

Cathedral Music in the 21st Century
A Reality Check

Lynda Collins

Campaign for the Traditional Cathedral Choir

Cathedral Music in the 21st Century

A Reality Check

Lynda Collins

FOREWORD

The cathedral choral tradition which has come down to us over the centuries has no counterpart elsewhere. It is arguably the brightest jewel in our national life. Not only does it have legions of devoted followers within this country, but it also elicits the enduring admiration of millions of people well beyond these shores. It comes as a shock then to realise that even those most closely involved with cathedral music are often unaware of the overall picture. However well informed they may be of what transpires at a local level, they usually have but a vague awareness of what goes on elsewhere. As a result, there is much misinformation and not infrequently a degree of complacency. It was for this reason that Campaign for the Traditional Cathedral Choir decided to investigate for itself.

The websites of the choral foundations were an obvious source of information. Some of these had been being monitored informally for over a year, but others not at all. It was therefore decided to put the monitoring on a formal basis, to seek the answers to specific questions and to monitor as many foundations as possible. In this way, it was hoped to produce a reliable account of how cathedral music was faring in the 21st century.

In the end, the websites of fifty choral foundations were selected for monitoring. Some sites were monitored for over a year, beginning in early 2008 and continuing until mid-summer 2009. Other sites were monitored for several months and a few for only a week or two. Such an approach is not ideal, but it was what was realistic in terms of the time and manpower available. However, the websites were not the only source of information. Facts were often gleaned from other sources and compared with the information on the websites. Sometimes, what was on the websites was found to be out of date, and on occasion it was simply wrong.

The facts obtained from cathedral websites were supplemented by information from another separate monitoring project which began in autumn 2008. In this case, Campaign members were invited to report on what they found when visiting a cathedral. In no way was this to be an inspection, with

all of that word's unpleasant associations, but a simple recording of what was observed while attending services. To standardise procedures, members were asked to complete a short questionnaire. Two of the questions required a personal opinion, but the rest were of a purely factual nature.

Thirty-two members took part in the monitoring. During the course of the next year, they visited forty-three cathedrals and attended a total of one hundred and seventy services. The contrast between this and the monitoring of cathedral websites, which covered fifty cathedrals and over two and a half thousand services, could hardly be greater. Its significance, however, lies in the fact that these were on-the-ground observations.

The findings from both sets of monitoring and their separate conclusions are presented with many caveats. The difficulties encountered from the very start were considerable. There was much statistical noise, and there were many imponderables and unknowables. A list of the problems posed would certainly include the following:

- (a) Choral foundations are all very different one from another and therefore making comparisons is a task fraught with difficulty.*
- (b) Information sought for the monitoring was often not available on the websites, nor sometimes even direct from the choral foundations.*
- (c) The shorter the period during which a site was monitored, the greater the likelihood it did not represent typical practice.*

Whatever the difficulties involved, however, the monitoring was felt to be a worthwhile exercise. While error could not be avoided, it was hoped that it would not greatly alter the general picture uncovered or the validity of the conclusions drawn. The fact that most, if not all, choral foundations were monitored, would, it was felt, help to reduce any unintended bias

WEBSITE MONITORING PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

Fifty choral foundations were monitored using a questionnaire designed to obtain information on the following: type of choir(s); number of choristers (boys and girls) and their age-ranges; number of lay clerks²; the make-up of the choir(s); availability of the Music List on the site and if it showed which choir was doing the singing; the total number of services sung over the period of monitoring; the proportion of different services in relation to the total; the proportion of services sung by the 'traditional choir'³, a 'girls' choir'⁴ or other choirs; number of dumb days; type of repertoire; benefits on offer to choristers. The information obtained was collated and analysed. Whatever its defects, what has emerged should give a reasonably suggestive picture of the overall choral scene.

The choral foundations monitored did not include any of the Oxbridge Collegiate Choirs, nor did it include any choral foundations in Ireland or Scotland. And although not every cathedral choral foundation in England was monitored, the majority were, especially, those of ancient origin or of special interest.

The list of choral foundations monitored is as follows: Brecon, Birmingham (Anglican), Blackburn, Bradford, Brentwood (RC), Bristol, Canterbury, Carlisle, Chapel Royal at Hampton Court, Chapel Royal at St James, Chelmsford, Chester, Chichester, Coventry, Derby, Durham, Exeter, Hereford, Gloucester, Guildford, Leeds (RC), Leicester, Lincoln, Liverpool (Anglican), Liverpool (Metropolitan), Llandaff, Newcastle, Manchester, Norwich, Peterborough, Portsmouth, Ripon, Rochester, St Albans, St George's (Windsor), St Edmundsbury, St Paul's, St Woolos, Salisbury, Sheffield, Southwark (Anglican), Southwell Minster, Truro, Wakefield, Wells, Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral, Winchester, Worcester, York.

CHORAL ESTABLISHMENT: THE CHORISTERS

A mere thirteen of the fifty choral foundations monitored are shown to have only a traditional choir. The ancient tradition of a single men-and-boys-only choir is now virtually confined to high-profile ecclesiastical, royal or academic choral foundations. Choristers in these choral foundations almost

certainly come within the 7- 13 age range. One cathedral previously featuring in this category, Newcastle, acquired a girls' choir some time ago, and another, Durham, while currently appearing, is scheduled to get its girls' choir before the end of 2009.

Chorister numbers in those choral foundations with the highest profile, Canterbury, St George's (Windsor), St Paul's, Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral, are much higher than in other choral foundations, whether they have a girls' choir or not – from 24 at St George's (Windsor) to a maximum of 40 at St Paul's. One might reasonably assume that these stronger choral forces enhance their ability to sing the very widest repertoire. This is a question, however, on which there are different views.

During the course of the last eighteen years, thirty-four of the fifty choral foundations monitored have suddenly discovered that the ancient choral tradition which they had jealously guarded for over a thousand years was unfairly constituted in that it unjustly and unfairly excluded girls. They have, accordingly, sought to rectify their errors by setting up additional girls' choirs. This is not meant to imply there has necessarily been a sheepish flocking after some notion of political correctness. For some, it was a question of falling numbers in choir schools. For others, it seems clear, they opted for a girls' choir because they did indeed feel it a right and just thing to do. However, as David Hill, former Organist and Master of the Choristers at Winchester, once said, in some cases cathedrals really were following the fashion of the moment. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that he is quoted as saying: "We see (the Winchester Girls' Choir) as an opportunity rather than an attempt to gain equality."⁵

While a handful of the thirty-four choral foundations with a girls' choir select girls from the same age-range as traditional boy choristers, the majority choose to have older girls. However, while having older girls makes more sense musically, less sense is made by the actual age range chosen in some choral foundations: for example, at Wells, 8 – 16, at Liverpool (Anglican), 6 – 16 and at Leicester, 7 – 16+; still less sense is made by such age ranges as 8 – 18, which they have at Chester, Coventry and Wakefield. Quite as astonishing is the age range at Chelmsford, which is 13 – 20. In musical terms, does that really make sense? And how can it be reasonable to continue to maintain that what we have here is a *girls' choir*? Since the law gives the vote to anyone reaching the age of 18 and thereby implies that they are adults, then it is inaccurate for choral foundations with age ranges up to 18 and beyond to continue to refer to their *girls' choir*. It is clearly a wrong

description, for the fact is that what we have in many choral foundations now is not a *girls' choir* but a choir of girls and women.

