of choristers is drawn from an increasingly narrow sector of society.

¹⁰⁸ Bourdieu distinguished between economic, social and cultural forms of capital. See: Bourdieu *The forms of capital*, 1986

Attitudes to boarding: Westminster Cathedral

In 2019 Westminster cathedral's choir school decided that its choristers would become weekly boarders. This was framed as necessary because parents were reluctant to allow their child to board full-time, and weekly boarding would improve recruitment to the choir. Critics of the decision argued that the quality of the choir would suffer as a result, and children who did not live in or near London would be deprived of the opportunity to be a chorister. It was also alleged that financial as much as pastoral considerations were driving the change. The cathedral's Master of Music resigned.

In response, the Cardinal commissioned a review of sacred music, which concluded that a high ambition should be set for the quality and reach of sacred music, grounded in the mission of the cathedral. Its recommendations ranged widely, covering ambition, vision, strategy and governance. It reinforced the decision to move to weekly boarding.

Sources

Diocese of Westminster Strategic review of sacred music September 2020; Catholic Herald What does the sacred music review mean for Westminster Cathedral Choir 28 September 2020; Private Eye issues 1500 and 1514, July 2019 and January 2020

11. The role of cathedral choir schools

- 11.4 Cathedrals without a linked choir school have to put considerable effort into recruiting choristers from local schools. Although data are scarce, it is no surprise that cathedrals without linked independent choir schools have the most diverse choirs (see para 10.2). There is some evidence that diversity is greater in terms of ethnicity than of socio-economic background¹⁰⁹, and cost can still be an issue for chorister families. Some cathedrals, for example St Davids, pay for transport to and from the cathedral for those choristers who need it.
- 11.5 This has long been recognised as an issue. In 1992, the Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Church Music expressed concern that, as a result of the fees payable, pupils attending choir schools would be from a similar social background instead of representing a more widespread cultural demographic, even though the fees are subsidised. In its recommendations, the Commission suggested that choir schools seek ways both of recruiting children from less wealthy backgrounds and of providing the same musical and liturgical education for girls as that enjoyed by boys. Since then, significant progress has been made on equality between girls and boys, but not on socio-economic diversity¹¹⁰.
- 11.6 What, if any, is the impact on the quality of a cathedral choir of the different chorister pathways? In a study published in 2018

of choristers' education and pastoral supervision, Dong identified that almost every choir with the highest reputation was attached to an independent choir school and required its choristers to board¹¹¹. Currently, nine choir schools require their choristers to board and all have a good musical reputation and high public profile¹¹². It should be noted that only boy choristers are required to board, even at cathedrals such as Winchester and Canterbury which also have a girls' choir. In addition, some independent choir schools require or encourage their choristers to board for some of the time, for example in the run-up to Christmas and Easter when choirs have a heavy service schedule: in 2010, Milton reported that more than 40% of choristers whose schools were members of the Choir Schools Association board for some or all of their time in the choir¹¹³.

¹⁰⁹ At a major cathedral in the Midlands, for example, over half of choristers are from a minority ethnic background but it is estimated that only 10-15% are from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. Information supplied to Cathedral Music Trust by the Cathedral.

¹¹⁰ *In Tune With Heaven: the Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Church Music 1992* (p256)

¹¹¹ Dong *Lifelong influences of being a chorister: a phenomenological study*, 2018 (p202)

¹¹² Cathedrals with choir schools which currently require their choristers to board are: Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral, Winchester, St Paul's, Canterbury, Christ Church Oxford, St John's College Cambridge, St George's Windsor, King's College Cambridge.

¹¹³ Milton *2009 Choir Schools Association census*, 2010. Quoted in Dong, 2018

11. The role of cathedral choir schools

- 11.7 Independent choir schools are almost always located close to their linked cathedral, and having choristers on site all the time and in the same place makes it easy to have an intensive rehearsal schedule, including in the early morning. At Durham, for example, choristers spend over 20 hours per week on music training and dedicate a further seven hours to music activities during school¹¹⁴. This is much more difficult at a cathedral which recruits choristers from a number of schools, where children are likely to have different school start and finish times and may have to travel some distance to reach the cathedral. The time available to train and rehearse choristers is less at a cathedral without a choir school, and this will have an impact on standards achievable and repertoire covered. Barrett noted, for example, that the amount of time choristers spent in practice is one of the key factors in reaching the highest standards in choral singing¹¹⁵.
- 11.8 Wells Cathedral School is one of four boarding schools recognised as a specialist music school under the government’s music and dance scheme, which provides financial assistance to students. Of these four independent schools, Wells positions itself as the only specialist music school to educate its musicians, including the choristers of Wells cathedral, alongside non-specialist musicians and within a broader educational context. Choristers are encouraged, though not required, to board¹¹⁶. St Mary’s Music School in Edinburgh, which educates St Mary’s cathedral choristers, is also an

independent specialist music school and pupils receive financial support from the Scottish government’s Aided Places Scheme. Choristers are only accepted as day pupils¹¹⁷.

