



Opportunity knocks

Many parents cannot imagine their child being suited to a cathedral choristership. But early skills are less important than a good ear and a bright personality, discovers **David Blackwell**, and the choristers' life can offer huge benefits in musical and personal development – as well as being fun

A few short paces from the magnificence of Westminster Abbey, next to its new visitors' restaurant but free of the clatter of knives and plates, is the Abbey's new song school. Here on most days the 30 or so boys who sing as choristers in the Abbey Choir stand at music desks wrapped in a horseshoe around the grand piano, while organist and master of the choristers James O'Donnell guides them in rehearsal. For choristers at this and every sister institution, the choir school is a familiar and vital space – a focal point in lives filled with activity and singing of the highest quality. Yet who are the children who come to these music desks, and what is life like for a 21st-century chorister?

'Rise, music practice, breakfast, choir practice, school, games, rehearsal, Evensong, supper, prep, free time, bed' is how Durham Cathedral's master of the choristers and organist, James Lancelot, succinctly describes a chorister's typical day. It reflects a pattern at many institutions, with singing framing each day, from early morning rehearsal to Evensong. It all makes for a packed schedule. 'I like the fact that you're never bored,' Westminster chorister Daniel Livermore tells me; 'there is always something interesting to sing or do. It's fun, but very busy.'

In most institutions the probation choristers, often as young as eight years old, begin with separate rehearsal sessions, but in the course of their first year gradually join in the daily chorister practices and sing at their first services. Rehearsals are closely directed, with an emphasis on accuracy and musicianship, while over time choristers assimilate the pattern of services and pick up details of their work from more experienced singers. 'The younger choristers tend to be swept along by the work of the older children,' David Halls, director of music at Salisbury Cathedral, says; 'there is a good atmosphere here of "looking out" for one another.' In many cathedrals, the vocal training of the whole treble line in rehearsal is supported by independent singing teachers,

who work separately with the choristers in small groups and coach soloists. All this preparation and training leads naturally to high-level performance in the service itself. 'The boys develop an awareness of the occasion and appropriateness of behaviour,' O'Donnell tells me. Daily repetition leaves them unfazed by the responsibility of performance in such a beautiful space.

(opposite and below)
Choristers at Durham
Cathedral: from early
morning rehearsal to
Evensong, singing frames
their day



THE VERY REVEREND MICHAEL SACROVE, DEAN EMERITUS, DURHAM

CHORISTERS



◀ Liturgical singing lies at the heart of a chorister's musical life, but all choristers benefit from a very broad musical education. Learning one or more instruments is encouraged or a requirement for choristers at many institutions, and Westminster offers free tuition. For choristers who board, music practice is often supervised, giving an enviable support that can enable rapid progress. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a number develop an interest in learning the organ. 'I had a few introductory sessions on the Abbey organ,' Alex Pott, former Westminster chorister and now organ scholar down the road at Westminster Cathedral, tells me. 'It was certainly a result of hearing such a fantastic organ being played that made me decide I wanted to be an organist.' There are orchestras and chamber ensembles to take part in, and jazz groups at Salisbury Cathedral School; there is also theory tuition, and for budding composers, lessons in composition. It all amounts to an extraordinarily diverse musical experience and education, where each strand supports and deepens every other.

'Personal qualities come first – someone who is bright, energetic, has a sense of curiosity and is willing to engage'

A rather special school is needed to accommodate all this musical activity and the daily round of rehearsals and services, and most choristers are educated at a dedicated cathedral school, often a stone's throw from the cathedral itself. At Durham, where the school celebrates its 600th anniversary this year, and at Salisbury, choristers are educated alongside other local children, but at Westminster Abbey, uniquely, the school exists solely to educate and care for its choristers, enabling class sizes as small as seven or eight students. Family support is encouraged. 'We live close to the school so have been very involved in supporting our sons in this experience,' mother of two choristers Lucy Shaw tells me. 'We're able to visit regularly and take our sons out for family time when singing commitments are complete.' A busy schedule of games and other outdoor activities is somehow squeezed into the day, but most cathedral schools also point with pride to the academic achievements

◀ **At Salisbury Cathedral there is a supportive atmosphere of choristers 'looking out' for one another**