In those choral foundations with both boys and girls, the boys, perforce, have to retire round about their thirteenth birthday or when they leave their choir schools. In a few cases, choral foundations specify that a boy may stay on in the choir until his 'voice breaks'. It would be interesting to know if there are many boys, or, indeed, any, who continue much past their fourteenth birthdays. Certainly, there will be no opportunity for boys to sing the top line at age eighteen, nineteen or twenty! Nature alone determines how long a boy will sing treble. Questions of equality simply do not come into it. Unfortunately, it seems that where many choral foundations have set up girls' choirs out of a sense of fairness to the girls, what they have ended up with is a situation where the girls stay on as choristers five or more years after the boys have had to leave. How fair, one might ask, is that?

In as many as seventeen choral foundations with a girls' choir, we have no information at all on the numbers of girls. However, most sites which provide this information show that the number of girls in the majority of choral foundations ranges from eighteen to the mid-twenties. As many as fourteen of the choral foundations monitored with a top line provided by both boys and girls appear to have deliberately chosen to have exactly the same or almost the same numbers of both sexes. All but two of these are ancient foundations. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that there is a general trend for there to be more girls than boys in foundations with both a traditional and a girls' choir. As always, of course, there are exceptions; Blackburn, St Edmundsbury and Leeds (RC) still seem to have healthy numbers of boys.

Three choral foundations need highlighting: Bradford, which has a frequently mixed choir; some services are sung by boys and adults and some by girls and adults; Brecon, which has a permanently mixed choir of boys, girls, men and women; and Manchester, where the choir is composed of men, boys and girls.

Bradford and Brecon do not show the ages of their choristers. At Manchester, the age range for both boys and girls is 8 – 13. Again, while this might fit a social justice agenda, it is not calculated for the best effect musically. Brecon has around six boys and ten girls, and though Bradford claims to have equal numbers of boys and girls, this is probably more a devout wish than reality: girls there were recently seen to outnumber boys by far. Over at Manchester, they specify '16 choristers': a short time ago the number of boys was seen to be just five; the rest were girls. The mixed choir of St Mary's, Edinburgh was not monitored. However, although "the number of girls admitted" was said to

be “kept proportional to the number of boys in order to tread carefully with regard to sound and not scaring off the boys”,⁶ it tends, in fact, to have around twice as many girls as boys. Clearly, the boys are drifting away.

CHORAL ESTABLISHMENT: THE LAY CLERKS

Lay clerks are, perhaps, the less glamorous members of a choir, but they are vital all the same – and just as choral foundations have to spend significant amounts of money on choristers, so they have to on lay clerks. Generally speaking, the more there are of them, the bigger the bill. Historical reasons undoubtedly account for the number of lay clerks in any one choral foundation. However, it might be conjectured that, in those choral foundations with additional top lines, numbers of lay clerks are occasionally kept low so as to save on the overall choral bill. If so, does this affect the music that can be sung and, in particular, does it affect balance? If the answer to both these questions is yes, that raises another question: Is a disproportionately small number of lay clerks “a price worth paying” in pursuit of equal opportunities for the girls? For that must certainly be the equation in many cases: add in girls and take out lay clerks so as not to add to the budget. This is certainly a matter on which an eye needs to be kept, but with one quarter of the websites monitored not displaying lay clerk numbers the situation is far from clear.

As might be supposed, as with chorister numbers, so with lay clerk numbers, high-profile, traditional choral foundations tend to employ more of them than do less famous places. Almost every choral foundation with twelve or more lay clerks comes into this category, with St Paul’s way out ahead with 18 lay clerks. Writing in 1849, S.S. Wesley stated: “The least number of men capable of performing the Cathedral service is twelve...there is not one (Cathedral) where such is the case.”⁷ Clearly, some issues linger on.

One very worrying fact confirmed by the monitoring is that Rochester has abolished the post of lay clerk. Instead, it now relies on three singers from “a pool of deputies” and three choral scholars. How can this be good for stability or for that musical understanding which comes from singing with the same people on a regular basis? Without a doubt, the decision to go down this route was finance-driven, and one might well wonder whether other choral foundations, strapped for cash, will consider doing likewise.

CHORAL ESTABLISHMENT: WOMEN

Chester has women in its choir occasionally, and while Rochester appears not to, there has been explicit mention of the possibility of “suitable women as well as men” being deputies.⁸ Does this represent the very thin end of a wedge? Might women soon be demanding of deans and chapters the right to sing in cathedral choirs?

Bradford, Brecon, Coventry, Leeds (RC) and Leicester, all employ women in their “cathedral choirs”, though only at Brecon is the choir fully mixed on a permanent basis. However, this is not the full extent of women’s involvement with singing in choral foundations. Birmingham (Anglican), Brentwood (RC), Chelmsford, Coventry, Leicester and St Edmundsbury, all have various supernumerary choirs which contain women. They are not the official choirs, so to speak, but they certainly constitute a break with tradition and an inroad into the world of cathedral music.

At Coventry, the boys sing around 20% of the services as a separate unit. Similarly, at Leeds (RC), they sing around 14% of the services as a separate unit. In neither case, do they sing with the men, which means their access to a great deal of repertoire is much diminished. And of course, an opportunity for this repertoire to be used in worship is also diminished. As is well known, boys need a challenge to get them to give of their best. Unfortunately, it is often the case that, when they sing with girls or women, they tend to take it easy and let these latter get on with it.

A greater worry is provided by the confusion in terminology mentioned earlier. Whatever might be said about the voices of young boys and young girls sounding the same or being trained to sound the same⁹, few would claim that the voices of either young boys or young girls sound remotely the same as those of women. The question, then, is at what age, at least in musical terms, do the voices of young girls and young women begin to differ significantly from one another? At fifteen years of age? At sixteen? Perhaps, as late as seventeen, but assuredly at age eighteen. Let us look at the thirty-four cathedrals with a girls’ choir.

If the answer to the question is age fifteen, then the monitoring shows that there are *womanly* voices in the choirs of **nineteen** choral foundations.

If the answer to the question is age sixteen, then the monitoring shows that there are *womanly* voices in the choirs of **eighteen** choral foundations.

If the answer to the question is age seventeen, then the monitoring shows that there are *womanly* voices in **thirteen** choral foundations.

If the answer to the question is age eighteen, then the monitoring shows that there are *womanly* voices in **twelve** choral foundations.

If the answer to the question is age twenty, then the monitoring shows that there are *womanly* voices in **one** choral foundation.

To these numbers, of course, must be added the singers actually designated 'women' who sing in the permanently mixed choir of Brecon, the frequently mixed choir of Bradford and Birmingham's girls' choir. Clearly, we already have a considerable womanly presence in our choirs.

If we go for the lower end of the scale (age 15 and above) then, we already have womanly voices in **twenty-two** choral foundations. If we go for the middle of the scale (age 17 and above), we already have womanly voices in **sixteen** choral foundations. If we go for the upper end of the scale (age 18 and above), we already have womanly voices in **fifteen** choral foundations. Perhaps, most people would agree on age 17 and above as defining womanly tone. On that definition then just under a third of the choral foundations monitored can be said currently to employ women's voices. That figure does not take into account the sixteen choral foundations which either do not show the ages of the girl choristers on their sites or where the ages are unclear. If these were known, the percentage of choirs employing womanly voices could be expected to be significantly higher. Music that was specifically written with choirs of men and boys in mind is now being sung by very different choirs. To some that matters and to others it does not. However, if it does not matter, then would it not be more honest to say so publicly rather than pretend that when the repertoire is sung by older girls or women the sound produced is practically indistinguishable from that produced by young boys?

