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# LIFELONG INFLUENCES OF BEING A CHORISTER

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Lan Dong



A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education Durham University

June 2018

*Choral music is not one of life's frills. It's something that goes to the very heart of our humanity, our sense of community, and our souls. You express, when you sing, your soul in song. When you get together with a group of other singers, it becomes more than the sum of the parts. All of those people are pouring out their hearts and souls in perfect harmony. Which is kind of an emblem for what we need in this world, when so much of the world is at odds with itself...that just to express, in symbolic terms, what it's like when human beings are in harmony. That's a lesson for our times and for all times...It's not a frill, it is like a great oak that rises up from the centre of the human race and spreads its branches everywhere. That's what music does for us, and choral music must stand as one of the supreme examples of it.*

*John Rutter*

# **Lifelong Influences of Being a Chorister**

*Lan Dong*

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines English choristers' education based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with thirty people who attended a broad selection of English Choir Schools as choristers between 1940 and 2010, divided into three groups: 1) those in secondary or tertiary education; 2) those in work; 3) retired people.

The value of traditional education is much debated, but by giving a detailed description, this phenomenological study has focused on providing a better basis for understanding the subject, and offers empirical evidence about how musical expertise is achieved. Choir schools claim to offer a solid training in choral singing, especially sight-reading and vocal proficiency, and in academic subjects, and that the regime they employ seems also to help the general development of the individual, especially where commitment and team spirit are concerned, as the majority of interviewees agreed.

However, this way of life does not suit every child even if they enjoy singing, and this study has developed a further interpretation of its complexities. Almost every choir school with a sound reputation is also a boarding school, which can in some cases damage family ties and preclude a normal childhood, a sacrifice mentioned by many participants. Interviewees also generally found life hard during the transition to their next school and some even had no desire to return to a church environment because of the religious aspect, though they would return for the singing.

I hope this study will contribute to educational research and practice in several ways, giving future researchers some useful guidelines. Perhaps the research outcomes can also inspire parents and more especially those who are directly involved with choristers' education to consider the needs of the child alongside those of the school thus making the process more beneficial and at the same time helping to continue the tradition.

Key Words: English chorister; choir school; boarding school; music education; phenomenological study.

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis, which I submit for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, is my own work and has not been previously submitted for a degree in Durham University or any other institution.

## **Statement of Copyright**

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## Overview

The structure of this thesis can be summarised as follows:

The *Introduction* sets out the aim of this study, then draws a rough image of the historical background of the UK choir school and its contemporary practices, which show the vivid strength of this thousand-year-old tradition and its adaptation to the change.

The *Literature Review* starts with a broader picture by giving readers an overview about childhood music engagement and its potential impact on children's development based on empirical studies. It then shows readers an overall outline of Britain's school music education where policy makers have tried to adjust the system in different ways, aiming to enable all school children to access a good quality music education. The third part highlights one of the options open to children who are absolutely passionate about singing --- being a chorister, which is the central core of this thesis.

As the thesis aims to explore both the pros and the cons of being a chorister, the *Methodology* chapter describes the whole research design and discusses the method employed for the data collection and the process of analysis. Using the data collected from 30 interviews of ex-choristers from around Britain, I adopted the phenomenological approach to explore choristers' overall education as part of a unique cultural phenomenon. Thematic analysis is employed for data analysis by giving readers information about the backgrounds of the interviewees and how they were selected, plus the strategical steps taken to group the themes. The validity, reliability and ethical issues are also discussed at the end.

Three data analysis and findings chapters follow. Chapter 4 explores how choristers developed their musical expertise and what essential skills they acquired through the intensive music training. Chapter 5 examines life skills training and character-building through being a chorister and through the reflections of the ex-choristers about how choir school experience and the heavy music engagement influenced their subsequent lives. Chapter 6 analyses some challenges that choristers may have faced at such a tender age, while Chapter 7 summarises the findings, examines them in relation to existing research and assesses their implications for practice.

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

This introduction gives the reader the aim of the study and some basic background information about English choristers' schooling, including the historical aspects and the modern changes, and how I came to get interested in this subject.

My personal interest in phenomenological studies applied to the uniqueness of the English choral training tradition stems from my background as a musician and ethnomusicologist (Ethnomusicology is a discipline that studies human musical diversity based on deep cultural principles and social structures (Rice, 2014)). I gained a Bachelor's degree in ethnomusicology from the Music Conservatory of China and later worked as a broadcaster/music editor in one of China's leading music channels, focussing on radio programmes related to Chinese folk songs and their associated personal, social and cultural meaning. Then, in 2009, while studying for my MA degree at the School of Education in Durham University, I was invited to join the local parish church choir and later went to Durham cathedral to listen to the choral Evensong, soon becoming a regular member of the congregation. (Later still, my two boys both became Durham choristers.) Not only did the music attract me but also the whole culture behind it, particularly, those young choristers with their beautiful voices and musicality.

The uniqueness of English choir school education has attracted the attention of several researchers. The performance peak for a chorister occurs around the age of 12 or 13, so it is a relatively short 'career' but of the highest quality. Furthermore, these children are exposed to a very special musical genre – the cathedral repertoire, which is not familiar to most children nowadays.

There are some valuable studies related to choristers' education, but these mainly focus on the music side. So far, there is no empirical study focussing on how being a chorister and having this unique experience, with its strong commitment to the Christian community and an extremely busy schedule, influences the development of the children involved. The current study aims to fill in some of the research lacunae, help others gain an understanding of Britain's choristers' education, and explore how musical engagement and the overall school experience can influence individual development by focusing on the perceptions of ex-choristers from English Cathedrals. Hopefully it will provide an insight into whether the transferable skills children gain from musical training as choristers can contribute to their later academic, social

and personal development. But I shall not ignore the negative aspects of this education and will deal with them in a later section.

## **1.1 Choir schools in the UK: an historical background**

A “chorister” will be defined in this study as follows:

*‘Chorister – a member of a choir, especially a choirboy.’* (Oxford English Dictionary). (No dictionary seems to have realised as yet that there are such things as choirgirls now).

According to this definition, in this research, ‘chorister’ refers to children (boys aged between eight and thirteen; girls aged eighteen or younger) who sing the treble line in English cathedrals, churches and collegiate chapels.

There are three main categories of religious institution in the UK that have choristers: the majority of them are cathedrals, some abbeys (such as Westminster Abbey) or minsters (such as York Minster) and a few so-called ‘major chapels’ (such as New College, Oxford). Throughout this thesis, the author will use the term ‘cathedral’ as a generalised term for any of the above buildings where religious choral music is performed. In this research, choir schools are members of the Choir Schools’ Association (CSA). To be a member of the Association, a school must provide a choir that sings at least four services a week in the foundation it serves.

Before looking any further at the current situation of choristers’ education, it is important to consider the general history background of choir schools to gain a deeper understanding of why choristers’ singing has been held in esteem up to the present day.

### **1.1.1 Chorister life prior to the 19th century**

An all-male chorister’s tradition is believed to derive from the training of Levite boys to sing psalms in Jewish temples during the first millennium BC, where boys with unbroken voices sang together with men (Brown, Sadie & Tyrell, 1980, p. 342). The earliest form of song schools in England can be traced back to AD 597 (Mould, 2007, p. 25), when Bede describes St. Augustine as having arrived in England from Rome with monks to establish a church in Canterbury. At the same time he also established a school which has become known as the King’s School, Canterbury. More choirs using boys’ voices were subsequently created, because, as Craig Wright emphasizes, there was “*no sound more celestially pure than those*

*emanating from* young choristers.” (Wright, 1989). For instance, St. Paul’s in London (AD 604), Rochester (AD 604), and York Minster (AD 627), saw liturgical singing at the centre of the curriculum for boy choristers (Welch, 2004). There is evidence to show that from the late twelfth to the early fourteen century, nine of England’s seventeen cathedral schools for boy choristers were secular and not bound to monastic life, such as Exeter, Salisbury, Lincoln, Chichester, Lichfield, St. Paul’s London, York, Wells and Hereford (Mould, 2007, p. 25). Since then, the performance of religious choral music employing boys’ voices has gradually become an essential part of the daily worship in cathedrals and major chapels in the UK.

Although during the Anglo-Saxon period music practice was disrupted by Viking invaders (8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century), and later again during the Norman Invasion (1066), during relatively calm periods music practice flourished with more than 1000 monasteries and nunneries established where not only boys but also girls were educated (Mould, 2007). Unlike the present day, parents then saw being a chorister in the cathedral song school as a first step for their sons to go on to a higher education when other sound elementary schooling was not available as “*Almost none of the new schools of the fifteenth century was founded as a school alone*” (Orme, 1973). Being a chorister, it seems, could be a promising stepping-stone on the social ladder as well as an aid to gaining employment in the field of law or government – and an easier career path into the church.

From the fourteenth century, more complex forms of musical polyphony were developed from the fairly straight-forward plainchant. This meant the singers had to be much more highly trained as vocal experts, so only professionally trained boy choristers could attain the sound quality that the composers expected of them. It was a relatively peaceful period, in which musical practice expanded, with a large increase in the number of collegiate foundations and chapels (Mould, 2007), such as Winchester (1340), New College (1379), Eton (1440), King’s College Cambridge (1441), Magdalen College (1478) and Christ Church (known as Cardinal College when it was founded in 1546) (both at Oxford), and these foundations were set up as centres of musical activity as collegiate chantries with educational facilities attached. They aimed to prepare young boy choristers to go on to grammar schools after their voices had broken, with advanced academic achievements alongside their musical expertise. The number of boy choristers had been relatively stable at that time and the “16 boys’ model”, eight boys

on the Decani side and eight boys on the Cantoris side<sup>1</sup> (often with four additional ‘probationers’) – which is still carried on into the present day at New College and Winchester College – later became the standard in major choral foundations (Mould, 2007, p. 46). Meanwhile, the *Eton Choirbook*, which represents the highest level of musical art of the fifteenth century, was assembled in the first years of the sixteenth century.

In successive centuries the choir tradition has survived, despite the Reformation (1509-1547) and the years of the Commonwealth of England, when political considerations affected the patronage which was of vital importance to English musicians in the seventeenth century (Spink, 1992). Choirboys in many monasteries were dismissed, although in cathedrals and chapels there were still boy choristers singing regularly in the daily liturgy. When Henry VIII split with the Church of Rome, the dissolution of the monasteries (1536-1539) closed down many schools and institutions associated with church foundations and the number of choristers consequently dwindled. The whole country only had twenty-seven cathedrals left and as Scholes mentioned (1955): “*Thousands of volumes of music were destroyed or shipped abroad as parchment for bookbinding...in fact, a great musical loss was sustained*” (p. 143). On the other hand, those trained musicians dismissed from monasteries brought sacred choral music into the communities. When they looked for jobs and places to stay, they passed their musical skills onto wider society and enriched the domestic music of Henry VIII’s reign.

Moreover, in Queen Elizabeth’s reign (1538-1603), the use of an organ and ‘curious’ singing were banned; from Archbishop Cranmer’s time, composers were asked to write plain choral progressions instead of counterpoint (Scholes, 1955). Until the Restoration (1660-1714) church music in Britain was still unaccompanied congregational singing of metrical psalms although a great era of organ building was started across the country. By the middle of the seventeenth century (1662) the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England (first compiled in English in 1549 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, under Henry VIII) was accepted after final revisions as the official prayer book of the Church, providing the texts to be sung by the choir, and is still used in church worship today.

---

<sup>1</sup>. *Decani* and *Cantoris* are names of the sides of the Choir. *Decani* sits on the same side of the Church as the Dean, and *Cantoris* sit on the same side of the Church as the Precentor. If the treble part divides then *Decani* usually sing the highest notes, and *Cantoris* the lower notes. (From Durham Cathedral Choir Handbook September 2014)



Until the early nineteenth century, there was no break in the continuity of cathedral services but cathedrals did not seem to have had sufficient singers in the choir and there were often complaints about the poor quality:

*“The men in the choir of St. Paul’s Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and the Chapel Royal were practically the same body...they did their double or triple duty...leaving one service as soon as the anthem was over in order to hurry to another.” (Charlton, 1984)*

To minimise the costs of recruiting boy choristers, St. Paul’s cathedral reduced their number to eight. On one occasion, the organist Sir John Goss got the message that only one tenor and one bass turned out, so he had to say to them: *“Do your best, I will do the rest with the organ.”*(Gant, 2017, p. 288). Salisbury also only had six choristers by 1681. There is no record of the numbers in Chichester cathedral and York Minster in the eighteenth century (Mould, 2007, p. 145). In some cathedrals, the boys’ treble line was replaced by men singing falsetto or by wind instruments. Even the number of adult singers available was uncertain until the service actually began, and cathedral choirs normally had little or no rehearsal time at all. Meanwhile, opera became a popular art form in seventeenth century, originating from Italy and spreading throughout Europe via musical societies. Composers like Purcell wrote many English language operas; this fondness for opera perhaps meant church music was somewhat neglected by famous composers of that time (Scholes, 1955, p. 144).

### **1.1.2 Musical performance, general education and living standards of choristers from the 19th century**

The standard of cathedral music was improved after the middle of the nineteenth century, perhaps as the result of the Oxford Movement (1834), which brought changes in the manner of sung worship and directly affected musical style, requiring church choirs to lead congregations in singing more sections of the services and anthems (Charlton, 1984). In addition, the cheaper price of music copies contributed to the development of English choral music. Vincent Novello’s publishing house started selling cheap-price musical scores in 1846, so introducing a wider range of pieces into the services became possible. Furthermore, records dating back to the beginning of nineteenth century from Salisbury Cathedral showed that Bishop Hamilton (1808-1869) suggested a choir reform, asking that all choristers live together in one house in the Cathedral Close, looked after by a clergyman. Up to then, choristers were living in different

houses around the city. In parallel measures, Samuel Sebastian Wesley too laid out detailed plans to reform cathedral choirs which included:

*“Every choral foundation should provide for at least twelve men, salary £85-150 per annum so that they need not take up further employment”; “the cathedral organist should be a professor of the highest ability and the annual salary should be between £500-800”; “a college should be founded for the training of all types of cathedral musicians”; and “there should be adequate financial resources to cover education of choristers...”(Charlton, 1984, p. 42).*

From an educational perspective, prior to the 19th century there were still very few schools in the country, most of them run by church authorities and providing only secular education. Scholes mentioned: *“During the early part of the nineteenth century, the boy choristers were often very ill educated and ill cared for.”* (Scholes, 1955, p. 144). In those days, choir schools were not actually intended to educate but were there merely to allow a choir to exist, so the reality was that many cathedrals saw their choir/song schools as a functional thing instead of an educational ministry. At Canterbury, the “schooling” of boy choristers caused so many problems that the King’s school refused to admit them. They were taught *“nothing but music”*, and no school teacher was appointed to educate the boys until 1845 (Mould, 2007, p. 141). In Worcester Cathedral, choristers first had their schooling in a room in the Old Deanery; *“this arrangement did not work very well, as they were a disturbing element, having to leave their classes both morning and afternoon for the cathedral services.”* During the nineteenth century the choristers in Worcester Cathedral were educated in King’s School, Worcester instead. Although they missed two hours a day schooling due to singing practice (Newsholme, 1997, p. 5), considering the very poor education choirboys received in those days, James Smith (lay clerks from Easter 1864) wrote: *“It was the cathedrals that offered a young boy his musical training through a choristership and later on apprenticeship to the organist”*. Furthermore, *“they were the sons of tradesmen in the city...many of them did remarkably well in adult life as musicians and in other professions.”* (ibid, p.4)

In 1870, the Elementary Education Act made education compulsory in England and Wales for all children up to the age of twelve (Day, 2014). It influenced the cathedrals to offer their choristers a broader curriculum and improved their general education. Since then the choral service and the condition of the children have been transformed. Choristers’ welfare was gradually improved during the nineteenth century by the efforts of Miss Maria Hackett, a wealthy and enthusiastic lady, later known as *“The Choristers Friend”* (Gedge, 1991). The

reason Miss Hackett promoted such a personal cause was a consequence of her having in 1811 sent her foster son, Wintle, to St. Paul's Cathedral as a chorister. To her surprise she found that the cathedral provided no basic education for the boys and that its only responsibility was to get them to services and rehearsals. Between 1817 and the latter 1870s, Maria Hackett made a tour of all the cathedrals in England and Wales and published her analysis of choristers' education from almost all the choral foundations (Hackett, 1817-1819). For example, she mentioned that:

*'Six Chichester choristers only received one hour of musical instruction three times a week, none attended the cathedral's Prebendal Grammar School and no educational provision other than in singing was made by the chapter'* (Hackett, 1827) – *Chichester Cathedral*, p. 17

She also mentioned that at Ely cathedral, *'singing was made by the chapter for their six choristers but no educational provision beyond that'* (Hackett, 1827, p.25). Influenced by Miss Hackett's long term efforts, the boys in St. Paul had at least an hour's general schooling every day and a nearby accommodation for choristers was later set up. After a sixty years' campaign by Miss Hackett, cathedrals started creating schools to teach choristers other subjects apart from music. In the 1870s choristers were finally granted holidays, as up to then they had sung every day of the year. Miss Hackett's lifelong efforts not only drew public attention to cathedral choristers' general education and welfare but also possibly led to the re-establishment of purpose-built schools for educating them and other children. At the age of eighty-nine, Maria Hackett at last saw a boarding school established for St. Paul's choristers. The choirmaster at the time, John Stainer, was emblematic of the changing fortunes of cathedral music. A former chorister at St. Paul's, he devoted himself to the careful education and training of the choristers and succeeded to make St. Paul's choir school a model for all others in the country (Charlton, 1984).

Singing as a cathedral chorister could still mean a hard life. The ending of daily Matins was the price paid for the proper education of choristers. Even as recently as the 1970s, for example, choristers at Durham had to sing Matins on Tuesday and Thursday mornings and evensong on most days of the week. Matins was at 10am to 11am but weekday Matins were phased out in April 1970 at Durham cathedral (Crosby, 2008, p. 89). Evensong was at 3:45pm, which meant these liturgical demands caused interruptions to their normal education (see appendix 7: *Durham Cathedral choristers' routine in C 20th*). At that time, boy choristers faced two

challenges: the difficulty of fitting education around three daily singing slots, and the uncertainty of where they would continue their education after their voice broke. Aside to this, the tension between the Organist and the Headmaster was often recalled in interviews with those educated in a choir school during 1940's to 1970's. In most Cathedrals, the Organists, although still keeping their title as 'Master of the Choristers', actually had little to do with the general education of the boys. The choristers, on the other hand, were under pressure to take exams to enter the senior school.

The Fisher Education Act of 1918 raised the school leaving age from 12 to 14 and required all schools to be registered and made available to state inspections while the 1944 Education Act established the bipartite system of grammar schools and secondary modern schools. This assisted choir schools as they retained a grammar school education and provided the training ground for professional musicians. For instance, in the Chorister School at Durham, with few exceptions choristers were the only pupils there for centuries until September 1948, when the school accepted eight other boarders and four day boys. After that the student number continued to rise and reached a hundred in September 1955. In 1972 the school leaving age was further raised to sixteen, which also brought a second expansion for many choir schools as that began to enrol day pupils from the 1970s onwards. Meanwhile, 1944 Education Act had the effect on the education of cathedral choristers and the number of services and rehearsals each week that it was reasonable to expect them to attend.

### **1.1.3 Opening of cathedral schools to non-choristers and the introduction of female choristers in the 20th century**

Over the past century, two major developments worth noting occurred within the choir school system: the opening up of attendance to non-choristers and inclusion of girls in the choir. Choristers have gradually become the minority group in the school as choir schools have transformed and pupils who are non-choristers have become the majority. The Chorister School in Durham for example only had 24 boy choristers before 1948, but after that it expanded to accept boys other than choristers and was opened to girls in 1995 (girl choristers were admitted from 2008), and now the school is a co-educational independent school for more than 200 students, about 16 % of whom are choristers. The 1988 Education Reform Act also made considerable changes to the education system, aiming to create a 'market' in education with schools competing with each other for 'customers' (pupils). In 1991 Salisbury became the first

old cathedral foundation in England to admit girl choristers, and nowadays most choirs in the UK (32 out of 46) have boy and girl choristers according to the Choir Schools' Association website. In many chorister schools the two choirs only join together occasionally for special events, concerts or festivals and normally boys and girls sing the daily services separately rather than together. Although in most cathedral choirs boy and girl choristers have the same amount of rehearsal time and do take turns.

## **1.2 Choristers in Britain: a contemporary practice**

To understand this research, it is necessary to know the religious background of the United Kingdom. The Church of England is the main Christian denomination in England and Wales, in terms of numbers. At the highest level, the Church of England is represented by the reigning monarch of the United Kingdom. In the past, religion played a more prominent role in people's identity, but recently, people are less likely to see being Christian as an important component of being British. According to the 2011 UK census, 59.3% of the population (33,243,175 people) identified themselves as Christians (this included not only Anglican but other Christian members) and 25.1% of them claim they have no religion. However, the figure from Natcen, the UK's largest independent social research agency showed in 2014 from its British Social Attitude Survey (1983-2014) that 49% of the population describe themselves as having no belief. It is true that the Church of England has suffered a dramatic loss of its followers, as between 2012 and 2014, the proportion of Britons identifying themselves as Church of England or Anglican dropped from 21% to 17%, a fall of almost 1.7 million people (Daily Mail. 1 June 2015). Another 17% of people described themselves as other Christian and 8% as Roman Catholic, also showing declines.

### **1.2.1 Choristers and the composition of religious belief in the United Kingdom**

From the point of view of choristers, when choristers leave their choir schools, their experience of singing in the cathedral several times a week and sitting through many sermons does not necessarily equate to the taking up of a faith perspective (Murphy, 2015). A similar finding can be seen in Martin Ashley's study (Ashley, 2002b), where he identified that choristers are a social group who share love for music together but do not share a religious faith. There is no requirement for choristers to have experience of Anglican worship or traditions, and those children just need to be comfortable with the ethos of the Cathedral.

In some Church of England foundations such as cathedrals and collegiate chapels, the sung service of Evensong takes place six times a week. On Sunday mornings there is sung Matins following a full sung Eucharist, this tradition of singing in the services to praise God, flourished for hundred years particularly in Anglican communion. A study found that the highest motivating factors for Cathedral attendance were peace and contemplation, worship and music and friendly atmosphere ( Holmes & Kautzer, 2013). Singing in the service enables people to express their emotions more fully because music underlines the meaning of the words and adds a new dimension to them. The existence of choristers plays an important part of this treasured choral tradition and their singing makes people feel more connected to the God in a more united and wholehearted manner because words carry more clearly when they are sung and not said. There are over 80 cathedrals and college choirs throughout Britain where the choral music, especially sung orders of service, play an essential role for people to join in worship, and historically the beauty of boys' treble voice in the choir seems to have been a peculiarly English requirement and sounds so exciting to foreigners (Mould, 2007, p50).

### **1.2.2 Modern Choir Schools in Britain**

There are 46 choir schools attached to cathedrals, churches and collegiate chapels in Great Britain according to the Choir Schools' Association; thirty-nine of which are fee-paying independent schools and five other choir schools are state schools (See the map on next page). For a full list of these choir schools see *Appendix 9: Full list of choir schools in the UK*. The twelve **boarding-only** choir schools are Westminster Abbey Choir School, London; St. Paul's Cathedral School, London; King's College School, Cambridge; The Pilgrims' School, Winchester; The Chorister School, Durham; King's Ely Junior, Ely; St. John's College, Cambridge; Christ Church Cathedral School, Oxford; St. George's School, Windsor; Westminster Cathedral Choir School, London; The Prebendal School, Chichester; and St. Edmund's Junior School, Canterbury.



Figure 1: Choir schools in Britain

Choristers can be awarded scholarships or bursaries, which cover all or part of their fees, and more than £200,000 of government funding supports choristers nationally (ibid). According to the Choir Schools Association publication “*Reaching Out*” (2012), roughly 1700 boys and girls are choristers out of the 25,000 pupils in choir schools. A further thirteen cathedral foundations draw their choristers from local schools. Some schools take children from seven to thirteen; others are junior schools attached to senior schools. The majority of choir schools are Church of England foundations, but a few Roman Catholic, Scottish and Welsh churches in the UK

have choir schools as well. In this research, all the choir schools and ex-choristers referred to in the data are connected with Church of England foundations. Today, Westminster Abbey Choir School is the only English choir school that educates just boy choristers and probationers. The whole school comprises just 30 students, enabling the Abbey to be the only choral foundation to maintain full choral services for the whole octave of Christmas, in a week when everywhere else, choristers are on holiday.

### **1.2.3 The unique life style of a 21st century chorister**

Choristers perform daily to a highly professional standard alongside their adult colleagues, learning to read music naturally. As music is an integral part of worship in British cathedrals and collegiate foundations, choristers are required to fit in with the mature sounds of the adult choir members so they have regular rehearsals with lay clerks and choral scholars and sing services together. It is an unusual dynamic compared to the experience that most children would have. Through working in a team with adults as equals, they gain confidence and are trained to achieve higher music standards in a limited time frame and quickly adapt to the pressure of public performance. Choristers also sing special services such as memorial services, national events and local commemorations, and are sometimes joined by visiting choirs. For instance, choristers at Durham Cathedral perform around 5 times per week for Choral Evensong, Sunday Martins and Eucharist outside of their school hours, which means their routine becomes intensive. Every choir school has their own schedule for choristers. Most places allow them to have one day off from morning rehearsal and Evensong, when the cathedral has adult male voices only. If the choir has both boys and girls as boarders, once a half-term, at the weekends, either the girl choristers or the boy choristers are granted an exeat (permission for absence from the school) to go home after Friday's Evensong during term time. However, Christmas and Easter are the busiest times for all choristers and their singing duties are extremely heavy.

Moreover, a greater proportion of instrument practice time generally helps choristers to learn about and understand music practice much more easily and rapidly. This is important as many cathedrals require their choristers to play two instruments: piano and another orchestral instrument, with a pass at Grade 5 Theory expected by the time the chorister leaves.

