

## Diocese of Westminster review of "sacred music in the mission of Westminster Cathedral"

The purpose of a cathedral - apart from its episcopal function - is to provide an appropriate setting in which to conduct the daily sacred liturgy of the Church. Public participation in a cathedral's liturgy is enabled and enhanced by its proclamation through a properly trained liturgical choir.

Westminster Cathedral Choir was, until the recent changes of 2019, the only Catholic cathedral choir in the world to sing daily Mass and Vespers, drawing on the sacred styles of music most suited to the Roman rite - Gregorian chant, sacred polyphony and other styles of music taking their inspiration from these forms of musical expression. It did that because the founder, Cardinal Vaughan, believed the Cathedral and its liturgy were inseparable; the Cathedral lives because of the continuous cycle of the liturgy taking place within it. Once that cycle is broken the whole *raison d'être* for the Cathedral, and its specialist choir school is threatened.

An honest and faithful review of 'the role of sacred music in the mission of Westminster Cathedral' is welcome - indeed, if changes were deemed necessary, it should have been implemented before making the recent decisions affecting the Choir, since the Choir carries the primary responsibility for sacred music in the Cathedral. The review is now faced with the retrospective task of identifying 'the steps needed to strengthen the role played by sacred music' when that role has just been diminished and weakened by the decisions of 2019.

In fact there was no credible evidence of a need in 2019 for any measures to 'strengthen the role played by sacred music', since that role was universally recognised for its excellence prior to the changes. It is the changes themselves (set out in the School's highly deficient *Strengthening the Chorister Tradition for 2019 and Beyond* report) based on flawed and misleading data, followed by the lamentable departure of the Cathedral's long-serving and highly capable Master of Music, which have brought about the present crisis.

The Choir School was - obviously - founded to serve the full-time boarding and educational needs of the choristers. The introduction of day boys in 1976/7 was solely to enable the prospering of the school as a choir school. As Peter Hannigan (Head Master of the school for nearly 20 years) explained just three weeks ago in *The Tablet* of 8 February 2020:

*The problem in 1976 was how to increase the size of the Choir School to make it viable educationally and financially. We decided to progress steadily and to see how things developed. Within ten years it had become clear that for every chorister and probationer (a total of about 30) there should be at least two and perhaps three day boys, giving a school total of around 120. That enabled us to afford an excellent academic staff as well as some of the finest peripatetic music teachers in London...By the time I left, in 1995, the school was financially healthy; music flourished amongst all our boys and the standard of the choir was one of the highest in England, which means in the world.*

*It is always tempting for headmasters to increase the size of their school, but in the case of the Choir School I felt that to be unnecessary, indeed detrimental. With chorister boarders comprising never less than a quarter of the whole school, it still felt like a choir school. The danger was that a change in balance would alter that character; a major change - with even more day boys - could make it feel like an 'ordinary' prep school, no matter how successful. And with a reduced choir, in every sense, the question can always be asked - why is England's principal RC cathedral supporting on its premises a school for the rich?*

The School's new policy appears to skew the objective of serving the choristers by prioritising the needs of an ever-increasing numbers of day boys who are not choristers and who play little part in the sacred music of the Cathedral. There is clear evidence that the recent decisions were made on the basis of data which has now been shown to be inaccurate and misleading. Even if the data had accurately demonstrated that there was a recruitment problem, the resulting decision could only exacerbate that problem by effectively imposing an extremely tight geographical limit which prevents anyone outside London from joining the choir. This blatantly discriminates against the universal participation which was possible formerly.

The performance of sacred music to the highest standard demands an enormous commitment in terms of time and effort to train choristers. (Sir Richard Terry spent an entire year training the Cathedral Choir before it was heard for the first time in public). As a chorister during George Malcom's time as Master of Music and later as a student at the Royal College of Music, I know that the training process (for all musicians) requires daily practice, because it is only by systematic repetition that co-ordination of a whole range of

skills in voice production, reading Latin and English texts and sight-reading, in two systems of musical notation, can produce acceptable results. This makes the case for full boarding and daily singing at Westminster Cathedral even more compelling than it is for the top Anglican cathedral choirs, where such a regime is considered an absolute prerequisite.

Sung Mass and Vespers every day had already been curtailed by the counter-intuitive decision to abandon Vespers on Saturday (surely weekends are likely to draw the greatest attendance - and the retention of Vespers could have provided an opportunity for involvement of those attending a vigil Mass). But the 2019 changes have eroded the full weekly cycle of choral services very much further. Along with the reduction of chorister participation in the Cathedral, there is a corresponding reduction of rehearsal time, which will be damaging to the standard of the Choir.

Several recent Popes have repeatedly urged the Church to strive for excellence in the music which is intrinsic to it: Gregorian Chant and the sacred polyphony which grew from it. This music is fundamental to the liturgy and it is the embodiment of prayer in any formalised setting. Unfortunately there are no churches in the world, outside monasticism, where the daily choral liturgy still exists. Westminster Cathedral is unique in maintaining the living tradition of the Catholic Church's priceless musical heritage, and anything which threatens this should be vigorously resisted.

As my own association, **Schola Gregoriana**, strives to serve the Church by restoring and teaching the Chant throughout the country, the Cathedral, which once led the way forward, now appears to be setting out in the opposite direction, without any apparent perception of the damage which the recent changes will inflict upon the wider world of Catholic church music. Quite apart from the importance of the Choir to the Cathedral itself, its significance for Catholic church music in the country as a whole, and indeed across the world, should not be under-estimated. Ex-Cathedral choristers are able to bring their knowledge and skill to parishes which otherwise have very little, or no access to the music of the Church.

This review should emphasise that it is not too late to reassess and reverse, or at least modify and lessen, the adverse impact of the recent changes and we would urge the School and Cathedral authorities to find alternative ways forward which do not involve the total abolition of full-time boarding for choristers in the very School which was established specifically to provide for them.

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