One problem associated with running a boys' top line in tandem with a girls' top line is that the boys are apt to feel less special, and so they make less effort than they would otherwise have done. This is all the more true when the two top lines are mixed; especially, if they are mixed in with women. Boys also tend to need to work at their music more than girls, so cutting down on their contribution to services will almost certainly affect their musicianship. All too often, where there are girls, the attitude of the boys is - 'let the girls get on with it.'

If a choral foundation, however, is bent on having a female input, then there is probably no better model than that of Winchester, where the boys continue to sing at most services, but where the girls have an occasional input. The Winchester girls are older than the boys, which makes more sense musically, and as to why their input is only occasional, this must be surely explicable in part by the fact that they are likely to be occupied with GCSEs and A Levels; they simply would not have time for a greater commitment.

MUSIC LISTS

Only five of the fifty choral foundations monitored did not have music lists on their websites. Clearly, websites are seen as useful resources both by the choral foundations and those who use them. What was less satisfactory was the number of choral foundations which did not show who was singing at any particular service. There is no knowing why this information is sometimes not provided, but in a few cases, there is compelling anecdotal evidence to suggest it is deliberately withheld. Indeed, telephone calls to elicit who was singing have on occasion been met with sharp rebuffs. At Salisbury, if the lay clerks or a visiting choir are singing, this is shown on the music list, but no indication is given as to when the boys or girls are singing. It is simply stated that the services are shared out equally. At Guildford, more information is available, but it is still only partial. Thus, if the lay clerks or a visiting choir are singing, this is shown, but not when the boys and girls are singing. However, a note on the Guildford site states that the boys (with or without the men it is not clear) sing Evensong on Tuesdays and Thursdays and two or three Sunday services. The girls (with or without the men, it is again not clear) sing Evensong on Fridays and one service on Sundays.

In some cases where there is no information as to who is singing, this can be inferred. At Bristol and Liverpool (Metropolitan), for instance, the sites only indicate when the girls are singing, which leaves one to presume that at other times it is the traditional choir which is singing. This presumption may be only partially correct, since services may be being sung by the full traditional choir of men and boys or by the men alone or the boys alone. The Chapel Royal at St James, Truro and St Woolos do not show who is singing. It is probably felt unnecessary to specify this, given that they only have traditional choirs of men and boys. Even so, it would be useful to know when the men or the boys sing by themselves. On the whole, however, it is good to note that almost all of the choral foundations monitored supply full information on their websites on who is singing the services.

SERVICES

Well over two and a half thousand services were monitored. Although only thirteen of the choral foundations monitored were fully traditional, they occupied half the top ten places in terms of the number of average weekly services they held. Westminster Cathedral led the field, with an average of 12.6 services per week, while the choral foundations with the fewest services per week were Bradford and Brecon. Almost a third of all choral foundations clustered around a median value of seven services per week. When many girls' choirs were set up, it was said they would enable choral foundations to provide more services than previously. How far they have been successful in this is open to debate. Almost one third of choral foundations with a girls' choir average fewer than seven services per week. Eight of these, it has to be admitted, are parish-church cathedrals. In some cathedrals, such as Coventry, Derby and Leicester, the boys sing by themselves and the girls by themselves just once a week.

Has the arrival of girls' choirs abolished the dumb day? The simple answer is a clear no, though that was supposed to be one of the benefits they would bring. Although most choral foundations continue to have one dumb day per week, some seventeen have at least two dumb days per week. And when we look more closely at the figures, we see that the majority of these seventeen choral foundations have a girls' choir. This must further undermine the claim that the formation of a second choir would enable the dumb day to be abolished. All the same, a degree of caution is in order here, since some of the periods monitored undoubtedly included choir holidays. Furthermore, most of the choral foundations with two or more dumb days were parish-church cathedrals, and as such they would not be expected to provide sung services on every day of the week.

The most successful choral foundations in the provision of choral services were Canterbury and St Paul's. Moreover, they had no dumb days. Of those foundations which have a girls' choir in addition to their traditional choir, the most successful were Salisbury and Wells; they had no dumb days over the period monitored.

On the question of dumb days, it is worth recalling what *CTCC's* Vice-President, Dr Roy Massey, former Organist and Master of the Choristers at Hereford, said when addressing members of the Campaign in 2002: "The standard of boy coming into our choir is all right. And if what we do is any good, it is because we do it every day. The whole centre of my life and being at that place was the offering of a daily choral service. Right until my very

last service, I still relished the challenge of going in there and trying to produce something beautiful, trying to make the best I could of the material I had, in whatever state it was. You never achieve what you are trying to do, but at least you try. We sang eight fully-choral services a week. We did not have any men-only or boys-only days. With the material we had, we achieved a reasonably good standard – because we did it *every* day. You would not do the sound of your music any favour at all if you took away any one of those services. Your boys would not become better; they would become worse. To maintain otherwise is absolute rubbish – make no mistake about it. If the standard means anything, the daily service, with a full choir of men and boys, is the way to do it.”¹⁰

When a second choir has been created and the sung services shared out between it and the resident traditional choir, how can musical standards possibly be maintained? Sometimes, this ‘sharing out’ might mean the boys lose just one service a week. However, there is a growing number of choral foundations which are pledged to the rigid 50-50 division of services which obtains at Lincoln, Salisbury, York and elsewhere. Any dumb days in such a situation will only add to the problem.

It is important to bear all these things in mind when discussing the choral tradition; it is also important to keep a sense of proportion. Despite serious concerns, the various choral foundations monitored continue to provide an impressive amount of choral worship, and the standards achieved are frequently impressive. Anyone wanting to experience this music first hand can do so most readily by attending Evensong. In the forty-six Anglican choral foundations here being examined, Evensong accounted for around 68% of all choral services. As for the Eucharist, given its well documented rise and dominance in modern times, it will come as no surprise to learn that sung Eucharists made up a further 19% of all the Anglican choral services monitored. It is sad to report, however, that a mere 8% of the services surveyed were choral Matins. (Various other services made up the remaining 5%.)

The disappearance of Choral Matins is nothing new. Daily choral Matins had largely disappeared even before the last war, and since then Sunday Choral Matins has also witnessed a steady decline. In 2000, Stephen Beet wrote to every cathedral in the land with an invitation to respond to a questionnaire on the availability of matins. The year before, he had also visited the majority of English cathedrals, attending at least one service, that service being matins where possible. Although he mentions having received “over fifty replies out of the sixty-five sent out”, he gives the results for just forty-two. Although these forty-two may not cover exactly the same choral foundations as the

forty-six of this monitoring, it might be thought reasonable to use them for comparative purposes. Unfortunately, only in thirty-five of the Anglican choral foundations in the monitoring do we know exactly which services they have. Let us proceed, however. In his survey of 2000¹¹, Beet found that “sixteen cathedrals... (sang) Matins every Sunday” and a further fourteen sang it “on a regular basis: two or three times per month”. The two figures give a total of thirty cathedrals then offering Matins. Now, nine years later, our monitoring shows only

twenty-one choral foundations still providing the service. Of these, sixteen sing it every Sunday or more or less every Sunday and five sing it twice a month or even less frequently. A further nineteen choral foundations never sing Matins; overwhelmingly, they are choral foundations with second choirs. The precipitous decline of Choral Matins outside the London choral foundations and the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court and St James is too obvious to ignore.