Table 3 in Chapter Three (see p.84), for example, shows the music schedule of one particular cathedral choir school where they have both boy and girl choristers. Here choristers spend over



twenty hours on music training every week, including an hour's rehearsal and half hour's instrument practice on four mornings before ordinary school hours. After school, they dedicate a further seven hours to music activities from Monday to Friday including music theory lessons and supervised instrument practice. At the weekend another four hours are spent on rehearsals and singing services in the cathedral. In weeks A, boy choristers sing Wednesday and Friday Evensong, plus Sunday Matins and Eucharist while girl choristers sing Tuesday and Saturday and Sunday Evensongs. In weeks B, boy choristers then sing Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday Evensong while girl choristers sing Evensong on Tuesday, Friday and two services on Sunday mornings.

### ***From probationer to full-chorister***

Each year the choirmaster/director of music chooses new choristers to replace those who leave or whose voices have broken, auditioning new probationers from the many who apply. The process from being selected as a cathedral chorister to actually being made up as a "full chorister" normally takes between one and two years.

Generally, in the audition, choirmasters are looking for children who love to sing, who have a good ear, a voice with potential, and, most importantly, the enthusiasm for being a chorister. David Hill (Organist and Director of Music at Westminster Cathedral from 1982–1987, at Winchester Cathedral from 1987-2002, and at St John's College, Cambridge from 2003-2007) once said in an interview:

*“When looking for new choristers I look for a number of things: a boy who appears to be bright and has a glint in the eye; a boy who is confident at ease with things; a musical boy with a pleasant voice which will develop well. I never look for a finished product, rather for something with which you can work – a voice which will open up and one which has a wide range. A good ear and ability to hear the notes is essential. He really must be able to discriminate between sharpness and flatness. If all these characteristics are present in a potential chorister then he will be an outstanding boy.”*  
(McVicker, 1990)

During the audition, the child will be asked to choose a favourite song (ideally not a nursery rhyme) and to sing back a few notes and a short phrase, clap back a short rhythm and read a passage out loud. Some choir schools ask children sit English and Maths exams to see whether they have reached certain academic standard to join the school with same age pupils.

All children who join the choir will serve a period as ‘Probationer’, meaning the child needs to attend rehearsals and services and sit in the probationer stall (seat). During the services the probationer wears a cassock without surplice because the surplice normally is the mark of being a full Chorister. The probationary period is designed to help the child get used to singing in the choir and develop basic singing and musical skills. Probationers are not required to attend all rehearsals and services and can go home every weekend even when full choristers are requested to be boarders. The probationary period will end when they have passed the relevant tests to become a Chorister. Every individual child develops at his/her own pace, but it usually takes a whole academic year to progress to a full chorister. The Probationers are then admitted into the Choir as a Chorister in a short ceremony.

### ***The boarding system for some of the top choir schools***

In some areas, there is a considerable concern over the recruitment of choristers, both boys and girls, especially in relation to boarding. One of the reasons for this could be parents’ doubts or worries about boarding at such a young age; another concern could be whether the music demands on choristers may negatively influence the balance between academic study and choir commitments.

The twelve independent choir schools around the country retain their boarding tradition and still more than 40% of choristers board for some or all of their time in the choir (Milton, 2010). The figure has not changed over the last few years. On the other hand, 29 other independent choir schools do not require young children to be boarders, which means choristers can go home after their singing duties or arrive earlier in the morning for rehearsals. In the data, three interviewees who were ex-choristers from the choir schools associated with New College, Oxford; St. Nicolas Cathedral, Newcastle, and York Minister were all non-boarders when they sang as full-time choristers, while an ex-chorister at Peterborough Cathedral was a boarder for his first year before becoming a non-boarding chorister as boarding was optional in his day.

So the cathedral choirs’ boarding system does change according to the economic and social environment, with some choir schools facing issues such as the 2007 recession which caused problems for fee-paying families. Particularly, Ripon cathedral choir school, founded in 1961 but closed down in 2012, represents the change of choir schools in modern times, where the accounts showed the school was reputedly losing £40, 000 a month (ibid). The school was

eventually sold to a property developer in an attempt to rid its debts of £600,000. Today both Newcastle Cathedral and Ripon Cathedral no longer have their own choir schools.

### ***Earlier onset of adolescent voice change***

It is obvious that boy choristers now face a growing threat in that their voices are breaking earlier. In the past, boy choristers continued to sing treble until the age of 15 or 16, but now many cathedral choirmasters find that boys' voices are breaking or 'changing' as young as 11 or 12. Often in their last two years (Year 7 and 8), just as all those years of training and experience are coming to fruition, as most boy choristers have mastered many of the musical requirements and become capable to sing solos, their voices go or change. Experts believe this earlier onset of puberty is caused by changes in modern diets; the ex-Dean of Durham Cathedral interestingly said in an interview of the 5th of May 2015:

*“I think there is a kind of sympathetic dynamic at work in groups, especially close knit groups. Women find they menstruate at the same time, not consciously but they just do. I have three daughters and am aware of the rhythms that can converge. It is the same with boys because if in a group when one voice starts going the others can respond sympathetically. There starts an unconscious dynamic at the time when most boys are on the threshold of manhood so it wouldn't surprise me if that was an influence.”*  
(Michael Sadgrove)

The loss of experienced choristers has also put pressure on younger ones. Some choirs have to limit their repertoire and avoid certain pieces of challenging music to cope with the loss of senior choirboys; some choirs are now even recruiting boys from the age of seven. For the boy chorister himself, leaving the choir is like bereavement when he realises that a performance is his last as a treble singer. It is especially frustrating if the boy is not yet at the end of his last academic year as then the boy will have a different routine for the remainder of his time in the choir school.

Nowadays, most choir schools are experienced in handling a chorister whose voice breaks earlier, involving the boy in musical and other performance events that the chorister is no longer able to take part in and keeping him occupied in other ways. Without choir commitments, there are about twenty hours in the week free for other activities. Boys are able to spend more practice time on their instruments and often improve markedly in instrument playing when they leave the choir. Boys are also able to play a greater part in school sports and become fitter as a result. As they are encouraged to continue singing in the mixed school choirs, thus enabling them to

spend more time in the company of girls, sometimes it is an added bonus for the 13-year-old boy. Some ex-choristers appreciate being able to spend more time at home after their voice has broken while for parents it will be lovely to have their son back home more frequently. From a parent's point of view, their child will also have more time to work towards academic exams or Common Entrance (from King's College Choir-Chorister Parents Handbook 2014-2015).

### ***Leaving the choir school at age 13***

School transition is a big challenge for choristers when they reach the end of Year 8 (aged 13). There are huge pressures surrounding choristers at that time to achieve academic progress as they normally have to do Common Entrance exams, obtain a music scholarship or apply for a bursary to move to a higher school. For those choristers who are bright and very capable however, parents cannot always afford the fees for them to continue in independent education, so things may become much harder.

### ***Female choristers***

The introduction of female choristers was a significant change in the male-dominated British choral tradition. To understand more about the effect of the introduction of female choristers, which happened in the late twentieth century, six female choristers have been involved in this study, three of whom sang in one particular cathedral girls' choir from 13 to 18. Perspectives from these participants explain the recruitment of girl choristers, why teenage girls are recruited to sing the upper voices as older choristers when the younger boys' voices break and the boys move out of the choir school.

Bury St. Edmunds (1914) and Leicester (1927) had female choristers at various points; in 1986 Bradford recruited girls to create a mixed choir after a large number of boys left, though this wasn't given much publicity at the time. Since Salisbury Cathedral introduced them into the choir-stalls in 1991, there has been a growing acceptance of girl choristers. Currently 13 choir schools accept girl choristers. Some other cathedrals draw members from a variety of local schools to form the girls' choir. Girls singing the treble line, either as a stand-alone girls' choir or mixed with boys occasionally, is much more common. By the end of this research in early 2018, nearly two-third of cathedrals, minsters and college chapels will have boy and girl choristers of the same age group and that those boy-only choirs will become the minority. In spite of some people still having a strong preference for boys' voice as treble and worry that

mixed choir will become predominantly female (Rainbow, 1997), the introduction of women is seen as a trend within the church. Also choral scholarships were offered to both male and female applicants recently and in 2015, the Church of England consecrated its first female bishop in a ceremony at York Minster. The role of women in the Church of England is thus considered important.

#### **1.2.4 Choristers and their link to society**

In the last twenty years, two important government schemes have played a role in introducing choral music to thousands of children in England: the government's Music and Dance Scheme and the Chorister Outreach Programme.

In 1991, choir schools became part of the Government's Music and Dance Scheme (MDS), and through its financial support over 100 children every year have been given the opportunity to sing in cathedral choirs, irrespective of their family financial circumstances (Choir School Association, 2012).

The Chorister Outreach Programme was part of the UK government's £10 million per year National Singing Programme '*Sing Up*' from 2007 to 2011, which aimed to ensure local primary school children could benefit from a good quality singing experience and foster "*positive singing experiences each week for all children of Primary school age in England*". Its intentions include: to enable "*children to experience high quality singing, both within and without their daily school curriculum, on a daily basis*" and help ensure "*every school has a teacher committed to facilitating high quality singing and vocal work for the whole school*". (Saunders et al., 2012, pp. 11-12).

Under '*Sing Up*' most cathedrals either sent choristers (of a similar age) to run music workshops and give concerts in local primary schools, or invited the children to train and perform with professional singers in concerts in the cathedral. Over 30,000 children in nearly 500 schools throughout the country had the experience of working with cathedral musicians and their team in 2011, and it is accepted that the cathedral outreach programme has successfully improved attitudes towards singing among primary school children and boosted school children's singing development.

The Chorister Outreach Programmes involved 60,000 primary school children and 1000 cathedral choristers (a map taken from the CSA website can be seen as Appendix 1: *CSA Members Outreach Activity 2016*). The aim is to encourage a lifelong love of music starting at a young age through taking part in singing and musicianship games with cathedral choristers together (Welch *et al.*, 2009). The evaluation of the first year of COP (2008-2009) showed that the attitude of local school children towards singing greatly improved through their participation in the COP, which has in turn boosted their singing development (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Children participating were reported to be “*more positive about singing and the school culture more open to the use of singing activities across the curriculum to facilitate children’s learning, concentration and enjoyment of lessons*” (P.88). It also made some parents aware that a certain amount of financial aid is available if their child wanted to learn to sing even if the family could not afford the fees.

Although it was not set up exclusively to provide choristers, the Chorister Outreach Programme has reversed the decline in applications for children wishing to become choristers. For example, there were 20 applications for four places in Truro Cathedral. In the Durham area, funding was given for “*Sing Up*” from 2007 until 2014, and thousands of children from widely differing backgrounds were given the chance to broaden their music experience, with 16 boy and girl applicants accepted as choristers. As Mish Kelly, who was in charge of the chorister outreach programme at Durham Cathedral mentioned:

*“It is with enormous pride that I look back on the number of Outreach singers who have moved up to Choristership. Children whom I have watched over the year focusing not just on the professional job of leading the daily services, but furthermore applying that sense of professionalism to their school work, their sport, and choices in their future lives.”*  
(cited from *Durham Cathedral Outreach Programme September 2014*)

Government funding of the COP and the *Sing Up* programme have ceased but many cathedrals still try to set up different bursary or funds for their potential choristers. The Friends of Cathedral Music established the Diamond Fund for choristers and are aiming to raise £10 million by 2020 (Friends of Cathedral Music, 2016). In the local choir schools, the Chorister Bursary Fund established by the Durham Cathedral Choir Association raised £6000 in 2016 to support chorister families who would not have been able to accept a place for their child in the cathedral choir (DCCA Newsletter, 2016).

Today, English choristers keep alive this unique choral music tradition through their singing, and their voices are admired by people around the world. Although the researcher acknowledges people may have very different feelings when they look back on their years as a chorister, choristers' education is such an exclusive experience for young people, as it opens an opportunity to boys and girls who have the necessary talents regardless of their parents' financial status and social background. Therefore, this study is focusing on ex-choristers' perceptions, positive and negative, of their school experience and music engagement, and how it influenced their subsequent lives.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter is a review of published scholarly literature relating to music education in the UK with particular reference to choristers.

Section One explains what we know about the underlying relationship of music engagement and its potential impact upon children's development based on empirical studies. The evidence and strength of main findings, validity and limitation of studies are discussed. Some advocates have a strong belief that music can play a powerful role in education not only because any skills and attitudes learned through the music experience can promote long-term benefits in terms of health (physical, emotional, cognitive), but also supporting different aspects of intellectual function (such as literacy and numeracy) and fostering social inclusion cohesion amongst diverse groups. Other music educators emphasise the value of music itself, as part of an aesthetic education, and suggest that we should concentrate on finding a way to deliver a systematic music education to all children, as music is constantly present in everyday life. These educators believe that defending music education because 'it helps with other things' is a tactical error.

Section Two gives readers an overview of music provision across the UK; how policy makers and music educators try to enhance musical inclusion for children; what the current challenges of music teaching in schools in Britain are; and how the government is trying to improve matters. However, not only the UK faces challenges regarding music education; it is a worldwide issue. England is a world leader in this area and the number accessing regular weekly instrumental tuition had grown from 438,772 (8.4%) in 2005 to a *projected* figure of over 1.15 million (17.4%) in 2011 (Hallam, Rogers & Creech, 2005), although according to NFER report: Key Data on Music Education Hubs 2013, "*a total of 531,422 state school pupils received at least one term of whole class ensemble tuition and 437,975 of these pupils received this tuition for the first time in 2012/2013*" (NFER, 2013).

As a successful model of good music practice, the choir school in the UK is a shining example of how to deliver high quality music education based on this country's choral tradition. Section Three contains a selection of studies about English choristers' music education, which are the



groundwork of this research project. Their findings will be considered under three sub-headings:

- 1) Effective ways of teaching children to learn music and become proficient within a relatively short period of time.
- 2) Vocal health.
- 3) The problems of boy versus girl choristers.

When we look at state school music education, it is obvious that music is not considered a core subject, is allotted little or no space in the timetable, and as a result receives very low funding. In addition, when funding cuts are being threatened music is one of the first subjects to suffer. A 2011 Department for Education and Department for Culture report (see p. 40) covering music education in the UK in general shows the low standard of achievement in GCSE music in state schools. Three key issues characterised the variability and inconsistency of school-based music education: a) the lack of confidence among ordinary classroom teachers to have anything to do with music; b) students not being encouraged to make sufficient musical progress; and c) that as a result, good music education only reaches a minority of pupils. Fee-paying schools had much better results but even better were those from choir schools, where there is a qualitative difference in the level of music engagement compared with even normal fee paying schools.

## **2.2 Music's underlying impact upon children's potential development**

This section lays out some empirical studies that indicate learning music may actually enhance children's abilities in many domains of learning, including cognitive (academic) and non-cognitive (non-academic) impacts. The goal is to integrate what is known about this area and to provide a substantive conclusion with an honest and dispassionate attitude, to analyse what is the value of musical endeavour and education.

Why do researchers care about the non-musical side-effects of exposure to music? In western society, it is widely known that IQ is predictive of academic performance and a few extra IQ points could make a huge difference for admission to the top schools and universities (Brody & Flor, 1997; Ceci & Williams, 1997; Gottfredson, 1997; Deary *et al.*, 2004). Although it is difficult to assess the relationship between music education and intelligence levels, public interest is focussed on a hypothesis that 'music makes you smarter', which leads to the exploration of potential implications about the role of music in the lives of children. This idea

that music engagement may link to the deepest workings of the human brain (Patel, 2010) or could become a conduit for improvement in other domains, hints at the point that music should be seen as an art form as well as a discipline.

Scholars have noted that there are neuro-anatomical changes in the brains of children who are engaged in making music (Blakemore & Frith, 2000). Research has further indicated significant gains in writing and reading skills when music-enhanced instruction was provided (Standley & Hughes, 1997; Kraus *et al.*, 2014). Although mixed results have been shown about the relationship between mathematics and musical engagement, it seems that childhood music learning can improve mathematics performance (Geoghegan, 1996) and that playing rhythm instruments can especially help students achieve high scores in mathematics tests (Haley, 2001). Furthermore, active engagement with instrument learning also has an impact on visual-spatial intelligence (Bilhartz *et al.*, 1999) and enhances fine motor co-ordination among children ( Schlaug *et al.*, 2005) for children aged 9 to 11 who had an average 4 years instrumental training experience. There are other compelling proofs to support the idea that music learning will contribute to training children's creative thinking and imaginative abilities (Craft, 2002).

Some researchers disagree with the assumption that music instruction can improve children's performance in arithmetic tests (Haywood, 2015; Haywood *et al.*, 2015). Vaughn (Vaughn, 2000) conducted a meta-analysis of studies to examine the link between music and mathematics. There were 357 participants, aged from 3 to 12 years, involved in these studies. The results showed that the inclusion of instruction in standard notation was not associated with better mathematics performance over that of those without instruction. Furthermore, a longitudinal study consisted of 117 Grade 4 children found that three years of individual piano lessons every week did not affect arithmetic performance at all (Costa-Giomi, 2004). A study based on 110 Portuguese students aged 11 to 14 shows that music training has a positive association with academic achievement, but the authors did indicate that the study has its limitations such as not being able to assess the cumulative effect of music training prior to the seventh grade (dos Santos-Luiz, *et al.*, 2016)

Can children get significant benefits from music education or not? Unfortunately for many music educators, some major studies regarding brain development are not persuasive. For

example, the famous “Mozart Effect” indicated by Rauscher *et al* claims that the Mozart piano sonata (K.448) or similar complex music has significant educational implications (Rauscher *et al.*, 1995; Rauscher & Shaw, 1998; Shaw, 2000). It is also further claimed that listening to Mozart’s piano sonata (K.448) will improve spatiotemporal reasoning, which may be relevant to success in subjects such as mathematics and science (Cooper & Mumaw, 1985). However, this famous effect has methodological limitations (Fudin & Lembessis, 2004) as it had been conducted only with adults and yielded equivocal findings. Later studies have directly examined the “Mozart Effect” in children (McKelvie & Low, 2002; Ivanov & Geake, 2003) and found no evidence for the effect in a naturalistic school environment using a sample of 8,100 children aged 10-11 years (Hallam, 2000). Meanwhile, several other researchers have doubted the result of the effect (for example: Steele *et al.*, 1999; Thompson *et al.*, 2001). They discussed the ambiguities associated with researching the effect because various researchers had found Rauscher’s results to be “*difficult to replicate*” (Schellenberg, 2004). According to these issues, the original claims that Mozart’s specific music stimulates or ‘resonates’ with the brain (Leng & Shaw, 1991; Rauscher *et al.*, 1995) could not be reliably demonstrated in children.

Researchers have also explored whether prenatal foetal musical stimulation can influence later individual development (Fifer & Moon, 1989; Jordan-Decarbo & Nelson, 2002; Hallam, 2006). Trehub (2006) supports this idea and summarises much evidence which portrays infants as “*musical connoisseurs*”, whose musical perception in some cases surpasses that of adults. However, such studies have methodological limitations (see example below), and no research has yet succeeded in clearly separating the effects of prenatal stimulation from postnatal effects on musical development. In another study, Lafuente *et al.* (1998) examined babies between 28 and 40 weeks old who were regularly exposed to violin sounds, and their postnatal development was monitored. The results showed that the babies in the experimental group were “*superior in linguistic development and certain cognitive behaviours*”. Parncutt (2006) doubts the reliability of this study and asks, “*Why might violin sounds have such a specific effect, while the author thinks the mother’s voice and other sounds do not have the same effects on the foetus?*” Hence Parncutt believes that the foetus has no way of distinguishing between speech and music. It is apparently not possible to control or eliminate postnatal effects on musical development. Until now, academic researchers have not shown convincing evidence that prenatal foetal acoustic or musical stimulation influences later development.

Scholars have established some very fundamental understandings of how the brain works but we know cognitive transfer is only likely to occur when the skills required are ‘near’. That is, the knowledge and skills learned through music activities may only transfer to other activities if the process involved are similar ( Münte *et al.*, 2003). The type of musical tuition is then important in determining the transfer of outcomes. It depends on what kind of musical training a child has, as some skills through musical practice help the child to adopt quasi-mathematical processes to sub-divide beats and turn rhythmic notation into sound (Vaughn, 2000). This might be by way of an example to explain why children who learnt with rhythm instruments scored high on mathematics test comparing with those who only took piano or singing lessons as mathematics and rhythm share the same nature of recognising numbers, ratios and patterns.

### ***2.2.1 Music engagement and children’s linguistic development***

Speech and music share similar processing systems, because the auditory analysis skills used for music perception closely link to skills in processing the auditory components of speech (Anvari *et al.*, 2002). Evidence is found from empirical studies to prove that music activities can help to promote the development of young children’s auditory perception, phonological memory, and meta-cognitive knowledge, which are three equally important components involved in the enhancement of linguistic abilities (Lamb & Gregory, 1993; Bolduc, 2009).

Active engagement with music sharpens the brain’s early encoding of linguistic sound. From a very young age, children’s brains respond to music; infants as young as eight-and-a-half months old demonstrate sophisticated responses with definite preferences for melodic processing, left ear (right hemisphere) for contour-altered changes and right ear (left hemisphere) for contour-preserved changes (Balaban *et al.*, 1998). Furthermore, Bertoncini *et al.* (1989) found that the hemispheric differences only persist until the ages of 5-7. Before this stage, music could be used to stimulate the preference for left hemispheric processing, but left-right differences are hard to cultivate in adults (Samson *et al.*, 2001; Zatorre & Belin, 2001). On the other hand, strong left ear advantages are evident for music timbre discrimination in 4-day-old neonates; because of the cross-over connections, this indicates preference for right hemispheric processing (Bertoncini *et al.*, 1989). Therefore, timbre discrimination is an important component both of speech and music perception: this commonality suggests that music and speech might be closely related in early development. If this is the case, a child’s early years

are a vital period for encouraging left hemispheric development through musical stimulation in order to set the stage for the child's maximum linguistic success later in life.

The evidence further suggests engagement with music plays a major role in developing children's perceptual processing systems which in turn facilitate the encoding and identification of speech sounds and patterns (Magne, Schön & Besson, 2006; Tallal & Gaab, 2006; Patel & Iverson, 2007), and also has significant influence on the cortical processing of linguistic tonal forms (Magne, Schön & Besson, 2006). Children's enjoyment of music and understanding of sounds help them formulate concepts of sounds and music, and contribute to their later pitch accuracy (Wong *et al.*, 2007), researchers found that musicians have earlier brainstem responses to the onset of syllables than non-musicians, and those playing music since the age of five have quicker responses and increased activity of neurons in the brain to both music and speech sounds.

In addition, learning to play an instrument may improve verbal memory. A study published in *Nature* in 1998 tested 60 female college students, 30 among them had at least six years of training with a Western musical instrument before the age of 12 and the other 30 had no instrument training (Chan *et al.*, 1998; see also Ho *et al.*, 2003). The result shows that music instrument training in childhood has long-term positive effects on verbal memory as it enhances the ability to remember words through enlargement of the left cranial temporal regions.

Therefore, music activities can help young children focus on sound and develop auditory discrimination and are valuable for developing every child's linguistic skills which are crucial to their later ability to sound out (to sing) and develop acute aural abilities. More research to investigate the effects of the age at which music training begins, and of the duration of training, will provide more corroborating evidence.

### ***2.2.2 Music engagement and children's social development***

Research literature has highlighted the intensely social activity of music participation (Hargreaves & North, 1997; Macdonald *et al.*, 2002). Several studies that focus on different age groups have increased speculation about the socio-emotional benefits of music and its motivational role, and the findings are significant.

From a young age, music education plays its role in an all-embracing type of education that may facilitate children's development of communication and oral expression, helping them to be more sociable. Clapping, hitting a drum, singing and jumping, imitating the teacher or peers are all excellent ways to adapt to the group environment. For example, a study in Switzerland showed children gain better social adjustment and positive attitude through learning music as part of the curriculum (Spychiger *et al.*, 1993); the study focusing on children from low income families shows improvement in self-esteem through active engagement with music (Costa-Giomi, 1999). Meanwhile, there are many specific activities such as 'song-word' play, which aim to introduce children to others through singing or putting their own words to the melody when they start a day's music session. They can also be encouraged to express their feelings and understanding for new subjects by improvising. Through such forms of musical experiences, children can be motivated to make connections with others and develop their social skills from the beginning of group life.

An in-depth study from Italy, for example, suggests that there can be long term, sustained benefits of choral activity on children's sense of social inclusion (Welch *et al.*, 2009) and there is similar evidence in the UK National Singing Programme '*Sing Up*' data which linked singing development to children's sense of being socially included (Himonides, *et al.*, 2011).

In the United States, Broh analysed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 to test the effect of participation in extracurricular activities on high school achievement. The result shows music activities provide opportunity to increase social interaction between the parents and the children; parents who have children involved in music activities are more likely to engage in educationally related interactions with other parents and the school (Broh, 2002). Recent studies have looked in particular at the educational outcomes gained by at-risk pupils through music engagement, for example, Kraus *et al* (2014) found that giving children regular group music lessons for five or more hours a week prevented an expected decline in reading skills for the poorer children.

In the UK, Pitts (2007) investigated a school musical, a long tradition in Britain's secondary schools. This experience has left deep memories for generations of those who were involved in this extra-curricular music activity. By focusing on young people's individual motivation and experience of being part of the show, the study highlighted the effects on friendship brought

about by spending time together for intensive rehearsals, and revealed that participation potentially increased pupils' confidence as they acquired or demonstrated certain musical skills, and made them proud to perform in front of others. It brought out the potential for those participants to become committed to a music group thereafter. Ashley (2002a), who studied choir boys aged 10 –14 singing in a major city centre parish church concluded that the boys really appreciated and enjoyed the music and exhibited many features of personal well-being, including the ability to balance the demands of present-day youth culture with those of their new environment.

Another study is based on self-reports from university students who engaged in ensemble music making but majored in subjects other than music. Participants mentioned they gained musical skills and broadened their musical tastes through making music in a group setting. In particular, the enjoyment of the social life was one of the highlights as it gave them the chance to interact with like-minded people in a friendly and relaxing environment (Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007).

