

would have made Maria Hackett, the campaigning reformer of the last century, weep with joy. Though this is not to deny that there are, have been and always will be pressures threatening their existence – financial, political, not to say liturgical.

What are the mechanics and dynamics of running a musical programme such as that of St Paul's?

Well, we field the largest cathedral choir in the country, quite simply because the building requires a choir of 30 boys and 18 men to make any impact in Wren's vast space. This pattern was established by Sir John Stainer in 1872, when he became Organist. He had, in fact, asked for 24 Vicars Choral, but the dean and chapter of the time refused him such extravagance.

The history of the choral foundation itself stretches back at least to the 12th century, when we find the earliest mention of a choir school and the list of former organists reads like a veritable Who's Who of English Cathedral Music – John Redford, Thomas Morley, Adrian Batten, Jeremiah Clarke, Maurice Greene, Thomas Attwood, John Goss, Sir John Stainer; and in this century, Sir John Dykes Bower and Christopher Dearnley. It's a formidable list, and no one is more conscious of the honour and privilege of following such distinguished predecessors than myself.

In addition to the 30 choristers there are eight probationers – the very junior boys. They have their own schedule of rehearsals with one of my assistants, in which they cover basic vocal production, sight-reading, musical theory, and learn how to point the psalms.

What do I look for when auditioning prospective choristers? Enthusiasm and an ability for self-projection are prerequisites if would-be choristers are to succeed at one of the thrice-yearly voice trials, when some 20 or 30 applicants are whittled down to the eight or so places available.

When boys arrive for their voice trial, it is important to be able to put them at their ease straight away. I ask them about their previous singing experience, whether or not they play an instrument, and if they actually *enjoy* singing.

When I hear them, I am not so much listening for a voice at that stage; that is something we can train and develop over a period of time. Rather, the emphasis is on musical intelligence and a particularly good ear. My task is to try to gauge potential, rather than achievement.

The little things that one notices – a spark of personality, bright eyes, the ability to give a performance – are factors that attract me to choose boys for the choir.

Once the choristers are admitted, music becomes an integral part of their daily

lives, and the discipline, corporate sense of purpose and team spirit, plus the immense concentration required for choral performance, carries over into other areas of their lives, and beyond into adulthood.

My working relationship with my choristers is tempered by the fact that we have a deadline to meet, in the form of evensong at 5pm. As the great actors say, you are only ever as good as your last performance.

Choristers require the sense of inner discipline that's essential to a professional approach. And my relationship with them is just that: not so much friendly as professional.

If that sounds fearsome, it is not intended to be. Making music to high standards does not exclude the element of fun; and as we struggle for perfection in human terms we can

'... there are times when I think that degrees in business studies and human resources would serve me better'

be jointly inspired in our efforts to perceive that glimpse of heaven which draws us to higher things.

Prompted by one's response to the verse of a psalm, by a phrase sung by a solo voice, perhaps even by a single note so beautifully sung that it "gathers into one things earthly and heavenly" we

strive day after day with what I like to think is a singular sense of purpose.

In addition to the daily continuum of worship, within the cathedral calendar there are many extra events in which the choir will take a crucial role: memorial services, national, state and Royal occasions, commemorative services, the Annual Festival of the Sons of the Clergy (held every year since 1655) and those for the Order of St Michael and St George and the Order of St John of Jerusalem, plus of course services for City livery companies.

All reflect in their scale and ceremonial the breadth and grandeur of Wren's cathedral, and in all music plays an integral and crucial part.

At Christmas and Easter there are the oratorio performances in which the Cathedral Choir is joined by the volunteer Cathedral Chorus; and in July our Sunday morning services feature Viennese Masses performed liturgically with orchestral accompaniment.

The repertoire encompassed is vast and constantly being added to and updated, ranging from the impressive Royal Acclamations sung at the Advent Carol Service, predating the Norman Conquest, to specially commissioned music for the choir by such composers as William Mathias, John Tavener, Robin Holloway, Robert Saxton, Hugh Wood, Francis Grier, Andrew Carter and Jonathan Harvey. Indeed, I have a passionate commitment to encourage present-day composers to write for the choir in the best tradition of the church as a patron of the arts.

Many composers find the challenge of writing for the unique acoustical properties of St Paul's very stimulating and challenging. However, the backbone of the repertory is rooted firmly in the Anglican choral tradition of Byrd, Purcell, S S Wesley, Stanford, Wood etc, though this has, in recent years, been expanded to include music by Continental composers including Bruckner, Poulenc, Maison, Stravinsky, Penderecki and Langlais.

*This art excelleth all without control;
The faculties it moveth of the soul:
It stifles wrath, it causeth grief to cease;
It does excite the furious mind to peace:
It stirs up love, increaseth good desires;
To heaven alone, its centre, it aspires,*

*And canst thou think that God made
this for nought?
Or that its mysteries should not be sought,
But be neglected by his chiefest creature
Man?*

Thomas Mace – *Musick's Monument 1676*

Our chorister at St Paul's

Current wearer of the Company's Chorister's Medal at St Paul's Cathedral is 12-year-old Benjamin Sheen, son of a freelance violinist mother and a bassoonist father.

Ben has been a chorister at St Paul's since 1997: A music teacher at his former school – St Dunstan's, Catford – realised that he had a good voice after hearing him sing in the nativity play, and suggested that he should apply to the cathedral.

At St Paul's, Ben has performed

a number of solos within the choir. He has also taken part in concerts in other venues, including the Royal Festival Hall, Barbican Hall and the Châtelet in Paris, and was among the choristers who went to New York last summer to sing at St Thomas's on Fifth Avenue.

Ben plays the piano and the cello, but the organ is his passion. He regularly plays for school assemblies in the crypt, and occasionally plays the great organ in the cathedral itself. Hobbies include roller hockey.