Some may question whether we ought to be concerned. Canon Henry Burgess has the answer.¹² So many wonderful settings of the Morning Canticles, he says, are very seldom heard nowadays, and before long a considerable portion of the marvellous legacy of such music will disappear forever. Indeed, the tradition of singing the psalms for the day is already lost in many Cathedrals. So now we have morning psalms in the evening or stand to risk never hearing half of the appointed psalms.

Happily, sung Evensong according to the Book of Common Prayer continues unimpeded throughout all the choral foundations. There has been no attempt to update it, to sideline it or in any way to diminish it. Any deans and chapters so minded probably do not dare! A rather more likely explanation is that Evensong is universally acknowledged for the jewel it truly is.

Three Roman Catholic cathedrals monitored, Leeds, Liverpool and Westminster, produce no surprises. Sixty-five percent of sung services at Leeds, approximately forty-eight percent of services at Liverpool and fifty-five percent of services at Westminster were masses. Almost all the other services were Vespers (and Benediction). Perhaps, one might have cared to have more Vespers at Leeds. And finally, in contrast to the preceding three cathedrals, Vespers at Brentwood appear very infrequently.

APPORTIONMENT OF SERVICES

Next, let us look at the apportionment of sung services between the choirs in the various choral foundations. Unsurprisingly, of those choral foundations with only a traditional choir, it was this choir which sang the overwhelming

majority of services. At the Chapel Royal at Hampton Court and St James and at Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral, the traditional choir sang one hundred percent of the services. On the whole, the services were sung by the full choirs, though, at Westminster Cathedral, Vespers were usually sung by the men only. The traditional choirs in the other traditional choral foundations also sang most of the services. Any slight reduction in services sung by them is probably attributable to the fact that some of the monitoring was probably carried out when the choristers were away on holiday.

The situation in choral foundations with both a traditional choir and a girls' choir is far more complex. As noted previously, there is occasionally a lack of information on websites as to which choir sings the services. Nevertheless, from the information we do have, the apportionment of services in thirty-four Anglican and Roman Catholic choral foundations with both a traditional and a girls' choir can reasonably be calculated as follows:

In eleven choral foundations with both a traditional and girls' choir, Bristol, Chelmsford, Liverpool (Anglican), Liverpool (Metropolitan), Newcastle, Norwich, Peterborough, Portsmouth, Ripon, St Edmundsbury and Worcester, the traditional choir appear to have sung between seventy and eighty-eight percent of the services. However, from what we know from other sources and given that some of the monitoring undoubtedly took place, as mentioned, at a time when choirs were on holiday, it would be reasonable to assume that at Southwell and Winchester the traditional choirs also sang seventy percent or more of the services. If this is correct, we have a total of thirteen choral foundations in which the overwhelming majority of the services was sung by the traditional choir. A word of caution is necessary, however, since the information on seven of the above-mentioned eleven foundations is very limited. In all likelihood, where there is a girls' choir as well as a traditional choir, the overall number of the latter singing seventy percent or more of the services has been considerably overestimated.

At Sheffield, the traditional choir sang sixty percent of the services, while at St Albans the monitoring showed the traditional choir sang fifty-three percent of the services. However, this latter figure is probably an underestimate; a percentage in the sixties is rather more likely.

In nine choral foundations, Birmingham (Anglican), Carlisle, Chester, Exeter, Guildford, Rochester, Southwark, Wakefield and York the traditional choir of men and boys, or sometimes the men only or the boys only, sang between forty-four and fifty-seven percent of the services.

In a further six choral foundations, Brentwood (RC), Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Llandaff and Wells, the traditional choir of men and boys, or sometimes the men only or the boys only, sang between thirty-one and forty-one percent of the services.

In four choral foundations, Coventry, Leeds (RC), Leicester and Manchester it is not clear whether the traditional choir of men and boys ever sang, although the boys by themselves sang twenty percent and fourteen percent of the services at Coventry and Leeds (RC) respectively. On Sundays at Leicester, the choir is fully mixed: men, women, boys and girls.

Two choral foundations, Bradford and Coventry, frequently mix their choirs. There is also evidence of an increase in the number of foundations which share out the services equally between the boys and the girls.

To summarise:

In probably fewer than half the choral foundations with a second choir did the traditional choir sing most of the services. In nine other choral foundations, the traditional choir sang about half of the services and in five choral foundations they sang around forty percent of the services. In two choral foundations, although the boys sang a small proportion of the services by themselves, they never sang with the men.

Even in those choral foundations where a traditional choir sang about half the services, it was not the case that the girls' choir sang a similar proportion. Of the nine choral foundations mentioned above, only three, Carlisle, Chester and York, shared their services more or less equally. To these, we can add Lincoln. In fact, in all these choral foundations – Carlisle, Chester, York and Lincoln excepted – the traditional choir sang a greater proportion of services than the girls' choirs.

Equality, Equal Opportunities, Natural Justice, Fairness – it was under such banner headlines that girls' choirs were introduced into the cathedral choral tradition. Suspicion that much of this has been little more than lip service paid to the notion of equality is not perhaps unwarranted when one notes that, of the thirty-four choral foundations with a girls' choir here monitored, the only ones which appear to have anything like real equality are Salisbury and York. This is because they (a) draw their boys and girls from the same age-range and because (b) both boys and girls sing roughly the same proportion of services. That just two cathedrals should stand alone in this way is an astonishing fact. The only plausible explanation for it is that deans and

chapters, as well as directors of music, understand very well that, unlike a boy, a girl does not really get into her singing stride until she is well into her teens. Undoubtedly, too, there must be some quiet acknowledgement of the fact that dividing up the services equally between boys and girls can only lead to a loss of quality for both choirs. Roy Massey's words on dumb days have equal relevance here: "With the material we had, we achieved a reasonably good standard – because we did it *every* day. You would not do the sound of your music any favour at all if you took away any one of those services."

In choral foundations with a traditional choir only and in those which also have a girls' choir, some services were also sung by supernumerary choirs of one kind or another. Holiday periods here too must certainly have accounted for some of these services, but certainly not for all of them. During term times, most traditional choral foundations had their traditional choirs sing almost all the services, but as many as seventeen choral foundations which also had a girls' choir had choral services sung by some form of voluntary choir. Five of them had between ten and fifteen percent of their services sung by such choirs, and a further twelve had between sixteen and twenty-six percent of their services sung by such choirs. To repeat, holidays must have accounted for quite a bit of this, but by no means for all. Inevitably, it makes one wonder why, if a choral foundation has two choirs, it needs to employ voluntary choirs to such an extent. At one time, a cathedral had its 'cathedral choir', and it was quite clear what that meant: a choir of men and boys. Nowadays, the term is often used to refer to a choir of men, boys and girls. The unity of the concept begins to unravel, but even more so when a cathedral sports many different choirs.

Finally, let us look at what has come to be called the "full choir" – that is, men, boys and girls all singing together. In those cathedrals with a traditional and a girls' choir, the full choir typically only sings together on important occasions and on the great feasts of the year. Inevitably, this means that music for these particular liturgies which was custom-composed for choirs of men and boys is being sung by a very different ensemble. Outside these special times and occasions, the full choir is not often used. And although thirteen cathedrals had their full choirs singing at some point, it was a rare event – mostly in the one to five percent range of the number of choral services.

