

SEARCHING FOR A STAR

The search for the BBC Radio 2 Young Choristers of the Year 2009 is under way, culminating in the final in October. Although the standard is high, the organizers are keen to encourage young singers from all church and school chapel choirs to apply. Stuart Robinson has been finding out more.



'We packed St Paul's Cathedral for last year's final,' says Philip Billson, the series producer of 'Chorister' as he calls it. 'Clearly there's considerable interest in singing, and wonderful evidence of the strength of solo and choral singing too.' After applications close in July, he and a small team of adjudicators will sit down to listen to a mountain of recordings from which will emerge eight finalists – four boys and four girls. There are always two winners, a boy and a girl.

'Just to reach the final was amazing,' says fourteen-year-old Alice Halstead, the current girl winner. 'The experience of singing solo in that massive cathedral in front of so many people was awesome.' For Alice and twelve-year-old Harry Bradford, the current boy winner, the competition has meant a busy round of performances on key BBC programmes including *Songs of Praise*, *Daily Service* and *Sunday Worship*, as well as interviews. During the year, the winners also receive (as agreed with

parents) singing lessons and vocal coaching. 'They make considerable progress,' says Philip Billson. 'The judges recognize potential – whether someone can deliver in front of a camera or a microphone.'

Next year, the competition will be 25 years old and during that time a number of past winners have expanded their musical careers. Two years ago, finalist Andrew Swait and winner William Dutton were taken on by Universal for their Choirboys group. Laura Wright was a founder member of All Angels, whose album was nominated for the 2008 Classical Brit Awards. Go back further in time, and the 2005 boy winner, Sam Adams Bye, was part of the Sony/Simon Cowell group Angelis.

Last year, the RSCM Director Lindsay Gray was a member of the adjudicator panel for the semi-final.



Alice Halstead and Harry Bradford, the 2008 competition winners, pictured with Charles Hazlewood

This year he'll be chairing the panel for the final in St Paul's Cathedral on 23 October. 'What is really fascinating is that a strong performer from a small village choir can genuinely challenge an experienced cathedral chorister. Last year there were some beautiful performances of simple contemporary pieces on one hand and an astonishingly impressive, virtuoso performance of a Handel aria with full cadenzas at the other end of the spectrum!'

Both producer and adjudicator are keen for young singers to have a go. 'Never ever think you're not good enough,' says Billson. 'One year we might get a winner from a parish church choir, and a cathedral choir the next: the field is wide open!' And Lindsay Gray also has personal experience of the competition. 'I can genuinely say that my daughter gained an enormous amount from her experience of competing in the final on two occasions as well as having a great deal of fun!'

➔ **The final will be broadcast on BBC Radio 2 in early November.**

Full details of how to enter can be found on the RSCM and BBC websites. You must be over eleven and under seventeen, and sing regularly in a choir or group singing in any church. You need to record a hymn and one other religious piece and send it (CD or cassette will do) to the BBC (and *not* the RSCM!) by 31 July 2009.