Thus, we can see strong evidence here that music-making has positive effects on the individual's personal and social development by promoting friendships with like-minded people, helping to acquire social skills, encouraging social networking and instilling a sense of belonging (Brown, 1985; Clift & Morrison, 2011). Not many empirical studies however have attempted to deal with the ways in which music engagement might be useful in promoting children's social development. This current study tries to develop this aspect.

Overall, the impact of participation in music activities on intellectual development and academic attainment have received more attention than the impact on social and personal development. Most studies can only suggest links between music and outcomes, but cannot determine the direction of causation. For example, although scholars believe there are changes in the brain of musically trained children, there is no evidence to prove that changes translate to improvements in academic attainment (Schlaug *et al.*, 2005; Olson, 2010).

However, it appears that the most frequent benefits for children from engagement with musical activities were related to language development and social development. In addition, participating in musical groups helps children to develop self-identity and awareness of others,

which produce other educational benefits such as confidence, self-esteem, persistence, and further increases motivation to get involved in music activities in the long term.



## **2.3 An overview of music provision across the UK - policy development**

This section queries 21<sup>st</sup> century policy development related to music education in the UK. There was a clear government message relating back to the beginning of this century that “every child should receive knowledge based on strong cultural education and should have the opportunity to learn to play and sing” (Department for Education & Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2011). The reality however shows this initiation has been continually ignored or unsuccessfully delivered in many schools. The QCA<sup>2</sup> data shows that in 2004/2005, only 5% of states primary schools in the UK offered music as a main subject, while a year later this had dropped to 3% (QCA, 2005). Ofsted<sup>3</sup>'s evaluation report for music education in schools from 2005 to 2008 (Ofsted, 2009) indicated that students do not always make as much musical progress as they could and emphasized that “simply offering opportunities to all did not necessarily mean that provision included every pupil sufficiently”. By 2012 little seemed to have changed in terms of the quality of music teaching in schools as a following Ofsted report, based on evidence from inspections of 90 primary and 90 secondary schools in England from 2008 to 2011 (Ofsted, 2012), judged that there was not enough actual playing of instruments in music lessons since too many lessons were made up of verbal communication and non-musical activities. The same report further highlighted the importance of ensuring that schools prioritised giving every student opportunities for developing aural awareness and musical understanding. To achieve this goal “music education hubs” were developed as a framework to provide support for school leaders and generalist teachers to understand more about musical learning and what good progress in music should be (Ofsted, 2013). In summary, although the UK government has a continuous supportive attitude on music education and puts considerable investment on improving school music education, the reality has not significantly changed due to various challenges. The following paragraphs will discuss various practical issues that schools now are facing based on recent Ofsted reports, including further discussion of the impact of music education hubs.

### **2.3.1 Challenges in state schools' music education**

The disappointing reality of current school-based music education, at both primary and secondary levels, shows the disjunction between policy and practice. From the literature, three

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<sup>2</sup>. QCA: Qualification and Curriculum Authority

<sup>3</sup>. Ofsted: Office for Standards in Education

key challenges stand out in terms of characterising the variability and inconsistency of school-based music education: a) the lack of confidence among ordinary classroom teachers to have anything to do with music; b) students not being encouraged to make sufficient musical progress; and c) that as a result, good music education only reaches a minority of pupils.

#### ***a) Teachers - Lack of confidence***

Successive Ofsted reports and academic studies on school music education mentioned the low level of confidence of primary classroom teachers (only 8% in the online survey reported feeling confident about teaching music), which the studies stated had been a major barrier to the delivery of a sound music education in schools (Lamont *et al.*, 2003; Ofsted, 2005). Music remains a low priority subject in the national curriculum and has been designated one of the most difficult foundation subjects to cover at KS1 and KS2 (QCA, 2005). In England, unfortunately, teachers increasingly lack the confidence to teach music, in comparison with teaching other subjects in general (Hallam. *et. al.*, 2009). A teacher's confidence can however determine the quality and frequency of music taught in the classroom (Bresler, 1993a; Gifford, 1993; Byo, 2000; Russell-Bowie, 2002). It also has been proved that the successful translation of theory into real practice depends on the skills, knowledge and confidence of the teacher (Temmerman, 1991; Hallam *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the study mentioned that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, "*it is unrealistic to expect the generalist primary teacher to manage the complexity and volume of the entire curriculum*" (Hallam. *et al.*, 2009). Teachers' days are already overloaded with higher standards and more exams, and there is no place for what are considered "non-core" subjects. The experience from the USA seems to show that music is not treated seriously in schools and generalist teachers cannot always handle it. Bresler (1993) claims that by then it had already become simply a vehicle for entertainment and supporting school productions and school traditions, but, as Bresler's final sentence says, "as long as the primacy of music in human knowledge remains unrecognised, music instruction is likely to remain as it is".

#### ***b) Students - Lack of musical progress***

The second challenge in school music education refers to students not making musical progress, especially during Years 5 and 6 and Key Stage 3. The 2009 Ofsted report emphasises that many classroom teachers of music lacked understanding of 'what making musical progress looks like' (Ofsted, 2009). The 1999 QCA set up level descriptions to show musical progression in

performing, composing, appraising and listening (QCA, 1999). It explained that an ideal music progression should include “progression in demand” (vertical progression), “progression in range” (horizontal progression) and “progression in quality” (progression in depth). The “progression in demand” is a process whereby the student moves from level to level and this type of progression is cumulative as learning in each level underpins learning in all subsequent levels; “progression in range” requires the pupil to demonstrate learning within and across a variety of musical genres, styles and tradition; and the “progression in quality” should demonstrate how the student increases confidence, ownership and independence through music engagement (QCA, 1999). However, teachers seem not to understand what is required to complete musical progression in practice (as demonstrated in Ofsted reports), and, as exemplified by teaching pupils to sing simple songs in reception before moving to teach them different vocal parts in Year 6 (Todd, 2012), teachers often demonstrated difficulty in knowing how to promote breadth of study (the range) against depth of study (developing quality) and a deepened musical understanding. Similarly, being able to pass musical instrument grade exams does not necessarily relate to “progression in quality” as “progression in quality” suggest a musical understanding across a wider range of musical styles rather than just improved instrumental skills.

So what does “progression” mean within a wider context? Fautley defines it as “acquiring new or modifying existing knowledge, behaviour or skills” when pertaining to advances in learning (Fautley, 2009). Rogers considers that the answer to ‘what is musical progress?’ depends on ‘what you mean by musical progress’, as skills are only a means to a higher end. Teachers need to recognise that practical skills and knowledge about music are a tool in order to lead to progress in understanding and musicality (Rogers, 2009). Todd defined music progression as “a child’s development of their interrelated musical understanding, knowledge and skills through the integrated areas of performing, composing, listening and appraising, on their musical journey to become a well-rounded musician” (Todd, 2012). She pointed out that every teacher has their unique journey to explore their musical understanding and there is no particular one way to teach which can ensure progression for the students, however the overall aim of making musical progression is to make sure children get a holistic education in school. Todd’s study also mentioned that in many cases, children are experiencing lots of different music in school but without them being challenged: this is opposed to acquiring musical knowledge and not the way a child can become musically developed.

Correspondingly, Darren Henley (Department for Education, 2011), the former journalist and the Managing Director of Classic FM (UK) who undertook an independent review titled “Music Education in England” recommended that clear progression routes be made available to children who play a musical instrument by taking lessons inside of school. As pupils have to be equipped with appropriate music skills to climb from the base to the peak of the pyramid, so more focus needs to be applied to helping children to make the journey. Thus, how to facilitate the musical progress of those children who show an aptitude for instruments or vocal performance should become the central concern regarding the teaching of music in schools. Talking about musical progression does not mean taking the risk of narrowly focusing music education on those skills-based elements that can be easily measured such as music grades exams, as assessment can be dangerous when it accounts only for standardized measures, but instead, broadening children’s notions of what it means to be musical should be an important tenet of musical progress. Todd believes that without an integrated understanding of “What is it to be musical?”, teachers cannot help pupils to achieve a holistic progression and improve their curriculum delivery (Todd, 2012).

***c) Music education only reaches a minority of children***

The third challenge is that good music education only reaches a minority of children. Education based primarily on exams not only reduces the depth of instruction in certain subjects but it also narrows the curriculum so that non-tested disciplines receive less attention during the school day - subjects like physical education, music, and drama. In the review published in 2011, Henley, who had already pointed out many children in England do not receive an adequate music education, recommended offering every child at Key Stage 2 the opportunity to learn an instrument through whole-class ensemble teaching for an academic year at least and this should be given for all school children based on weekly tuition (DfE, 2011, P.11). Henley further suggested that the provision of music education should remain a statutory requirement as part of the National Curriculum and should also be included as a subject in the English Baccalaureate, otherwise it will run the risk of being devalued. Although teachers sometimes acknowledge that music is enjoyable and recognize potential cognitive and social benefits for students, they are still not convinced that enjoyment in music lessons is a judicious use of time because of the continual pressure to raise test scores in schools. So music remains largely outside the core curriculum.

Ofsted also mentioned that the persistently wide variation in the quality of music education in schools was getting wider (Ofsted, 2012). Unfortunately, this inadequacy of music provision occurs again unaddressed in Ofsted's 2013 annual music report. Since music lessons became a statutory entitlement, they have still not been delivered to every child consistently despite the focused interventions of the last two decades. Overall, the gap between the best and the worst music education in schools is getting wider.

### **2.3.2 Recommendations for a better music education**

Various attempts have been made to resolve the above issues but with no great success so far. In England, a study involving 341 trainee primary school teachers showed only around half of them were confident about teaching music; the result also showed that those who were able to play one or more instruments had naturally more confidence to teach music compared to those who cannot play musical instruments (Hallam, *et al.*, 2009). Research linked to this finding concluded the development of classroom teachers' music skills, subject knowledge and confidence was one solution to improving teaching quality and outcomes (Holden & Button, 2006; Hallam & Creech, 2010).

The UK government therefore encourages existing teachers to take Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training courses towards this goal. This solution however relies hugely on the funding and time an individual teacher can invest in extra training outside their intensive teaching hours. It is also determined by the school's management team, as, for many schools, music is given a very low priority when set alongside other demands. As has been mentioned before, it might be unrealistic to expect the generalist primary teacher to manage teaching effectively. Consequently, seeking for a partnership between classroom teachers, specialist teachers, professional musicians and a host of other organisations, becomes one of the options to give young people a good quality music education by bringing together all expertise and getting support from a wider local music structure (Education, 2011). For example, the Arts

Council of England<sup>4</sup>, a government-funded body dedicated to promoting the performing, visual and literary arts in England, developed in 2013 a qualification (The Level 4 Certificate for Music Educators<sup>5</sup>) to encourage music educators such as instrumental/vocal teachers, early year/primary teachers, professional musicians who undertake education work, and community musicians to develop new skills and a greater understanding of music education, so as to encourage better practice in schools.

The second solution is to have specialist teachers to teach music in school with the generalist teacher (Plummeridge, 1991; Askew, 1993) or to have advisory teachers who work across a range of schools to providing support to the classroom teachers (Hinson *et al.*, 1989). Back in 2000, the Secretary of State for Education and Skills announced that “*over time, all pupils in primary schools who wish to, will have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument*”. Thus, the Wider Opportunities programme, introduced into all schools in England in 2002, delivered part of the music curriculum through whole-class instrumental lessons and provided instrumental teachers to pupils at Key Stage 2 (age 7-11). The evaluation report produced at the end of the first year showed pupils benefited from having specialist instrumental tutors and their acquisition and development of musical and technical skills were generally improved (Ofsted, 2004).

There are however some side-effects of relying on specialist teachers. First, specialist teachers cannot integrate music lessons into the wider curriculum of every class they teach; and in some cases, staff and pupils were confused over the main purpose of the music session as it was not clear to them whether pupils were supposed to improve singing skills, instrumental technique or notation reading (Ofsted, 2004). The specialist teacher also has less knowledge of individual child than the classroom teacher (Mills, 1998), therefore children still need the presence of their generalist teacher to make them feel more secure. The financial cost of hiring specialist music educators is also of primary concern to schools when faced with their limited funding. In general, however, classroom teachers favour this collaborative work system with specialist teachers (Beauchamp, 1997) and evidence showed it could be effective (Gamble, 1998; Ofsted,

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<sup>4</sup>. Art Council England: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk>.

<sup>5</sup>. The Level 4 Certificate for Music Educators: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/music-education/music-education-programmes>.

2004) to improve the music teaching in schools. For example, Colley (1991) found that specialist teaching provided a high standard of subject knowledge, and mostly had a positive impact on developing generalist teachers' skills through working together.

The third option is to have music partnerships, such as Music Education Hubs, be involved in school music teaching. The music partnership between “classroom teacher, specialist teachers, professional performers and a host of other organisations, including those from the arts, charity and voluntary sectors” was emphasized in Ofsted’s 2012 music report. The UK government believes that music partnerships play a considerable role in providing opportunities and setting high standard music education for state school pupils, which enables them to access musical settings such as county youth orchestras, bands, choirs, local Saturday morning music schools, classes at conservatories, and holiday courses where pupils can have individual instrumental and vocal tuition or allow classes to participate in whole-class ensemble programmes (Ofsted, 2012). This report stated that music partnerships such as Hubs did set high standards in school music teaching and provided more music opportunities to pupils but often however could not play a sufficient role to secure talented children gain long lasting improvements through school music provision as many schools failed to ensure that all pupils understood common musical features such as notation, time signatures, scales chords and key signature. Also many primary school leaders consider that without a good reason, pupils are not ready for such learning involving musical theory and believe students would not enjoy it. Particularly, when students moved to Key Stage 3, their music learning was disjointed and superficial, with classical music rarely introduced to pupils. By Key Stages 4 and 5, music had become “a specialized activity for a small minority” (Ofsted, 2013). The history and impact of Music Education Hubs is next explored in more detail.

### **Music Education Hubs (MEHs)**

Music Education Hubs were established in 2012, in response to the government’s 2011 “*A National Plan for Music Education*” (NPME), published after Henley’s “*Music Education in England*” review but in the same year (Department for Education, 2011). The creation of MEHs are central to the plan. Music Education Hubs are groups of organisations working together to deliver music education in their areas. Across the UK, Music Education Hubs provide a variety of services in schools and specialist centres, including instrumental tuition, a wide range of ensembles, holiday courses, specialist projects (like the chorister outreach programme

mentioned in the *Introduction*) and curriculum support (Department for Education and Department for Culture, Media and Sports, 2011). The NPME refers to “*schools, local authority music services, Art Council England client organisations and other recognized delivery organisations to work together to create hubs in each local authority area*”, and each hub receiving funding from central government to deliver music education in each area and aims to give young people from any background opportunities to engage with music activities beyond school boundaries. Comparing the MEHs with the old music service system, the government report published in November 2013 unfortunately found little change (Ofsted, 2013).

Before this creation, the UK government traditionally funded shared music services through local authorities. The NPME provides funding through a different route, namely Music Hubs, where the hubs are selected through a bidding process and are “federations of local organisations with an interest in music education” (details for music hubs can be seen on the Arts Council England website). £171 million has been allocated to music hubs from 2012 to 2015 to improve state school pupils’ music education<sup>6</sup>; and most recently, the total amount of hub funding from Department for Education in 2016/17 is £75 million.

Since 2013, the Arts Council England has appointed the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) to provide independent analysis of MEHs’ annual performances. Within the hubs’ first year, the hubs’ inspectors visited 22 out of the 31 schools and found little different to that provided by the former local authority music services. It concluded several difficulties in practice, the lack of understanding of music as a subject and low expectations in music among the schools’ senior leaders, which have often caused discontinuity of children’s music learning. The general image was that schools’ senior leaders were unable to challenge their own staff or visiting staff members from MEHs to introduce improvements, since local authority services historically saw schools as mere ‘customers’, and the “‘*customers*’ were frequently not expert enough to know what constitutes high-quality music teaching, or demand what was needed” (Ofsted, 2013). As a result of this attitude, any improvements were unlikely to have any lasting impression.

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<sup>6</sup> See the Arts Council England website: [www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/our-investment/funding-programmes/music-education-hubs/](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/our-investment/funding-programmes/music-education-hubs/).



So far, in relation to the amount and range of provision on offer to state school pupils, Hubs have demonstrated a steady increase in their second year of operation. The 2013 MEHs report showed that Music Hubs provided more chances to pupils to play instruments and sing both in class and through ensembles and choir, and Key Stage 2 students show the most benefit (Arts Council England, 2014). MEHs' 2014 report showed that 83.4% of the state-funded schools have provided whole class ensemble teaching to over half a million pupils in 2013/2014 across the country; music instrument teaching in school has reached 39.7 % pupils in Year 4 and 15.3% of pupils in Year 1-6. On the other hand, the report also mentioned children often drop out of the ensemble playing when they make the transition from primary to secondary school, and 70.3% (almost three-quarters) of pupils are performing at 'entry level' (Sharp, 2015). Hubs are facing challenges such as how to encourage more boys to take part in school music ensembles. Most importantly, quantity does not necessarily mean quality, and Hubs need to make sure participants become more proficient players as they get older, and not just stay at "beginners" level but make evident progress.

Nevertheless, despite the poor picture presented by UK government reports about school music education, we can still see 65% of pupils in independent schools and 62% of students from grammar schools achieved A\* or A in GCSE music, compared with 26% in maintained mainstream schools (Department for Education and Department for Culture, 2011), which means a broad and balanced curriculum including artistic, sporting and cultural opportunities has reached some young people. The government is working on a broad music workforce continuously by encouraging professionals such as peripatetic music teachers, who are based outside school boundaries, to take up teaching opportunities. From 2012, the Teaching Agency developed new primary music ITT (Initial Teacher Training) modules to boost new teachers' confidence and skill in teaching music, aiming to enable them to network and get support from developing MEHs. These modules are optional and designed to be taken toward the end of ITT courses when many primary trainee teachers know the location of their first job and whether they would need to teach music themselves. The new ITT modules include advice and exposure to new teaching technology that can potentially contribute to excellence in music teaching in the future (Department for Education and Department for Culture, 2011).

When we step back to see the whole image, the UK still produces some good musicians in different music genres and is particularly successful in rock, pop and dance music, while the

UK music industry accounted for 17.1% of the global music market. The Beatles, Rolling Stones and Adele still proudly dominate sales worldwide. It shows the achievement of the UK's music education. Furthermore, there is some good and outstanding practice up and down the country, such as the choir schools' model in the UK. At the centre of a chorister's life are the immediate surroundings and the daily routine as they sing a hugely varied repertoire in inspiring architectural and liturgical settings. It is important to remember that choir schools in the UK are not specialist music schools, even though choristers spend a lot of time on music – singing, instrumental work and music theory; they also follow the normal academic curriculum, as well as playing sport. This makes for a busy life for the child but stimulates it to do well not only in music but in all the other subjects. What the choral foundation can offer to the wider society is potentially fulfilling an important function in promoting singing for children in schools. The Outreach Project mentioned in Chapter 1 is a good example of a recent development. The partnership between choir schools and their local primary schools forms an aspiration to same-age pupils. It can be an encouraging initiative in musical education, as the choral foundation provides a possible pathway to musical success and fulfilment --- not the only path, but a good one.

## **2.4 Studies focusing on English cathedral choristers**

Studies about English cathedral choristers have been conducted through observing choristers in choir school settings (e.g., Barrett & Mills, 2009), analysing choristers' voice development (e.g., Williams, 2010) and change through puberty (e.g., Ashley, 2013), and comparing the differences between boy and girl choristers' singing voices according to audiences' perceptions (e.g., Howard & Welch, 2002). So far, researchers have explored elements that contribute to developing musical expertise of young choristers, tested various aspects relating to choristers' vocal health and vocal behaviour, and debated whether having girl choristers is a threat to the male-only choral tradition. Relevant studies are discussed below.

### **2.4.1 Development of choristers' musical expertise**

English cathedral choristers' lives are strongly linked to ritual practice, especially in Anglican churches. They are children who are 'employed' in the services and religious and cultural practices through contributing their voices to daily sacred choral music. Researchers are wondering how music learning and development occurs in this unique setting in the 21st century, and what individual, social and/or cultural conditions possibly support the development of young choristers' expert performance.

Margaret Barrett and Janet Mills published a longitudinal narrative case study by employing a dual observation (which means two researchers exploring the same issue through individual description and analysis of their own experience of that situation and afterwards combining their observations to form one study) approach to sum up their first day impressions of choristers' life in a Oxbridge cathedral choir school (Barrett & Mills, 2009). The aim of this paper was to seek a 'plausible, credible and believable' narrative through analyses of the field-notes recorded by both authors in order to enhance the understanding of music teaching and learning process in an English cathedral choir school. Barrett had extensive experience as a teacher-educator and researcher working in Australia, while Mills had worked as one of the Her Majesty's Inspectors and had expertise in evaluating teaching in terms of its impact on learning. Barrett paid more attention to the musical elements in the rehearsal while Mills was more concerned about whether one should give some verbal instructions to young choristers (e.g. comments on posture and to discourage yawning) instead of letting them follow a 'wordless' routine. Their different ways of describing what they had seen give us an example of how the life experiences of each individual researcher can shape data generation and analysis

as it reflects particular historical, social and cultural beliefs and values from an individual's life experiences (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005). However Barrett and Mills' study does not give readers the whole image of how the boy choristers obtain their musical expertise in the choir school but focuses primarily on exploring the methodological possibilities of dual observation. Its importance for this current study lies in the field-notes from the two authors, made during morning rehearsals, which allow readers to gain an in-depth understanding of how those young boys start their daily singing routine and how demanding a chorister's life is and the first step of the study mentioned below.

Barrett (2011) continued with her research, focusing on boy choristers' education in the same choir school and investigating how they manage such a highly demanding musical life. The project included interviews with 20 boy choristers aged from 8 to 13 years old and another 10 boys who were not choristers but who were also aged 8-13 and educated in the same school. Participants also included the school music teacher, the boarding house matron, the headmaster, cathedral staff such as the organist and the deputy organist, two organ scholars, eight choristers' parents and several ex-choristers who attended the same choir school between 1936 and 1996.

The main finding of this study shows that the environmental condition such as '*early exposure/instruction*' and '*strong family support*' are key elements in the development of a chorister's musical expertise. For example, the research noticed that youngsters were selected through auditions that not only tested a child's musical potential but also looked for the social skills and capacity for 'self-sufficiency'. These environmental conditions combine with individual drive, focus, peer mentoring and structured practice to be essential for a productive learning experience. In addition, choristers' long 'working' hours in the services and the boarding system helped them to maintain the volume of practice. Most importantly, Barrett recognised that the role of 'practice' in a highly structured timetable is important, providing the means by which the choir achieves the level of 'excellent', to which many adult choirs '*could only aspire*' (2011, p. 268).

'Deliberate practice' is one of the characteristic features of choristers' musical training. Ericsson believed that the key strategy in developing expertise is to have a critical and monitored practice supervised by a coach or mentor (Ericsson, 2007) who makes the learning more effective. Having focused goals and opportunities for repetition also can help the learner to achieve their

desired level of proficiency (Ericsson, 2005). When these factors are related to cathedral choristers' learning experience, the chorister's 'practice' has been described as a 'deliberate practice with clear focus' in Barrett's study (2011). She further explained that choristers' daily practice has to be very specific as they sing so many different kinds of music according to the need of the secular performance. Besides, they actually do not have sufficient time to go through every single piece from beginning to end according to the observation. Barrett also found that the choirmaster always highlights the difficult bits and focuses on them first, which is a characteristic feature of their training – an intentional, strategic practice. This focus is important to improving the skills choristers have and extending the reach and range of their skills by focusing on key points of the work (Barrett, 2011, p. 278).

*'Peer mentoring and modelling'* is another strategy of choristers' learning. Peer mentoring means that the structure of the choir makes older choristers match with young choristers who they are expected to assist. Barrett explained that "peer mentoring" in cathedral choirs is in particular represented by the seating arrangement for choristers and concluded that the physical places/locations of individual chorister within the choir provides effective learning opportunities for the less experienced probationers/singers as they are strategically positioned next to seniors:

*"An eight year-old new boy would be placed next to a more experienced older boy. The older boy would point to the page, or run his finger under a line as he sang, glancing sideways to check that the young boy was following the music."* (Barrett, 2011, p. 267)

Barrett also explained that "Modelling" in cathedral choirs means those choristers are exposed to a range of models of musical practice from the beginning. For example, although probationers are not allowed to sing in services before they are officially 'made up' as a full chorister, every weekday they sit through two or three services and are exposed to the singing of more experienced choristers who demonstrate the routines of the choir in practice and service to them (Barrett, 2011). The experienced choristers demonstrate models of vocal production, music reading and interpretation and performance practice: *"the younger choristers always learn from the older ones, that is the way it works in that team set-up. So the older ones setting a good example is really important."* (ibid). Additional music models for choristers also include back row adult male singers who work five days a week with choristers, and orchestral musicians who perform with choristers in occasional concerts. More evidence can be seen in

recently published Durham Cathedral Choir Association News (2015-2016), as Abbe Rochford - the girl Head Chorister (2015-2016) in Durham Cathedral choir said:

*“The example that the senior choristers gave to me, made me want to do the same. The standards we uphold in the choir are of great important, and it’s up to the senior choristers to enforce them, this is mainly by example”.* (DCCA News 2015-2016, p.8)

Also the choirmaster at Durham Cathedral-James Lancelot wrote:

*“Each generation of singers in the choir learns from its seniors. The younger Choristers learn from the older choristers, the younger men in the back rows learn from the older. So it has been for centuries.”* (DCCA News 2015-2016, p.26)

These all show to us how choristers learn by osmosis for people with great expertise in a group environment.