However, there were exceptions:

Exeter: Twelve percent of the services monitored at the cathedral were sung by the full choir.

Wells: Twenty-one percent of the services monitored at the cathedral were sung by the full choir.

Derby: Forty percent of the services monitored at the cathedral were sung by the full choir.

Of those choral foundations with mixed choirs, the results are as follows:

Bradford: one hundred percent of services were sung by a partially mixed or fully mixed choir.

Brecon: one hundred percent of services were sung by the full choir.

Manchester: sixty-eight percent of services were sung by the full choir, twelve percent by the men only and twenty percent by some other choir or choirs.

Note: While the choirs of Bradford and Brecon contain women, that of Manchester does not.

REPERTOIRE AND THE CHORAL PROGRAMME

Although a handful of choral foundations do put on less formal services from time to time – even, on occasion, the frankly appalling; one thinks, for example, of the Elvis Presley look-alike service put on by Truro some time back and Rave in the Nave at Ely – on the whole, a dignified repertoire remains the norm. From time to time, however, kites for something very different are flown. Thus, the Rt. Rev. Nick Baines, Bishop of Croydon, in a book backed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, argues that pop music writers can convey deep theological concepts in a way that is more accessible to the younger generation, and he describes the influence pop songs have had on his Christian belief. Churches, he says, “should offer a menu to people from different backgrounds”.¹³ So far, there is no evidence that such thoughts have found any response in the world of cathedral music, though one choral foundation with a somewhat different repertoire is Brentwood (RC); in addition to standard fare, it also regularly features lightweight and undemanding music.

The fragile finances of cathedrals are a recurring theme and a constant source of anxiety for the choral tradition. An example of this is Chester’s decision to slash the costs of its music department, with a consequent downsizing of music staff and curtailment of the number of choral services.

BENEFITS ON OFFER TO CHORISTERS

Choral foundations offer a wide variety of benefits to choristers, from the very considerable to the comparatively insignificant. The larger the benefit, one has to presume, the greater the inducement to potential choristers and their parents. Thirty-four of the choral foundations monitored mentioned benefits to choristers on their websites. Any attempt to categorise them, however, is a bit hit and miss; not least because exact figures are nowhere given. However, the following might serve:

Choral foundations offering total or significant contributions towards cost of education or similar benefit: Canterbury, the Chapel Royal at St James, Gloucester, Hereford, St George's (Windsor), St Paul's, Manchester, Truro, Westminster Abbey, Westminster Cathedral and York.

Choral foundations offering major benefits: Chelmsford, Chichester, Durham, Exeter, Lincoln, Liverpool (Metropolitan), Llandaff, Norwich, Peterborough, Portsmouth, Ripon, St Edmundsbury, Wells, Winchester and Worcester.⁷

Choral foundations offering minor benefits: Birmingham (Anglican), Bristol, Carlisle, Chapel Royal at Hampton Court, Chester, Guildford, Rochester, Southwell and Wakefield. Choral foundations offering minimal benefits: Bradford, Brecon, Coventry, Liverpool (Anglican), Newcastle, Sheffield and Southwark (Anglican).

Choral foundations providing no information on benefits: Blackburn, Brentwood, Derby, Leeds (RC), Leicester, St Albans, St Woolos, and Salisbury.

Sometimes, the description of the benefits on offer was unspecific and sometimes they seemed only to be being offered to the boys.

Despite the well named "curse of cool" factor in the recruitment of boys to the choirs of choral foundations, boys still continue to come forward. Without a doubt, when the benefits on offer are substantial, savvy middle-class parents are not slow in coming forward and are keen to convince their sons to become choristers. Life does not stand still, however, and now that, increasingly, little Johnny must be closely consulted about anything and everything, he may ultimately decide he is not interested. The pressure to act grown-up is immense, and it can take a great deal of courage on the part of a boy to resist it. In the more rough-and-tumble world of boys from poorer backgrounds, these pressures can be expected to be even greater – especially if, with girl

choristers around, being a chorister is made to seem even more of a girly thing. An unexpected result of bringing girls onto choral foundation in the name of fairness could be the loss of potentially good boy choristers from poorer backgrounds. And if the boys start to disappear? Well, the girls might not be far behind.¹⁴ This is what happened in parish-church choirs after all. Already, there is some anecdotal evidence of girl choristers in parish-church cathedrals skipping services on occasions, just turning up when they feel like it.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Despite changes and difficulties in recent years, the choral tradition remains strong. In particular, the traditional choir manages to hold its own, even in cathedrals which have opted to have a girls' choir as well.
- Evensong according to the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 continues on almost a daily basis in the majority of cathedrals, but the availability of Choral Matins continues to decline. At Westminster Cathedral and Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, the traditional choirs dominate, in the case of the former singing all of the services and in the case of the latter most of the services.
- A vast repertoire of the finest church music continues in daily use throughout the choral foundations, and there has been no dumbing down.
- A mere thirteen out of the fifty choral foundations monitored have not set up a girls' choir.
- Although, overall, the Music Lists show the traditional choir tending to sing most of the services, any reduction in the proportion of services sung by the traditional choir is calculated to lead to a loss in quality.
- Older girls are used in a majority of girls' choirs which raises the question of whether we should now begin to refer to them as 'choirs of women and girls'. Whatever the musical competence of such choirs, they are most unlikely to produce the traditional cathedral tone.

- Several cathedrals already employ women in voluntary choirs.
- Bradford has a frequently mixed and Brecon a fully mixed choir of men, women, boys and girls, while Manchester's choir has men, boys and girls. Chester also uses women from time to time in its cathedral choir. Rochester seems not to at the moment, but there is specific provision for women to sing in the choir.
- Lay clerk numbers may be insufficient. Are numbers being kept down to pay for second choirs?
- Generally speaking, the creation of girls' choirs has not led to more choral services or to dumb days being abolished.

CONCLUSION

The wonderful Choral tradition we have inherited in this country is made up of many strands, any one of which can so easily unravel. Change, while not intrinsically bad, needs to be evaluated with ice-cold logic. Apparently good ideas need to be challenged and subject to rigorous scrutiny. What emerges from this monitoring is not the full story; there are many other matters which impinge on the health of our choral foundations. Chorister recruitment, for instance, never easy and never to be taken for granted, is likely to prove ever more difficult in the ethos of the modern day. Possibly just as difficult and yet less remarked on is the problem of recruiting competent lay clerks. However, it is matters of finance which override all other considerations. There is hardly a choral foundation in the country which can feel relaxed about its finances, and maintaining the choral tradition is very costly.

Campaign for the Traditional Choir has spoken out for more than thirteen years on the necessity to keep to ancient tradition. It makes no apology for its stance. Over this time, it has highlighted many issues which have the potential to destroy that tradition. Central to our work has been a concern for the future of choirs of men and boys and the simple belief that the boy's treble voice is particularly suitable for choral services and that it is unmatched in its power and beauty. Andy Martin, in a column in *The Times Magazine* some years ago, paid tribute to the unassuming role of the boy treble in the making of cathedral music: "What makes the voice of the choirboy such a rare and precious commodity," he said, was "precisely its butterfly-like transience, its precariousness balanced on the cusp of innocence and experience, its intimations of mortality. It seems like an echo, in its short-lived purity and

catastrophic decline, of our genesis and fall. The male treble voice achieves its maximum power and resonance just as it is disappearing".

