

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Following in the footsteps of Edmund, King and Martyr



2013 Review of music provision at the Cathedral

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The following is a summary of the 2013 Report on the provision of music at the Cathedral. There was unanimous appreciation of the overall good quality of music at the Cathedral, ably and effectively overseen by the Director of Music, and of the expertise, commitment and care with which James Thomas carries out his role.

Introduction

Chapter provided the following statement as part of the background to the review:

Music is central to the mission and ministry of the St Edmundsbury Cathedral. English Cathedral Music is one of the unique and distinguishing marks of a cathedral. Foremost in any review of music provision, the Chapter affirms the vital contribution that our Music Department makes to the life of the Cathedral, and is committed to maintaining the vitality and high standards needed to ensure that this tradition is maintained into the future. Additionally, the Cathedral, as a centre of education, mission and spiritual formation, must recognise the vital place of children and young people in maintaining our choral tradition, and this too is fully endorsed by Chapter.

The purpose of an audit of music provision here is to employ an external and objective review of how the Cathedral's Music Department is functioning. As a Christian community, any part of the Cathedral's work must be sustained by a theology which is open to guidance of the Spirit and to change. Chapter's desire therefore is that this audit will celebrate and affirm those areas of the Music Department's work which are flourishing, and also identify areas which need developing, strengthening or further review. Such a review has not been undertaken for many years, and it is good practice to do this in the context of the wider mission and ministry of the Cathedral, and is essential to our stewardship of resources and our guardianship of a sacred heritage in this county, town and diocese.

Terms of Reference

In addition to a general overview of the Cathedral's musical provision, Chapter asked for the review to provide comments and recommendations in the following areas:

1. Whether the current structures and practices of our Music Department best serve the needs, vision and purposes of the cathedral and the wider community and diocese.
2. How our Music Department and music provision here compares with other cathedrals with comparable resources and context.
3. Current practices, schedules and capabilities: are we using existing paid staff and volunteers effectively, and what areas for new work or development are desirable or possible?
4. The current level of performance standard and repertoire across our choirs.
5. The current variety of concerts and events – both those provided by our Music Department and choirs, and those overseen by our Arts and Events Co-ordinator.
6. Choral Scholars and Lay Clerks are unpaid: is the current level and standard of music provision sustainable without being underpinned by funding through the establishment of a Choral Foundation?
7. The theological and artistic rationale for different choirs here, their age and gender profiles and whether further provision is possible for girls as well as for boys
8. Our relationship with local schools (in the light of West Suffolk schools re-organisation to a two-tier system) and other local/diocesan 'stake-holders' such as the Local Authority, Diocesan Music Committee and local colleges.
9. Chapter's care, remuneration and professional/career development of key members of staff.
10. Whether the new Friends of the Cathedral Choir charitable trust meets the needs of the Cathedral's Music Department and how this compares with other cathedrals with similar structures.

The Review Process

The review took place in January 2013, during which time Tim Hone, who undertook the review, was able to attend a number of services and to observe rehearsals. He met those most involved with the Cathedral music, representatives of those responsible for the Cathedral's governance and administration, the Head of St James' Middle School, and representatives of the Diocese.

Satisfactions of Music at the Cathedral

There was unanimous appreciation of the overall good quality of music at the Cathedral, ably and effectively overseen by the Director of Music, and of the expertise, commitment and care with which James Thomas carries out his role. The Archdeacon of Suffolk summed this up well: 'the standard is much, much higher than one might reasonably expect, across the range, in what might be considered a relatively small provincial Cathedral, with no choir school or choral foundation. The repertoire is broad and diverse, occasionally challenging, a healthy balance between the traditional and innovative – though leaning a little towards the traditional... Most of all, the musicians rise to the 'occasion' and always provide something exceptional for major services. The high quality of organ voluntaries is often overlooked.' There are many places in the report which indicate the high level of satisfaction with all that is achieved. Some comments are as follows:

St Cecilia Juniors

Polly Carnegie [the choir's director] is a natural educator, and I admired the work she was doing to help the children find their way around a musical score and she made effective use of other techniques to help with pitching, such as hand signals. I was particularly impressed by a rhythmic canon performed by the children, which used the whole body as a source of percussive sounds.