Most significantly, Barrett’s study explored the dimensions of music practice in that choir school as strong evidence contributing to the development of a chorister’s musical expertise. In the choir school where Barrett carried out her study, boy choristers sang more than 14 hours every week including four services a week, five morning rehearsals and rehearsals before the actual services. Thus choristers spent on average 14 hours on singing for 35 weeks a year, so if they stay in the choir school for 5 years, then they will have spent 2,450 hours singing choral music during that time (Barrett, 2011).

In summary, the above explanation from Barrett’s study gives readers a vivid image of choristers’ life and reflects on how expertise is developed in the choir school setting. On the other hand, those who have no experience of choral singing, let alone choir schools, may imagine that such intensive singing duties would place choristers under high levels of vocal and emotional stress, and wonder what effect all this sheer volume of vocal usage can possibly have on vocal function and vocal health.

#### **2.4.2 Choristers’ vocal health and some challenges**

There is one study focusing on vocal pedagogy within the English cathedral choir setting by Williams, Welch and Howard (Williams *et al.*, 2005). Williams, an experienced voice coach working with boy choristers in major cathedrals in London, found the average age at which the voice started to change to be 12+ (Williams, 2007). This seems consistent with Cooksey’s

finding (based on American data) that many boys have a diminishing singing range between the age of 12.5 and 13.5 years (Cooksey, 1977).

Williams later conducted a detailed study (Williams, 2010) in a London cathedral on the connections between school environment, vocal activity, and the vocal health of choristers as part of her PhD study. The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of the intense schedule (rehearsal and performing) in relation to the boy choristers' vocal health and future development. At one point in this study, she says:

*“Significant differences have been noted between the vocal health of the boys in the chorister group and the non-choristers; the boarding choristers, although having the highest vocal loading, have the lowest incidence of voice disorder. This would in itself suggest that either the voice is being athletically conditioned to support such activity, or that the chorister group employs some self-regulation with regard to overusing the voice.” (Williams, 2010, p. 2)*

The interesting phrase “*athletically conditioned*” indicates cathedral choristers have been trained in the same way as professional sports people to cope with and overcome the stresses and strains of their chosen task.

Williams' study involved 34 boarding choristers (who sang 24 hours per week) and 11 day-pupils (all males) in the same choir school. Boys' speaking and singing voices were recorded every six months over a period of three years. For comparative purposes, 45 other non-choristers also participated in the study in order to figure out other cultural and social influences of peer groups in voice use. Significant differences were found between the vocal health of boys in that choir school who boarded there and sang intensively and those who did not sing. Although boarding choristers had the highest vocal loading (stress inflicted on the vocal apparatus during periods of usage, including speaking or singing), Williams' pointed out that they not only sang for many hours a week but as boarders would often be involved in shouting and loud activities in play, speaking loudly over high levels of background noise (especially during meals) but that they had the lowest incidence of voice disorder. This would suggest that, although they have been exposed to a greater vocal loading, they have learned how to use advanced vocal techniques to reduce the level of vocal damage. The study enables us to understand the effects of English choristers' vocal training and showed that choristers with “unhealthy” speaking voices had “healthier” singing voices, suggesting that they employed technical strategies in their singing to overcome *dysphonia*, a general term referring to any

unusual or unhealthy vocal behaviour ('hoarseness' is a more common term, according to Williams).

However, the earlier onset of puberty has been described as a threat to the English choral tradition in the last two decades. Martin Ashley published several studies related to boy treble singers and voice change through puberty (Ashley, 2006, 2010, 2011). One of his publications particularly relates to English cathedral choristers (Ashley, 2013). It systematically investigated if earlier puberty posed any threat to the English choral tradition, and to what extent boy choristers' earlier onset of puberty has affected this tradition. The sample was collected from five cathedral choirs, one university collegiate chapel choir and one parish church choir, involving 127 boys aged from 9 to 14 years. The findings showed that over 40% of the Year 8 boy choristers (age 12.5-13.5) had achieved complete puberty. It seems quite clear that on average about 1/3 or even 2/3 of the boys in a choir reach 'retirement age' before the end of their final year. However, Ashley believes although nearly all the eleven and twelve year olds in present choirs have begun puberty, it is possible that older boys can keep singing instead of taking a break to rest their voices. Williams (2010) also agrees with this opinion, through her own teaching experience, she saw the possibility for older choir boys, while their speaking voice had descended to the baritone, to keep singing for a while at least, in a strong and musical soprano range, because the larynx and cartilages are still flexible and soft during the period of rapid growth despite total voice change being inevitable (p.279). These deliberations are important, as it indicates it is possible for English boy choristers to sing treble for a period of time after their voices start to change.

Ashley and Mecke (2013) further argued that despite the common misconception that puberty begins when the voice "breaks" (commonly referring to the adolescent male voice change), choir traditions and structures may influence the time at which a boy is considered to have a changed or "broken" voice. Although uncertain as to whether the historical average for onset of boys' voice change will continue to occur earlier, they argued that it is wrong to conceive that the age at which boys are "apt to change their voice" is purely biologically determined, claiming there are also significant social and cultural dimensions that can influence the timing of voice change:

*"Different choral practices clearly have a major impact, and boys' own desires to present their emergent masculine selves through voice render the use of the term 'apt' quite appropriate" (p.14).*



Therefore, the authors suggest that instead of thinking of choirs populated by 9-13 years olds, choirmasters should think of 8-12 as the age range; and that all boys singing in the cathedral choirs should at the age of twelve get regular voice tests to prevent any damage to their vocal health. Meanwhile, simplifying musical repertoires could be one of the long-run solutions (Ashley & Mecke, 2013).

Another factor that may have influenced matters since the 1990's has been the introduction of female vocal teachers, which some of those who work with choirs believe to be the real threat to UK's choral tradition rather than the problem of the earlier development of puberty in singing boys. Girls' voices remain strong and stable during the last year of their choristership and so are more likely to be given the solo parts. Vocal teachers are employed in all choir schools now and they are in charge of training an individual chorister's voice while the choirmaster's job is much more focussed on blending all the voices together and achieving a collective sound result according to the need of the repertoire. Grayston Burgess, a former head chorister at Canterbury, choral scholar at King's Cambridge and head of vocal studies at Malvern College, also a well-known countertenor and conductor, mentioned in the letter to *The Times* newspaper (December 18, 2012)<sup>7</sup>:

*“The reason that boys’ voices are breaking earlier today than in the Baroque period is, in my view, that very few organists and choirmasters have had the remotest connection with vocal training. Consequently they do not know how to foster a young maturing voice into puberty and beyond without cracking. Instead they leave it to nature and rely on the senior choristers to lead by example, which often results in choristers forcing their voices and inevitable ‘burn out’.”*

In addition, Donovan Peters mentioned that most properly trained choristers do not lose their voices suddenly and know how to use ‘pure head-register’ (also called head voice)<sup>8</sup>, and he

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<sup>7</sup>. Accessed from <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/letters/article3633967.ece#> on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016

<sup>8</sup>. According to Brown (2010:15), there are three “voices”: head voice, chest voice and mixed voice, detail on page 15.

believed the real threat to UK's choral tradition is not the problem of earlier puberty in singing boys, but that the vocal teachers do not know how to teach them to sing in a proper way<sup>9</sup>:

*“They are not as well suited to teaching boys as they might be; We are talking of the historical method that has produced so many superlative English trebles in the past, taught by men. Yet the appointment of a female singing teacher for boys, increasingly common today, seems mainly to be based on the idea that she can relate to the pitch of the boy's voice... A man has an advantage - his masculine presence and approach - an aspect particularly important for boys today. He knows boy-psychology first-hand because he has been a boy - probably one who sang. No woman has been a boy.”*

American scholar Charles Brown also mentioned the issue of using upper register and provided valuable insights into upper register that boy choristers habitually use in performance. The upper register singing is also referred to as head voice or light mechanism and its characterized by thinner vocal folds that continue to have full vibration along their entire length (Williams, 2013). Brown explained that the ‘head voice’ was taught and used in boys’ singing as this featured treble voices with a light and flute-like quality, different from falsetto. Falsetto is known to have only partial vibration, which lacks the dynamic range of full fold vibration and is frequently employed by boys especially during mutation before vocal part reassignment (Denison, 2017). Brown further explained a child’s head voice has a richer tone and includes vibrato: by contrast, the falsetto has a thinner tone quality with the absence of vibrato. Moreover, Brown believed older boys within the English cathedral tradition developed an upper or mixed register and were capable of singing pitches above the chest register during voice change and he further agreed that adolescent boys must use head register, not falsetto, because

*“Singing in head register allows boys to sing in choir on the alto or soprano part when the chest register is unstable. When using head register, adolescent males have more than a four-note range, or whatever pitches exist in the chest register that particular day.” (Brown, 2010; p. 29).*

This matches with Williams’ finding that trained professional boy singers continued to sing efficiently in the upper ranges (Williams, 2012). However, only recently has research been carried out to investigate the subject of “registers” among trained cathedral choristers and there

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<sup>9</sup>. Donovan Peters, Boys’ voices-are they really changing earlier? Retrieved from <http://www.ctcc.org.uk/ccsept2013.htm> (November, 25th, 2016)

is no available evidence to suggest that having female voice trainers has a negative effect on the choral tradition or that any damage occurs to this tradition.

People also wonder whether choristers should carry on singing when they are going through voice change. Some studies based in the US support the idea that they should. John Cooksey set up one of the standards for measuring male adolescent transforming voice, his classification becoming a guideline for voice assessment for male voice change from boyhood into adolescence (Cooksey, 1992). Later on he produced his own classification of vocal ranges, tessituras and typical singing experiences of boys during the change process (Cooksey, 2000a, 2000b). Meanwhile, Cooksey was the first scholar to advocate empowering boys to sing through adolescence (Cooksey, 1992), claiming that a boy who has voice training during childhood is likely to have a smoother voice change and normally can reach higher portions of tessitura because his vocal-muscular condition has been enhanced (Cooksey, 2000b). Here ‘tessitura’ refers to the portion of the vocal range in which it is comfortable to sing for a considerable time without getting tired, but if the general line of any song lies outside the tessitura, voice strain results.

According to Freer (Freer, 2016): “*The goal of helping adolescent boys to understand their developing voices and healthfully sing through the period of change was central to John Cooksey’s work*”, as those boys are willing to continue singing and intend to learn techniques when given knowledge about the voice change, its process and its effects. Henry Leck, the founder and artistic director of the Indianapolis Children’s Choir, USA, developed an approach for boys to sing through adolescence called the ‘expanding voice’ method (which has been identified and described in Chapter 3 of Brown’s PhD thesis (Brown, 2010). Brown also suggested that boys should sing through adolescence and he developed the ‘expanding voice’ method for guiding boys to sing effectively; meanwhile Leck has provided insights into the use of head-register singing for developing the chest register in his study (Leck, 2009).

In conclusion, the above studies discussed the effects of English choristers’ vocal training, and proved that trained boy choristers can use their voices naturally and without forcing if they have had a proper training for around five years. Although the boy chorister’s treble voice may not last until the end of his choristership, a proper use of the head voice still can make them remain in the choir longer, so it may be necessary to release the boys from singing the treble line and

not make them sing falsetto as that produces a different tone quality and could be a wrong example for junior choristers. They should be found other roles in the choir or for a few months at least taken off choir duty and allowed to focus on instrumental work, until their voices settle down. Thus, more research is required here to make vocal teachers understand that the ‘head voice’ still exists and can be very useful during the transition into a mature voice. This can facilitate choristers smoothly transferring to the next stage without having to give up singing activities.

### **2.4.3 Pros and cons of employing female choristers**

Cathedral choirs have been having more trouble finding treble voices in the last two decades so are having to turn more and more to girl choristers. The next section will discuss this.

The introduction of girl choristers has been described as a ‘radical revolution’ (Sergeant & Welch, 1997) and has not been without controversy. There is a concern about whether the rise of girl choristers will cause English cathedrals to lose the sound of the boy treble. The Campaign for the Defence of the Traditional Cathedral Choir (see CTCC website), which is against the introduction of female choristers, was formed in 1996 with the aim of championing the ancient tradition of the all-male choir in cathedrals and similar ecclesiastical foundations. They hold that there is a natural affinity between the pre-pubertal boy’s voice and church music and that the introduction of female choristers will reduce opportunities for boys and as a consequence make it harder to recruit adult male singers since the majority of them are ex-choristers. They express their deep concern for the uniqueness of boy choristers’ voices.

Owens and Welch’s (2017) experience, however, was that in the English cathedral setting, girl choristers seem to learn to sight-read more quickly than boys. Boy choristers seem more willing to try new things and get them wrong at first, but if the group is made to feel comfortable with making mistakes, it becomes part of their learning process. In relation to letting girl choristers

enter this male-dominated culture, Sergeant & Welch cite three broad reasons that enabled this change to occur<sup>10</sup>:

First is public awareness of equal opportunities law. They provide numerous cases including a mother who took Salisbury Cathedral to court when her daughter was excluded from its choir<sup>11</sup>. That same year, the Cathedral took on board the very first female choristers in the country. Six years later, again on the grounds of equal opportunities, Emily Edmonstone won her case against Winchester's cathedral choir's ban on her becoming a choir member because of her sex. As a result a girls' choir was established there and the process has continued ever since.

Secondly, the continued recruitment of boys to cathedral choirs is becoming an obvious challenge. For instance, at Durham, despite all the efforts that the cathedral choir has made (such as outreach programmes, sending choristers to sing in local primary schools or churches and 'Be a Chorister' events three times a year), it is still very hard to recruit choristers, especially boys, as a recent letter to all parents from the choirmaster James Lancelot suggested:

*"You will have noticed firstly that the Choristers sing beautifully but secondly that there are not quite enough of them to fill the stalls! Durham is not alone in being in this situation, but if the music of this iconic and holy building is to continue to inspire in the way that I know it does, then we need fresh blood in the choir each and every year."*

The third reason is the cathedral choir's significant workload, which normally involves eight services every week. Seal (Seal, 1991) recognized that the introduction of female choristers (into Salisbury Cathedral) would reduce the boys' vocal workload from four services to three but with the same amount of rehearsal time. Meanwhile, female choristers could be fitted in to sing the Evensong when the boys were not singing (Mondays and Wednesdays). This arrangement could let the boys have 'slightly' less singing time each week. More detailed political debate can be seen in Welch (Welch, 2011, p. 233).

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<sup>10</sup>. Welch, G., Presentation Recording (Sep 10th, 2004), 2nd International Conference on the Acoustic and physiology of singing, Denver, Colorado.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1440939/Genders-singing-from-same-songbook.html>, retrieved November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

#### **2.4.4 Studies about differences in voice quality between boy and girl choristers**

There seem to be problems linked to training girls to sing in cathedrals. Back in the 1990s, Salisbury cathedral organist Richard Seal noted the overwhelming desire among parents to have their daughters recognised as equals and saw it as a moral imperative that the choir stall should be open to both boys and girls. Seal explained his idea in his notes:

“When I boarded the train at Waterloo...I began to address the problem of how on earth girls could be incorporated into this great tradition...By the time I reached Salisbury an hour and a half later, I had formulated a plan” (*Seal, 1991, p. 2*)

So what problems perhaps did Seal come up against while formulating his plan? Despite the traditional view that English boy choristers have a unique vocal timbre and purer sound before their voices change, a number of empirical studies have been published since the late 1990's as to whether English boy choristers produce a ‘uniqueness’ of sound which girls cannot, exploring whether such claims have strong backing evidence (Sergeant & Welch, 1997; Howard *et al.*, 2000).

There are some related anatomical and physiological studies that discuss whether the gender of cathedral choristers matters. As Kent and Vorperian (1995) mentioned, the changes in body height are closely linked to the size of the vocal structure. Titze (1994) reported that there was little or no difference between the speaking voices of girls and boys aged three to ten. Thus Welch infers that boy and girl choristers have very similar voices during the first two years (they join the choir at the age of 8), as the nature of physical anatomy and physiological processes for singing employed by both sexes at that age are similar until the onset of puberty. Then the question is about the final three years of the choristers’ service and whether there is a significant acoustic and perceptible difference in their singing voices.

The first systematic empirical study focussing on listeners’ perception of trained choristers’ voices, was published by Sergeant and Welch in 1997 (Sergeant, 1997). In the experiment, 45 digitally recorded clips from 15 choirs, sung by cathedral boy choirs and girl choirs of a similar musical standard, were played to a panel to see whether the listeners could identify the sex of the singers. The panel consisted of 10 choral specialists (with equal number of males and females), including music teachers, choral directors or cathedral music directors. The result showed those specialists were unable to determine the sex of the choirs and the soloists, thus

suggested there was a possibility for girl choristers to exhibit a boy-like timbre with the same training. After that, another study was published by Howard and his colleagues (Howard *et al.*, 2002) using professional recordings of an English cathedral choir to investigate perceptible voice production differences between boy and girl choristers. Again, results proved that some girl choristers' voices were misidentified as boys' voices (about 60% accuracy) but the researchers concluded that most listeners can hear some difference.

Furthermore, researchers based at Wells Cathedral were interested to see how girl choristers fitted in with the tradition (Howard & Welch, 2002). The acoustic data was collected from girl choristers after the Wells Cathedral set up its girls' choir four years earlier in 1998. The data was generated from recordings of individual voices and groups made annually over a period of three years to pinpoint any developments. At that time, female choristers remained in the choir until the age of fourteen (not 13 years old as boys) so the individual voice data in that study was from older girls (12-14). This study was based on first-hand data instead of commercial recordings, and the aim was to gain insight into any measurable variations within individual singers on a longitudinal basis. The result showed the voice range of three older girl choristers had increased and their individual overall dynamic range was being employed in their later singing, considered by some not a good thing in a choir setting, as the aim of a choir is surely to achieve a collective voice. These studies perhaps concentrate too much on the differences and too little on the blending of voices into a choir. After all, it is most certainly true that the choir is the creation of the choirmaster whether it contains just boys or just girls or a mixture of both. Thus, the choirmaster/educator should understand this change in older girls and provide appropriate teaching to shape the individual as well as the group performance behaviour.

Overall, empirical evidence from the above studies has showed that a training process can enable a physical potential to be shaped towards the production of the desired perceivable model vocal output. That singing training can be used to enable girls from 8 to 14 years of age to sound 'boy-like' in certain pieces from the past which are deemed 'by tradition' to require such a timbre. So it seems possible to shape cathedral girl choristers' vocal timbre to fit an acoustic 'stereotype' demanded by the ethos of English cathedrals.

## 2.5 Summary and Identified Research Needs

Although the literature review seems to confirm that music can have positive effects on many aspects of any child's development in the long term, it should be recognised that, while all humans have the capacity to understand it to a greater or a lesser degree, music is but one part of the universal human vocabulary. Instead of stressing the positive benefits of music engagement, it should be seen as just one of a number of activities that are good for all-round child development. See and Kokotsaki (2016) suggested we should think more broadly about the role of the arts in education --- *“If children enjoy the arts and if that leads to improvements in academic attainment and other affective outcomes, that is a bonus, but it should not be the main purpose for having it in the school curriculum.”*

Unfortunately the music provision in mainstream schools is quite weak in comparison with private schools in the UK. According to the ABRSM (Associated Board of The Royal School of Music) 2006 report, 50% of private school pupils are musical learners compared with only 8.4% of state school pupils (ABRSM, 2006). Choir schools offer music education to 100% of their pupils and show a qualitatively different level of music engagement. Their superior music education, especially for choristers, gives us an example of a high quality of music education based on a historical tradition.

Nowadays choristers receive a first-class academic and musical training, but research exploring choristers' education has tended to focus on the music attainment ignoring other facets such as life skills and academic achievement while the potential challenges are still ignored. This research aims to address this issue.



## **Chapter 3 Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter details the *methodological* approach of this study. It comprises nine sections, each focusing on a distinct aspect.

Section 3.2 shows the reader the research questions, which are strongly related to the aim of the research.

Section 3.3 highlights the research paradigm --- account of my decision-making process. It explains my journey from exploring all the possibilities to finally making the choice of qualitative research strategy by employing the phenomenological lens.

Section 3.4 first explains how the sample was recruited and gives details of the thirty interviewees. It also describes the methods of data collection (semi-structured interviews), plus the procedures for pilot interviews and how interview questions were slightly modified to take into account the different backgrounds of the interviewees.

Section 3.5 further explains the six stages of data analysis, the strategic steps taken to group the themes and the process of data analysis, and how these were further subdivided to become chapters 4 to 6.

In Section 3.6 and 3.7 validity, reliability and ethical issues were considered in order to minimise any methodological bias.

### **3.2 The Research Questions**

The first step was to establish a firm research focus on which to base the study. In order to formulate the research questions a literature review and pre-study were conducted, which highlighted the quality of music education based on the long-standing traditions of UK cathedral choir schools. What was developed from this in-depth investigation became therefore the phenomenon to focus on and from it arose the following questions:

1. What attitudes and perceptions do ex-choristers currently hold about their music training?
2. What influence did choristers' choral training and schooling experience have on non-musical aspects of their academic, social and personal development?
3. What particular challenges did the choristers face, if any?

This research aims to use the experiences of thirty ex-choristers from a wide selection of cathedral choirs to gain a deeper understanding of the educational phenomenon that is Britain's

choir school education, and to explore how musical engagement and the overall school experience can influence individual development. It will hopefully provide an insight into what kind of music skills choristers achieved through such intensive training, whether they developed a life-long interest in music, and how being a chorister might have made a difference to various aspects of their later personal development.

The study is not intended to give a glowing report on English chorister schools, but will also consider the negative aspects of this life as mentioned by several of the interviewees --- for example, the strictness of the school regime and the possible strain on family ties (also discussed in Chapter 6).

### **3.3 Research Paradigm**

The purpose of any scientific enquiry is to offer explanations about different perspectives of physical and social phenomena.

To understand the nature of knowledge, Guba and Lincoln mentioned three basic questions that since earliest times, philosophers have struggled to find answers to:

1. What is there that can be known?
2. What is the relationship between the knower and the known (or the knowable)?
3. How can we gain deeper knowledge of the world around us?

(Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p.83)

Aristotle (384-322 BC) believed that certain explanatory principles could be generated by observation which lead to deductive premises about the nature of certain realities. Much later, in the seventeenth century, Descartes (1596-1650) elaborated his hypothetico-deductive method and laid the foundation for its application in science. However, it was only in the twentieth century that empirical studies employed active experimentation in testing hypotheses (Smith, 2000). The choice of the appropriate methods emerges from the researcher's particular philosophical preconceptions about the nature of social reality. Specifically, issues of ontology and epistemology affect the choice of the most suitable methodology.

*Ontology* is a branch of philosophy concerned with issues of existence or being as such. It seeks to answer Question 1 above - What is there that can be known?

*Epistemology* seeks to answer Question 2 - What is the relationship between the knower and the known (or the knowable)?

*Methodology* is the branch of philosophy (especially of philosophy of science) that sets out to answer Question 3 - How can we gain deeper knowledge of the world around us? It deals with methods, systems, and rules for the conduct of inquiry. For Descartes, for instance, epistemology and ontology were inextricably linked: 'what is accepted as existing depends on how confident we can be about our knowledge of it' (Benton & Craib, 2001, p. 5).

Whichever ontological, epistemological and methodological belief system that any researcher decides to adopt will also guide their decisions as to the most appropriate methods and strategies for their investigation. After all, it is the researcher's methodological standpoint that will determine the choice of methods. As Guba and Lincoln (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.108) put it, 'the methodological question cannot be reduced to a question of methods; methods must be fitted to a predetermined methodology'. In other words, the researcher has to have a clear idea about what they want to know and then find the appropriate methods for obtaining this knowledge.

The major methodological divide in the social science realm has been the adoption of qualitative or quantitative research. Most recently, qualitative research, quantitative research and mixed methods are three approaches that dominate the forms of research in the social sciences (Creswell, 2014). Most people distinguish qualitative research and quantitative research methods by defining them as one that uses words (qualitative) and one that uses numbers (quantitative). Others think qualitative research is more likely to use open-ended questions while quantitative hypotheses use closed-ended questions. However, the above impression needs to be further clarified. The qualitative approach aims essentially to understand the meaning of people's beliefs and actions by using non-numerical analytic procedures. In contrast, the quantitative approach aims to generate quantifiable data liable to be statistically elaborated. It is often assumed that quantifiable data lend themselves to more 'objective' analysis compared to the 'softer' qualitative process. However, as Patton (Patton, 1990, p.479) argues, 'qualitative methods are not weaker or softer than quantitative approaches – qualitative methods are different'.

Here are definitions given by John W. Creswell (2014, p.32) :

*“Qualitative Research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data.”*

(This study involves describing the essence of Britain’s cathedral choristers’ education and employs direct quotations from ex-choristers to illustrate the phenomena faithfully and to reflect lived experience.)

*“Quantitative Research is an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analysed using statistical procedures.”*

(This current study aims to get a deeper understanding of English Choristers’ overall education on the basis of rational evidence, which is qualitative rather than quantitative.)

*“Mixed Methods Research is an approach to inquiry involving collecting both quantitative data by means of a questionnaire handed to each participants and qualitative data collected by personal interviews, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks.”*

(The core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone. A mixed method approach is not suitable here. I did not consider the questionnaire a proper approach in this case as my interviewees (none of who I had previously met) had such a wide range of ages and backgrounds, that a face-to-face interview seemed a much better way of making these people feel comfortable enough to talk openly.)

Creswell further states that the difference between qualitative research and quantitative research is in the basic philosophical assumptions each researcher brings to the study, the strategies used in the research (e.g. qualitative case studies or quantitative experiments) and the specific

methods employed in conducting these strategies (e.g. collecting qualitative data through observing a setting or collecting data quantitatively on instruments) (ibid).

Qualitative research methodology can produce detailed data, provide insight into the issue, and inform practice. An increasing number of music education researchers over the past thirty years have been using qualitative methods to examine research topics through interviews, observations, documents and archival data (Roulston, 2006). A number of studies have looked at the processes of music teaching and learning at different ages, stages, and educational levels (Blair, 2009; Powell & Wiggins 2005; Silvey, 2005; Conway *et al.*, 2010; Solomonson, 2011); the use of technology in music education (Ruthman 2006; Shin 2011; Thibeault 2007); the educational power of music outside of school, particularly the lived experience of listening to and making music in a broad range of settings, including instrumental studio teaching (Kedem 2011; Miller 2012), home schooling (Nichols 2012), musical interactions in playgrounds (Harwood 1998), performing arts (Bresler 2010).