There is no evidence that the new girls' choirs have overall resulted in the provision of more choral services or in dumb days being a thing of the past. As to standards, it is difficult to see how these can be maintained when services are shared around. However, it is the practically unnoticed entry of women, in the guise of "girls", into the choral tradition which is perhaps the most startling finding of the monitoring. And although, on the plus side, there is no suggestion of any dumbing down of the repertoire, there are occasional indicators that things might change.

The facts revealed by this monitoring exercise need to be taken seriously by everyone involved and by everyone concerned for our precious choral heritage - a heritage, the like of which can be met nowhere else on the face of the globe. Just what it is that fortune has bestowed on us is marvellously encapsulated in remarks Sir Sydney Nicholson made while addressing the Musical Association in 1944: "Shortly before the war musical critics from all parts of Europe were invited to this country to see and hear what we had to show them. They heard the work of our chief composers, our soloists vocal and instrumental, our choruses, our orchestras, our opera. But when it was over and they were asked what most impressed them as the outstanding contribution of England to the music of the world, the answer was the singing of English choirboys." ¹⁵

August 2009

FOOTNOTES

1 I am very grateful to Don Edwards, Bernard Haunch and David Watson for their invaluable help in the monitoring.

2 The term 'lay clerk' is used as short-hand throughout to refer to the men who sing the bottom lines in cathedral choirs and who are sometimes also known as lay vicars (occasionally suffixed 'choral') or songmen.

3 "Traditional Choir" is used as short-hand for a choir of men and boys or for a choir consisting of men only or boys only. Unfortunately, because of the limited resources available for monitoring, it was not always possible to be more specific.

4 The nomenclature, "girls' choir", has been objected to, and not without reason, since what is almost always meant is a choir of men and girls. "Girls' top line" has, instead, been proposed. However, most people refer to them as "girls' choirs" and, indeed, the majority of choral establishments with such

choirs themselves tend to describe them as “girls’ choirs”. For this reason, the term will be used throughout.

5 Quoted in Jobs for the girls, an article in “Classical Music” by Clare Stevens

6 Duncan Ferguson, Flourishing North of the Border, “Cathedral Music”, 2/2008

7 S.S. Wesley, “A few words on cathedral music”

8 Dean and Chapter of Rochester, “Worship and Music Policy”, 2007

9 This question has been expertly dealt with by Dr Arthur Saunders in The voices of boy and girl cathedral choristers – Is there a difference? And does it matter? CTCC Occasional Paper No1.

10 Roy Massey, MBE, D Mus, FRCO(CHM), FRSCM, ADCM, “Forty-Seven Years of Choirboys”, an address to the AGM of CTCC, CTCC Bulletin No 10

11 Stephen Beet, “In Search of Choral Matins”, CTCC Bulletin No 6

12 Canon Henry Burgess, “Why Prayer Book Morning Prayer”

13 Rt. Rev. Nick Baines, “Finding Faith”

14 Arthur Saunders, “The decline of the traditional church choir: the impact on the Church and society”, CTCC Bulletin No 17 and “The decline of the traditional church choir: the end of an era?”, CTCC Bulletin No 18

15 Sir Sydney Nicholson, MVO, “The choirboy and his place in English music”

***IN SITU* MONITORING PROJECT**

INTRODUCTION

Most cathedrals¹ were visited by a single monitor. Others, however, were visited by several monitors - Hereford, for example, by five and Gloucester by as many as eight. Of the forty-three cathedrals monitored, just fifteen had only a traditional choir², though they might on occasion have employed a choir of a different make-up. The remaining twenty-eight cathedrals all had girls' choirs³ or other choirs which sing on a regular basis. Thirteen cathedrals received only one visit while others received many more. Numbers of visits averaged out at around four per cathedral.

SERVICES AND THE CHORAL FORCES EMPLOYED

Unsurprisingly, one hundred and seven of the one hundred and seventy services monitored were Evensong. Monitors also attended the Eucharist on twenty-five visits and Matins on eleven visits. Various other types of service were attended fifteen times. However, carol services accounted for some of these. Finally, there were nine masses and three services of Vespers monitored at Roman Catholic cathedrals.

Given the commitment of members to the traditional choir, it was only to be expected that monitors would largely be in attendance at services sung by choirs of men and boys. In fact, there were one hundred and twenty-seven such cases. The composition of other choral formations employed and the total number of services reported on is as follows:

- Total number of services sung by men only: 8
- Total number of services sung by boys only: 8
- Total number of services sung by men and girls: 8
- Total number of services sung by girls only: 0
- Total number of services sung by men, boys and girls: 8
- Total number of services sung by boys and girls: 2
- Total number of services sung by men, women and boys: 4
- Total number of services sung by men, women, boys and girls: 2
- Total number of services sung by men and women: 3

If we add up all these other combinations, we see that they account for around a quarter of all the services attended by monitors – though the situation is less striking if we exclude the services sung by men only or by boys only.

CHORISTER NUMBERS

In the monitoring, we were also interested in getting some idea of just how many choristers are typically involved. At some services, numbers were seen to be as low as six, while at one service at Winchester, when the choristers were joined by the College quisters, the number reached thirty-four. However, the average number of boy choristers noted at the services in our monitoring survey was around sixteen. Either side of that figure, there was quite a spread. For cathedrals with only a traditional choir, the average number of boy choristers was eighteen, but in establishments which also had a girls' choir, the average number of boy choristers was sixteen. Girls' choirs, on the other hand, had an average of around nineteen girl choristers. While the figures for girls' choirs are of interest, it should be pointed out that they were based on only ten cathedrals, whereas the figures for the average number of boys singing in any cathedral were based on forty cathedrals. One wonders if there is anything behind these simple facts. Perhaps, they are just too meagre to signify. And, of course, it must not be forgotten that services in which boy choristers sang greatly outnumbered those in which girls were involved.

MUSIC LISTS

Music Lists were displayed or available in all the cathedrals monitored, apart from one, though in the case of eleven of the cathedrals, the List did not indicate who was singing. However, at six of these, the “deficiency” was recorded on only one visit, and since information was available on other visits, we are probably dealing here with an anomaly of no significance.

The Music List on Guildford Cathedral's website does not show who is singing, while the List available at the Cathedral itself does – though it does not show this on Sundays, it would seem. And although some monitors at Ely noted that indications as to who was singing the services were given, others noted just the opposite!

The Music Lists of Bristol, Chester and Salisbury did not show whether boys or girls were singing the services. To these, we can add York, which, since the monitoring took place, seems to have adopted the same practice.

APPORTIONMENT OF SERVICES

Of the twenty-eight cathedrals monitored which have a girls' choir as well as a traditional, just seven of them – Bristol, Chester, Coventry, Lincoln, Salisbury, Wakefield and York – share out the services between their traditional choir and their girls' choir on a more or less fifty-fifty basis. As far as the cathedrals here monitored are concerned, they are the exception. In fifteen of the twenty-eight cathedrals, the traditional choir, or the boys alone, sing more than fifty per cent of the services. Indeed, in thirteen of them, they sing between sixty and eighty-seven per cent of the services – and this despite the fact that the cathedrals concerned have often given quite a fanfare of publicity to the creation of their girls' choirs. The reality is that girls' choirs sing more services than traditional choirs or the boys alone in just one cathedral – Leeds Metropolitan. At Leeds Metropolitan, the boys sing around eleven per cent of the services by themselves. Otherwise, they tend to sing with a choir of mixed adult voices. However, while the girls by themselves sing double the number of services the boys sing, this only amounts to a paltry twenty-two per cent. At other times, they, too, sing with a choir of mixed adult voices. At Sheffield, the girls' choir seems to triumph. In the week of the monitoring, it sang eighty per cent of the services, but other sources of information suggest that the normal split is more in the region of fifty per cent of the services sung by the traditional choir, or by the boys alone, and forty per cent by the girls' choir – with various other arrangements making up the remaining ten per cent.

