

*Survey of Developments
in the
Cathedral Choirs of the
United Kingdom*

A Report

1996

*Campaign for the Defence of the Traditional Cathedral Choir
17, Wigmore Street, London, W1H 9LA.*

SURVEY OF DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CATHEDRAL CHOIRS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

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This would appear to be the first attempt at a comprehensive Survey of our cathedral choirs. Carried out in the second half of 1996, at a time of continuing, rapid change in the world of cathedral music, the Survey set itself a two-fold task: an appraisal of the well-being of the choral foundations and an assessment of the possible impact on them of recent developments.

Particular concern has been expressed of late at the effect the introduction of girls' choirs might have on the choral tradition. Yet girls' choirs are only one thread in the skein. The weal and happiness of a great cathedral choir has many strands to it. Any one of them unravelling must affect the whole.

We trust this Survey will be welcomed by all those involved with our cathedral choirs - and especially by those entrusted with their stewardship.

Methods used to obtain information

The questionnaire compiled for the Survey was sent to organists in cathedrals, chapels royal, collegiate churches, university chapels and one or two other ecclesiastical establishments generally linked with the world of cathedral music. In addition, cathedral choirs in Eire following the Anglican tradition were included in the Survey. (The term 'cathedral' is used in this Report to denote all these establishments. It is stressed that the information extracted from the questionnaires was supplied by organists and choirmasters and not by deans and chapters).

The total number of questionnaires sent out was seventy eight. Forty-six (or almost 60%) were returned. Twenty-six of them were from cathedrals we chose to classify as major - mostly, on historical grounds, or because they sang regularly throughout the week, not just on Sundays.

Not all respondents answered every question - usually because certain questions did not apply to their particular circumstances. Whilst it is regretted that the data are thus not complete, market researchers might find our response rate very serviceable.

The Survey was divided into two parts - the first, to cast a general eye over choral foundations and their make-up; the second, to focus directly on the girls' choirs. The objective was to provide a comprehensive overview of developments in cathedral choirs and to substitute accurate information for anecdotal and partial evidence.

PART ONE: Questions Relating To All Cathedral Choirs

Q1. What is the statutory number of men in your choir?

As might be expected, there is wide variation. Forty per cent of choirs have between 9 and 12 men on the foundation. Twenty-seven per cent have six or fewer men. Six is often considered the minimum number needed.

Q2. What is the statutory number of boy choristers in your choir?

There are between 14 and 20 boy choristers in 64% of the cathedrals. Eighteen per cent of cathedrals have between 22 and 40. No cathedral in the Survey has fewer than 14 boys on its foundation.

Q3.

(a) Do you have a girls' choir?

Twenty-nine per cent of cathedrals said they had. Among major cathedrals the figure was 27%.

If cathedrals did not have a girls' choir we asked:

(b) Why not?

The reasons given are listed below. There was often more than one reason. The number of respondents giving each answer appears in brackets.

Tradition (2)	No demand (3)
Other matters are more urgent first (3)	No time (2)
Financial reasons (11)	Not wanted (1)
Boys and girls do not mix well (1)	No need (5)
Effects on future supply of men (1)	No interest (1)
Considering the possibility (3)	Not stated (1)
No opportunity for 2 choirs (2)	Lack of facilities (3)
Age range of girls is wrong musically (1)	Lucky to have anyone these days! (1)

We added a further question:

(c) Might a girls' choir be established sometime in the future?

Fifty-two per cent of all cathedrals and 67% of major cathedrals answered 'Yes'. Of course, such an answer might include everything from a strong to a very remote possibility. None the less, if we bear in mind the number of girls' choirs already in existence, it would seem that the idea of having girls' choirs has breached a certain psychological barrier.

Q4. Do you see a time coming when women will join the choir?

Although 13% answered 'Yes', 77% were either opposed or had no such plans. A tiny number of cathedral choirs already have women singers.

Those foreseeing the eventual admission of women were asked:

What part(s) would you expect them to sing?

