

Keeping a low profile

'We have the same aims as the high-profile cathedrals: to make as good music as possible in the context of worship, and to bring musical life to the area we inhabit. But we have a very different way of doing things. We do not have the same financial clout and we have a different relationship with the community.'

David Price, organist and master of the choristers at Portsmouth, is talking about those cathedrals sometimes thought of as in the second rank: places like Portsmouth, Chelmsford, Blackburn, Sheffield and Rochester, which despite (or perhaps because of) being without choir schools, glamorous locations or ancient endowments, deliver music to an impressively high standard, week in and week out.

Each of the three music directors I spoke to tackles the challenge in a slightly different way. For all of them the solution lies in maintaining an all-male choir in the English tradition for most of the day-to-day service singing, and combining that with multiple choirs and creative partnerships.

Some rely on links with a specific school. At Rochester, where Roger Sayer is organist and director of music, all the boy choristers come from the city's King's School. They have 40% of their tuition fees paid by the cathedral during the time they are in the choir – much as if they were attending a choir school. They also (like their counterparts at Blackburn and Portsmouth) receive individual singing lessons.

'We take singing seriously,' says Roger Sayer. 'We try to invest them with a good singing technique so they do sing properly. The actual standard of singing is very high, and we are proud of that.' They are sentiments which could have been uttered by any one of the three music directors. As for the line-up of men at Rochester, the cathedral supports just two contracted lay clerks. Sayer books the other four men for services by rota. He also runs a girls' choir – one of the earliest, established in 1995 – and a special choir, made up of auditioned adult voluntary singers. Both these choirs sing services regularly when the cathedral choir takes a break.

He is particularly proud of a new venture, the senior girls' choir. 'They are girls who have been singing with us from the age of eight and we are reaping the bene-

**Absolute volunteers:
some of Blackburn's 170 singers**

Not all cathedrals boast choir schools, glamorous locations and ancient endowments, but the music-making can still be second to none.

Marian Blaikley reports

fits of that. They are capable of singing any part of the repertoire that the resources allow.'

David Price at Portsmouth is also blessed with a close partnership with the local grammar school, whence most of his choirboys come, but not exclusively so. 'At the moment, I have to pack at least two of them off into taxis to their schools the other side of town, after the daily 8am rehearsal.'

In return for their demanding weekly schedule the Portsmouth choristers (and their parents) get little tangible reward. There are no bursaries covering all or part of the school fees as at Rochester, though the cathedral does pay for each boy to have instrumental lessons. Here as elsewhere, the choristers also get a little bit of pocket money each time they sing a service.

'It is rather different from the big cathedrals with choir schools where they can insist that the boys must be somewhere at a certain time because they are paying the school fees,' says David Price. 'We have to work hard at ensuring the boys have a fantastic time and work round their other commitments – drama, sport – or it just won't happen.'

The 'fantastic times' – the extras – are made possible by a very active choir association. That raises funds both for local expeditions (to the bowling alley or to see round an aircraft carrier in the dockyards – this is Portsmouth after all) and for overseas tours (an annual feature for the main choirs of all three cathedrals). Some £18,000 was needed for Portsmouth Cathedral Choir's most recent tour to Estonia.

Price's method of securing a first-rate back row is more radical. Seven permanent cathedral lay clerks receive 'a token gesture in terms of salary', but they are joined each year by a new batch of gap-year students. The scheme, established with the help of Dr Tim Hands, headmaster of Portsmouth Grammar School, is similar to ones set up elsewhere, in Truro and Gloucester, for example. The six or seven gap-year music scholars share (and pay their whack for) accommodation in a house rented specially for them by the cathedral and are able to combine their duties with a job. The local music authority funds one post, for someone to work one day a week in a struggling state school, and others have posts in the grammar school and in the cathedral music office.

David Price sees the gap-year scheme as one that works well for all parties: 'It is a great way to ensure that there are male voices trained in a choral way for the future. In my experience these gap-year students are jolly good musicians. They gain experience while they are with us and take it away elsewhere to ensure the tradition carries on. During the year they work out how to manage themselves on a budget in a protected environment. It's a good introduction to independent life before going to university.'

Portsmouth is a parish church cathedral and also has a thriving choir of some 25-30 mixed boys and girls of ages to sing for services geared to the parish. David Price is seeking to make a further investment in voices – particularly of young men – by starting up a third choir this autumn called Cantate, for teenage boys and girls. 'It's to catch those boys who in the past left at 13, when their voices change. We want to





help them get through to the sixth form using their voices.'

At Blackburn the 170 singers who sing in the choirs run by organist and music director Richard Tanner are absolute volunteers: no money for lay clerks or school fees or gap-year schemes here. He does not have the luxury of a feeder school, either. His solution is to target them young, running school workshops for boys and girls aged five to seven, and regularly giving a 45-minute Powerpoint presentation in certain primary schools. He follows this up with an audition session, and an open morning at the cathedral for both children and parents.