- 11.9 In the state sector, Bristol Cathedral Choir School is the first government-funded Choir Academy in the country. A Church of England Academy with over 1,000 students, it selects 10% of its intake at Year 7 according to musical aptitude. These students, among whom are the cathedral choristers, are recognised within the school as music specialists¹¹⁸. Cathedral choristers are educated in the junior departments of the state-funded King’s (Cathedral) School in Peterborough and the Minster School in Southwell. In both schools the junior department is very small (60 and 40 places respectively). The Minster School, which is a Church of England academy, positions itself as a music specialist where singing is “an essential feature of life in the junior school”: all pupils are expected to learn the piano and benefit from free tuition on one instrument. Entrance to the junior department is based wholly on musical aptitude¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁴ Dong *Lifelong influences of being a chorister: a phenomenological study*, 2018 (p82-3)

¹¹⁵ Barrett “On being and becoming a cathedral chorister: a cultural psychology account of the acquisition of early musical expertise”. In Barrett. (ed) *A cultural psychology of music education*, 2011

¹¹⁶ See: <https://wells.cathedral.school/music/#specialist>

¹¹⁷ See: <https://www.stmarysmusicschool.co.uk/about/welcome>

¹¹⁸ See: <https://bccs.bristol.sch.uk/learning/specialism/music>

¹¹⁹ See: <https://www.minster.notts.sch.uk/page/?title=Music+Provision&pid=15>

11. The role of cathedral choir schools

11.10 It appears, then, that whether or not a cathedral choir has a linked independent choir school is a key predictor of how diverse the choir is in ethnic and particularly socio-economic terms. Offering 100% bursaries may not be enough to level the playing field for those seeking to become a chorister. Even state-funded or state-supported cathedral schools require applicants to demonstrate strong musical potential, which may be less easy for those families without the relevant cultural or social capital. It also appears that the quality and profile of a cathedral choir is higher in cathedrals with a linked choir school. These are elements of the cathedral music landscape which would benefit from more research, particularly to understand the impact of independent choir schools on recruitment to and quality of cathedral choirs.

12. From outreach to partnership

12. From outreach to partnership

12.1 Cathedrals have engaged in outreach activities for over 20 years as a way of making cathedral music more accessible to local communities. Truro cathedral, with its choir school Polwhele House, was the first to set up an outreach programme in 1999¹²⁰. An important national strand of outreach work was through the government's four-year, £40 million National Singing Programme, Sing Up. Sing Up was launched in 2007 as part of the government's "Music Manifesto" which aimed to ensure that "all children and young people have access to high quality music education". One strand of Sing Up was the Chorister Outreach Programme (COP), funded by the government at £1 million per year from 2007 to 2010, with the aim of enabling "professional children's choirs to work creatively with primary school children in their local area"¹²¹. The programme was overseen by the Choir Schools' Association (CSA), usually in partnership with the local music service and Sing Up team. In total, COP supported over 45 cathedrals, choir schools and churches to run outreach programmes involving choristers and members of music staff, drawing in 60,000 primary school children and 1,000 cathedral choristers. More than 3,083 teachers and other school staff took part and just under 1,600 teachers were trained to lead singing¹²².

12.2 The CSA's own qualitative research on the impact of this outreach programme found that it improved singing cultures in visited schools, especially among the less able and those with

special needs, and developed the skills of music teachers. The impact was two-way: the programme was found to broaden the horizons of choristers and helped them think about their own role and singing development. For cathedrals, it enabled them to engage with a wider area of the diocese. The CSA reports that a majority of COP projects continued when government funding came to an end and continue to play an important role in local education provision¹²³.

¹²⁰ See: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2001/february/15.0a.html>

¹²¹ See: https://www.singup.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Blog/PDFs/Sing_Up_2007-11_Executive_Summary_01.pdf

¹²² See: <http://www.choirschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/COP-Impact.pdf>

¹²³ See: <https://www.choirschools.org.uk/news/two-training-courses-sing-team>

12. From outreach to partnership

- 12.3 UCL's Institute of Education undertook a research evaluation of certain features of COP, focusing on the impact on singing skills¹²⁴. The report commented that COP was essentially a programme that focused on the joy and other benefits that accrue from children's sustained participation in collective singing activities. But it also found that the programme had a positive impact on children's singing development and on their attitudes towards singing. For example, it noted that primary school children who participated in COP tended to have the highest singing development ratings within the dataset outside the cathedral choristers. The report also found evidence that other activities had an overall positive impact on children's singing development, including a more positive attitude towards singing.
- 12.4 One of the community engagement programmes which grew out of Sing Up is MusicShare, a partnership between Lichfield Cathedral School, Lichfield Cathedral and The Music Partnership¹²⁵. Since 2003, MusicShare's Schools Singing Programme has worked with over 500 schools and reached over 20,000 pupils in the West Midlands with the aim of spreading the joy of singing. It won the Times Educational Supplement's Independent-State School Partnership Award in 2019. MusicShare uses a mix of core projects and one-off workshops to teach singing to children through a varied repertoire, culminating in a performance which often takes place in Lichfield Cathedral. Choristers and former choristers

act as Young Singing Leaders to demonstrate what can be achieved.