The answers given were: (a) either soprano or alto
(b) both soprano and alto

Q5. Do you have a choir school?

Fifty-three per cent of all cathedrals have associated schools. Seventy-nine per cent of these schools are mixed.

As might be expected, most major cathedrals (77%) have their own choir schools. Eighty-five per cent of them are mixed.

<i>Decade</i>	<i>Number of schools</i>
Early 1970s	2
Late 1970s	6
Early 1980s	3
Late 1980s	3
Early 1990s	1

Q6. How do you recruit choristers?

Few cathedrals rely exclusively on any one particular strategy. The very varied responses can be grouped as follows:

<i>Means of recruitment used</i>	<i>All cathedrals</i>	<i>Major cathedrals</i>
Advertising /PR	22	16
Contacts with schools	21	7
Word of mouth	16	11
Voice trials and auditions	8	4
Other	6	5

Q7. What is the composition of your chapter?

It seemed reasonable to assume that women priests on a cathedral chapter might not be unsympathetic to girls' choirs and even to women singers.

Sixty-nine per cent of chapters are all male. In major cathedrals, the figure is 85%. The corresponding figures for mixed chapters are 19% and 8%.

Q8. Are you aware of any plans to appoint female priests to the chapter?

A few cathedrals already have women priests. Otherwise, most respondents were unaware of any such plans. Presumably more chapters will become mixed in the coming years.

Q9. Do you see the ancient tradition of all-male choirs as something particularly precious which should not be jeopardised?

A strongly positive response was almost universal.

Q10. Do you think the establishment of girls' choirs threatens this tradition in any way?

<i>Threatens the tradition</i>	<i>All cathedrals</i>	<i>Major Cathedrals</i>
Significantly	16%	19%
Somewhat	50%	46%
Not at all/Not here	34%	35%

Almost without exception, cathedrals see the all-male tradition as "something particularly precious which should not be jeopardised". Although none of those cathedrals already having a girls' choir believes the all-male tradition was 'significantly' threatened by their introduction, 23% of them (3 cathedrals) feel that it has been threatened 'somewhat'.

PART TWO: Questions relating to cathedrals with girls' choirs

There were fourteen cathedrals with girls' choirs in the Survey.

Q1. When was the girls' choir established?

<i>Decade</i>	<i>All cathedrals</i>	<i>Major cathedrals</i>
1970s	2	0
1980s	1	0
1990s	11	7

Q2. Why was it established? (Note: Only 13 responded)

<i>Reason</i>	<i>All cathedrals</i>	<i>Major cathedrals</i>
To provide equal opportunity	6	4
To provide an extra choir	3	1
For educational reasons	1	1
Pressure brought to bear	1	1
To increase the no. of services	1	1
To sing at parish communions	1	0

Q3. What is the statutory number of girl choristers?

Only seven of the cathedrals replying had statutory numbers. Of them, the majority (all major cathedrals) had between 18 and 20 girl choristers. One cathedral had as many as 50. In five other cathedrals, girl choristers were non-statutory, with numbers ranging from 18 to 28.

Q4. Do the boys' and girls' choirs enjoy equal status?

<i>Reply</i>	<i>All cathedrals</i>	<i>Major cathedrals</i>
Yes	4	2
Nearly	1	0
No	6	4
Inappropriate question!	1	0

Most girls' choirs are new and need time to establish themselves. Not all cathedrals, however, may *wish* to accord them equal status. In some cases, they are simply regarded as supplementary to the main, traditional choir.

Q5. How many services do they sing each week?

A typical girls' choir sings only once or twice a week and is at an early stage of training. Overall, the boys still sing most of the services.

Q6. Do the boys' and girls' choirs sing together?

<i>Sing together</i>	<i>All cathedrals</i>	<i>Major cathedrals</i>
Occasionally	7	4
2-4 times a year	1	1
Annually	1	0
Never	3	2

One might wonder how occasional 'occasionally' is. Although mixed cathedral choirs have existed for some time, there is no evidence that recently established girls' choirs are singing with the boys' choirs on a regular basis.

