

Organizing and Training a Boys' Choir

PERHAPS one of the more unfortunate results of the Reformation was the banishing of boys from the chancels of our Cathedrals and Abbeys, and the consequent weakening of the Church's hold upon their affections and imaginations. In medieval times they seem to have been linked only one degree less closely than the clergy. Under the shadow of the great monasteries and cathedrals they learned their lessons, sang in the daily services, assisted in the ceremonial, waited at table at the celebrations held to mark the greater festivals of the Church, and gobbled up after the guests had departed. Thus the Church, both as a place of work and play, was right at the very centre of their lives. It is little wonder, therefore, that, when boyhood passed, so many of them remained attached to the Church, either as lay-brethren in the monasteries, or as fully professed monks, or as secular clergy.

It is nearly fifty years since boys were brought back to the Abbey Choir in Paisley, although they had to wait until 1907 before an organist came who was able, or willing, to devote the necessary time and attention to specializing with them. Unfortunately death cut short his work after only two years; but during that time this man, John Finlay, had built them up into a choir some sixty strong, containing within itself a solo group which toured extensively in Scotland, and as far south as Yorkshire. In those days many more services were sung in the Abbey, and before and after each service they had a short practice, with a longer one once a week. They also assisted at weddings. In addition Mr. Finlay held a weekly Bible Class for them, and they appear to have been quite devoted to him and to have served him loyally.

He was followed by Frederick Boothroyd who continued this valuable enterprise with the boys. Every Saturday they were to be seen arriving at his house for practice, and in the neighbourhood they became affectionately known as "Boothroyd's Chicks". Succeeding organists, while not neglecting the boys, did not specialize to the same extent, and by the time of the outbreak of the recent war they had become unruly in behaviour, and had ceased to count

musically, even in the Abbey services, although numerically as strong as ever. All external singing had faded away.

In December, 1944, there came once more to the Abbey an organist with considerable experience in handling boys, and they began to pull themselves together, until now they form one of the most vital elements in the life of the Abbey. Nor would it be going too far to say that the Abbey forms one of the most vital interests in their own lives. Some of them, who were boys in 1944-45, are now singing as Tenors and Basses, and are beginning to be called away to military service. Yet, when they return on a Friday or a Saturday for week-end leave, they are to be found unfailingly in the Choir on Sunday, and also at practice when they can get home in time on a Friday. The mere fact that they are ready and willing to devote so much of a precious week-end leave to being in church speaks for itself. During the recent Holy Week observances some of them managed to arrange sufficient leave to enable them to get home for the final practice, and were to be found nightly in their places in the Choir at the special choral services arranged to mark Holy Week and Easter.

What are the methods followed, of which this devotion is the outcome? First, they are worked hard. In my experience no boy minds hard work, and he soon begins to see results which, in turn, spur him on to further effort; but he is quickly bored when things are easy and there is little to do. Like the boys of old they are constantly in and out of the old Abbey, and its hallowed precincts. Drawn in the main from the three principal schools in the town, and from many churches, the boys make this a meeting-place of friends. When practice is over there is nearly always time for a game—in their robing-room when it is cold and wet, outside in the Abbey grounds when it is fine and warm—and the traditional "feeds", so dear to the heart of a boy, are not forgotten either.

At Christmas they go to the local Infirmary to sing carols in procession round the entire building, and finish up with a Christmas tea provided by the Matron and staff. Occasional smaller visits are paid from time to time on Sundays, after morning service, when, after hymn-singing in procession round a group of wards, the boys are rewarded with as many ices as they can comfortably consume. At Senior Choir parties they are not forgotten, and anything not disposed of is put aside and shared out at their next practice.

From time to time visits are paid to other churches to sing, followed by the inevitable "feed", and merry singing of a less orthodox kind on the homeward-bound bus journey. This latter convention is greatly cherished as an occasion when all the usual choir *dicta* about rounded mouths, soft tone, and so on, may be flouted with impunity in the Choirmaster's very presence, and a surprising repertoire of unecclesiastical songs is allowed to emerge. Strict silence and rigid discipline is always observed on the outward journey, and is conceded quite willingly, with nothing more than a reminder before setting out.