- 12.5 For cathedral choirs, community engagement work is now seen very much as a two-way partnership with local schools, often involving the music education hub. One example is the Liverpool Cathedral Schools Singing Programme, which works with 12 primary schools each term. The cathedral's music team deliver singing workshops each week in school, culminating in a concert performance at the Cathedral. Portsmouth Cathedral offers the Cathedral Sing! Programme, which consists of a series of classroom workshops and community-based events for children and teachers in primary schools, delivered by singing leaders and members of Portsmouth Cathedral Choirs across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. The programme engages with thousands of children each year and highlights the potential cross-curricular outcomes of music, using it as a means to explore different languages, history, geography and mathematics¹²⁶.

¹²⁴ Saunders et al. *The Chorister Outreach Programme of the Choir Schools Association* 2012

¹²⁵ See: <https://lichfieldmusicshare.org.uk>

¹²⁶ See: <https://www.portsmouthcathedral.org.uk/cathedral-sing-choir-outreach>

12. From outreach to partnership

12.6 A new initiative is the £2.3 million National Schools Singing Programme (NSSP), which aims to fund world-class inclusive music programmes in Catholic dioceses¹²⁷. It provides seed funding to enable Catholic state schools to establish independent, financially sustainable music projects. For example, projects may offer weekly sessions which take place during the normal school day and are tailored to suit each class and year group. They include music for school liturgies blended with interactive music education games and secular repertoire. Classes support the national curriculum and enhance educational attainment and progression. For children who are interested in taking their singing further, there is a network of regional after-school choirs, which can be a cathedral choir or boys' and girls' choirs in a local town¹²⁸. Based at Leeds cathedral, consultants to the NSSP are the Director of Music and the Director of the Schools Singing Programme in the Diocese of Leeds, which itself involves some 50 schools and over 4,500 children weekly and provided the model for the NSSP.

12.7 Overall, it appears that partnership work is predominantly focused on community impact and local schools. By definition, the 50% of major cathedrals which do not have a linked choir school have to engage with the local community and local schools in order to recruit their choristers. There is less information available on how these activities have impacted cathedrals, perhaps to influence attendance levels or to change the demographics of who is attending and who feels comfortable coming into cathedrals. There is also limited information about whether partnership work has a positive impact on recruitment to choirs, particularly those associated with independent choir schools, although COP did reverse a decline in applications for children wishing to become choristers. Durham Cathedral, for example, was very pleased with the number of children who took part in COP and then moved up to a choristership¹²⁹.

¹²⁷ See: <https://www.nssp.org.uk>

¹²⁸ See: <https://www.musicmark.org.uk/news/collaboration-is-key-inside-the-national-schools-singing-programme>

¹²⁹ Dong *Lifelong influences of being a chorister: a phenomenological study*, 2018 (p19)

13. Conclusions

13. Conclusions

- 13.1 The cathedral music landscape is changing rapidly. It has taken 30 years for almost all cathedral choirs to provide girls with the opportunity to be choristers, but the move to recognise and then achieve gender parity has happened much more quickly. The moral and legal impetus to provide true equality for girls and boys is likely to mean that those few choirs which remain boys only will have to adapt in order to retain credibility in the eyes of the public.
- 13.2 It is not yet clear that gender diversity has fully reached the back rows, organists or directors of music of cathedral choirs. The higher numbers of girls now coming through chorister training may in turn lead to higher numbers of female professional musicians with a particular interest in working in cathedral music. Cathedral choirs are very unusual, however, in that they are, and always have been, intergenerationally diverse.
- 13.3 Many cathedrals are working hard to improve the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of their choirs. Although there is a lack of data to track progress, it is clear that there remain some significant gaps in these facets of diversity. The cost of subsidising all aspects of a choristership, even if school fees are not involved, may hold back progress.
- 13.4 There is a clear divide in the cathedral music landscape between those cathedrals which draw their choristers from a linked independent (fee-paying) choir school and those cathedrals which recruit choristers from local schools (a 50:50 split in the major cathedrals in England). At a time of increasing school fees and great pressure on cathedral budgets, it raises the question whether independent choir schools are sustainable, or indeed justifiable. In the last decade, Ripon cathedral school and the Minster School in York have closed: Ripon now draws its choristers from local schools, while the education of York Minster's choristers was transferred to the fee-paying St Peter's School. These are unlikely to be the last choir schools to get into difficulty.
- 13.5 The association with independent choir schools is one factor with which cathedrals must grapple in formulating their future strategy. They also have to balance requirements of cost, quality and diversity, which may all pull in different directions. It is not enough for cathedrals to rely on the intrinsic value of their music to justify its existence: sociological research has suggested that for organisations and institutions to survive they must be seen as legitimate by key audiences. If questions and concerns about the relevance of cathedral music are widespread (internal or external to the church), they may have an impact on its perceived legitimacy, and that could be one factor threatening its survival.