More closely related to my current study is Margaret Barrett and Janet Mills' case study based on a dual observation approach to observe the lives of choristers in a Oxbridge cathedral choir school (Barrett & Mills, 2009). It allows readers to gain an in-depth understanding of how those young boys start their daily singing routine and how demanding a chorister's life is. What is new here is the systematic inquiry towards an in-depth understanding of lived experience and processes of engagement, acknowledging the multiplicity of contexts and perspectives in shaping deeply held values, in learning, and in developing.

### **3.3.1 The five traditions to qualitative inquiry**

The five traditions to qualitative inquiry as stated by Creswell (2013) include narrative research, phenomenological research, ethnographic research, grounded theory, and case study, all of which I considered for my study.

*Narrative research* involves the researcher obtaining details of the life of an individual (or that part of their life relevant to the study) and then retelling the resulting information in a chronological narrative (Riessman, 2008). From there, a collaborative narrative is produced by combining the participant's experiences with those of the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This method did not seem appropriate for me; collecting the detailed life stories of all

thirty participants and producing a collaborative narrative seemed very difficult at that time. For a start, I was very unfamiliar with the English church ritual at that time and had had no previous experience at all of choir school life, so I could not easily relate to what my interviewees were talking about.

*Ethnography* aims to study shared patterns of behaviours, language, and actions of a close cultural group in a natural setting, but it involves close observation of the group over a long period of time (Wolcott, 2008; Fetterman, 2010). This study has nothing to do with one group of people in a natural setting, as my interviewees were in choir schools in different parts of the country at widely different times, so ethnography cannot apply here.

*Case studies* is a design of inquiry in which the researcher creates an in-depth analysis of a program, event, activity of one or more individuals over a defined period of time, using a variety of ways to collect data (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009, 2012). It normally involves a detailed observation and description of the setting or individuals, followed by analysis of the data for themes or issues. In order to enhance the generalisability of my findings, I decided to employ a more diverse sample instead of focusing on one choir school alone, so regular observation was impossible and therefore it could not be a case study.

*Grounded theory* requires the researcher to formulate a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants and involves using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2007). It has systematic steps which involve generating categories of information (open coding), selecting one of the categories and positioning it within a theoretical model (axial coding), and then explicating a story from the interconnection of these categories (selective coding). Due to the extreme age range of my sample (from 17 to 84) and the number of different choir schools involved, it would not be possible to generate a plausible and useful theory of the phenomena from the data, so this method has not been used.

*Phenomenological research* is a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study (Creswell, 2014). It uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (1994) called an “essence description”. It comes into

play after all the interviews have been collated, at which point common phenomena start to emerge, i.e. certain events experienced by more than one participant (Giorgi, 2009). By applying this approach, Moustakas highlighted the importance of asking what the participants experienced and in what contexts or situations they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

There is a shared philosophical basis of grounded theory and phenomenology: grounded theory and its later modified versions (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) use face-to-face interviews and interactions such as focus groups to explore a particular research phenomenon and may help in clarifying a less-well-understood problem, situation, or context; Phenomenology shares some features with grounded theory (such as an exploration of participants' behaviour) and uses similar techniques to collect data, but it focuses on understanding *how* human beings experience their world and gives researchers the opportunity to understand the subjective experiences of participants. Most important, it is the participants' voices that the researcher is trying to hear, so that they can be interpreted and reported on for others to read and learn from.

This study is a descriptive, qualitative study of English Choristers' experience that is rooted in phenomenology - the process of turning attention to previously lived experiences in an attempt to investigate *what* is experienced and *how* it is experienced (Husserl, 1937). Having carefully considered each of these approaches with regard to the present study, it became clear that the best approach would be to employ a qualitative methodology following a *phenomenological* approach with semi-structured interviews forming the main data collection tool.

### **3.3.2 Phenomenological inquiry and thematic analysis**

As already said, phenomenological research is a method of studying the essence or nature of the lived experience in order to find, from participants' individual lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon, a common factor linking a group of people together (Creswell, 2013). Husserl (1937) established its foundations, followed by Merleau-Ponty, Van Manen, Patton and Moustakas. Husserl believed that immersing ourselves in a phenomenon leads us to a deeper understanding than positive science does, as the human lived experience is not something stable and concrete that can be measured through an objective lens: “...*the positive sciences, after three centuries of brilliant development, are now feeling themselves greatly hampered by securities in their foundations, in their fundamental concepts and methods*” (p.46). Merleau-Ponty (1962) agreed with Husserl that the human experience was the first step

in the understanding of a phenomenon: “*The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to scrutiny, and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world*”. Both researchers held the philosophical position that we can only know what we experience and believed that the study of human consciousness, as it exists in the lived experience, is at the heart of credible scientific inquiry. In another study, we read “*A true phenomenological study is concerned with the essence or structure of the experience or phenomenon and uses phenomenological analytical processes to determine this structure, all with the understandings that come with exploring the researcher’s own perspective and bias in the process.*” (Hourigan & Edgar, 2014, p.150). Put simply, the aim of this type of study is to collect data from people who have experienced the phenomenon and use this to develop a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals: “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological research has been widely used in music education. Chapter 9 of *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research in American Music Education* written by Hourigan and Edgar (2014) gives us examples of how international journals frequently publish qualitative research articles using phenomenological methodology and how it has attracted the attention of many researchers in the United States, for example, studies relating to teacher education (Hart & Swars, 2009; Goodnough, 2011), and classroom technology (Ottenbreit-Leftwich *et al.*, 2010; Corwin & Cintron, 2011).

In this present study, the specific strategy of inquiry (phenomenology) connects the researcher to the specific method of data collection (personal interviews). To interpret the lived experience of English choristers, this study employs the phenomenological lens to explore ex-choristers’ perspectives of their childhood experiences in a very unique and highly structured religious setting.

There is also a close relationship between phenomenological inquiry and thematic analysis, which is a process to be used for encoding qualitative information but requires an explicit ‘code’. The code could be a list of themes, a complex model with themes, indicators and qualifications that are casually related (Boyatzis, 1998, p.4). Here, thematic analysis can be a method to reflect reality and to unravel the reality, but does not need the detailed theoretical



and technological knowledge of approaches such as grounded theory, where the goal is to generate “*a plausible and useful theory of the phenomena that is grounded in the data*”(McLeod, 2001), requiring analysis to “be directed towards theory development ” (Holloway & Todres, 2003). However, thematic analysis means it is not necessary to subscribe to the implicit theoretical commitments of grounded theory if the researcher does not want to produce a fully worked-up grounded theory analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I personally think thematic analysis, which is a constructionist method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data, does not only help the researcher to organise and describe the data in great detail, but also to interpret various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). It should be used as the whole process is data-driven. It is an *inductive* process for encoding information, following the process of segmentation and categorization, which means the themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (Patton, 1990) and then re-linking obvious aspects prior to final interpretation (Grbich, 2007). It is also related to phenomenology in that it focuses subjectively on the human experience (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011), which is perhaps the most important factor in this study of the lives of English choristers. Furthermore, it emphasizes the interviewees' *individual* perceptions, feelings and experiences as the paramount object of study, and allows the interviewees to discuss the topic in their own words, free from the constraints of fixed-response questions found in quantitative studies.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

I investigated the ex-choristers' perceptions by using in-depth semi-structured interviews. This, it was hoped, would produce evidence that would lead to an understanding of each participant's experience and draw out the main themes of the research.

#### **3.4.1 Sample Recruitment**

I had no previous social contact with this group of people (choristers) so going through an informal network of friends and their acquaintances seemed the only way to recruit participants. Meanwhile, as I did not know any of my interviewees personally, I totally relied on my friends' connections, which helped newcomers trust me from the start and later introduce me to other contacts. The most important thing is, whoever introduced me to a new interviewee played a role as 'gatekeeper', as they only identified further contacts who they thought might be able to offer me first-hand information linked to my research. So face-to-face interviews seemed the most appropriate way to extract information and gain an understanding of how ex-choristers

reacted to their musical training and overall schooling in the choir school, and how it may have affected them in later life.

Qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, studied in depth in their context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The initial plan was to interview twelve former choristers from the choir school in Durham, but the number was increased to thirty and, because I opted to use the personal recommendation method to find new interviewees, it came to include ex-choristers from other choir schools thus making it a “snowball sample” but much more useful to my purposes.

Snowball sampling (also known as ‘chain-referral methods’) can identify individuals who have the characteristics researchers are interested in. It uses social networks, informants and contacts to put them in touch with further individuals or groups (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011, p.158). In snowball sampling, interpersonal relations feature very highly (Browne, 2005) and the process requires a lot of all-round understanding and trust.

As for the pre-study, the researcher approached a cathedral official who was well acquainted with the Durham Cathedral choir school network. He gave me the names of ten ex-choristers, three of whom still lived in Durham, and these three were the first interviewees. One of them had also been the co-founder and subsequent director of the Durham Singers and a one-time chairman of the Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Associations, and he kindly put me in contact with several other ex-choristers from around the country.

At the same time, the researcher also contacted Durham University Music department and St. Chad's College to see if they could also provide a few contacts. As a result of this, several current university students offered to take part in the interview and provided the names of further possible interviewees (in a few of these cases, the interviews were contacted online). Among these, it turned out that a few had been purely parish church choristers but had not been in a cathedral choir or a college chapter choir, so they were of no use for this project.

### **3.4.2 Sample**

The participants involved in this study were all ex-choristers who attended English Choir Schools between 1940 and 2010. They were divided into three groups: those in secondary or tertiary education, those in work, and retired people. All these full-time choristers, who were

expected to sing three or four services in cathedrals or college chapters every week, received an intensive music education whether they were boarders or not.

Table 1: Sample Details

CODE	BOARD- ER?	GENDER	AGE IN 2015	Y.O.B	OCCUPATION (* = music connected)	CHOIR SCHOOL
1	Y	M	84	1931	College Principal *	Durham Cathedral
2	Y	M	84	1931	Music teacher *	Durham Cathedral
3	Y	M	80	1935	Retired Vicar	Durham Cathedral
4	Y	F	20	1994	University music student *	Salisbury Cathedral
5	Y	M	18	1996	A-level student	Durham Cathedral
6	Y	F	23	1991	University student	Salisbury Cathedral
7	Y	F	18	1996	University student	Ely Cathedral
8	Y	M	56	1958	Organ technician *	Durham Cathedral
9		M	20	1994	University music student *	New College, Oxford
10	Y	F	20	1994	University student	Ely Cathedral
11	Y	F	21	1994	University student	Ely Cathedral
12	Y	M	54	1960	Computer Consultant	Durham Cathedral
13	Y	M	44	1970	PhD music student & music editor *	King's College, Cambridge
14	Y	M	47	1967	Director of Publishing *	Durham Cathedral
15	Y	M	17	1998	A-level student	Durham Cathedral
16		M	83	1931	Tax officer	York Minster
17	Y	M	16	1998	Secondary school student	Durham Cathedral
18	Y/N	M	37	1977	Accountant	Peterborough Cathedral
19		M	75	1940	Sales	St. Nicholas, Newcastle
20	Y	F	22	1992	Soprano *	Salisbury Cathedral
21	Y	M	75	1940	Treasurer	Durham Cathedral
22	Y	M	35	1980	Sound Designer *	Durham Cathedral
23	Y	M	66	1948	Managing Director	Ripon Cathedral
24	Y	M	74	1941	Bank manager/public speaker	York Minster
25	Y	M	58	1957	Science teacher	Ripon Cathedral
26	Y	M	21	1994	University student- Medicine	Westminster Abbey
27	Y	M	21	1994	University student- Mathematics	Westminster Abbey
28	Y	M	22	1993	University student- Architecture	Westminster Abbey
29	Y	M	22	1993	University music student *	Winchester Cathedral
30	Y	M	24	1991	University student – Theology	Winchester Cathedral

The sample includes fifteen interviewees aged thirty or under, and fifteen over thirty. Of those thirty, only six were female, all in the under-thirty age group. The majority were boarders; only four attended non-boarding choir schools, as can be seen from the table 1. Most of the interviewees still have an active interest in music, and ten had or still have an occupation which had a connection to music.

After thirty interviews had been done I assessed whether any further interviews were needed. Charmaz (2006) suggests that the data collection process could stop when “gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties”, i.e. when the categories (or themes) are saturated. In this case, no new information was emerging from the final interviews, so an initial analysis was begun.

### **3.4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews used in qualitative inquiry encourage the exploration of people’s perceptions, feeling and understanding on a particular area of their experience. There are three different ways to structure interviews depending on the purpose of the research. Fully structured interviews do not deviate from a predefined format whereas unstructured interviews are open and do not follow a set pattern (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

For this study, it was decided to make the interviews semi-structured, which enables respondents to project their own ways of defining their childhood experience as a cathedral chorister. This permits flexibility rather than rigidity in the sequence of discussion, allowing participants to raise and pursue issues and matters that might not have been included in a pre-devised schedule (Silverman, 1993). However, the layout was determined in advance so all interviewees were asked the same basic questions in the same order. This is particularly useful when the respondent’s viewpoints and perceptions on a particular topic need to be quite detailed (Smith, 1995).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Most interviews were carried out face-to-face (four were done via Skype due to long travel distance and time limits), which allowed direct interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee so that I could modify my enquiry to follow up interesting responses offered by the interviewees and explore possible underlying messages provided by non-verbal cues (Robson, 1993). Before the interview, a range of

questions or topics had been prepared. However, the interviewee was free to give detailed explanations on some points, or even refuse to answer certain questions. As Smith (Smith, 1995, p.12) argues, '*the respondent can be perceived as the expert on the subject and should therefore be allowed maximum opportunity to tell his or her own story*'.

The strength of the semi-structured interview here is that the interviewees answer the same questions in their own way thus increasing comparability of responses since the data is complete for each person on the topics addressed in the interview. In addition, it helps the researcher to organise and analyse the data. A lot of unexpected information may surface during interviews, the assessment of which increases the workload of transcribing interview recordings as the researcher has to sort out the useful from the useless. The weakness of the semi-structured interview is that the standardized wording of questions may constrain the interviewee and relevance of questions and answers (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Overall, however, semi-structured interviews can elicit the information necessary to explore the research questions, ensuring a common coverage of key aspects, whilst at the same time giving potential for exploration of other areas if they arise. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews allowed the collection of rich information and gained maximum information from each interviewee and allowed direct comparison with other interviewees' answers.

#### **3.4.4 Pilot Interview**

As part of the pilot phase of the data collection, ex-choristers, key researchers, and people who were familiar with the choristers' school ethos (for example, members of the CSA (Choir Schools Association) and FCOCA (the Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Associations) were contacted. From these contacts I gained a good background knowledge of how different cathedral or college choirs were organised – whether a school is attached, whether state or independent; boarding or day only; boy only or mixed choir etc. Thus I was able to fine-tune my questions to suit each individual interviewee. I also gained a good insight into how things used to be in these establishments from the FCOCA, who sent me several copies of their magazine.

Once the interview questions were written and key points selected (Appendix 2: *Semi-structured interview questions*), a pilot interview was carried out to gauge the appropriateness of the probes and the pace and timing of the interview. In light of this interview, which took

approximately 45 minutes, it was felt that some revisions were needed to cover broader aspects such as: family influence; religious attitude; peer instruction; music influences before, during and after your time in the choir school.

The interview questions were basically divided into three sections:

- 1) Early years: Was the family somehow musically inclined- playing an instrument, singing or listening a lot to music? Also was it the parents' idea to send the child to the choir school?
- 2) Time in the choir school: How long were you there and from what age? Apart from singing, did they help build up an all-round musical and academic education and how?
- 3) Life after leaving the choir school: What happened after leaving the choir school and how might being a chorister have made a difference to your later life?

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a search for important themes that describe the phenomenon (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997). It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis which can be divided into codes, a process involving recognizing (seeing) an important moment and encoding it (seeing it as something) prior to a process of interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). There are three ways to develop a thematic code: theory-driven; prior data or prior research driven; and inductive (from raw data) data-driven (ibid).

This study uses the inductive (data-driven) approach to develop codes, which allows themes to emerge directly from the raw data and helps identify overarching themes.

In thematic analysis, if the data has been collected for the study through interviews, the themes identified may bear little relation to the specific questions as the interviewees may give additional information beyond the question; thus the answers of those questions may well not be driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area or topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As Rubin and Rubin (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) claimed: "*you discover themes and concepts embedded throughout your interviews*". It is then the researcher's task to interpret the data after obtaining the findings and to construct a framework from the results of the raw information that enhances appreciation of the information, and eliminates potentially contaminating factors (Boyatzis, 1998, p.30). Surely, my own experiences and background (see p. 2) will have shaped and informed the collection and analysis in some ways.

All semi-structured interview transcripts in this study were coded several times in order to organize and group the interview data thematically, for coding is a cyclical process that requires repetition that no-one gets right the first time (Saldaña, 2013). The analysis includes the following stages:

Stage 1: familiarising with the data.

Stage 2: generating initial codes.

Stage 3: searching among codes/nodes for themes.

Stage 4: reviewing, categorising and comparing themes.

Stage 5: determining and naming themes.

Stage 6: producing the report

Stage 1: familiarizing with the data

After each interview, first, I transcribed the interviews, reading and re-reading them and noting down initial salient points. The time spent in transcription was massive but it formed the early stages of analysis and enabled me to develop a far more thorough understanding of my data through having transcribed it. Furthermore, re-reading the interview transcription was time-consuming as well, but by doing that, I began to look for patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest in the data already. At the same time, I started to taking notes and marking ideas to prepare for the formal coding process.

Stage 2: generating initial codes

A code in qualitative inquiry is most often “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2013, p.3). Codes identify a feature of the data, and focus on the most basic element of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998, p.63). I worked systematically through each transcript, and information from the text relevant to the study’s aims and research questions was identified, highlighted and coded as appropriate. Certain interesting themes immediately emerged, such as sight reading skills, strong discipline and home-sickness but some of the reminiscences were quite surprising. One example for which I had to create a new code concerned the ranking system within one of the leading choir schools, where for instance the lowest ranking boy would be made to carry the heaviest music books and the highest-ranking boy could choose the first cake at tea time!



Coding is a method that enables the researcher to organize and group data into categories or “families” because they share some characteristic or show the beginning of a pattern. Coffey and Atkinson (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) propose that “*coding is usually ... breaking the data apart in analytically relevant ways in order to lead toward further questions about the data*” (p.29). Each researcher develops their own coding according to their academic discipline, ontological and epistemological orientations. Sipe and Ghiso (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004) note that “*all coding is a judgment call*” since we bring “*our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions, [and] our quirks*” to the process (p.482–3). Therefore, coding is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act and an essential part of the analysis. In other words, coding is the transitional process between data collection and the more extensive data analysis. As Charmaz (2006) puts it, “*coding generates the bones of your analysis...integration will assemble those bones into a working skeleton*” (p. 45). Thus, coding is not just labelling, but can lead the researcher from data to an idea, and from the idea to all the data pertaining to that idea (Richards & Morse, 2007). After each interview, I first listened to it again and transcribed it. From the transcription, I made a summary of the points that caught my interest, which became the basis for my codes.

At this stage, I also used NVivo 10 software to help me analyse the data and organise quotations once the transcripts were done. The software is not an interpretative device but can be used as an organisation tool to index segments of the text to particular codes, with the researcher carrying out the analytic work (King, 2004). Nvivo helped me to work in an efficient manner with large amounts of text and complex coding processes, to ensure the resulting analysis was as accurate as possible.

### Stage 3: searching among codes/nodes for themes

When all data had been initially coded and collated, I ended up with a long list of the different codes that I identified across the data. Here I re-read the quotes for every code and looked for potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each of these. In this stage, my focus was the analysis at the broader level of *themes* rather than *codes*, so I started to consider how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme by using visual representations to help sort the different codes into those themes.

A theme is “*a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes the possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon*” (Boyatzis, 1998). Also it is a subjective outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection. Rossman & Rallis (2003) explain the differences between a code and a theme: “*think of a category as a word or phrase describing some segment of your data that is explicit, whereas a theme is a phrase or sentence describing more subtle and tacit processes*” (p. 282). Most importantly, the themes in Thematic Analysis have to “*capture something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represent some level of patterned response or meaning with the data set.*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A ‘patterned response’ here does not necessarily depend on a large numbers of interviewees. What is important is that the patterned response emerging from the data must be relevant to the overall research questions and occur fairly regularly in interviews. Simply put, a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the overall research question and the researcher’s judgement is necessary to determine what a theme is.

In Stage 3, I first set up each interviewee’s data extracts by making a “flash card”. On each card were the three categories: music skills, non-music skills and positive/negative influences. A fourth category covered extra information such as family influences and their daily routine. These data extracts together became the data set, and it is particularly helpful to have them at this stage. As each interview transcription could be more than 15 pages, through this process, each transcription can be condensed down to 4-5 pages, making further analysis easier to handle. Therefore only a selection of these extracts would feature in the final analysis, from which the themes would emerge. Meanwhile, I paid more attention to the relationship between codes, between themes and between different levels of themes (e.g. main overarching themes and sub-themes within them). I checked to see if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, thus generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis (See the figures on pages 82, 127 and 158).

This process enabled me to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share some characteristic, i.e. the beginning of a pattern. (It is worth mentioning that some initial codes may go on to form main themes, whereas others may form sub-themes, and still others may be discarded). At this stage, I had a set of codes that did not seem to belong anywhere so I created a new temporary theme called ‘miscellaneous’.

#### Stage 4: reviewing and categorising themes

Further analysis was needed to identify connections between themes. In order to do this, I summarised the main themes and supporting quotes, then drew this information together in diagrammatic form to show how the themes and key ideas expressed in each section were related to each other (see **Error! Reference source not found.**; Figure 4: *Possible effects of the choir school environment on the development of life skills* and Figure 7: *Challenges of being choristers*)

At this stage, I decided to categorise all themes under three headings: (a) music skills choristers obtained in the choir school; (b) transferable life skills gained through being a chorister; and (c) possible challenges of being a chorister. Then it became evident that some themes had to be discarded because there was not enough data to support them. For example, one interviewee mentioned she was no good at pop singing, for which you need an untrained voice whereas her voice had been ‘properly’ trained. Others themes were collapsing into each other to produce one totally new theme, so a fair amount of rethinking became necessary. On the other hand, the music proficiency theme started to break down into two main sub-headings: vocal proficiency and non-vocal proficiency (see p.106).

#### Stage 5: defining and naming themes

In this stage, further analysis is needed to refine the specifics of each theme, to clarify the overall story that the analysis conveys and to generate clear definitions and names for each theme. Braun and Clarke mentioned that “defining” means here is to identify the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92). The aim of this stage is to organize themes into a coherent and internally consistent account and make the reader clear what is of interest about those themes and why. I considered how each theme could fit into the broader overall ‘story’ in relation to the research questions and the results can be seen in Figure 2 on page 82. In the upper part of the chart, the choir education is broken down into three main themes: vocal training, instrumental lessons and music theory, but all three are closely linked to each other as the figure shows. These three main music themes also play a big part in the lower part “*Individual Music Achievements*”, which is sub-divided into the main headings: strong sight reading skill, music proficiency and life-long interests in music.

Braun and Clarke suggested that one way of testing the validity of themes is to see whether the researcher can describe the scope and content of each in a couple of sentences. At the same time, the researcher might already have given the themes working titles, but this is the point to start thinking about the names that will be given to themes in the final analysis. Names should immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about. At the end of this stage, I clearly define which themes are still valid in my research and which are not.

#### Stage 6: producing the report

This is the last opportunity for analysis, for selecting the most vivid, compelling examples, and for making a final analysis of selected extracts, where the analysis is tightly linked to the research question and related literature, and then producing a scholarly report of the analysis. The whole point of this report (see next three chapters) is to tell the complicated story of my data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of my analysis and provides sufficient evidence of the themes within the data.

### **3.6 Validity and Reliability**

Unlike quantitative researchers, who apply statistical methods for establishing validity and reliability of research findings, qualitative researchers aim to design and incorporate methodological strategies to ensure the ‘trustworthiness’ of the findings, i.e. its credibility or truth value. However, it is acknowledged that the researcher’s personal experiences and viewpoints may have resulted in methodological bias, so consistency is needed to present interviewees’ perspectives clearly and accurately. It has to be shown that correct methods have been undertaken and that the researcher has maintained a ‘decision-trail’; that is, the researcher’s decisions should be made clearer. I commenced research with broader research questions, but, as I spent more time talking with ex-choristers, categories and themes became clearer, including both the positive and the negative aspects of being a chorister, which the interviewees themselves came up with. Consequently two chapters explain the musical outcomes and transferable life skills, while the third concentrates on the drawbacks.

Validity refers to the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data in quantitative research --- whether theories or explanations derived from the data itself--- are true and accurately capture what is really happening (Gibbs, 2002). It is mostly associated with the

accuracy of the investigation. It is impossible for any research to be 100 per cent valid, since the subjectivity of interviewees, their opinions, attitudes and perspectives together contribute to a degree of bias. Validity then should be seen as a matter of degree rather than as an absolute state (Gronlund, 1981). The exact nature of 'validity' is a highly debated topic in both educational and social research since there exists no single or common definition of the term. However, validity is an important key to effective research: if a piece of research is invalid then it is probably worthless.

Quantitative research tests (examines) what can be measured or quantified while qualitative research attempts to 'pick up the pieces' of the unquantifiable, personal, in depth, descriptive and social aspects of the world (Winter, 2000). For qualitative researchers, 'validity' is not centrally concerned with issues of cause and effect, and is not so harsh in its isolation and categorisation of particulars within the phenomena. The extent to which the results can be generalised and thus applied to other populations, is usually of no importance to qualitative research and the attempt to achieve it can seriously hinder its overall validity. This is why many qualitative researchers claim that 'understanding' is more pertinent than 'validity' (Wolcott, 1990).

