

BUCKING THE TREND

Readers may wonder about my qualifications. Why has the organist of a small Welsh cathedral been asked to share thoughts on recruitment and retention of choristers? When I came to Newport, in 1979, there were eight boys in the choir (most over twelve years old) and now we consistently have over 35 in two choirs. Although we do not have a waiting list as such, I am confident that, should the need arise, I could easily increase those numbers. My diocesan work as cathedral organist and my extensive work for the RSCM have both shown me that in the same period there has been a general decline in choir membership among children in general, and boys in particular. So how have we managed to buck the trend?

First, I should not like to give the impression that I have all the answers. I can only describe what has worked here, and leave it to readers to consider the implications for their own situation. When I take RSCM courses on choir recruitment, participants often say 'Ah well, it's easy for you with the status of a cathedral choir to offer'. In fact, I think the reverse is true. Despite its sterling work, St Woolos Cathedral does not have the profile locally that would be enjoyed by the greater cathedrals; indeed, plenty of people in Newport do not even realize that this perfectly ordinary town has a cathedral – a situation unlikely to be the case in, say, York! 'Status', real or imagined, is emphatically not something that attracts boys to our choirs. And yet, because we are a cathedral, the demands on the boys (and their parents) are considerably more than they would be in most parish churches. The choristers in our main choir attend ten to twelve hours in a normal week, often more; they do not receive scholarships or any other valuable financial incentive – just a modest amount of 'pocket money'.

So why do they come? Ultimately, because they enjoy it so much. I will look later at how we help them enjoy their choir experience, but first let us consider actual recruiting: how do we get them into the choir stalls in the first place? Although my experience has been with a boys' choir, I am confident the basic principles will work for girls' and mixed choirs as well; indeed, the preponderance of girls in most parish and even some cathedral choirs now, suggests that it is easier to recruit and retain girls. It may be worth considering the merits, in some circumstances, of single sex boys' choirs. Without wishing in any way to denigrate the outstanding contribution made by girls, I do feel that the time is ripe to affirm and encourage singing boys as they

At a time when many choirs have problems attracting boys, the small Welsh cathedral of St Woolos has a thriving trebles section. Christopher Barton, Organist and Master of the Choristers at St Woolos Cathedral, considers the reasons for its success.

seem to be a minority. It may be easier to attract boys into an all male choir; such a choir, too, will break down the deplorable notion that singing is a 'girly' thing to do, or is something that boys grow out of around the age of nine. In fact, singing in a good choir demands at least as much toughness and physical determination as playing any sport (and more mental determination); many of the boys in our choirs are very sporty, and I am sure most of them would agree with me.

Which leads me to observe that many boys' rugby and football teams play matches on Sunday mornings: a regrettable situation, but not one we can change. It is difficult to drag a boy away from his sport. I would therefore argue that – desirable as it is to have a full choir at the main Eucharist on a Sunday morning – it would be much better to designate a Sunday evening or even weeknight service for a boys' choir to sing, than not to have them sing at all and never set foot in church.

Some fortunate churches will be able to recruit choristers, boys or girls, from the young people within the church (one must always be careful not to 'poach' from other youth organizations) but that will not be the case everywhere. If I had recruited only from church families, I would have found two boys! But, of course, bringing children in from other sources adds to the whole church family, and many of our chorister parents have become regular worshippers at the cathedral. Word of mouth also helps, and we have had a number of boys who have come along with friends. Formal advertising we have generally found to be unproductive, although I do take every opportunity to send news items and photographs to our local paper, and always include a sentence about how to make contact, should any parents be interested.

If many children do not go to church, then we must go to them. Over 90 per cent of our choristers come from me visiting schools in the neighbourhood of the cathedral. I have found almost all heads to be supportive in this. It takes time to build a relationship with a given headteacher or a school, but the rewards are great. In making initial contact with new heads (and, indeed, potential new parents) I stress the general benefits that singing in a choir offers: the ability to concentrate for long periods; self control and self discipline; motivation; teamwork; sensitivity and understanding of great texts as well as great music – a whole cultural heritage. These are things that will enhance a child's

overall academic achievement, and heads and parents are rightly impressed by these arguments. They may not care whether their son knows the difference between Byrd and Rutter (they may not themselves!) but these skills are vital for success in any walk of life. There are other carrots too – travel, concerts, broadcasts and the like – but it is the child's week by week attendance that matters, and the fact that such benefits arise through an enjoyable activity.

Readers will note that I have so far been more concerned with 'selling' the choir to parents and teachers than to the boys themselves. This is deliberate. When I go into a school, I give every boy in Year 3 a very short voice test (in groups of about five – any more and they get too giggly) to see whether they can pitch notes. If they can, I give them slightly harder tests, such as pitching two notes in a chord. The whole test rarely takes more than two minutes for each boy, thus disrupting the school routine as little as possible. I then send a letter home through the school to parents of potentially suitable boys outlining choir membership, what it requires and what it can offer, and inviting them to come and meet me and chat further about it. I do not usually talk to the boys themselves at great length about the choir (although I will of course answer their questions) because I am always concerned about seven year olds getting hold of the wrong end of the stick and going home with all sorts of improbable tales! I can talk to the boys about why they will enjoy choir when they come to meet me with their parents.

'Enjoy' - there's that word again. Having got the children to come along, how can we ensure they enjoy themselves? I think one of the most important things is to give them music that they will enjoy singing. This emphatically does not mean seeking the lowest common denominator of 'populist' contemporary worship; indeed, that is about the worst thing to do as children so quickly see through the false and the patronizing. No, give them the highest quality music (which does not necessarily mean the most difficult) of all periods that the choir is able to manage comfortably. Our boys particularly enjoy Haydn, Mozart and Schubert, Romantic composers such as Mendelssohn, Bruckner and even Rheinberger, as well as the English schools of composition, and most modern music. They are less keen on Renaissance polyphony, but they are brought up to appreciate that it is an important part of our heritage and that they will probably like it when they are older – as, indeed, they usually do by the age of twelve or so.

I am always keen to promote the choir as offering more than just singing. All the boys enjoy their singing, but there is more to life than that (particularly from a child's viewpoint), and we want them to enjoy their whole choir experience. Therefore we offer many extra curricular activities which have, in the last two years, included: theatre trips to Stratford and Bath; trips to see Cardiff City play (not always a pleasant experience!); private hirings of our local leisure pool; fund raising fairs; football tournaments; bowling; trips to concerts and operas; youth hostelling trips; even a stage fighting workshop; plus of course such musical activities as tours, RSCM Festivals, courses and examinations. Not all the boys come on every trip but I am convinced that such activities are invaluable in maintaining the enthusiasm of the choir.

I have kept perhaps the two most important factors until last. First, I suspect it is impossible to run a thriving children's choir (or, indeed, be any sort of successful teacher) unless you genuinely like children and their company. And second, mutual respect is essential. I hope and expect not only that our choristers will respect me but also, at least as important, that each one senses how much I respect him as an individual. Without that respect they are little more than singing machines, and if they are allowed to feel that, the attraction of any choir will soon pall.

Six strategies for building and maintaining a healthy choir:

- 1 respect your singers
- 2 enjoy their company
- 3 give them worthwhile music to sing
- 4 don't waste their time
- 5 give them plenty of other activities
- 6 encourage parental involvement

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