Boys and girls aged five to eight who emerge from this process join the 25-strong children's choir. 'The hope is that they may move up into the boys and girls choirs when the time comes,' says Tanner.

At eight, boys graduate to the cathedral choir, where their commitment is big: rehearsals after school three nights a week, before school on Wednesdays, Saturday mornings (finishing by 10.30 to leave the rest of the day free), a regular evensong on Wednesdays and two services on Sundays. Alongside this Richard runs a girls' choir (50-strong), a girls' chamber choir, a youth choir of mixed teenage boys and girls, an adult chamber choir and the Renaissance Singers – a more occasional cathedral-based choir for adults which gets through an extraordinary amount of both secular and sacred repertory in any one year.

One of the Renaissance Singers' most recent ventures was to sing Bob Chilcott's *Little Jazz Mass* on Radio 4's *Sunday Worship* at Pentecost. All the choirs have opportunities to sing regular services, with the youth choir providing the music for the parish Eucharist at 9.15 every Sunday morning.

The choirs also get the chance, in various permutations, to join in the ambitious programme of concerts that Tanner mounts each year, with the aid of hard-won sponsorship and the fund-raising efforts of Friends of Blackburn Cathedral Music. This year has seen several collaborations with the Northern Chamber Orchestra including a Christmas spectacular involving most of the choirs, a Mozart festival (sponsored by local travel and transport company Fraser Eagle) and, to round off the season at the end of June, a concert combining a performance by the Renaissance Singers of the Durufle *Requiem* with the world premiere of an organ concerto by David Briggs (soloist Greg Morris, the cathedral's assistant director of music). The event – which was quite an occasion with luminaries like Wayne Marshall in the audience – coincided with the release of a recording of the concerto.

Richard Tanner is delighted that the Briggs work came the cathedral's way to celebrate the refurbishment of the organ. (Briggs was the adviser on this process, which has provided the cathedral with a world-class instrument). One of Tanner's regrets is that lack of funds and of rehearsal time does not allow him to commission more new music, particularly in a cathedral which has such a tradition of commissioning in the visual arts: one of its most recent acquisitions, a series of paintings for the stations of the cross by Penny Warden, installed in 2005, is stunning.

Frustration at not having more resources to do more new music is shared by the other music directors. But when the occasion is big enough, commissions do happen. Rochester celebrated the 1,400th anniversary of its foundation by mark-

ing the dedication of a new fresco by the Russian iconographer Sergei Fyodorov with a commission from John Tavener in 2004. In the same year Portsmouth Cathedral Choir was at the heart of the 60th anniversary of D-day commemorations in Caen and Bayeux and took an original piece – including a role for an untrained state school choir – commissioned from Harvey Brough.

That school choir is still going, based in the cathedral for its rehearsals, a satisfying legacy of the Caen event which illustrates that very special role in the community which these cathedrals create for themselves. At Portsmouth they also have schemes in place to help music-making across the diocese. Sub-organist Marcus Wibberley spends two thirds of his time as a diocesan music adviser. Through a 'Classrooms to Choirstalls' scheme – another example of the cathedral's close partnership with the local education authority – he works with state primary schools, setting up singing clubs and encouraging members to join the local church choir. Through the 'Pipeline' scheme he helps to train young organists across the diocese. As David Price puts it, 'We are investing in the next generation. These are small things from which great things will grow.'

Portsmouth's education programme has been running for some years but Blackburn's was launched for the first time this season. Developed in partnership with Darwen Music Service and Blackburn Diocesan Board of Education, it is supported by sponsorship from an unexpected source – the Professional Footballers' Association. 'Blackburn is a footballing town and it's a great way of integrating what we all do in the community,' says Tanner. (It is not so surprising then, that both the cathedral and football ground received equal billing during Condoleezza Rice's recent visit to the city with Jack Straw.)

Some of the Blackburn projects are tied in with key concerts. Performers from the Mozart festival took workshops into local schools; David Briggs ran hugely popular workshops around his concerto premiere at the end of June. On other occasions it is the cathedral as venue that drives the event. In March the cathedral housed the local authority's gamelan and attendant workshops and concerts. Richard Tanner is delighted at the success of these cooperative ventures: 'We find if we work in partnership with those who like to support us we get people thinking of the cathedral as a place to come and listen to – and make – music.'

Tanner's challenging all-year-round concert programme grows out of that philosophy, as does Portsmouth Cathedral's involvement in the Portsmouth Festivities, an arts festival held every year at the end of June, and the Summer Festival of Music at Rochester Cathedral. If you want to experience at first hand the high musical standards being set by cathedrals such as these then Rochester is the place to go from 26 to 30 July (www.kiad.ac.uk/rc/news/index.asp).



Investing in voices:
Portsmouth Cathedral

www.portsmouthcathedral.org.uk/music.htm
www.kiad.ac.uk/rc/music