Unlike quantitative research, there are no standardised or accepted tests within qualitative research and often the nature of the investigation is determined and adapted by the research itself. There may not be any hypothesis or even any findings as such. Instead the 'validity' of the research resides with the representation of the actors, the purposes of the research and appropriateness of the processes involved. Therefore, the term 'validity' is not applicable to qualitative research. As Winter puts it: "*Validity is not a singular acid test that can be applied to the research process as a whole*" (Winter, 2000). It depends at what stage of the process the researcher deems validation necessary. After all, one possible test for validity is to enquire whether the research is measuring what it was intended to measure (ibid). There is no doubt that the researcher needs to show that the explanation of a particular event, issue or set of data which a piece of research provides can actually be sustained by the data, so the finding must describe accurately the phenomena being researched (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). Patton (2002) believes that it is the interviewees' reflections, conveyed in their own words, that strengthen the face validity and credibility of the research. In my case, such points arose from remarks by interviewees which highlighted aspects I had not considered but which suddenly seemed of

some importance. Interpretive research must demonstrate credibility of trustworthiness throughout the research process (Koch, 1994). It requires the researcher to clearly demonstrate how interpretations of the data have been reached and to support findings with quotations from the raw data.

Qualitative researchers have also generated or adopted what they consider to be more appropriate terms, such as 'trustworthiness', 'relevance', 'plausibility', 'confirmability', 'credibility' or 'representativeness' (Hammersley, 1987; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mishler, 1990; Wolcott, 1990; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) wrote:

*“Conventionally, inquirers have found it useful to pose four questions to themselves:*

*1) Truth value: How can one establish confidence in the “truth” of the findings of a particular inquiry for the subjects (respondents) with which and the context in which the inquiry was carried out?*

*2) Applicability: How can one determine the extent to which the finding of a particular inquiry have applicability in other contexts or with other subject (respondents)?*

*3) Consistency: How can one determine whether the findings of an inquiry would be repeated if the inquiry were replicated with the same (or similar) subjects (respondents) in the same (or similar) context?*

*4) Neutrality: How can one establish the degree to which the findings of an inquiry are determined by the subjects (respondents) and conditions of the inquiry and not by the biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the inquirer?”*

These are the criteria applied in this study, but for the reader it might be simpler if in place of 'truth value' we use '*credibility*', for 'applicability' we use '*transferability*', for 'consistency' '*dependability*', and for 'neutrality' we use '*confirmability*' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.300).

### **3.6.1 Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested five techniques to fulfil these trustworthiness criteria

- 1) Prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation (p.301-307)
- 2) Peer debriefing (p.308):
- 3) Negative case analysis (p.309)
- 4) Referential adequacy (p.313)
- 5) Member checks (p. 314)

First, prolonged engagement means investing sufficient time to achieve certain purposes such as learning the ‘culture’ and building trust. Before I started this chorister project, I helped in Durham Cathedral Sunday school and later on became an Acolyte for Sunday Eucharist. This purposeful involvement within the cathedral life did greatly help me to recruit participants and to build up my understanding of chorister’s life and the music they sing. Persistent observation based on choristers’ activities at Durham Cathedral helped me to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that were most relevant to the issue emerging from data. The above two techniques have been described thus: “*if prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth*” according to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.304). (The technique of triangulation was also loosely applied to improve the credibility of the findings and interpretations of this study, using participants from three different age groups: full-time students, workers, and retired people. In the end, the differences of opinion among these three groups of ex-choristers lead to some valuable explanations about the data and further indicated different areas of impact on life of musical training among different generations, again adding an additional dimension to the thesis).

Secondly, peer debriefing aims to provide an external check on the inquiry process. It is a process of ‘exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.308). Peer debriefing helps the researcher to undertake an external evaluation of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Maxwell, 1992, 2005; Leech, 2008) and involves asking disinterested persons to discuss my work and test its honesty and any possible working hypotheses the researcher may have produced. Lincoln and Guba have depicted the role of the peer de-briefer as the devil’s advocate, an individual who keeps the researcher ‘honest’, posing difficult questions about various aspects of the research study (e.g., procedures, interpretations). In the case of the present study, the role of the de-briefer was played by a peer student with a doctorate in social sciences so has extensive experience of dealing with research data issues. He tested concepts and their relationships and challenged my interpretations of the data, helping me to bring out and examine unthought-of aspects of the phenomenon.

Thirdly, negative case analysis aims at refining each working hypothesis as more and more information becomes available, discussing ‘negative’ data that does not support emerging

explanations, constantly refining data until it accounts for all known cases without exception (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.309). The present study did not make use of the negative case analysis technique because the aim was not to prove any preconceived hypotheses. On the other hand, I had an open mind about the facts gathered through data collection and did not assume from the start that such choral training only brings positive benefits. Therefore, this study was open to the possibility that training as a chorister could impact negatively on life experiences.

Fourthly, referential adequacy -- checking preliminary findings and interpretations against archived “raw data” so that different analysts can ‘reach similar conclusions’ and ‘test the validity of the conclusions’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.313). All interviewing material in the present study was imported in Nvivo 10 software but, because of ethical considerations (see 3.7 Ethical Considerations) can be accessed only by the researcher and the interviewees, who were informed at the beginning of the study that this would be the case.

Finally, member checking can provide the direct test of findings and interpretations with those people from whom the data were originally gathered. Lincoln and Guba (1985) called it the most important technique for establishing credibility. It basically involves asking the study’s participants to check on the research findings and provide feedback on their credibility, and was applied in this study at different stages of the data collection. After the first bit of coding had been conducted, interview questions were modified to cover broader aspects such as: family influence/religious attitude/ peer instruction/music skills gained before joining the choir school, in the choir school and after the choir school/ non-music achievement/ career development. Additionally, the final analytic findings were confirmed by previously interviewed participants who were asked to assess the credibility of the results.

### **3.6.2 Transferability**

Transferability is a concept where the researcher is simply providing sufficient description of the study. It is self-contained and does not seek to generalize so that others may judge whether it can be applied more widely. The findings in this study, taken from a small sample, were never intended to be applied to a wider field, so the study is only seeking to represent the phenomenon being investigated fairly and fully in an honest manner. Transferability is limited but this study



provides a valuable insight into choristers' real life and hopefully inspire further research, perhaps on a much larger scale.

### **3.6.3 Dependability**

Dependability means accuracy and precision of measurement, and a dependable result would be considered one that is consistent across repeated investigations. Putting it simply - if the study were to be done a second time, would it yield the same results? However, for qualitative researchers – and most certainly in this limited study where each interview is unique - this idea of replication is problematic and probably impossible to achieve. Two researchers who are studying a single setting may come up with very different findings but both sets of findings might be valid. For example, the dual observation conducted by Barrett and Mills (2009). This study might be criticised because it does not give readers the whole image of how the boy choristers obtain their musical expertise in the choir school but focuses primarily on exploring the methodological possibilities of dual observation. For its limited perspective and potential for bias. I believe however that by drawing upon perspectives from ex-choristers in a wide age range and by engaging with the church life in multiple ways, such research may enable a better understanding of this phenomenon's different facets and therefore can build up a reliable picture of chorister life, at least for how they went through their morning rehearsal before a normal school day started.

### **3.6.4 Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that an inquiry auditor should be appointed who would be responsible for examining the process of the inquiry as well as its product. However, Robson (1993) suggested that one should collect and analyse all material 'as if' an auditor was going to be appointed. All findings here have been supported by raw data from the interviews, but it was made clear from the start that there would be total confidentiality so no-one else would be allowed to access the data. Because this is my own PhD project, the only thing I could do is ask one of my interviewees to discuss all three finding chapters with me; when I had finished the whole data analysis process, I also asked a church leader to read my conclusion and discussion chapter and offer comments. The comments of both were taken into consideration when I next revised these chapters, but it would be ideal if someone else could repeat the exercise elsewhere to compare results.

When truth value (*credibility*) and consistency (*dependability*) have been addressed, the credibility of the findings should be confirmed. To test the credibility of this research, I gave presentations to three widely differing audiences. The first group consisted of postgraduate students in Education and Music and the second of students and lecturers in Music and Theology along with dignitaries of Durham Cathedral. The third presentation was to a large audience made up of music educators, researchers and students at an ISME (International Society of Music Education) conference in Glasgow. From these three presentations I gained a lot of valuable feedback, most of which was positive, and which seemed to confirm the credibility of my findings.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were always a very important part of the manner in which this study was conducted. Durham University's Ethics Code of Practice (September 2016) states: "*In planning, and in the conduct and reporting of research, researchers should act in ways that ensure that no participant is disadvantaged by their age, class, 'race', gender, sexual orientation, religious or political beliefs or disability.*"

The research I carried out involved some students as participants which necessitated the advance written permission of the department's ethics committee, as no research should be conducted until ethical approval is obtained. In this case, the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee assessed this research against the British Educational Research Association's Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011): more details can be seen in "Department Code of Practice on Research Ethics". Ethical approval was granted in April 2014 (see Appendix 3: *Research ethics and data protection monitoring form*, p.208-209).

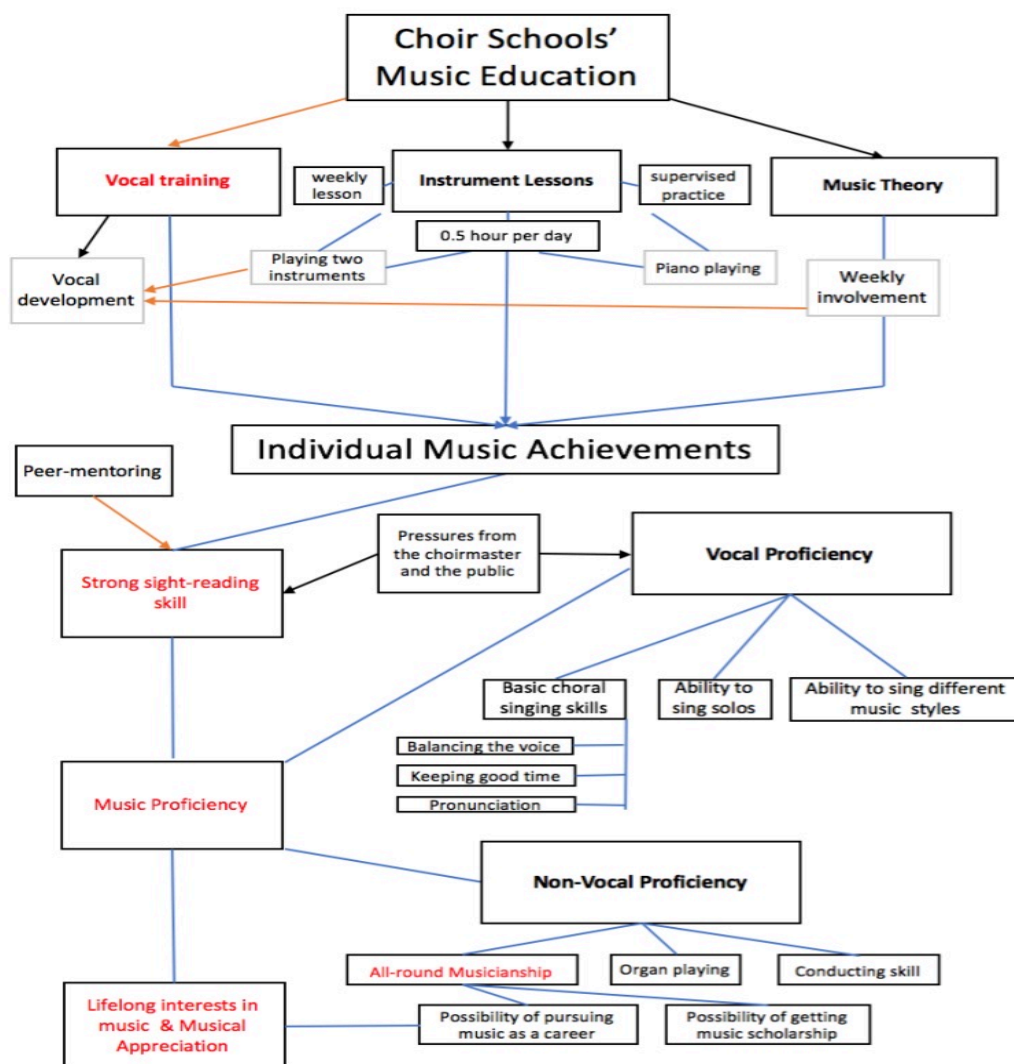
Three main areas in which ethical issues can arise in interviews in particular are informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity (Kvale, 1996, pp. 111-120). Before the official interview it was made clear to each participant just how the interview would proceed, that it would be recorded, how the data acquired would be subsequently used, and that in every case anonymity would be fully preserved at all times. After each interview, the participant was asked to fill in and sign a consent form (See Appendix 4: *Consent Request Form*). The participants were further informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, even after the interview, and without having to give a reason for withdrawing.

Regarding careful planning and protecting anonymity, scholars have discussed the researcher's responsibility to advocate anonymity in the reporting of findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.106). In this study, all interviewees were allotted a four-digit number as their private code in the final report in order to make all participants anonymous, which meant they could not be identified or traced. The first two digits referred to the order of interview; the third digit showed whether the interviewee was male or female; the last digit meant boarder or non-boarder. As a theoretical example, 4512 would have meant that interviewee No. 45 was a male non-boarder.

## Chapter 4: Findings Part 1 - Choristers' Music Achievement

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how the interviewed choristers developed their musical expertise and what essential skills they acquired through their intensive music training. The most important role of a chorister is to help lead the cathedral's worship by singing the services on weekdays and weekends. It is described as hard work but many choristers think it is a privilege. Working closely with other musicians, young choristers soon have the satisfaction of doing something well, and doing it as part of a loyal team. This study showed that, when they looked back at their time in the choir school, most ex-choristers could remember with real gratitude the hard efforts they had to make. The figure that follows (*Figure 2*) is based on the data analysis showing the links between themes.



*Figure 2: The outcomes of choristers' music education*

## 4.2 The effect of the daily work pattern on musicianship

It is interesting to see how music schedules have changed by comparing Durham Cathedral Choristers' schedule during the 1940s and their schedule in 2016.

Table 2: Durham Cathedral choristers' routine in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century:

Time	Monday			Tuesday, Wednesday & Friday			Thursday			Saturday			Sunday		
	C 20th	C 21st		C 20th	C 21st		C 20th	C 21st		C 20th	C 21st		C 20th	C 21st	
	Boys	Boys	Girls	Boys	Boys	Girls	Boys	Boys	Girls	Boys	Boys	Girls	Boys	Boys	Girls
07:00	Instrument practice			Instrument practice			Instrument practice								
07:30	Breakfast & Recreation	Breakfast		Breakfast & Recreation	Breakfast		Breakfast & Recreation	Breakfast		Breakfast & Recreation	Breakfast		Breakfast & Recreation	Breakfast	
08:00	School	Rehearsal		School	Rehearsal		School	Recreation		School	Rehearsal		Rehearsal, Matins & Eucharist		
08:30															
09:00	Rehearsal & Matins	School		Rehearsal & Matins	School		Matins	School		Rehearsal	Freetime				
09:30				Matins											
10:00															
10:30															
11:00	School			School			Sports			School					
11:30															
12:00															
12:30															
13:00	Lunch														
13:30	Recreation	School & sports		Recreation/Sports	School		Freetime	School & Sports		Recreation	Recreation		Recreation		
14:00				Rehearsal & Evensong											
15:00	Rehearsal & Evensong	*Rehearsal or theory		Rehearsal & Evensong	*Instrument/Rehearsal or Evensong		Freetime	Freetime		Rehearsal & Evensong	*Instrument/Rehearsal or Evensong		*Rehearsal and Evensong		
15:30				Rehearsal & Evensong											
16:00	School or Piano			School or Piano						Rehearsal			Freetime		
16:30															
17:00															
17:30															
18:00	Tea & Recreation														
18:30															
19:00	Piano or Prep	Prep		Piano or Prep	Prep		Piano or Prep	Prep		Piano or Prep	Recreation		Freetime		
19:30															

(For the original sources please see Appendix 7: Durham Cathedral Choristers' routine in the early C 20th ; and Appendix 8: Durham Cathedral Choristers' routine in the early C 21st)

Some interviewees mentioned that their academic study time in the choir school in the 1940s and 1950s was far less than nowadays; to explain this, it was evident from the interviews that in many Anglican church foundations, the boy choristers had to sing Matins in the middle of the morning which reduced the teaching hours for other academic subjects.

*“Apart from Saturday, we sang Matins every morning from 10.00 to 11.00 and Evensong every afternoon from 3.00pm in the winter and 4.30 pm in the summer. We practiced the longest every morning. I can't remember exactly but I think we had teaching between 8.30 and 9.00 before we trooped over to the cathedral for a rehearsal and service. I think there was an hour of teaching in the morning and about two hours in an afternoon, with homework every evening. We also had one half day of sport a week, so **it was a very***

*rigorous regime where music took precedence over everything else<sup>12</sup>.”*  
(0311)

It is also evident that choristers singing at Durham Cathedral in the early 20th century had more singing duties (24 hours per week) than today (up to 15 hours per week), because in those days, there was only one choir of boy choristers. Now there are two choirs, one of boys and one of girls, which share the duties, as can be seen from Table 3: *Durham Cathedral boys and girl choristers’ routine in 2010s-week A & week B*. Against that, the 1940s’ choristers had 5 hours instrument practice per week, compared with 2.5 hours for present day choristers, demonstrating that past music training was more intense.

Table 3: *Durham Cathedral boys and girl choristers’ routine in 2010s-week A & week B*

Week A	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday A	Sunday A
7:00-7:30	Instrument	Instrument	Instrument	Instrument	Instrument	8:35-9:45	Rehearsal
							8:55-9:50
8:05-8:55	Rehearsal	Rehearsal	Rehearsal	Rehearsal	Rehearsal		10:00-11:00
							11:15-12:30
4:05-5:00	Rehearsal	Instrument	Instrument	Rehearsal	Rehearsal	4:05-5:00	2:40-3:20
							3:30-4:30
5:00-6:00	Theory		Evensong	Evensong	Evensong	5:15-6:15	Rehearsal
	Instrument				Instrument		Evensong
Week B	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday B	Sunday B
7:00-7:30	Instrument	Instrument	Instrument	Instrument	Instrument	8:35-9:45	Rehearsal
							8:55-9:50
8:05-8:55	Rehearsal	Rehearsal	Rehearsal	Rehearsal	Rehearsal		10:00-11:00
							11:15-12:30
4:05-5:00	Instrument	Rehearsal	Instrument	Instrument	Rehearsal	4:05-5:00	2:40-3:20
							3:30-4:30
5:00-6:00		Theory	Evensong	Evensong	Theory	5:15-6:15	Rehearsal
		Instrument			Instrument		Evensong

Now at Durham Cathedral boys and girls share their singing duties almost equally, as can be seen from Table 3. The boys (in blue) sing 4 services during week A and 3 in week B, while the girls (in pink) sing 3 in week A and 4 in week B; they do not sing in Evensong on Mondays and Thursdays. (On Thursdays, there is morning instrument practice at 7:00 to 7:30 as usual, but the rest of the day is purely given over to academic study and sports.)

<sup>12</sup> Sections of quotations in bold type indicate that the author sees them as important.

The academic schooling of choristers the chorister school Durham was not that great before the 1920s: *“The old days when the choristers were all local boys, were paid an annual fee for their services, and were taught the three Rs in a schoolroom in one of the vestries, and played their games in the cloisters or the monks’ garden. The education was such that it was seldom that a boy qualified for entrance to Durham School, much less of a scholarship.”* (Ganderton, p. 101). In the 1940s, there were only boarding choristers in the school with no day boys; then in 1948, the Chorister School had been enlarged to include non-choristers (ibid. p.128) and gradually choristers took up 21 hours per week to do academic study. The results were impressive. Here is a part of the Durham Cathedral Chorister School Speech Day Report in 1948:

*“To take only the last 20 years, of 114 boys who have passed through the school, 45 have gone on to Durham School, 10 with King’s Scholarship, and 56 to other Public Schools and another school on scholastic grounds, though one or two schools have thought that the boys had not done enough Science. But for a small school of 24 boys, drawing its members for the most part from Elementary Schools, I think the record of achievement is creditable.”* (ibid. p.128)

However, the choristers nowadays have 30 academic hours per week, the exact same amount of time in school as the day pupils (9am-4pm). Between choristers and non-choristers, the only difference is that the choristers have at least an hour’s regular music practice both before and after normal school hours.

From the interview data, most ex-choristers believe that the huge volume of time that choristers spend on music is the key to their musical development. It is the first of the elements that contribute to their general musicianship, which includes receiving theory tuition every week, learning to play more than one instrument and participating in school orchestras and bands.

Many interviewees clearly remember their music routines as a chorister despite the fact it happened decades ago. It is not necessary to quote every interviewee here so I have selected four examples to represent how choristers develop their musicianship by investing huge amounts of time in choral singing training, learning music theory and instrument practice. Finding time to practise two instruments is often a challenge, but one that is part of every chorister’s daily routine to the extent that they are expected to have passed Grade 5 Theory by the time they leave the choir school at the age of 13 (Year 8). These four examples are in chronological order; the first two describe the music routine at Durham Cathedral but in

different decades; the third concerns a boys' only choir school; while the fourth is from the first cathedral choir school in the country to introduce female choristers.

(1) Durham Cathedral choristers' routine in 1940s (affected by WWII):

*"We had ten services to attend every week and ten practices roughly, we worked hard on Sundays of course, we had at least two services probably three, always Matins, possibly a Communion after that, now they have Matins and Eucharist and Evensong on an afternoon but you had all sorts of extras thrown in and during the war that was quite interesting, because you had all sorts of regiments who were training locally and they would come in for a sort of final service before they went off to North Africa or wherever like that." (0111)*

(2) Durham Cathedral choristers' routine in 1960s:

*"When I first started, we used to sing in the Cathedral Tuesday and Thursday morning Matins as well as Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday evensongs. We used to sing Saturday evening and then we had three services on a Sunday and then in amongst all of that we had practices as well where we had a morning practice and a brief evening practice before evensong. Then we had a long rehearsal with singing men on a Thursday which took up most of the morning." (0811)*

(3) King's College choristers' routine in the 1980s:

*"We woke up in the morning, we had breakfast, then we had a choir rehearsal and then we had instrument practice. Then school started, so then a full school day, going to the chapel, probably 45-minute rehearsal with the choral scholars, then time for a cup of tea and a cake. Then Evensong, then back for dinner, then two hours of prep and then bed really. Once a week, there were also music instrument lessons with a teacher which you would leave your academic lesson to go to. Essentially, we would be either rehearsing a performance or just rehearsing instrumental technique or something for a good few hours every day." (1311)*

(4) Salisbury Cathedral girl choristers' routine in the 2000s:

*"We were woken up around 7 o'clock and would leave the boarding house around 7.30 and walk over to the cathedral school for breakfast because, unlike many schools, our boarding house was about a ten-minute walk within the cathedral close. Then at about 8.20 the boy and girl choristers would both have their rehearsals. How it went was, if you had Evensong that day, you would rehearse in the cathedral but if you didn't have Evensong that day, you would rehearse in the music department in the cathedral school but would still rehearse the same amount of time. And the choristers that were on duty that day would then also have a rehearsal before the service in the afternoon at about 4.20 I think... if you don't have Evensong that day you would have to do your music practice, you were also expected to do music practice on*



*Saturdays, yes, they managed to fit in quite a lot of music practice. But ultimately if you didn't have Evensong, you would be going back to the boarding house earlier and you could have a bit of time to play. If you had Evensong you would have to also do your prep after Evensong and your music practice and then go back to the boarding house and by that point it would be bedtime...Because the boys and girls shared the services, the girls would sing on a Monday and a Wednesday and the boys would sing Tuesday and Thursday and the girls and boys would alternate whether they were going to Friday, Saturday, Sunday Evensong or Sunday Matins and Eucharist so that is how it kind of evened out, you would either have Evensong throughout the weekend or just the Sunday morning services. It depended on what was coming up, if it was just a normal weekly service, we would do separate rehearsals; however Easter Day and Christmas Day, and those big services leading up to those, we would have joint services and a lot of joint rehearsals as well. We joined forces basically for the big services and the big concerts.”*  
(0421)

From these examples we can see, whether in the 1940s or the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whether in a choir school where boys and girls share the singing duties or not, cathedral choristers spend a lot of time in choral practice and on music in general. Before the church foundation cancelled the weekday morning Matins, choristers needed to sing 10 services a week in the major cathedral and collegiate chapels; that took at least 20 hours a week without including the instrumental practice hours. For example, even after weekday Matins were phased out, choristers were still fully occupied and worked ‘non-stop’, as in Example 3 above, where the interviewee mentioned choristers normally missing two lessons a week to take individual instrumental lessons. This has still not changed in most of the choir schools. Example 4 shows a modern choir school’s schedule fairly accurately, although the choir has both boy and girl choristers who share the singing duties almost evenly. Choristers still rehearse on the day they do not need to attend a service, and fit instrumental practice into their schedule even on Saturdays.

Therefore, English choristers’ music training is not only about singing, but about the amount of time and effort devoted to instrumental playing and learning theory; all these elements are deemed equally important to foster an all-round musicianship and to guarantee choristers maintain a high musical standard.

#### **4.2.1 Vocal training**

Basic choral singing skills enhance singing proficiency. ‘Proficiency’ covers a whole spectrum of skills. To become a fully functioning choir member, certain choral singing skills have to be developed through purposeful training and intense practice. Choral singing skills include:

balancing the voice, keeping good time, controlling breathing and accurately reproducing the sounds of languages other than English (choristers could pronounce whole sentences without necessarily understanding what they are singing).

#### (1) Balancing the voice

According to my interviewees, perhaps the most important aspect of choir-training is to balance the voices so they fit in with the idea of the overall sound that the choirmaster has envisaged.