St Cecilia Chorale

Very few cathedrals have managed to establish a mixed choir for this age group. The one of which I am most aware is the Youth Choir at Gloucester Cathedral... I feel that the Cathedral should do more to affirm and celebrate the work of the Chorale and James Thomas's significant achievement in motivating young people to contribute to the Cathedral in this way.

St Edmundsbury Singers

This choir of 22 ladies, formed in 1988, struck me as being particularly impressive. They are very ably directed by Dan Soper [Asst Director of Music], whose rehearsal with them was efficient and effective.

Other Cathedrals

While I believe there is something to learn from other cathedrals, even if it is the cautionary tale of not spreading the resources too thinly, it should not be assumed that everything will translate directly into another place. At the same time, many other cathedrals would learn a lot from St Edmundsbury, particularly in terms of the provision of rehearsal facilities, the successful rebuilding of the Cathedral organ, the recruitment of choristers, and the involvement of parents in supporting the choir and fundraising.

Further, those who sing in the choirs value the opportunity to be part of the musical life of such a place and to be challenged in terms of repertoire and the standard which is expected of them. This response, from one of the St Edmundsbury Singers, is typical: 'I am incredibly glad that I live near a cathedral and can experience choral singing of such a high standard at services. I think James and Dan do an excellent job with very limited resources. I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate in the St Edmundsbury Singers, and I am especially grateful for being able to sing at some of the great occasions in the Cathedral'

James Thomas and Dan Soper are valued as colleagues and for their awareness of the fact that the music is there to serve the worship. The Precentor comments that he 'particularly values their thoughtful, creative and sensitive approach to liturgy and worship, as well as their skills, expertise and knowledge.' The musicians themselves write with appreciation of the satisfaction of rehearsing all the choirs, recruiting the Colts from a very big and diverse pool of children, nurturing the singers, seeing them develop (especially when Colts become Probationers and then Choristers), reaching out to the families of the choristers, of working with a broad spectrum of singers rather than a single group, of the synergy that results when liturgy and music really connect, and the satisfaction of the new organ of which, quite rightly, they are very proud.

These thoughts from a parent show that all this hard work is very much appreciated: 'The *esprit de corps* displayed by the choristers, who represent many schools, ages and backgrounds, is... wonderful to see. And the development of the boys as they move from tentative beginnings to eventually performing major solos to packed audiences is a wonderful testament to the work of the Choir School.'

Challenges and Opportunities

There was broad agreement about the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, and the report's recommendations listed below are a distillation of these and suggest priorities for consideration and development. All those interviewed agree that the recruitment of lay clerks and the provision for girls is a significant priority. Further, there is a significant desire not merely to maintain what the Cathedral has at present but to strive to improve excellence, and to build networks with choirs and musicians in the diocese and community.

While some people overlook the amount of effort needed to recruit singers to regenerate the choirs and thus maintain the kind of musical provision that the Cathedral presently enjoys, the musicians are well aware of the challenges of persuading children and their families to commit significant amounts of time to an activity that is counter-cultural.

Moving to a two-tier education system, with the loss of St James' Middle School, has enormous implications, not so much for recruitment of choristers from the primary schools, as for retaining them as choir members when the children move to the upper school and are faced with a diversity of choice in terms of extra-curricular activities. The loss of a school on the present site near to the Cathedral would be very significant, if this happens.

While a few people interviewed argue for the creation of endowment funding, most people assume that this is not a likely or realistic aspiration. Most people are aware of the financial challenges of managing with a limited budget, and those closest to this process have specific concerns about ensuring that money continues to be available for music purchase and organ maintenance when the dedicated funds that presently support these are exhausted. There are individuals and groups, including the Friends of the Cathedral Choir, who see their task as creating sufficient financial resources to support particular musical initiatives and developments, including recording and touring opportunities for the choir. These are part of a more comprehensive aim of using the music to build more connections to the world beyond the Cathedral.

Looking at the broader issues, the musicians expressed a hope that the present commitment to the music within Chapter will be maintained as members change. They are aware of cathedrals where this is not the case and where the music has struggled to prosper. The Cathedral is fortunate in its present clergy team. They seem well aware that most of the demands to inspire the singers fall on the professional musicians, and that it is important to support their professional development, helping them to retain their energy, passion and freshness of approach. All of this needs a strategic framework from Chapter, which enables the Cathedral to look to the future with confidence.