Q7. Do the girls ever sing alone with the gentlemen?

<i>Frequency</i>	<i>All cathedrals</i>	<i>Major cathedrals</i>
Often	1	1
Five services out of six	1	0
3 times a fortnight	1	1
Once a fortnight	1	0
Once a month	1	1
Three times a year	1	0
Occasionally	8	4

Q8. Do you see a time coming when the choirs might ultimately merge?

The reply was a 100% 'No'.

Q9.**(a) By how much have costs risen with the establishment of a girls' choir?**

<i>Percentage increase</i>	<i>All cathedrals</i>	<i>Major cathedrals</i>
0%	3	2
2%	1	0
10%	1	0
15%	1	0
25%	1	0
30-35%	1	1
By £1,000	1	0
Unknown	3	3

(b) How is the girls' choir funded?

Some cathedrals (even major ones) run girls' choirs on a voluntary basis and some obtain money by sponsorship and fund-raising. Deans and chapters fund the choirs outright in three major cathedrals, though there is no information available on actual costs.

(c) Does that mean less funding for the men's and boys' choir?

No cathedral said that less funding resulted.

Further comments were invited. Seventeen were received.

While a few choirmasters stressed the importance of equal opportunities for the girls, almost none did so without reservation. In fact, there was almost nothing that might be described as an unfettered welcome for girls' choirs. Quite the contrary. Fears were expressed for their effect on the boys' choirs, the future availability of lay-clerks and the all-male tradition generally. Their likely effect on overworked choirmasters was mentioned by two cathedrals and the financial implications were mentioned by another. Tepid support was expressed for a girls' choir, if this were to mean an increase in services, but preference was expressed for 13 - 18 year-old girls.

This cool response towards the girls'-choir issue came almost exclusively from cathedrals without girls' choirs.

CONCLUSIONS

While the statutory number of boy choristers would seem adequate, there is some cause for worry where lay-clerks are concerned. Given that six is often considered the minimum number of men needed, it is obvious that some cathedrals must experience problems on occasion. Using women to sing soprano and alto would harm and not help the tradition.

Financial considerations, more than any other one thing, would seem to put a brake on the introduction of girls' choirs. In this respect, major cathedrals, especially those with full, daily choral services and boarding traditions, would confront a much greater financial outlay than parish-church cathedrals. However, Salisbury's achievements in rapidly raising very large sums of money to finance its girls' choir should be remembered.

While a mere five respondents cited fundamental objections to girls' choirs, certain *conditional* objections voiced by others might not survive their term in office. It is significant that none of the major cathedrals with girls' choirs saw them as posing any kind of threat.

At a time when schools in the private sector generally find themselves forced to compete for pupils, financial concerns have undoubtedly encouraged choir schools to take in girls. A subsequent determination to provide equal opportunities for all pupils has been the major driving force behind the new girls' choirs. Parish-church cathedrals, however, see girls' choirs more as a way of increasing the number of sung services.

Recruitment remains a major task, but there are successes. One cathedral recently found itself oversubscribed by more than five times. Perhaps there is a case for cathedrals getting together to pool ideas and make use of outside expertise.

There is no obvious conclusion to be drawn from the admission of women priests to cathedral chapters. It would not only be simplistic but plainly wrong to equate the girls'-choir movement with the advent of women priests - though clearly, the two matters are not unconnected. Chapters are still predominantly male, and it is under their aegis that the new girls' choirs have sprung up.

The Survey shows there is a clear determination not to mix choirs on any regular basis. However, some cathedrals have already stated that they intend the boys and the girls should eventually share the sung services equally. In such a situation, it does not seem credible that costs will not increase.

It is difficult to avoid the general conclusion that, although the all-male choir is almost universally regarded as something particularly precious which should not be jeopardised, and although a majority feels that the new girls' choirs threaten this tradition to some degree, cathedrals may still go ahead and establish them anyway.

