



CATHEDRAL
MUSIC TRUST

CHORISTER
SURVEY
2023

SUMMARY OF
FINDINGS

Choristers are the lifeblood of cathedral music. Yet very little is known about the overall picture of the young people who sing on the front rows of choirs in our cathedrals, major parish churches and collegiate chapels. The lack of such information was highlighted in the report *The Future for Cathedral Music* commissioned by Cathedral Music Trust in 2022. The Trust therefore undertook a major survey of chorister demographics between October 2022 and March 2023. 118 choral foundations were invited to participate in the survey, with a very high response rate of almost 80%. In almost all instances, the survey was completed by Directors of Music, and the qualitative comments received therefore reflect their particular experiences and viewpoints. We are very grateful to all those who contributed.

KEY FINDINGS

- Over 3,000 choristers make a significant commitment to music-making in the UK's cathedrals, churches and collegiate chapels.
- Many choirs need help to recruit more choristers. Retention rates are high but most choirs are not at full capacity.
- Affordability is a key issue in widening access, particularly to fee-paying choir-school choristerships.
- Choral foundations are under considerable financial pressure and most choirs are insufficiently resourced to offer the level of musical education they feel their choristers need and deserve.

The survey shows that the current cathedral music scene is flourishing, benefiting from the dedication and professionalism of all participants, including its choristers. But it is also fragile and vulnerable, particularly at a time of widespread economic difficulty. Respondents emphasised the need for investment to sustain and develop excellence in cathedral music alongside the need for non-financial support to celebrate and promote the sector's opportunities and achievements.

PARTICIPATION

Using data from the survey, we estimate that about 3,000 children and young people in the UK are choristers, split almost equally between girls and boys. Most choral foundations, a term which in this survey covers cathedrals and other places of worship which

sing a regular pattern of choral services, have both girls' and boys' front rows, which usually sing separately. Almost all the other front rows are mixed; there is now only a handful of choral foundations which offer no opportunities for girls. The majority of choristers are aged between 7 and 13. Some girls' and mixed front rows include choristers up to the age of 18.

About one-third of choristers attend a choir school affiliated to their choral foundation, the vast majority of which are fee-paying. Other front rows, which in this survey we refer to as multi-school front rows, draw their choristers from local schools which may be independent or state schools. We noted that the proportion of choristers in mixed-gender, multi-school front rows who attend independent schools almost exactly matches the proportion of children nationally who attend independent schools (around 6%). The overall picture is very different, however: looking at the entire cohort of choristers, almost half attend independent schools (most at choir schools affiliated with their cathedral).

The survey reveals that the ethnic diversity of choristers broadly matches that of the population nationally (72% identify as White English/Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish/British), and in many cases is significantly more diverse than the congregations they serve.

We found that socio-economic data on choristers is not routinely collected. About half of our respondents were able to provide information about the number of choristers eligible for free school meals, reporting that approximately 10% of their choristers were eligible (the equivalent figure for all school pupils in England is 22.5%). We believe that this is an area for further work,



as we consider it important for the sector to have robust (anonymised) socio-economic data on choristers in order further to develop effective ways of broadening participation in cathedral music.

Cathedral Music Trust recognises that affordability is a key issue in widening access to choristerships at many cathedrals. Choral foundations with affiliated independent choir schools offer non-means-tested discounts on school fees ranging from 5% to 66%, with a mean of around 37%. Not every respondent was able to provide the data, but we estimate that about a quarter of choristers attending these schools receive additional support for school fees, with approximately 10% receiving a 100% bursary. However, the research suggests that the majority of families of children attending independent choir schools are able to afford a significant level of school fees. Further research is needed to identify whether children from lower-income families are discouraged from becoming choir-school choristers because adequate financial support is not available or not sufficiently publicised or because there are social and/or cultural barriers to entry. Nearly half of the choral foundations surveyed said that they would like to be able to give additional support to choristers from lower-income families.

On average, choristers rehearse five hours and perform four times per week

RECRUITMENT

Choral foundations told us that they are not currently at full capacity. A key issue in recruitment was identifying children with suitable potential, and once identified, persuading the child and their families to take up a choristership. In addition, families of prospective choristers may not appreciate the benefits and opportunities that choristership offers. The disparity of music provision in the UK's schools means that many children have little experience of structured, regular singing activities, let alone an awareness of choral singing in cathedrals. It is notable that survey respondents rated knowing someone who is or has been a chorister as an important factor in attracting new recruits to a choir.

Almost half of choral foundations which do not have a full complement of choristers had offered places to children who had subsequently declined them. The level of commitment expected from choristers and their families was the most frequently cited reason for doing so. Rehearsal and service figures reported through the survey demonstrate the high level of commitment required of choristers: on average, a chorister will be rehearsing for 5 hours per week, performing once or twice a week on weekdays and twice at weekends. The commitment for choir-school choristers is much greater (an average of 8 hours and 20 minutes and 4 to 5 services each week). These hours are broadly similar to the level of commitment required by Premier League youth football academies.



RETENTION

The survey found that overall retention rates for choristers are high, although membership of choirs had been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The drop-out rate for choir-school choristers is significantly lower than for multi-school choristers. For example, 12% of choir-school choral foundations reported that none of their choristers had left early in the last 5 years, against a figure of 4% for multi-school foundations. At the other end of the scale, only 12% of choir-school foundations reported more than 10 choristers having left early, in comparison with 32% of multi-school foundations. The incentive of the school-fee discount for retaining choristers may account for this variance. Overall, the two most common reasons for a chorister deciding to leave early are wanting to do something different and pressures of academic work. Some respondents commented that it is the parents as much as the choristers who find the continued commitment difficult.

Choral foundations are under significant financial pressure and face difficult choices over financial priorities. Over half of choral foundations said that they would like to provide more vocal tuition and support for instrumental and theory lessons for their choristers, targeted at children whose families cannot afford private lessons. An honorarium/pocket money to choristers, to encourage recruitment, retention and commitment, was the form of financial support provided most frequently for multi-school front rows.

TRANSPORT

Difficulties with transport to and from the cathedral was a significant issue for choral foundations whose choristers do not attend an on-site choir school, impacting attendance and punctuality. Over 50% of choristers have a one-way journey of more than 15 minutes' duration, with 15% of choristers travelling for more than half an hour each way. Respondents also cited the difficulty and/or expense of travel as a major factor for children and their parents not taking up the offer of a chorister place.

CONCLUSION

The results of the survey underline the dedication of cathedral music departments and their choristers. It is encouraging to report that the fun of being a chorister was cited as the biggest attraction overall to joining a choir. The survey also provides data highlighting areas of challenge where choral foundations would welcome additional financial and non-financial support in order to widen access to cathedral music and to sustain and develop their record of musical excellence. Cathedral Music Trust intends to use the information from the survey to help build an even more robust and well-researched case for the support of cathedral music which will unlock additional funds, enabling us to work with our partners in the sector to bring forward programmes which will promote excellence and widen participation at an affordable and sustainable cost.



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