Recommendations: a possible way forward

The report deliberately does not provide a blueprint for the future as this needs to be worked out by Chapter in consultation with others. The possible framework suggested is not the only way in which the music department can go forward, but the process of working at these challenges together will help people to take ownership of the decisions and, even more importantly, to make sure that proposed new directions feel right for St Edmundsbury.

The responsibilities of Chapter

Tim Hone says:

“At the highest level, I think the initial response to the report should be to agree a strategic but realistic vision for the music which Chapter is committed to develop. There are clearly issues about whether you continue to aspire to professional standards but without the resources to support them, or whether you re-define goals around the priorities of people, community, and equality of opportunity. The issue of how to renew the back rows of the choir is widely acknowledged, and this is a challenge that will need to be grasped urgently.

“The financial challenges clearly cannot be ignored because they set limits on what is realistically possible. Like most cathedrals that operate on a very tight budget, St Edmundsbury has been ingenious about doing a great deal with very little. In the current financial climate, it may still be possible to attract direct funding for some projects which would relieve the pressure elsewhere. While not ruling out the possibility that you will find major donors who are attracted by the big vision of a choral foundation, I think it would be unwise to make this the core strategy for success. This means that you have to decide how ambitious it is realistically possible to be and set aspirations in the light of this”.

The report highlights the fact that the **imminent restructuring of the educational provision** will have a significant impact on the future of chorister recruitment and retention. Since the final decision will be taken somewhere in central/local government, the report makes it clear that it is necessary to have a plan for the future which would allow things to develop whether or not a school continues in the existing St James' location.

The report shows that there is so much common ground about **the need for a clear strategy for recruitment of lay clerks/choral scholars** and the desire for **girls to have a full part in the Cathedral's musical life**, that a way forward will need to be found on these as a priority. Detailed plans for this development, together with other issues raised in the report, should be worked out by the Precentor and the music staff so that a way forward is found which is practical and to which they are committed.

The report makes it clear that Chapter has both a professional and pastoral responsibility to its staff as a revised pattern of musical provision evolves, and that it will be important that James Thomas and Dan Soper are enabled by Chapter to make contact with other cathedrals, to observe what they are doing and hear what they are able to do.

The Recommendations

1. Set up a small working group which includes one of the lay clerks, to develop a strategy for recruitment. I suggest this looks at the implications for recruitment within the current financial constraints and then asks what more might be done to encourage good singers to make a regular commitment to the choir.
2. Look seriously at a structure which would allow for the development of a girls' choir.
3. Try to find a relationship between the service pattern and who sings them so that there is some restriction in the categories of repertoire that each choir sings.
4. Think about the place the Colts choir structure has in recruitment and progression. If it stays, and if the girls are of the same age group as the boys, think about how this structure works for both girls and boys.
5. Think about ways of integrating the singing lessons and the development of the basic sound of the choir.
6. A revised rehearsal schedule would be facilitated by the provision of a second rehearsal space with a good acoustic piano. It should be possible to achieve a flexible arrangement in the lecture room, without having to make too many changes.
7. Set aside time and allocate a budget to allow for opportunities for professional development each term, and to build creative contacts with other cathedrals.
8. With the Dean and other Chapter members, manage the transition to a two-tier education structure and develop an educational philosophy which underpins this.
9. Manage the budget in such a way that the best use is made of current resources while identifying clearly what you could do if you had additional funding.
10. Once the proposals are agreed within the department and approved by Chapter, consider how to communicate them to all those involved with the music at the moment.
11. Periodically revisit the report in order to assess the progress that has been made and agree new priorities.

The report also recommends that responsibility for considering other matters raised, of a less strategic nature, should be reviewed by the Precentor and music department team.

How to turn these aspirations into reality

The Cathedral Chapter recognise that existing provision of excellence in music and worship takes considerable energy to sustain, and that this needs to be maintained as it is currently. Chapter have enthusiastically received this report and in response have appointed a Working Team, including the music department staff, Chapter members and two external advisors, to take the review forward, working out priorities, vision, funding and practical ways to meet the challenges and recommendations. The Team will report progress and proposals to Chapter as they begin to form.

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