*“When you are singing all the time in a choir you do learn to balance your voice, as you are growing as a chorister and your voice becomes stronger. Often the organist will tell you politely with hand signals to gently quieten your voice then you have to obtain eye contact and communicate simultaneously.” (1411)*

The interviewees thought that, as everyone’s voice is different, each choir member has to listen to the rest of the choir all the time. It is an ‘art’ to work together to create a particular sound quality that the choirmaster wants and reach a particular balance within that sound, so all trained choristers are aware of others and have an idea of the sound that is required:

*“It is quite an art conducting a choir because you have to communicate with nearly 40 people at the same time and you know adjusting their volume and getting the eye contact and everything.” (1411)*

*“I think everybody’s voice was so different that it was really about how the choir as a whole sounded. A lot of people’s voices sounded very different so they just tried to bring the best out of you.” (2911)*

*“Learning how to sing with a choir, hear the balance and get used to that. We had the same conductor for quite a few years so sort of got used to that as well.” (1121)*

In some cases, the choirmaster encouraged choristers to observe each other without looking at the choirmaster. Through this training process, choristers could manage their own voices and adjust them accordingly:

*“He is keen on us singing by ourselves, looking at each other and using our intuition as singers without a conductor. I am perfectly happy singing without a conductor and do it quite a lot.” (2611)*

#### (2) Keeping good time

For the older generation who sang as choristers during the 1940s and 1950s, learning to beat time was vital as the choirmaster was up in the organ loft so there was no conductor standing in front of them:

*“The organist was the choirmaster<sup>13</sup>, whereas now they have a conductor who conducts the services, we had to do it on our own because the choirmaster was playing the organ. So the organist would lead us into it and then we would sing.” (2111-a chorister who sang in the 1950s)*

This training for establishing the sense of rhythm is an important component to build up choristers’ musicality and is ‘ingrained’ into them:

*“When we were choristers at rehearsal we always beat time, the whole of the practice we would beat time, even now I sing in a church choir and I beat time without thinking and my choirmaster says “why are you beating time?” I can’t stop it is something just ingrained into you obviously.” (1211 – a chorister who sang in 1970s)*

It also developed a responsibility for senior choir members to set the tempo for the rest, as sometimes there was no actual conductor standing in front of the choir:

*“At that time, the two head choristers on each side of the aisle had to conduct the responses with their hands. We called it beating. They would just **beat the time for the choir** to come in. But then on the (responsive) psalms they would nod to bring the other side in. I was deputy head, so I was the head of my side.” (1411)*

(3) Pronouncing languages other than English and controlling breath:

Some also mentioned being trained in foreign vowel sounds and breath control during choir rehearsals, because they were taught that there is a received way to produce those vowels and the breath control helps the singer get the optimum sound. (It is important to note that the training here focused on the *sound* of the language, but not so much on the *meaning* of every word being sung):

*“There was a lot of training on the Italian vowels to let us get the brightest sound.” (2911)*

*“Latin is actually a really nice language to sing in because it doesn’t have the same diphthongs that exist in English so everything is very pure and it is*

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<sup>13</sup> In modern practice, the assistant organist normally plays the organ during service while the organist, who is the choirmaster as well, conducts the choir.

*fixed to the Italian vowels so actually singing in Latin was very common.” (2911)*

*“I certainly know that **one of the things I have benefited from most is singing so much German.** I didn’t learn German but because I have sung so much, **I know how to pronounce it very well,** which means now if I sing German I don’t have to think about it, I can just sing it.” (0912)*

Two interviewees mentioned the importance of having good breath control, which is an important factor in voice production.

*“We did lots of breathing exercises with the diaphragm. It was all about breathing support and vowels and pronunciation so I guess it was like elocution lessons for singing for the voice.” (2911)*

*“We are taught to support the air in our diaphragms. We are taught to keep a constant and balanced air flow, when to breathe and how to use all of our breath and maximise the amount of air used.” (3011)*

The above quotations give us some idea of how choral singing skills are developed through intensive practice, which covers many aspects such as balancing individual voices, counting the beat, producing a ‘bright’ sound and controlling breathing. All this training leads to a significant singing proficiency of which I will give more details below.

#### **4.2.2 Instrumental learning**

Usually, choristers have to take up two instruments and pass the ABRSM Grade 5 proficiency exam in one of these. When my interviewees looked back, they did not feel that it was unusual to play two instruments and felt in the main that it helped their vocal development, as shown by three sample quotes below:

*“It was a very, very musical environment. I remember **in my year group there was only one person who didn’t play at least two instruments.** It was geared towards daily practice with everyone having rostered music lessons.” (3011)*

*“It would have been difficult if I had said I don’t want to play an instrument because perhaps they knew that a lot of the teaching on that side would come through the instruments and not always through the vocals.” (2211)*

*“In an ordinary school to sing and to play an instrument was not the norm whereas in the Choir School to not play an instrument or not to sing that would be abnormal. Everybody would want to do that, they all want it to be inclusive. They wanted to sing and they wanted to play an instrument.” (2311)*

Piano is normally one of the instruments every chorister has to learn, as thinking of a piano keyboard directly helps sight-reading, the importance of which and the methods of teaching it will be dealt with in 4.3.1 *Sight-reading*.

*“If you struggle to sight read, it is quite helpful to think about it as a piano keyboard so that is why we had two pianos in the boarding house so you could always just go down and play.” (1021)*

*“We were heavily encouraged as choristers to play the piano in terms of building up treble clef and bass clef musician skills.” (0511)*

The choice of second instrument is totally dependent on individual preference however.

*“I played piano but when you joined the abbey school everybody had to be learning two instruments. Therefore I chose to take up the oboe because my Mum had played it. I passed Grade 5 on piano and Grade 3 on Oboe there.” (2811)*

*“When you arrived, everyone played piano. You had to pick another instrument in addition to this, so I picked trombone. I was a little bit more advanced on piano so I went straight to Grade 2. I was **Grade 6 on piano** when I came out and **Grade 8 on trombone.**” (2911)*

*“I already had piano and trumpet (before joining the choir school) so I carried on with that, the idea being to **do a Grade a year at least**. I finished as **Grade 6 on the trumpet** and **Grade 7 piano standard.**” (3011)*

In most choir schools, choristers have half an hour’s instrumental practice every day. The practice slots are normally in the morning or during lunch break. In a few cases, the school might have evening practice as well, which makes a chorister’s life much busier:

*“Three mornings a week there was 15 minutes of extra music practice before our hour-long choir practice. There was also half an hour extra instrument practice at lunch. Sometimes in the evening after homework, we had more music practice so it was really intense, filling every minute of the day with something. So for instrument practice, we certainly had half an hour at least every day.” (3011)*

Instrumental practice is ‘supervised’, meaning that a boarding house staff member or a music student normally walks around to check everyone during the half-hour practice time and sign the practice record booklet for them.

*“When you are really very young someone comes around and makes sure that you are practising. They would ask if you needed any help and **would***

*very helpfully play the piano for you if you needed a pianist. There would be lots of people practicing at the same time so they would walk around with a clip board and tick you off if you were doing what you were meant to be doing. Nobody forced me but I just knew that I had to do it so I just got on with it. It wasn't a struggle because I needed to practise and I had learnt this routine."* (0621)

Another interviewee explained his feeling in regards to the supervised practice in his choir school in the following words:

*"Your practice was checked to make sure you were practising on a rota. A person would come round the music room you were assigned to practice in at a certain time to check that you were in there practising. So it was very efficient for small children and very business-like. It was not much fun but it was very effective because it got me through the stage of practice when it was boring, progressing me up to Grade 7 when I left. It got me over that hump of practice being really dull, getting to that point where actually it was rewarding to practise on my own."* (3011)

The quality of an individual's instrument practice varies but from the above comment we can see the level of efficiency of the 'supervised practice' in a boarding choir school context. Although children were still young and at times not very self-motivated or disciplined regarding daily instrument practice, for some of them supervised practice can gradually take these youngsters to a level where they can enjoy the process of playing. However, for the majority, instrument practice was just another part of their routine and not a particular enjoyable experience, as described below:

*"I don't think I looked forward to practising - it was more like a duty. I think it was because of the whole set up when you are in a choir school of 30 boys. You got up in the morning, you rehearsed for an hour, you came back and you would do music practice on your own, then school, Evensong, more music practice, dinner, homework and then practice again. It was just a routine and I didn't know anything different I think at the time. I wouldn't say I particularly enjoyed but I didn't detest it."* (2711)

The format of instrument lessons entails having one lesson per week for each instrument. The lesson normally takes place during school hours which means choristers regularly miss some academic lessons, as they were taken out of class for instrument tutoring.

*"Because you have two instruments, in the morning the head of music at the school would write the time of your lesson on your hand in pen, and so at 10.30 you would go: 'excuse me Sir, I have to go to my music....' You would be forever washing numbers off your hand."* (1311)

From the above evidence, it can be seen that interviewees perceived the overall aim of instrument learning for choristers is to foster an all-round musicianship and that sight-reading proficiency skills are developed particularly during instrument lessons. The instrumental skill and the overall singing skill are interlinked, one leading to the other. Good instrumental playing needs to be vocal and include all the nuances of text-based phrasing, while good singing needs the rhythmic discipline and academic rigor of good instrument playing. Therefore, the interviewees believed that a lot of the learning on the singing side would come through the instrumental work and not always through vocal training.

#### 4.2.3 Music Theory

In many of the choir schools, in addition to playing instruments, choristers are expected to attend a series of lessons outside normal school hours in order to pass the ABRSM Grade 5 Music Theory exam.

*“We were taught music theory as a compulsory subject. **If you didn’t have Grade 5 theory you would be taught it by the organ scholar during lunch time.** You had to take the lessons for the exam; it was just something you had to do as a chorister. If you didn’t pass level 5 they would give you lessons until you did.” (0721)*

*“We had music theory on Saturday mornings, about an hour in a group lesson, and then further up the school when I was about 11. I had some private lessons for that before I did my Grade 5 Theory exam.” (0421)*

Some choristers might not be sure why the Grade 5 Theory exam is that important at such a young age but must follow everyone else and obey the teacher regardless:

*“Every chorister would start doing Grade 5 music theory in Year 6 although I did it the following year in Year 7. We would have maybe **half an hour a week with one of the music teachers. It is kind of assumed that because if you were a chorister you would know Grades 1, 2, 3 and 4.** I don’t know why but Grade 5 always felt very important. **Fairly early on we started doing it and we all passed it fairly quickly.**” (2611)*

Usually they have no choice in the matter, though sometimes there might be a small added incentive to try to keep them happy:

*“We had lessons in twos but I hated it, I absolutely hated it. It was incredibly dull and even though our teacher gave us chocolate it was still dull.” (3011)*

On the other hand, some others knew the Grade 5 exam was a compulsory requirement for attaining higher instrument grades:

*“They taught everyone music theory and put us in for the exams. I completed Grade 5 because it was a prerequisite for further instrument exams.” (2811)*

*“When I was quite young, probably age 9, I did my Grade 5 theory so that I could progress to grade 6 in my instruments.” (0912)*

In all the choir schools, choristers and probationers attend a weekly theory class, as do other advanced instrumentalists who need to prepare for the Grade 5 Theory examination (a prerequisite for entry to practical examinations at Grades 6, 7 and 8). The knowledge choristers gain from their music theory lessons is extremely useful because it helps them read music quicker and understand music better. This conjecture is supported by opinions from other ex-choristers. As the interviewees mentioned:

*“We learnt a lot music theory in the choir school. I have had no formal music teaching since but I am a confident singer and a competent sight reader.” (1211)*

*“In your probationary **first year you had to do your Grade 5 theory** if you were a chorister. We had lessons in twos. I guess the idea was that you needed to know how to read music to a certain standard.” (3011)*

*“We had to pass Grade 5 music theory if we wanted to progress in instrument grades higher than Grade 5 as **music theory was necessary to understand music better.**” (2911)*

For some choristers, being able to pass the Grade 5 Music Theory exam also means a possibility to study music at their next school:

*“I did Grade 5 theory when I was about 12 so when I ended up doing music in comprehensive school, I was quite a lot further ahead.” (2211)*

*“After I did Grade 5 in music theory, I did Grade 8 when I was about 15 but that was at a different school.” (2611)*

To sum up, during the years they receive their singing and instrumental tuition, with an emphasis on music theory, the interviewed choristers had a fully immersive experience. Their expected musical training includes learning to read music, developing their voice, learning at least two instruments, and so, almost automatically, a high standard of all-round musicianship is established for the future.



I would like to end this section with the quote below as it provides a glimpse of the effectiveness of choir school music education:

*“We learnt music by singing, reading and the understanding of musical terms. It was a holistic education in music; part of the profession of being a chorister. That was the great thing - as boys we learnt not only how to sing but also how to understand and interpret music in different modalities. We learnt all about rhythm, style and melodies and everything about musical harmonies, not just for singing in church but for other purposes too. It was a whole education as we were introduced to symphonic music, learnt what suites were and how they were built up into four or five different types of dance. You were taught the whole business of music and encouraged to read about it so we just thought of music as another educational subject.” (0311)*

### **4.3 Music Achievements**

The main musical outcomes emerging from the thirty interviews conducted for this research can be divided into three sections. The first is the significant sight-reading skill that most choristers gain through their five years training; second is the all-round music proficiency some choristers have gained through their unique experience; third is a life-long appreciation of music which has been fostered from a young age through being a chorister.

As part of the interview question, all participants were asked whether their parents were or are musical and whether they had early access to music tuition before joining the choir school. Relevant interview data is shown in *Appendix 5: Participants’ family music background*. Twenty-six participants out of thirty said they had had a musical upbringing as their parents always wanted them to learn an instrument; many of this group had been encouraged by their parents to join the choir of the church they attended while others did not attend church. As shown in the *Appendix 6: Music training before joining the choir school* shows the choristers’ families valued music education and choral singing and gave them early and continuous access to musical resources and education. Only four out of thirty said they had not learned any instrument or singing before their auditions, while the rest had all been prepared by having special music lessons or singing experience.

For many choristers, their parents had done some preparation by giving them that early and continuous access to music, and also several of them had organised some form of home tuition. It is helpful if children who join the choir school at the age of eight as choristers (especially boarders) have already acquired essential learning skills and self-discipline (Barrett, 2011). The

above explanation shows the importance of parental support which make many participants in this study believe themselves already musically and academically above average before joining the choir school. This will be discussed in 7.2.1 *The role of family influence*.

#### 4.3.1 Sight-reading

When ex-choristers look back on their music training in choir school, of all the skills they gained as a chorister, the one most mentioned is sight-reading. The following four extracts show that sight-reading has to be picked up rapidly because choristers need to sing different music in daily services while having only a limited time for practice:

*“The ability to sight read I think is absolutely crucial. There were definitely times when, particularly with things like the psalms, you just ran out of time to rehearse them so you would sing them in the service...Yes you might remember it from the previous month but you weren’t good at them and you had to be up to doing that.” (1812)*

*“Sight-reading was hugely improved whilst I was a chorister. I didn’t really know how to sight read when I started in year 9. I realise you learn that sort of skill from being in the choir, not easy but made that much easier than it would have been for someone who didn’t sing every single day. My sight-reading will never again be as good as it was then because I was singing every day and it was just second nature.” (1121)*

*“We were performing music every day and singing every type of music. The range of music from the 16th-century to contemporary works that were being composed for us, with pretty much everything in between. So being able to sight read means a lot.” (1311)*

*“Certainly the sheer volume of rehearsals, that is my main memory of it. That is to say every day we were reading music and rehearsing or recording so I think very quickly we got the sight-reading skill.” (2211)*

These four quotes show just how highly choristers regard this training, even if it was a real struggle at the beginning. It also could be seen that they are forced to learn a wide range of music rapidly so a reasonably good sight-reading skill is a fundamental building block of choristers’ musicianship.

The following diagram shows the two distinct elements that contribute to the development of this skill: peer-mentoring and other pressures.

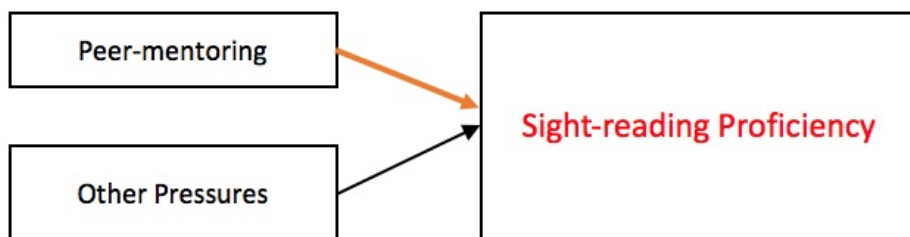


Figure 3: Elements contribute to the development of choristers' sight-reading skill

#### 4.3.1.1 Peer-mentoring

Peer-mentoring or peer instruction means older choristers are paired with newcomers whom they are expected to assist. This seems very common in English choir schools; if we consult modern choir schools' website advertisements, most demand little or no prior musical training from new recruits. For example, King's College School, Cambridge states on their website that on audition day boys will be assessed for their vocal capabilities and take some academic tests, and if they are already learning an instrument they will be tested on that, but it is by no means compulsory. Interviewees mentioned right from the start sight-reading is considered all-important and had to be learnt as a priority.

The essentials of peer-mentoring are clearly seen in the following quotes: one of the ex-choristers believed that they learned from "listening and mimicking". A 'monitorial system' was also mentioned by the older generation (choristers who sang in cathedral and college choirs in the 1940s or 1950s). Their sight-reading skill was learned from the very beginning from peers in the choir:

*Ex 1. "We learned our singing by what I suppose in the 19th century was called the monitorial system. This was where in education, you got educated senior youngsters to train their juniors. The choir was divided into juniors and seniors and probationers and so I was introduced to one of the seniors in the choir. He stood over me in practice and I had to stand next to him and copy him. If I made a mistake, I either got my shins kicked or my ears boxed, so it made me a very, very quick sight reader ". (0111- chorister 1942-1945)*

Twenty years later, things were still much the same:

*Ex. 2 "If you had not learnt how to sight read you would copy the senior boys that you stood next to in services. At that age, you learned by copying from boys next to you and developing your own techniques." (2511- chorister 1965-1970)*

*Ex. 3 “I think a lot of the ways that choristers learn how to sing in the way of their choirs is that you come in and you listen to what is going on around you, so you are probably influenced by the sound of the choir and to an extent just mimic what is going on around you.” (1812 -chorister 1989-1992)*

Even in the present century, the same basic learning strategies still apply:

*Ex. 4 “To be honest, we weren’t really taught how to sight read. I think it was just something you picked up and you had. The older girls or the older boys, they would be fairly solid on their sight reading, you just gradually pick it up I think. (2021- chorister 2002-2006)*

As the last interviewee says, choristers were not taught as such to sight-read. It was a matter of survival or even self-preservation, as can be seen from Ex. 1 above (though that was half a century ago). A young probationer joined the choir at the lowest level, and if they wanted to pass their probationer-ship training and rise to head-chorister or deputy head-chorister, they had to learn quickly, especially how to sight read.

Even when most choirs had introduced a singing teacher, peer-mentoring still seems to have been the main method by which choristers picked up the various singing skills, as the following comments illustrate:

*“We had vocal training lessons. They were quite short in truth because it would happen during the choir rehearsal, so she [the vocal trainer, normally a female] would come in one day a week and each week she would take a few people out for lessons. You would have ten minute lessons each with her ... I mean it was quite limited but I think most of the training probably came in choir from listening to the other choristers and listening to what the choirmaster was saying rather than the individual lessons.” (2611- chorister 2003-2007)*

This last sentence shows clearly that peer-mentoring has maintained its importance in this unique choral tradition, as no one as yet seems to have come up with a more efficient way of teaching. It is purely about immersing a child in the choral music environment every day and letting them use their own talents and common sense to make progress through copying their peers.

#### **4.3.1.2 Other Pressures**

The uniqueness of choristers’ careers means they sing in front of a big congregation several days a week where the repertoire is constantly changing, all of which requires quick learning. Immediately newcomers enter the choir school, they are aware of a whole host of pressures.

The first pressure often comes from the choirmaster. If the choristers do not sing something correctly, it is immediately made extremely clear to them. Thus their sight-reading has to develop equally quickly, to avoid further errors:

*“If we didn’t sing well then our director would tell us, and a lot of girls would cry. So it certainly taught us to just try to do our best.” (1021)*

*“I think the environment was very pressurised. Certainly the idea that if you made a mistake you would be essentially singled out and you would have to own up to it. So there was a real pressure to get it right, we were just being exposed to it so much.” (2211)*

The above two quotes mention that choristers would feel very upset if they made a mistake during rehearsal or performance because they would be singled out afterwards. As they work in a team, they learn how to help each other or cover mistakes to achieve the best result. All these experiences stimulate them to read music very quickly due to this pressure and not only because they have a wide variety of music to learn.

Another pressure comes from a feeling within the choristers themselves. From the very start, as several ex-choristers mention, they had to learn to fit in with the rules of the choir school and the cathedral and become part of the ambient environment --- it is an obvious pressure to get **everything** right. If they made a mistake they felt ashamed that they had not performed professionally.

*“It was just constant practice and just being taught to be professional. You would get a rehearsal and you would go and sing a service and it had to be right. **There was no margin for error.**” (2311)*

The final pressure originates from the audience.

*“They make a huge difference because doing that stuff at the age of 11 and 12 where you are live on the radio and having people listen to choral Evensong, like two million people. You are vaguely aware that is what you are doing but you are able to just kind of manage your way through it.” (1812)*

A pressurised environment is caused by the choirmaster, the choristers themselves and high expectations from the listeners, all of which encourages the choristers to get work done and learn the music swiftly, meaning their sight-reading level increases dramatically. One must understand that the choirmaster expects things to be done efficiently in an hour’s rehearsal and

know what must be achieved in that time. As such it is very rigorous work that has a clear sense of purpose behind it.

Although the pressures must have been formidable at times, on the other hand, many choristers report they quickly came to regard these pressures as challenges and faced up to them with determination. On looking back, many of the interviewees actually found it had prepared them well for the pressures of later life.

In summary, choristers' sight-reading level increases dramatically when they sing intensively in cathedrals and college choirs, and the data shows clearly that peer-mentoring has maintained its importance in this. As it is about immersing a child in the traditional choral music environment every day and letting them use their own talents and common sense to make progress through copying their peers. Meanwhile, the pressurised environment created by the choirmaster and the choristers themselves, plus a high expectation from the listeners, encourages and compels the choristers to develop their skills as they have to learn the music swiftly and efficiently.

#### **4.3.2 Music Proficiency**

This section considers the music proficiency choristers can gain through their unique training. This training mainly gives choristers a valuable foundation for vocal proficiency, including the ability to sing different styles of music and, for some, the opportunity to sing solos, but it also ensures the development of their non-vocal proficiencies, such as instrumental playing of various sorts and conducting.

##### ***4.3.2.1 Vocal proficiency***

###### **(a) Ability to sing different music styles**

Among the thirty interviews, another interesting point I found is that choristers are not only capable of singing choral music, but are also capable of singing all sorts of music.

*“To have had an experience that few others had at school has benefited me greatly, it was invaluable music experience. Most of us left the school with Grade 5 and above in two or three instruments and an ability to sing whatever they wanted.” (2711)*

*“Having learned to sight read church music, that enables you to count in time, to be able to read the words and the music at the same time, so I think*

*we have got the skills now to be able to try and sight read lots of different types of pieces. Obviously, we have been well prepared I think.” (1121)*

Like their peers but unlike several of their predecessors, the modern-day chorister also enjoys pop music:

*“When I was a chorister you would never find anybody who wasn’t interested in pop music and stuff. I think it was because we had so much exposure to choral music and whatever that we all had to have a change.” (2611)*

One interviewee remembered the choir sang some jazz music in a tour abroad when he was in one of the leading choir schools:

*“We did do a couple of pieces for concerts as a whole choir and were singing in a sort of jazz style. It is a different style and it requires a different interpretation I think but certainly it is not beyond the ability of us. **I think lots of choristers like the change and they can switch into any style pretty easily.**” (1311)*

No matter what other forms of music they became interested in, the ability to sing different music genres is never lost which gives individual choristers a good chance to enjoy singing more in later life. One interviewee mentioned that after leaving choir school for many years, he joined his college choir and sang all sorts of music there:

*“Interestingly, last summer the whole choir recorded a CD of jazz music. We would normally have taken some of that music on tour and used it for encores at the ends of concerts but like on the tour I have just been on, we performed half of the concert as jazz music. We actually do it quite a bit now. I am hoping to join a barbershop singing group this year as I did at grammar school, where we had a group of 8 of us who sang lighter music arrangements for close harmony and I kind of miss doing that.” (2811)*

Even if they stuck to choral music, all sorts of opportunities were open to them as this following quote shows. The interviewee could always find a fresh choir to join in his locality:

*“At [...] School **a chorister boy was quickly picked up by the teachers so I ended up singing in the [...] School Choir.** I joined my local Choral Society and as I moved around the area, I moved from one choral society to another. There was Durham Choral Society, Bishop Auckland Choral Society, South Shields Choral Society and so forth, so **I have sung all my life.** I sang until I was about 75 years old.” (0311)*

Furthermore, some choristers felt that it was relatively easy to be back in a church environment and sing the music which they were familiar with, even after dropping off singing for decades and retiring as they could still remember the treble line well. A 75-year-old retired salesman,

who was a chorister in a north-east cathedral, said that he had not sung seriously since he left the choir school. Only after retirement when he found he had problems with his knee and could not play sports anymore did he realise that returning to singing could help prolong his active life, and on joining a local choir, he found he had lost none of the skills he had learnt in the choir school:

*“Funnily enough there were one or two pieces that we sang recently. I was looking at just the top line, the solo line, and I remembered the whole thing from start to finish, and it is just there. And I can sing Ave Verum Corpus which is Mozart and I could sing the top line even now. Then all of a sudden, the opportunity comes to bring it from here to the front and there it is...I have got to start from scratch because I am reading the bottom line now and not the top.” (1912)*

When people mentioned how much they enjoyed singing different types of music no matter whether in the choir school only or afterwards, it is clear that as a consequence of this systematic music training received many ex-choristers are able to join a choir and sing at any stage of their life. It seems having once been a chorister, the individual retains much of what they have been taught, no matter how many years they may not have been involved in singing of any kind.