Before all Abbey services the boys robe in their scarlet cassocks and assemble in the Practice Room to run through exercises and the anthem under the leadership of the senior chorister until summoned by the church officer, when the Choir prayer is said and they proceed to the Assembly Hall to await the Minister. This custom of practising under the leadership of one of their own kind is invaluable and is followed at all times. Practices begin at the exact hour, whether or not the Choirmaster is present. If he is delayed, or occupied with a parent, or concluding a class for the probationers, they go into the Practice Room and begin the hymns under the senior chorister present. Each boy has a little mat on which he may sit when he chooses. All exercises are taken standing and also any music in final rehearsal. For the rest it is left entirely to the boy's own discretion to stand up or sit down as he feels inclined, the change of position being made only between pieces. All music is laid out beforehand on their mats, in the order in which it is intended to be practised, so that each knows exactly what he has to do, and, moreover, can be relied upon to do it.

The boys respond to this sharing of responsibility. Once when a sudden onset of illness prevented the Choirmaster's attendance this matter was put to the test. Unaware of the emergency the boys assembled, went through all the work set out, and only then did the Head Boy come to find out what had happened. During the days that followed, with Christmas near at hand, they toiled on faithfully under the Head Boy, the practices becoming longer and longer, but without any grumbles. After each practice, progress or otherwise was duly reported and anxious enquiries made as to whether I should be back in time to supervise the decoration of the Christmas Tree which they had been promised might be set up in the

Abbey that year for the first time. In view of their insistence, although somewhat shaky, I was allowed to return in time, and all passed off happily.

Incidentally this Christmas Tree became the forerunner of many such. Each year the weeks preceding Christmas-tide are occupied in painting and decorating the branches and hanging on stars and angels and other appropriate things which they make themselves or buy with their odd pennies, or wedding gratuities. At midnight on Christmas Eve they assemble around the Tree and sing carols in a crowded Abbey. Thereafter, for the duration of the school holidays, they work out a rota, coming into the Abbey in twos, for an hour or half an hour at a time, and watching over it as long as the church is open.

End of their year, in July, is marked by a 10 a.m. practice to run through all the holiday music. Thereafter the day is given over to a jollification, in which eating, naturally, takes a leading place. Each boy brings his own special delicacy, then a great system of bartering ensues, after which we adjourn to some selected spot to eat. Various are the places chosen: once it was the Tower, and the merriment reached such a height that people collected below and someone telephoned the police! More often the Glennifer Braes are chosen, if the weather is agreeable. Another favourite device is to roam over the closed parts of the monastic buildings and to search for a way down the Night Stairs, long since blocked, and to climb up to Triforium and Clerestory and peer down at the tiny people walking in the nave below, concluding with, perhaps, a little singing by the soloists on the ledge below the great West Window.

During the holiday period, roughly mid-July to the end of August, there is a thirty-minute rehearsal at 10.30 on Sunday mornings, to run over the music for the day, anything left over being finished off when morning service has ended. Any boys at home, or passing through the town, attend; and some even come back from near-by holiday haunts for the day, returning again the same evening or next morning.

Enough has been said of the fun and games. What of the work? Certainly it is hard and there is plenty of it, but there is a good spirit and no grumbling. The first practice of the week is held after the service on Sunday evening. An experiment is in progress just now in building up a four-part choir consisting entirely of boys and adolescent

boys, together with one or two ex-choristers in their twenties. All must have served at some time in the Boys' Choir. As their voices have failed, boys have tended in increasing numbers to hang on, instead of returning to their former churches, or just drifting away altogether. After a voice test they are encouraged to try gently a little tenor or bass, or occasionally alto. In this way a promising body of singers for future years is in process of building up, with a long background of training, experience and habits of regular attendance. While their voices are settling they are learning the notes, together with style in performance, and it is surprising how quickly a trained boy's voice settles down, usually avoiding altogether that uncouth squeaking period which is the bane of so many schoolboys. Say what you will, you cannot stop a boy from singing and talking during the period of vocal change, and we know from Pepys that the Chapel Royal boys and others of his day continued to sing at that stage. In modern times Sir Sydney Nicholson was the pioneer of a change of view from the somewhat outmoded idea that a boy should stop singing altogether for an unspecified period, advising instead that a little gentle singing under proper supervision and guidance was much the better method.

Sunday evening from eight o'clock to nine is given over to madrigal singing by all the boys, old and young, who form this group. They also specialize in Gregorian music, contributing ancient Sequences, Hymns and Chants, as Offertory music, from time to time, usually during the special seasons of Advent, Christmas, Easter and Whitsun. It is found to be much liked by those worshipping in the Abbey. At nine o'clock the older boys leave and the younger ones run through the music for the coming week, so that all may be in order for the principal Boys' Practice which is held on Tuesdays immediately after school. This lasts approximately two hours and is preceded at certain seasons by an instruction class in the rudiments of notation, reading and time, for the probationers and junior boys. A human touch is given by an arrangement whereby mothers come in pairs in rotation each Tuesday and have a cup of tea in readiness as the boys arrive from school. Full practice with the Senior Choir is held on Friday evenings from 7.30 to 9.30 or 10 p.m., the boys assembling officially at 7 p.m., but more often from 6.15 onwards for purposes of their own.