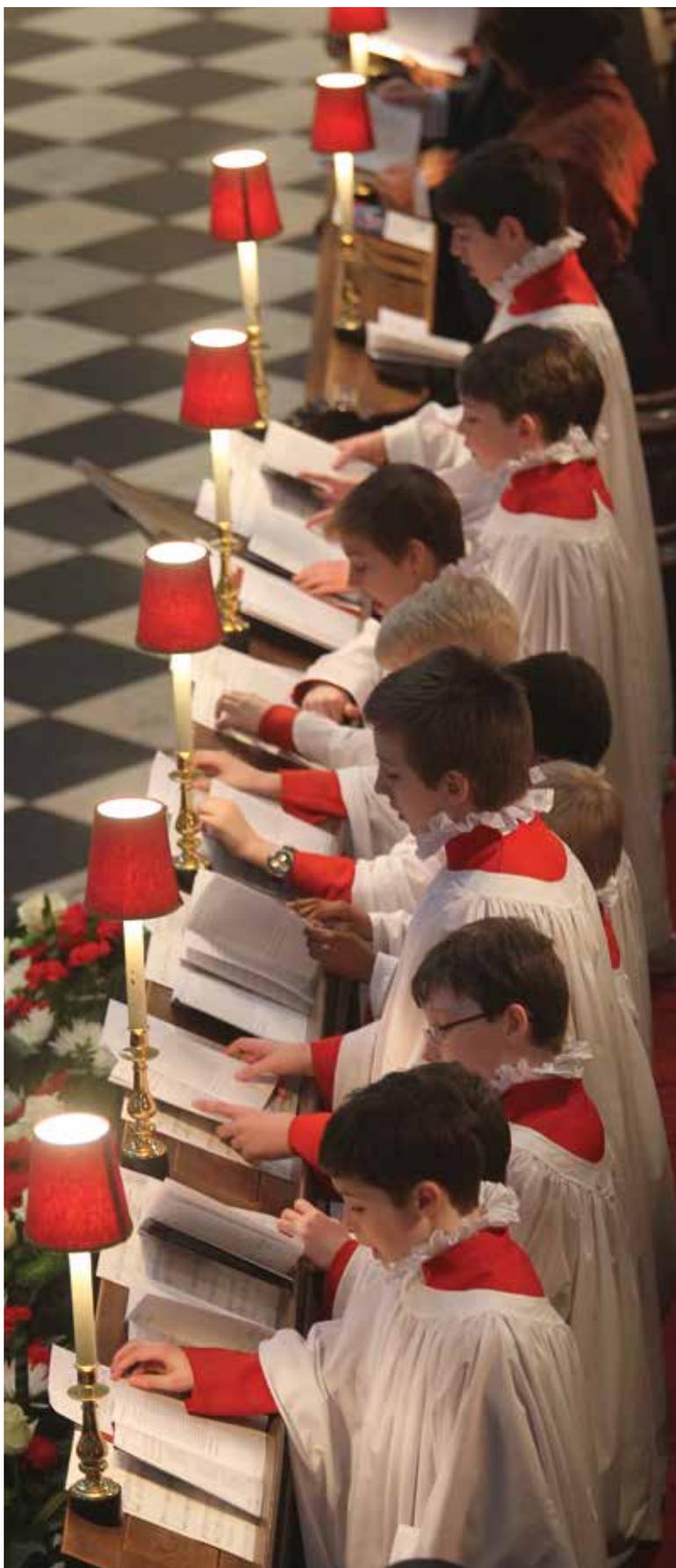
of their students and the scholarships they win to prestigious secondary schools.

This rather extraordinary educational experience is open to any child with some musical aptitude and a willingness to work hard. 'People make all kinds of assumptions about what life as a chorister is like,' O'Donnell says, 'but I'm keen to "demystify" that and show how accessible it can be.' At Westminster, would-be young choristers have the chance to experience life at the school and in the choir stalls for a day: 'We've just had our first event,' O'Donnell says, 'and it yielded three applications.' At Salisbury, the 'Be a Chorister for a Day' event each November leads to a voice trial workshop in December, followed by formal auditions in January and February. Yet the whole audition process is gentle and free of any demanding display. '[At Durham] we look for potential and promise more than actual achievement at this stage,' Lancelot tells me; 'hardly any applicants come from parish choirs, and many cannot read music. I'm looking for a love of singing, a vital spark, a good ear and a voice that has clarity.' O'Donnell agrees: 'Personal qualities come first – someone who is bright, energetic, has a sense of curiosity and is willing to engage.'

And so the choristers are selected and become the latest to join a venerable tradition stretching back many centuries. They begin a pattern of rehearsal and worship that forms the foundation for a superb musical education, and with adult singers help to provide quality liturgical choral singing to enhance services in their cathedral. Yet while this work remains the focus, cathedral choirs these days have expanded their work far wider, offering their choristers a whole set of other experiences. Concerts with professional orchestras and soloists, concert tours overseas, critically acclaimed CDs – these are all essential ingredients of the life of a modern cathedral choir and savoured to the full by its singers. 'Tours and concerts are great for esprit de corps,' O'Donnell says; 'it's a different audience and the choir gets instant validation, not least with applause, which can surprise some choristers!' CDs spread the reputation of the choir, and provide young choristers with experience of another aspect of professional music making. And then there are the broadcasts, festivals and special events. At Durham, choristers have sung on a Sting DVD and at a service of thanksgiving for Sir Bobby Robson; at Westminster, Daniel Livermore remembers his nerves before a memorial service for Nelson Mandela, to say nothing of the many great occasions of state and royal events ▶

▶ At Westminster Abbey, rehearsals and worship form the foundation of a superb musical education

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CHORISTERS

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TOM BRADLEY



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◀ At Westminster Choir School, a busy schedule of games and other activities is squeezed into the day: 'There's always something to sing or do ... you're never bored'

◀ that take place there.

An increasingly important aspect of the work of a chorister is the outreach programmes offered and supported by many cathedrals. At Durham, choristers go to local primary schools to support singing and talk about their life as a chorister, while in London, Westminster choristers visit schools and hospices to sing. This year at Salisbury, choristers and students with special needs joined together to provide a unique Evensong service that celebrated the creative talents of all its participants and their highly individual and varied response to the Christian liturgy. Such work places the choristers of the choir at the heart of their local community.

'Growing up in a happy, supportive, Christ-centred community which cares about their personal and spiritual formation' is how Lancelot lists the benefits of a chorister's education, adding with some glee the diverse occupations that Durham choristers have followed, from professional musician to Prime Minister (Tony Blair) to Mr Bean. Halls agrees: 'Being a chorister is a superb grounding for life itself,' he says, offering 'a daily insight into what it is like to do something to a very high standard and function as part of a highly motivated team.' For O'Donnell the choristers are proof that the Abbey is a living and breathing institution. 'The children animate it; they get so much from the experience but give so much back.' It becomes a way of life that never fades – and it all begins clustered around a piano in a song school. ■

David Blackwell is a freelance writer and editor.