Men, boys and girls singing together were responsible for seventeen per cent of the services at Blackburn and five per cent at Exeter, and boys and girls together sang three per cent of the services at Wells and two per cent at Exeter. In a more typical week at Blackburn, however, boys by themselves or men and boys together sing three out of five services. As for both Exeter and Wells – and especially, Wells – the treble line is mixed more frequently than was witnessed during the monitoring. St Mary's, Edinburgh, of course, occupies its own particular niche. Seventy-two per cent of the services there were sung by the combined forces of men's, boys' and girls' voices, and a

further fourteen per cent of services were sung by the boys and girls together. The men, singing by themselves, accounted for the remaining fourteen per cent of services. Elsewhere, the number of services sung by the men alone ranged from nineteen per cent at Wells to five per cent at Ripon. Lastly, there were the various forms of choirs with mixed adult voices. The employment of such choral forces in services varied widely— from thirty-three per cent at Blackburn and eighteen per cent at Coventry to nine per cent at York and five per cent at Exeter and Wells.

REPERTOIRE

Monitors were also asked to note the anthem of the day or the main item(s) of music at a service. For this analysis, an expert eye⁴ was cast over all the music sung, and it is pleasing to note that in none of services was the repertoire other than “standard cathedral” –the term being used loosely and not so as to exclude more modern pieces. Just fifteen items were unknown to our reviewer, but that is no reason to think that they might not have been other than most appropriate.

SINGING AND DICTION

In the final part of the questionnaire, monitors were asked to hazard an opinion on the singing and the diction of the choir. In the one hundred and seventy services monitored, the singing in over a third was deemed outstanding – surely, a matter of singular pride for all those involved as well as for those of us privileged to assist at such services – and the singing in a further quarter was adjudged good. The singing at the few remaining services was considered fair or not very good - the ‘not very good’ assessment being accorded to a mere five of the one hundred and seventy monitored. Even the best of choirs, of course, have their off days. Finally, there was diction to assess – perhaps, somewhat less easy to come to an opinion on. However, top marks were given it by monitors in as many as eighty percent of the services attended, and again, only a tiny number were thought to be not very good in this respect.

COMMENTS

Finally, monitors were invited to add any comments they might wish to make. This resulted in fifty-four contributions, varying in length from three or four

words to a whole page. In many cases, it was clear, the monitors expressing views or making observations were musically knowledgeable people. It is not possible to reproduce all the comments here – but neither is it necessary. The encouraging thing to record is that, in general, monitors came away from services with very positive impressions.

Twenty-eight of the fifty-four comments made were complimentary and just nine of them negative. It would be invidious to name names in this latter case – especially as, to some degree, we are dealing with matters of opinion – but it is certainly worthwhile highlighting the positive, which is exemplified in the following comments:

- Canterbury: “Consistently superb”; “Super!”
- Chichester: “A quintessentially English sound”; “Bright and enthusiastic singing”
- Christchurch: “Superb singing”; “Perfection”
- Coventry: “Good, bearing in mind that there are quite a few new recruits in the choir – some only seven or eight”
- Gloucester: “Outstanding singing and organ playing. Quite superb! One of the best I have ever attended.”
- Liverpool Metropolitan: “Very confident singing of difficult music”
- Ripon: “Singing of high quality”; “Superb psalm singing”
- St Albans: “The quality of this choir is superb.”
- Truro: “Singing of high quality; beautiful enunciation”
- Wakefield: “Very good service”
- Wells: “This choir (men and boys) is in truly outstanding form; Wells’ best kept secret”
- Westminster Abbey: “Superb standard”
- Westminster Cathedral: “Stunningly good”; “Everything sung to the same standard. Heavenly!”
- Winchester: “A heart-stopping *Pie Jésus (Fauré)* by the Head Chorister”
- York: “Polished and professional”

Sixteen of the twenty-eight complimentary comments referred to the traditional choir in establishments which have no girls’ choir, and ten referred to the traditional choir in establishments which have both a traditional and a

girls' choir. Of the ten negative comments made, one refers to a traditional choir in an establishment with no girls' choir, seven refer to the traditional choir, or to the boys only, in establishments with both a traditional choir and a girls' choir, and the remaining three references are to combinations of mixed adult and boys' and girls' voices. Negativity expressed by monitors ranged from the strong to the relatively mild:

- “The most dreadful singing –the boys are dreadful.”
- “For most of the service the choir was practically inaudible; the solos just faint mumbles.”
- “Boys sang nearly a semi-tone sharp throughout the service. Probationers singing alongside qualified choristers hindered the standard overall.”
- “Men good, boys weak”
- “Not quite up to their best standard; perhaps, under-rehearsed”
- “Music sung too fast”

- “Trebles predominantly girls. The few boys present seemed to sing with little enthusiasm and make no noticeable contribution to the sound.”

Overall, there was just one disagreement between monitors. One choir, several times described in glowing terms, received less than full-hearted support from one monitor. Boys, he admitted, sang “with more ebullience and confidence” than previously, but now there was a “tending to force tone/volume, lack of sensitivity/shape to phrases. Loud climaxes punched out to the detriment of the whole.”

There was also a comment by one monitor on an unexpected change of choir to that publicised on the website of the cathedral concerned. This particularly upset the monitor concerned, who said she had invited an American friend along “to show off a good cathedral choir of men and boys only to find there were girls singing.”

Other comments concerned non-musical matters – deportment, processing, liturgical practice, use of the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorised Version of the Bible.

CHORAL SERVICES AT CHURCHES AND EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENTS

In addition to the major cathedrals, eight monitors attended twenty-six services at fourteen parish-churches, most of which had just a traditional choir. (Of course, the number of churches with such choirs nowadays is minute.) Monitors mostly assisted at just one service, though one monitor reported on as many as twelve services.

Evensong accounted for sixteen of the twenty-six services at which monitors assisted. The Eucharist accounted for a further three services, Matins two, and various special services of one kind or another made up the remaining five.

Men and boys sang nineteen of the twenty-six services, and the boys by themselves sang a further three. Boys also sang once with girls and once with mixed adult voices, and there were two services sung by a choir of mixed adult voices.

Fifteen was the average number of boys to each choir, though there was a more or less equal spread either side of this figure. Actual numbers ranged between seven and twenty-six. In the one case where girls were singing, they numbered twelve. In one of the two churches where there was also a girls' choir, the services were split more or less equally between the two choirs; there was also a choir of mixed adult voices which sang a small number of services. At the other church which had both a traditional and a girls' choir, the traditional choir sang three-quarters of the services and the girls' choir one quarter. In quite a few cases, the Music List was not displayed in the church, or it was not indicated which choir was singing. However, this was almost certainly because the churches concerned had only one choir, and the situation was generally known. Even so, the information is often available on a church's website.