The majority of wedding services are sung by the boys alone, and for these occasions and for concert purposes they are divided into first and second trebles and altos. The distinction is there quite clearly as in women's voices, but few choose to recognize it. All boys, of course, have head notes ; but, in the case of altos, the lower notes are fuller and of better quality, and these are specially trained downwards, while the lighter treble voices are trained upwards. For the purposes of hymn singing and giving a good congregational lead the fulness is a great asset, while the thin purity of an all-treble line in three-part music can be a thing of great beauty. An adequate period each Tuesday is devoted to vocal training, and certain standard exercises precede every practice and service, so that boys know exactly what to do, and can get down to it without loss of time.

In addition to an extensive knowledge of the standard Cathedral routine service music for full choir they have a repertoire of their own for boys' voices, of which such classics as "Let the Bright Seraphim", the Messiah arias, Mozart's "Alleluia", Bach's "Et Exultavit", and many other arias form the foundation. One of these is sung after the exercises at every practice, so that all are more or less kept in being. Neither do we limit ourselves, in this field, to the sacred ; although these others are not, of course, used in the Abbey itself. Rimski Korsakoff's "Hindu Song" is used for the practice it gives in chromatic singing and is, moreover, generally sung in French, being much loved on account of its beautiful and unusual melody. "Non so piu" from Figaro was once studied in Italian, and Latin is used for ancient church music. The next adventure is to be Bach's "Schlage doch", in German. All this helps in their general education and broadens their outlook, striking a blow at insularity.

When a piece begins to lose its hold it is dropped for a time, or for good. Of some, no one seems to weary, and they retain their places permanently. Two-part and three-part music, both sacred and secular, is studied and there is always something new, generally several pieces, on hand to keep interest at fever heat. I make it a rule never to put on music, even among the classics, which does not appeal strongly to myself, and in this way I find I can be sure of the boys' interest also. If a piece of no great musical interest is required for the sake of the beauty of the words or to serve some particular purpose in a service,

I say so, and find that they will then tackle it without hesitation and get it done. This device dates from an occasion when they were making heavy weather over a rather dull anthem, and some boy asked if I really liked it myself. Rather surprised, I said I was not very attracted, but that it served a purpose; whereat they heaved a sigh of relief and murmured "that explains!" When we are working at a piece I tell them anything that comes into my mind, about the circumstances of its composition, or its significance in the Church or the musical world, or of famous performances, or of the composer himself.

What, then, is the value of all this (a) to the boy himself, and (b) to the Church? There is no doubt that he derives a great deal of fun and enjoyment while at the same time acquiring, unsuspectingly, a firm basis of musical taste which he will almost certainly broaden and deepen for himself in later life. One parent told me that after some months his son became noticeably more selective in his choice of wireless programmes. Concentration and care for detail are instilled; leadership and *esprit de corps* as well as a sturdy independence are encouraged, with a determination to stand on one's own feet; for a good choir will not tolerate the slack or the slovenly. From robed processions he learns dignity of carriage and behaviour,—and who can be more dignified and graceful than a boy, when he chooses? All these and many more can be the Church's gift to the boy in its midst.

And as for the Church? A lively enthusiasm and a love not yet grown cold. Are gifts needed for the Harvest Festival or flowers for Easter? Is there some fetching or carrying to be done, or other odd job? You can always count upon the choir boys. Properly led, there will never be half empty seats or irregular attendance, and if there is bad behaviour, then blame the Choirmaster, not the boys! They can't keep order for themselves, and they know it, without some kind of firm hand somewhere in the background. Gone will be those disputes over solos and chief places; boys care not a rap for any of these things. Allocate a solo outright and they will not give it another thought, except to be ready if you change your mind tomorrow. Put it up for competition and the most unlikely people will have a shot at it, and all will sit down interestedly to hear the trial, and themselves, possibly, vote the winner.

In the Abbey it has been our experience that the young people who remain on in the choir early join the class for

Young Communicants ; neither do they become sleeping members afterwards. Not only the choir, but other organizations also benefit from the constant inflow of new blood. In England the ranks both of the clergy and of the musical profession are regularly enriched from this source. Why not in Scotland, too, once the Church is ready to bring her boys back into the picture ?

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