



Friends of Cathedral Music

THE CATHEDRAL MUSIC TRUST

Diamond Fund for Choristers

OUR HERITAGE · THEIR FUTURE

Some observations from Professor Edward Higginbottom

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Our heritage of music in cathedrals

The spiritual and artistic value of the music of this nation's cathedral choirs is inestimable. There is certainly nothing like it in the rest of the world. The presence, day by day, week by week, month by month, of highly polished liturgical music in the country's most iconic architecture is an extraordinary phenomenon. It is matched only by the breath-taking beauty of the buildings in which the activity takes place. And there it is: free to all, an offering to anyone and everybody who seeks deep truths and personal enrichment.

Increasingly, the public, religious or not, is realising just how precious this experience is. They understand just what a difference the music in these spaces makes. As a result, our cathedrals are a



growth industry within the Church as a whole: the music of cathedrals is meeting a real need.

And who sustains this phenomenon? Children! This is the most extraordinary



story of all. Over half the singers in our cathedral choirs are children between the ages of eight and fifteen. Children who scale the heights, do extraordinary things with their voices and musicianship. Children who put us adults to shame. Above all, these are the people the Diamond Fund must cherish: we cannot let them down.

What does the chorister experience mean for these children, and what do these choristers mean for the future of music in this country?

The incomparable chorister experience

When children are selected for a choristership – around the age of seven – they have little idea of what lies ahead: it's all too new and baffling. At the age of twelve, they have a very good idea. If you asked them then about their experience, they would say something like this, though possibly in a simpler fashion:

'Singing has become my life. I love the music we perform; Bach and Mozart are my favourites, though I have a soft spot for Eric Whitacre.'

'Being a chorister takes me to special places: sometimes the music itself; sometimes the architecture where we sing; sometimes the events at which we sing. Put all three together, and it's unforgettable.'

'I love being part of a part of a team, and working alongside adults.'

We adults can reflect more deeply on the benefits of the chorister experience. Many who have been choristers in the past do just that. They talk of the unparalleled musical richness of the experience; and they talk also of its personal aspects: **the responsibility, self-reliance, capacity for concentrated work, ability to manage a demanding schedule, maturity of outlook, and professionalism.** They recognize that the early cultivation of these personal attributes has made all the difference to their lives. Indeed, it is rare to find a former chorister who does not say: 'it was the making of me'.



As a youthful musical experience, being a chorister is the richest to be had, anywhere. It embraces 600 years of repertory, hundreds of individual pieces,

working to professional levels alongside adults (who are professionals), and giving hundreds and hundreds of musical presentations – mostly liturgical, but also concerts and recordings.

This is all possible because it involves *singing* – a child's voice and musicality can be brought to a high degree of proficiency and excellence by the age of 12 or 13.



And, because liturgical routines are perfectly adapted to the acquisition of musical skills, there is a wonderful synergy, where the chorister's musical skills are expended on the liturgy, and the liturgy in turn privileges the most effective modes of musical training.

But the experience is broader than a purely musical one. It extends to all sorts of personal skills: developing a strong work ethic, taking on weighty responsibilities, learning to work in a team, displaying strong leadership skills, and managing a workplace where adults are co-equals. Nothing matures the young more than finding themselves indispensable to their elders. Real pleasures and real expectations drop onto their shoulders. **Behind those 'angelic' faces lie competence, grit, determination, resolve and assurance, as well as sensitivity and tact. And these qualities stay with them throughout their lives.**

Music-making at this level is unique to the chorister experience. It forms children in a very special way. It creates

an environment where artistic awareness can grow exponentially, where choristers can learn to appreciate beauty as naturally as they learn the first declension of a foreign verb, where their emotional development finds resonance in the truth and beauty of great art.

In a manner that does not at all surprise educationalists, the personal and intellectual qualities required by musical tasks rub off onto everything else. A chorister's general education is enhanced, and often their sporting prowess is given a lift. There are plenty of transferable skills abroad here!

The incomparable legacy

The story is not over by the mid-teens. These skills are instilled for life. If you want a simple answer to the question, why is Great Britain paramount in the world in choral music, then you have only to say, it's the chorister tradition. It may not be the only route to choral excellence, but it is the one that gives this country the edge.

And just as our young choristers have learnt by the age of 12 to work alongside adults to the same level of accomplishment, so they bring to their adult endeavours a level of professionalism and commitment standing outside the ordinary. The investment in a chorister experience pays huge and sometimes unsuspected dividends in later life.

An experience with doors wide open

Some may think that all this has a somewhat elitist identity, perhaps because private schooling plays a part in many (though not all) of the organisations underpinning our cathedral choirs. However, as a matter of fact, the chorister tradition is socially progressive, seeking through outreach activities to

attract as wide a participation as possible, and through bursaries to remove significant financial barriers. **The aspiration is to include children of all walks of life and of all identities**, provided they show potential for the musical demands and social commitment of chorister life.

An ecology and an heritage

The environmentalists among us might call these cathedral choirs SSSIs, Sites of Special Scientific Interest: they merit careful conservation, and should be supported by all possible means. Those who talk about *heritage* also have a point - a very powerful one. **In our cathedral choirs we have a living heritage where tradition is in daily renewal,**



where something as precious as the cathedral building itself is in constant renovation and re-creation. These choirs are among the country's most remarkable musical and educational assets. It sometimes takes an outsider to see this clearly. Ask, if you will, musicians and educationalists from the USA, France, Italy, Japan, Australia, Hong-Kong. They will tell you that what we have here in Britain, blessed by centuries of tradition, and daily maintained in our own time, is unique and utterly irreplaceable.

The preservation of a peerless heritage

Our first task is to understand the nature of what we have. Our next is to preserve it.

The Friends of Cathedral Music fulfils a twofold role: to spread the word about our cathedral choirs, and then to support them as strongly as possible. Here is where the Diamond Fund comes into play. Launched in April 2016, the Fund seeks to raise 10 million pounds by 2020. This money will address some of the financial shortfalls already arising, and their inevitable increase in the future.

It costs something like £250,000 per annum to run a major music department at one of our leading cathedrals. This money has to be raised year in, year out. It is indeed a heavy load for a Dean and Chapter. Given the



broader interests in play, notably the place of cathedral choirs in the nation's musical life as a whole, it is perfectly reasonable to expect cathedrals to seek partners in funding their choirs.

All of us prize the singing of Britain's cathedral choirs, admire the opportunities they offer to choristers, admire what the choristers offer to us, and admire the

contribution all this makes to our nation. We can respond with a tangible sign of our admiration. This is the opportunity the FCM's Diamond Fund now lays before you.

Since our cathedral music heritage is centred on opportunities for children, it is impossible to overstate neither the significance of the possible losses of opportunity, nor conversely the rewards of a secure future for our musically talented children.

Your contribution may turn out to be what makes all the difference between the preservation or loss of a musical tradition in one of our cathedrals. Difficult though it may be to imagine irreparable damage to one of our cathedral choirs, it is all too easy to see how financial pressures might bring it about. The Friends of Cathedral Music, through its Diamond Fund, is determined to meet the challenges lying ahead. We may see this as the Diamond Fund having 'a part to play'. This would be to understate its role. **It is more than likely that the Fund will be instrumental in saving parts of our musical heritage that would otherwise be lost – provided of course that you and I contribute to it, and generously. That is now the challenge.**

Edward Higginbottom, 2016