Some of the church choirs were monitored in cathedrals, where they were singing services during the holidays. The opportunity the holidays provide is very important for such choirs, though the advantages are by no means all one way. From all accounts, some of our church choirs are more than able worthily to fill the choirstalls in our cathedrals.

Repertoire in all but one church was standard. While some of the music was reasonably easy, some was quite demanding and ambitious. The singing at half of the services was rated either outstanding or good, and a similar estimate was accorded to diction. There were two instances of singing and

three of diction adjudged to be not very good and a single instance where the monitor felt constrained to write: “Not an act of worship. It would hardly have done credit to a Sunday School.” That particularly severe judgement concerned a church which had recently dismissed its splendid traditional choir and replaced it, at least in part, by an “instrumental ensemble”. It no longer has a single boy in its choir.

Comments by monitors included the following:

- The (boy) soloist was outstanding and would have graced any cathedral in the land.
- The music is always first-class.
- Super choir!

There were a couple of more negative comments:

- Tone good and the soloist good, but the choir generally is lacking in confidence.
- The treble line weak, and some boys did not sing.

Finally, monitors attended services at two schools - Papplewick Preparatory School and Winchester College. Papplewick had twelve boys in its choir, and they sang with mixed adult voices. The singing and diction were both rated good. The quirksters of Winchester College are educated at the adjoining Pilgrims School, another preparatory school. They were joined at the Eucharist by the Winchester Cathedral choristers, and together they made up a grand total of thirty-four boys. The monitor gave them a top rating for singing and diction.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Although overall, the cathedral choral tradition prospers and standards remain impressively high, they do so overwhelmingly in those cathedrals which either have only a traditional choir or where there are parallel choirs with a choir school and regular morning practice. Elsewhere, there are serious causes for concern.
- In a tiny number of cathedrals, choral services are now shared out equally between the traditional and the girls’ choirs. This can be contrasted with that small handful of cathedrals with a traditional and a girl’s choir where the input from the latter remains quite minor – some might even say token. Overall, however, judging by the number of services sung, in only around half of the cathedrals monitored

might the traditional choirs of men and boys continue to be regarded as the principal choirs. In roughly half of cathedrals with dual choirs, the contribution of girl choristers was significant, ranging from around twenty to almost fifty percent of sung services. In most areas of life, a reduction or increase of such proportions would be considered enormous. But that is not all; from a few cathedrals (Chester, Coventry, Sheffield and Wakefield), there is factual and impressionistic evidence to suggest that the girls' choirs are now the principal choirs in all but name, and at Leeds Metropolitan Cathedral a variety of ensembles overshadow both the traditional and the girls' choir. Unlike older foundations with their much greater resources, provincial cathedrals with several choral ensembles have a particularly difficult job keeping the boys motivated. On several occasions, monitors found the boys in these choirs responding poorly and evincing little interest in what they were doing. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the overall standards of the girls or adult singers in these cathedrals were often quite high.

- Chorister numbers appear very adequate, though they vary widely from cathedral to cathedral. Where there is only a traditional choir, numbers of boy choristers tend to be higher than is the case where a cathedral also has a girls' choir. Numbers of girls in girls' choirs are greater than those of boys in traditional choirs.
- Repertoire remains serious, elevated and appropriate for worship.
- Evensongs based on the Book of Common Prayer are standard everywhere. Matins is much less available. Vespers are a regular part of the choral worship at Liverpool Metropolitan and Westminster Cathedrals.
- Music Lists generally indicate which choral ensemble is singing. Where this is not so, a telephone call to the cathedral office will often suffice to clarify the situation. At other times, however, the information is rigorously withheld. Clearly, in such a case, this is not an oversight but a policy decision. The BBC similarly refuses to say which choir is singing its services of Broadcast Evensong.
- There is a not insignificant input into the choral tradition from various other choral ensembles, including choirs of mixed adult voices. However, their contribution is generally much lower than that of girls' choirs.
- Choral standards in most of the traditional church choirs monitored were also high – sometimes, exceptionally so. Unfortunately, their remaining numbers are miniscule. Often, good choirs have been closed down at the whim of a clergyman or through ignorance.

CONCLUSION

The findings here presented, based on actual attendance at services, largely reflect the findings of our earlier survey of the choral scene, which obtained its information from cathedral websites. Like that survey, this one has many *caveats* attached to it. Some of what is written here may be plain wrong – though a great deal of effort has been put into minimising this possibility – but what is unlikely to be wrong is the general picture obtained from the monitorings. One might instance the question of chorister numbers. Illness and bad weather certainly accounted for reduced numbers of choristers at some of the services monitored. Indeed, one monitor specifically mentions the bad weather. And where girls' choirs are concerned, it is known that some cathedrals have difficulty maintaining the full choral complement because the girls have part-time jobs or else are busy preparing for major public examinations. Nevertheless, the general picture on chorister numbers is quite clear, as it is on the other aspects surveyed.

The use of ensembles of mixed adult voices must, in many ways, be attractive to cathedrals and – no small consideration – cheaper. For that very reason, their employment needs watching, especially, where a cathedral also has a girls' choir. Already, in a few cathedrals which employ such choral forces, the input from the traditional choir or the boys by themselves has been greatly reduced.

In many ways, heart might be taken from these findings. Despite a host of fears expressed in recent times, not least by CTCC itself, choral services of the highest standards continue to be provided throughout the country. It is important not to exaggerate problems, be they real or potential. However, it is also important not to disregard existing and latent dangers to the tradition. Of particular concern is the reduction in the number of services sung by the traditional choir. This risks a reduction in standards –from the boys simply not singing enough, but also from a perception among them that being a chorister is merely one of several things they do. Being no longer special inevitably impinges on boy psychology and boys may come in time to feel that they are merely among the 'also ran'. Monitors noted this to be particularly true when boys and girls were singing together.

No longer special – perhaps, these words encapsulate the changes in the world of cathedral music which have taken place over the last two decades. The special *quality* of the boy's voice has been pitted against *e-quality*. No great art form was ever built on such a foundation. If our traditional choirs

are to survive and continue to flourish, they must be promoted with love and courage and not forced to grapple with unending change.

February 2010

FOOTNOTES

¹ *“Cathedral” is used as a generic term and refers to Chapels Royal, Oxbridge College Choirs and other choirs generally regarded as having a distinguished choral tradition.*

² *The term traditional choir refers to a choir of men and boys.*

³ *The term girls’ choir is used throughout as short-hand for choirs where the treble line is provided by girls or women’s voices.*

⁴ *The expert eye belonged to Dr Peter Giles, to whom I am ungrateful for undertaking the task.*

The Campaign is grateful to Mr Peter Gould, Master of the Music at Derby Cathedral, for pointing out that 40% of services are not sung by their full choir and that, in fact, the only four times in the year when men, boys and girls are combined are: Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Easter Day and the Choir AGM.

Mr Gould has also informed us that, in the case of Derby, the addition of a girls’ choir has resulted in more services being sung.

The Campaign is likewise grateful to Mr Andrew Teague, Choir Director and Organist at Bradford Cathedral, for informing us of the progress which has been made in re-establishing the boys of the choir as a strong entity in their own right. From the end of September 2010, a Tuesday choral evensong for boys will be added to the schedule.

Unfortunately and inevitably, as was made clear in the Foreword to the Survey, errors could not be completely avoided. However, when these are drawn to our attention, we are more than happy to correct them. We do not believe that the odd inaccuracy invalidates the general conclusions.