13. Conclusions

- 13.6 This review has analysed the emphasis placed on excellence in cathedral music. But in order to thrive, cathedral music may need to embrace a broader concept of excellence, one which might be termed “happy excellence”¹³⁰: not striving for purely musical perfection, but offering a holistic, inclusive experience which finds a satisfactory compromise between the competing priorities cathedral music faces.
- 13.7 At the same time, cathedrals enjoy an enviable worldwide reputation for their music and a growing, appreciative attendance for their choral services. Beyond its central place in worshipping communities, many people who love cathedral music do so without subscribing to the religious experience from which it sprang. This means that the church is not the only quarter from which support comes. Indeed, there is strong support and engagement from those interested in heritage, the artistic and cultural value of the music, and its place in education – and whose religious background may not be Christian, and/or may not be religiously active. There is much for cathedrals to celebrate and build on.

¹³⁰ A term originally coined by Wells cathedral.

Appendix: Recommended further research

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This review has highlighted a number of areas where current understanding of the cathedral music landscape is limited. There are a number of research projects underway which focus on the appeal of choral music and the experience of being in a choir. This appendix notes other gaps which would benefit from further research or surveys. It is important to avoid overlap with ongoing work, so a comprehensive list of recent and current research would be a useful first step. Further insights into cathedral music will help establish benchmarks and good practice which may inform how cathedrals and their choirs wish to operate in future.

1. A survey of the socio-economic background of choristers, back rows, organists and directors of music using standardised measures, for example parental occupation or parental educational background as the primary marker of social class, and/or the number of choristers in receipt of pupil premium (as a proxy for deprivation). It may also be interesting to investigate the percentage of choristers and back rows, organists and directors of music with family members who were also members of cathedral choirs, to determine if there is a “transmissibility of advantage” through generations. Ideally, a survey of this nature would also seek to establish whether the social background of choristers and back rows, organists and directors of music differs to any significant degree depending on the cathedral and according to entry routes.

- 2. A survey of the ethnic background of choristers, back rows, organists and directors of music.** Again, this survey would also seek to establish whether the ethnic background of choristers and back rows, organists and directors of music differs to any significant degree depending on the cathedral and according to entry routes. It would most sensibly be carried out in conjunction with the socio-economic survey.
- 3. Qualitative research on the different pathways to becoming a chorister.** This research would seek to understand why and how children decide to become a chorister, and how this differs according to the pathway followed (principally, via a fee-paying independent choir school linked to a cathedral, or via one of a number of local schools in the community). The research could also seek to identify and disentangle the relative influence of economic capital (parental income and wealth) compared to cultural capital (for example family members’ cultural tastes and interests) and social capital (in other words, networks of friends and family). Ideally, it would explore what, if any, is the impact on the quality of a cathedral choir of the different chorister pathways.

Appendix: Recommended further research

- 4. Further qualitative research on the experience of being a chorister or back row, organist or director of music.** Building on recent and ongoing research, it would be useful to examine how this experience differs between different cathedrals and schools, and varies according to the individual's gender, social background, or ethnicity. This is important because diversity and inclusion is not only about outcomes. It is also important to understand how these environments are navigated and negotiated by young people which can also help to determine what forms of support they might most benefit from or need, especially where they come from a non-traditional background.
- 5. Research into the background of cathedral precentors, with a view to understanding why and how precentors decide to take up the role.** Precentors are responsible for music and liturgy within cathedrals and are a key link between musicians and clergy, often acting as line manager for the Director of Music. Under the Cathedrals Measure 2021, as a member of Chapter, the precentor will be both a trustee with responsibility for governance, and, where he or she has responsibility for a department or for part of the operations of the cathedral, they will also have an executive role as a member of the senior management group.
- 6. Research into the cost of cathedral choirs.** This research should seek to determine a comparable basis between cathedrals for the cost of their choirs, to ensure as far as possible that like is being compared with like, and to establish a financial benchmark for the provision of cathedral music. The research should also analyse how costs vary between cathedrals which have linked choir schools and those which draw their choristers from local schools and the community. Ideally, the research would also investigate any relationship between quality and cost.

More

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