(b) Ability to sing solo

As part of the choristers’ music training, during the last two years in the choir (aged 12-13), senior choristers often perform more solos once their singing technique and music understanding have reached a good level:

*“We wouldn’t have done any solos when you are 9, 10, 11; the only soloists were the older boys 12 or 13.” (2111)*

*“The majority of them were given to Year 7s because they were kind of at the right level of experience and their voices weren’t changing yet.” (2611)*

Most the time, important solos are given to the head chorister or the deputy head chorister:

*“As a head chorister, **you have to be a really strong singer to lead the other members** of the choir. You stand in the middle of your row so that you can lead the choristers standing around you and **you have to have pretty good sight reading skills** to read the music better than everybody else. As well as this **you are given more solos** because you are selected as a singer.” (0621)*

In some cases, the choirmaster will give the solo to whoever is best suited, especially in a girls’ choir as choir members are teenagers (13-18) such as at Ely Cathedral.



*“The solos were always equally shared. As soon as the youngest, **the year 9s, were relatively comfortable, they had to do the psalms and sing solo.** It was never just the one person, it was always **whoever was best suited to the role.**” (1021)*

*“In the rehearsals the choirmaster would have favourites for who he wanted to do solos but in general everyone did a solo over their time there. I was quite nervous about singing solos and it was a lot of pressure from what I remember.” (2911)*

The above quote represents a very commonly admitted reaction to doing solos as many ex-choristers found they disliked the huge pressure from singing solos as it often made them feel terrified:

*“When we were recording the CD, I was meant to sing one of the solo pieces but I just really didn’t want to and someone else sang my solo in the end. I did a duet instead. I can understand why it is stressful because you don’t want to fail, especially if it is a live performance and you have exactly one shot at it.” (1021)*

*“I had terrible stage fright as a kid until I was 13. That was basically fear. I suppose that is why I didn’t get that many solos because I didn’t take to it very naturally.” (2611)*

*“I was very nervous, particularly as a treble. It was quite nerve-wracking and although the nerves have decreased, they have never gone away, even now.” (2811)*

Some others thought they were not very nervous when they were young but this nervousness increased as they got older:

*“I think my very first solo... because I was little...I just didn’t quite realise that I was singing live on the radio. That just didn’t faze me at all and I was absolutely chilled, not nervous at all. However, as I got older my nerves got so much more extreme and I would do solos in services and my nerves would be awful. This is true for many people: as you get older, you become more aware, you become more nervous. Yet my first solo I wasn’t nervous at all, which is funny really.” (2021)*

*“When I was little I just really enjoyed singing and wanted to do it as much as possible. I think the fear came later as an older chorister because if I was given solos that would have been absolutely terrifying.” (0421)*

*“I did sing solos. I felt fairly nervous but I think I felt the pressure more as I have gotten older. I think I found it easier when I was younger. I mean it was competitive with lots of other people that were kind of at my level so I felt*

*pressure to perform really well. I am really nervous when I sing on my own.”*  
(0621)

For many others, singing solos meant conquering one’s shyness and nervousness, but when they look back, they recognise it as a confidence-building process:

*“I was quite nervous as a chorister. I don’t think I coped with it very well. As an adult I’m fine with it, I still get nerves but I know how to manage them so I probably learnt something out about being able to sing solo.”* (1812)

*“It was the build-up. You know you are singing the ordinary anthem or whatever it might be: ‘Oh, there is my part, what am I going to do?’ and then you are nervous. My mouth used to go dry and I would say ‘oh I am going to have to sing this ....’ And then you open your mouth and then you are all right but it was the build-up.”* (1912)

Although definitely not everyone enjoyed singing solos in front of a massive audience and it is frequently described as a ‘nervous’ or even a ‘horrifying’ experience, eventually the fear and the nervous feeling are overcome:

*“You don’t worry about ‘oh, oh I can’t do that. I’m frightened to do this’. It goes out of you, the worry, the shyness. **In fact, shyness goes out of it completely and it does make people of you.**”* (1612)

*“It doesn’t matter how hard you practice, **how your voice turns out is a bit of luck.** I mean the solos are more on merit and it seems that the quality of a person’s voice is a kind of luck really.”* (1411)

The most important outcome through singing solos in public is the confidence boost which comes through public performance. From being very nervous in the beginning, several interviewees noted that they came to enjoy the experience in the end.

*“It wasn’t unusual to sing solos at age 11; to do a small solo part just to get used to it. I think you have got to be a little bit nervous. **It is the only thing that I have come across where children and adults perform on the same level, doing exactly the same thing.**”* (2511)

*“**I must have felt pressure I think because I don’t remember many things.** I don’t remember many sort of individual moments of performances but I remember one relatively strongly at least. We sang from the other end of the cathedral, like a voice from beyond. It is quite a theatrical idea and so I remember the experience of walking there and being in this ‘different’ place. **I remember I was certainly nervous but it was great, I enjoyed that experience.**”* (2211)

*“I quite liked doing solos. I was quite confident in that respect. It was obviously very nerve-racking the first few times. You get very nervous in a cathedral when you are the only one singing and it is hard to develop that skill because normally you can hide behind everyone else’s voices. No one can really hear you and I felt quite sort of flattered when the choir mistress would choose me to do a solo. Obviously, I had been having singing lessons and I started singing solo, not lots of solo stuff but I was sort of used to having school concerts even before I got to being a chorister so I had done solos before I was a chorister and I quite liked doing solos.” (1121)*

In addition, singing solo makes choristers very much aware of the responsibility placed on them by the choirmaster to get their part exactly right in front of an audience. There is absolutely no room for error.

*“I think **it certainly taught us to just try to do our best.** You are responsible for your own actions. You need to get prepared if you know that you have to sing a solo, and you know it is going to be in front of a lot of people. So you would be responsible for yourself and do well.” (1021)*

#### (c) Benefits of singing proficiency

Even if choristers did not do anything for some years, when they wanted to come back into singing, the skills they had learned from the choir school were still there and could be picked up easily.

*“The good thing about the cathedral education and singing in choirs is you can stop for years and then start straight away, like riding a bike. Once you have learnt it, you can get on a bike after ten years and off you go. I think the quality of your voice needs time to get back up to really good regular quality but certainly, I can read music today like I did ten years ago.” (1411)*

The quote above shows a significant advantage of being a chorister as it means a reasonably good singing skill learned from the choir school can last a lifetime:

*“Since coming to Cambridge, I have done a lot more and my sight-reading skill is still reasonably good. It is not the best **but it is enough to get by on if I am doing a service and only have one hour’s rehearsal.** At Evensong and there is a piece by Byrd I had never seen before but can now accomplish.” (2811)*

The skill of ‘just singing something you have never sung before’, may be quite a challenge for an ordinary choir member, but for a chorister, it seems quite normal:

*“I could look at music and sing it, not a very nice noise but I could sing it and that was a big advantage. People used to ask: ‘how do you do that, that is very fast, how do you know that goes la, la, la, la by looking at it? Well...*

*if you had done it for five hours a day for four years, you'd know how to do it.” (0211)*

Ex-choristers also mentioned that the advantage of being able to sight-read anything means they can easily get a job in a choir:

*“Well, that is another thing for the regular singers in most of these churches. You turn up, you have one rehearsal and then you sing the music. **Being able to sight read means you can get work.**” (1311)*

More significantly, cathedral choristers get the privilege of singing on extremely special occasions because of their professionalism and singing proficiency:

*“I haven't met anybody with similar opportunities to me in terms of touring and producing music. To have released a solo and ten choir CDs by the age of 12 – 13 is unheard of in the music world except for choir schools.” (2711)*

Singing on special occasions often involves pieces ranging over several centuries, all of which have their own special style, and from the start the choristers have to be fully aware of the challenges every new piece brings.

In addition, many ex-choristers mentioned that after they left the choir school and moved to another school, they soon became popular, as people soon found out ‘you are a singer’ (meaning they regarded you as being very proficient).

*“When I got to the comprehensive school there was quite a mix of social classes and mixture of academic abilities. Quite soon one of the other students in my class who knew that I sang in the cathedral asked me to sing in the school band. I was different but somehow got accepted anyway. Probably being known as a singer actually helped me socially, I think.” (2211)*

So, being able to sing seems to make it slightly easier to become part of a new society.

To sum up, singing solos is part of a chorister's unique experience; never easy to begin with yet rewarding in the long run. They have learned to manage their nerves in public and take control of their own voice. This confidence becomes extremely useful in later life (see in 5.3.2 *Confidence*) and also instils in them an understanding of responsibility (discussed in 5.2.2 *Discipline* and 5.2.5 *Leadership/Management*).

#### 4.3.2.2 *Non-vocal proficiency*

Apart from the vocal proficiency, several interviewees mentioned many other music skills they developed through being a chorister. For example, many ex-choristers said they took up conducting in later life, having been inspired by just watching the conductor. Participants also mentioned the instrumental skills gained in the choir school that were good enough for them to be able to play in a band or chamber group later on. Some learnt to play the organ after leaving although they had never properly learnt it in choir school. These instrumental skills could also help them obtain a music scholarship/exhibition. The evidence below further shows the significant impact of choristers' music education on the later development of an individual's proficiency in all-round musicianship, especially instrumental performance.

On entering the school, all choristers of the older generation were given the choice of lessons in either piano or violin (few seem to have opted for the latter), though the style of training was far from formal. Many of the older choristers cited the less formal piano skills they learned:

*“You had to learn either the piano or violin, so I learned piano there. The maximum you can get is Grade 8. I got to Grade 6. As my father said: 'If you can play a piano you can play anything', so my mother bought a piano. Throughout life it has been the source of great enjoyment and **if you get with a group of people and you can play a piano, they love you. You know they do. You are very, very popular.**” (2411)*

Another older chorister also mentioned how he used to play piano in a jazz band to make money after having left the choir school:

*“I learnt a bit about all sorts of instruments in the chorister school. Then when I was head of music at a grammar school and the kids played all sorts of things in the orchestra and you have got to know a bit about all of the instruments, you can sort of speak to them in their language... I like jazz, later, I played in a jazz band and when I was at college, I was playing all over the place during the holidays, just to make money. You know what it is like when you are a student.” (0211)*

Piano skills learned in the choir school cover a wide range. The interviewee below mentioned that he was able to work out tunes on the piano keyboard and attributed this to being a chorister:

*“I remember I was about ten years old and suddenly thinking I can now work a tune out on the piano. It might have been something that we sang at Evensong. I would go to the piano and I would just work out the melody that we sang without having the music. Once I learnt that I was then working out pop songs. I think that is another **benefit of singing every day, all these different types of music - that your brain works out how the chords are without seeing them or the music.**” (1411)*

In more recent years the range of instruments offered has become very broad. Ex-choristers surprisingly developed a wide range of skills in all sorts of instruments, for example drums or guitar. And some of them tried to make money from playing instruments, and some even had their own band:

*“I was a percussionist. I eventually left the choir school and got my own dance band. Dance music- I shouldn’t have been in that because I was in the Minster School with choral music which is completely different to dance music. But in those days, I had a big orchestra in Harrogate, and we were called ‘the Davytones Big Band. That was what I was interested in and used to: rhythm. **That was my main interest...** I had dance bands and people used to book me because of the rhythm and the dance, because they knew that if they were going to do a quick step, then we were doing a quick step in temp. If they were doing a waltz, we would do a waltz. We weren’t rushing it or slowing it, we had got the actual rhythm and that is why **we were very popular**. I was working and then I was going out playing at night. At Christmas, we were probably playing three and four nights a week. That was in the 60s...my dance band. I had a friend with me who used to come along. He was my trumpet player and **I whipped up hundreds and hundreds of dances all over Yorkshire. I have played in front of Mrs Thatcher.**” (1612)*

*“I definitely spent too much time with my guitar. I used to play in a skiffle group and when I left St Peters School I also joined a dance band. We played at the Assembly Rooms in York and over Yorkshire. I was studying to be a Chartered Accountant when I left the Dance Band and joined the former drummer in a cabaret group. We used to play three nights a week in York and one night a week in Leeds. **I was getting more from that than I was from studying to be a chartered accountant.**” (2411)*

*“I did my Grade 5 piano in the choir school and then I stopped and never picked it up again. I still play clarinet. I am doing my Grade 7 Clarinet and I still do Grades for that. I stopped piano because my scholarship here covered two free lessons and that was singing and clarinet. I also still do grades for singing. Now I spend probably four or five hours a week on music, a lot less compared with my time in the choir school. Next year, I am going to get my Grade 8 for clarinet for UCAS points...I also play guitar. I don’t do Grades but I just busk. It is good and just depends where you do it. You get different pay because when I went to my friend’s house who lives in Canterbury I had an hour to wait for a train in King’s Cross, I went to the VIP lounge and borrowed someone’s guitar and **I made £200 in 40 minutes.**” (1711)*

The above three interview quotations show that choristers are highly capable in their instrument proficiency, though probably not every ex-chorister can play an instrument to a professional

standard. None of my interviewees reached a level to be a professional classical soloist, but a lot of them did enjoy just playing.

(a) All-round musicianship

If a chorister attends a choir school from the age of 8 until they are 13, they will have undergone an intensive and systematic music training, for they will have learnt to sing properly and will have been taught instrumental skills to a certain level.

*“You had to learn two instruments in the choir school. I was already doing **piano** and obviously **singing lessons**. I took up the **cello** as my second instrument and later the **organ** as well but that was because I wanted to do it. The cello I had to take. So I got Grade 8 piano, singing and organ. Cello was 7. That was the one I let slip and that has always come back to haunt me...” (0912)*

This ex-chorister now is a music student at Durham. His music skills cover all sorts of areas, singing, piano, cello, organ, directing and conducting. To some extent, these all link to his background as a chorister and his solid music foundation which had been laid out in the choir school. He goes on to say of his present way of life:

*“I do organ a bit here. I am not a normal scholar this year in particular, because I am conducting quite a lot but I know the cathedral organist really well and I occasionally get to play his instrument which is good fun...I do lots of singing still, not all the time. I deputise when people are ill or away and I have done that more this term than any other term because there is a bass that can't make every Thursday...Lots of piano playing, I am accompanying lots of people! It seems there are no accompanists here and lots of singers and instrumentalists needing people to accompany them so that is really fun. Then I am making my cello debut next week.” (0912)*

Another example is an 84-year-old chorister who is now retired but still plays chamber music with friends every week at home. His life-long, non-stop engagement with music and all-around musicianship and music proficiency were founded on his choir school training:

*“I play piano mainly and cello. I am not a brilliant cellist but I manage to get by. I learnt it at choir school just because there was nobody else to play the cello. Now I play a lot of chamber music. I also sang in various choirs like the Northern Sinfonia Chorus and the Swale Singers. I have done a lot of choral work in my time and ran the Durham Singers for 23 years.” (0111)*

From the above quotations we can see that being a chorister is probably the best musical training any child can receive, as it offers all sort of music skills including singing, instrumental skill and theory. But there are other musical skills which are not often taught in the schools but which

nevertheless leave their mark on certain children. The two that are specifically mentioned in the interviews are organ playing and conducting.

#### (b) Organ Skill

The organ is a special instrument that choristers encounter in their daily life. Very few actually got a chance to learn the organ in the choir school but it was recognised as a ‘nice’ extra on top of other music training.

*“I learnt the organ but not quite so thoroughly as the violin. I did take it up in the latter years of Salisbury and I continued it at my senior school. I never focused on it massively but it was a nice extra just to have on the side.” (2021)*

*“I was lucky enough that the organist at New College gave me some lessons during last two years, and when I went to Radley I continued and I still play here at Durham. I always get asked to play the organ at church when I go home, which is nice.” (0912)*

Although not a common instrument for choristers and not part of the instrument choices offered to them, it seems hearing the organ everyday sowed a seed in some minds.

*“The organ is tonally complex. This isn’t something I have thought about before but when you are working with the organist, the range of aesthetics they can call on [sic.]. All the different stops are quite large. With arranging the different sound tones and sound sonic aesthetics during situations or in my case narratively, I think that has also helped by having an exposure to that when I was young. This organ could sound so different in many ways, almost like a composition if you think about it from a compositional point of view, so that was helpful in developing the skill to match emotion to sound.” (2211)*

One said he only started learning the organ when he moved schools after being a cathedral chorister but still enjoys playing for his local church:

*“In the choir school I learned two instruments: the piano and flute. With the piano I think it would have been around Grade 5 and for my flute around the same level, Grade 5 as well. I also did my Grade 5 music theory while I was there. I have continued all of them and also play the organ now. I play the organ professionally at my local church at Christmas services so I am getting the best of both worlds in terms of what I should do with my life at the minute.” (0511)*

Sometimes, if a boy enters puberty early then the choirmaster will encourage him to do something else such as turning pages in the organ loft:



*“My voice suddenly broke when I was 11. I remember it being a problem because my family couldn’t have paid me to stay on but the school found the money to give me a bursary. I had an academic scholarship anyway but I remember it being uncertain as to whether I would stay. I was one of the first boys to break early because that was just at the time where children were starting to be fed proper food in this country. So I went in the organ loft did page-turning which was really great because I got taught all the tricks of the trade, and it was far more interesting actually. I taught myself organ from a chamber organ in the choir rehearsal room in the cathedral that I was allowed to go over to by myself first thing in the morning at 7.00 o’clock. **I never had lessons and taught myself.**” (3011)*

As we can see from the above example, choristers are exposed to the organ when young, though not usually taught how to play it. They gradually pick up the skill based on self-learning in most cases. It is assumed that the fundamental keyboard skills they learn from piano lessons and the other music knowledge absorbed from singing and theory lessons all contribute to self-learning at this point, particularly in their last year in the choir when voices started to change so they can no longer sing treble. In addition, they got the sense of an organ’s changeable sound effects by listening to it during services. This first-hand impression gives them the inspiration possibly to play this instrument. The interesting evidence below shows how an ex-chorister’s experiences later led him to become a well-known organ builder:

*“When I was approaching sixteen, and that of course is a big time for making the decision as to what you are going to do in the future, it seemed that my future in the academic world was not going to go very far. And because I had shown a bit of an interest in organs and also did a certain amount of woodwork, my father suggested I should go into organ building, and it was his idea that we approach Harrison & Harrison to see if I could join them as an apprentice. So I wrote off, was invited for an interview and got an apprenticeship...**I feel fairly strongly that actually the reason I got the job was because I had been a chorister in Durham.** When I applied for a job, because I was living in Yorkshire it wasn’t easy for me to come to attend an interview so I had to come up on a Saturday morning. Ordinarily if you came to be an apprentice here you had to see the foreman in the workshop and he would give you a test, a written test and he would give you something practical to do, to see whether he thought you were the sort of person who would fit in with them. Coming up on a Saturday I bypassed all of that, and had an interview with Cuthbert Harrison, Managing Director of the company at the time, and I sat quietly in his office while he and my father had a conversation. The next week, I got a letter to say that they wanted to offer me an apprenticeship. I had an idea about what an organ was but really I was on the periphery and as I say **I am sure it was the fact that I had been a chorister that Cuthbert Harrison recognised as being something he thought was worth following up.**” (0811)*

As we can see from the above evidence, although this young man had no real knowledge of the organ and organ-building, perhaps because he was an ex-chorister he was taken on in trust. He worked hard and now is one of the leading organ builders in the country.

### (c) Conducting

Conducting is not taught in choir schools, but some ex-choristers mentioned that this skill could develop through their choir training. In the 1940s and 1950s, as interviewees remembered, the choirmaster usually doubled as organist, so during the actual services certain boys were discreetly delegated to conduct:

*“Nowadays you have people conducting the choir, don’t you? We never had a conductor, we just conducted ourselves from the back desks on either side of the choir. We learnt to conduct ourselves unnoticed. So Cyril sat in the organ loft<sup>14</sup>, played the organ and we sang and that was it. I mean the expertise of choristers is beyond belief but that is how we learnt. Because we always did that in practice in those days, quite a lot of ex-choristers were fairly good conductors.” (0111)*

Most choristers said they never learned how to conduct while they were in the choir school, but that is something they watched all the time and gave them the inspiration to take up conducting later on if they got the chance:

*“It definitely created some kind of intrigue. I was interested in conducting but we weren’t actually taught it at the choir school. I learnt a bit of conducting when I did the Eton Choral Chorus a few years after Salisbury and then I also did the conducting module at Durham University.” (2021)*

*“I would certainly say watching our choirmaster **conduct influenced me and made me want to do it** but I didn’t conduct when I was there.” (0912)*

*“(As a pupil...) At [...] School, I conducted the choir in chapel and I would say that is something that I wouldn’t have done had I not been introduced to that world as a chorister. The same with my organ playing. I think that is probably something I have been introduced to as a chorister in terms of you are there every evening with this enormous instrument. I would say that is one of the reasons I took it up- just the unknown quality that I had of it. I didn’t know about it and tried to learn about it.” (0511)*

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<sup>14</sup>. Cyril Maude was the organist at Durham cathedral during World War II.

*“I am a conductor and conduct my own choir but I never did it as a chorister. We do lots of concerts and are making a CD but **I am completely self-taught.** I just worked it out myself. **That is not really quite true** because of course **I have had A. at Winchester** when I was a chorister and **M. at the College Chapel Choir** and of course now **S. at Trinity.** All three of them are very, very brilliant choral conductors who have made a hell of a lot of concert disks and recordings and stuff. **I would say I have learnt from all of them just by watching them while I was singing but I have never been trained.**”*  
(2611)

Once again, that choral music experience can bring out hidden talents, although these young people did not realise this potential benefit at that time. But they were given such a rare chance to be in that environment and, subconsciously, take note of how their choirmaster led them and inspired them. Later they could just develop at their own pace and go into music as deeply as they wished, but the foundation was there.

(d) Possibility of following a path in music

English choir school music education can often help former choristers to obtain a music scholarship or some such award, or even follow music as a career.

(1) Possible funding for further music study

Another measurement of music proficiency can be seen in the music scholarships and exhibitions<sup>15</sup> that the interviewed choristers gained after they had left choir school. Although music standards vary quite significantly from school to school, rendering it difficult to make any meaningful generalisations about the levels of achievement necessary to gain an award, as a broad guideline, gaining a major award at a school of good musical standing, Grade 5/6 Distinction or Merit at age thirteen would be a typical expectation. A lesser award, perhaps an exhibition or bursary, may be gained with fewer qualifications. What senior public schools look for in choral candidates are ability, enthusiasm and potential, and whether they can contribute to the school music life significantly. In this case, many (27 out of 30 interviewees) ex-choristers easily got a music scholarship, exhibition or bursary for their next school.

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<sup>15</sup>. ‘exhibition’ – a financial award or grant to an individual student, normally on grounds of merit.

In the two cases below, ex-choristers were awarded both a music scholarship and an academic scholarship to enter a top public school or grammar school:

*Ex 1: “I actually had two scholarships to Winchester College. I had a music scholarship which I got by audition by singing and playing the piano and cello, and an academic scholarship in which I had to sit eight different exam subjects. So yes, I was a double scholar at Winchester. The music scholarship got me free music lessons, free singing lessons, free cello. At Winchester, it was about a couple of years before I arrived that they reduced the value of the academic scholarship from 50% to 25% so I only had a 25% off for Winchester. I don’t know if you have been there but Winchester’s an all-boys school- very, very expensive and very, very old. The fees are massive, about £32,000 per year so it was still pretty useful.... Now I have a choral scholarship from my college in Trinity College, Cambridge. It’s not very much money at all as I get £300 a year.” (2611)*

*Ex.2 “The grammar school I went to was still a private, selective school. I had two scholarships, an academic scholarship and a music scholarship, mainly because I had been taught everything already, I wasn’t a genius, it was just because I had been taught everything when I was young. Rigorously, you learn your grammar, you learn how English works, you learn how chemistry works, its basics. You learn all the really boring foundations so there was lots of rote learning and tests. The sort of education that we don’t do in this country any more. That was one of the things that I found amazing when I came to Cambridge.” (3011)*

Most ex-choristers obtained a music scholarship to move on to a grammar school or independent school, as we can see in example 3:

*Ex 3: “One of my chorister friends went to the grammar school on a music scholarship so he didn’t have to pay. When I left I also got a music scholarship to a grammar school in the same town. It wasn’t as expensive as some private schools but it was still obviously much more expensive than a state education. I got considerable money off and had to pay only half of the fees. I wasn’t boarding and continued doing music there as a scholar. I sang in the choir, we do a lot of the same music that I did when I was younger so it is very nice, and played my clarinet in the orchestra clarinet ensemble as well.” (0421)*

Some choir schools have their own ‘feed school’, which means a special music scholarship has been set up to attract the ex-choristers to apply, for they know the choristers from the nearby choir school are guaranteed to have a good music standard, as examples 4 and 5 explain:

*Ex 4: “I got a music scholarship when I entered Lancing College. Actually, it was a special music scholarship called the Professor Stanton Music Scholarship and Professor Stanton created the scholarship primarily for Salisbury Cathedral Choristers. So, if you were a Salisbury Cathedral Chorister you would have a much better chance of getting it and if they didn’t*

*have a Salisbury Cathedral chorister apply, then they would give it to another chorister. It was a particular one for Salisbury, so it was great.” (0421)*

*Ex 5: “I was lucky because I got a scholarship from the Minster School, because my parents wouldn’t have been able to afford the St Peters school fees. St Peters have got a strong musical tradition and they loved having ex Minster boys in the choir. They loved it because they didn’t have to teach us anything and in fact we could teach the other lads what we knew, so consequently we were looked upon favourably I would say.” (2411)*

A lot of choristers leave the choir school with a music scholarship to the next school which means that they have a discount on their fees, otherwise, their parents might not be able to afford it:

*Ex 6. “In my case I think it was a third of the fees. This is another benefit to the chorister education, that it gives you the ability to apply for a scholarship to the next school. I don’t think we could have afforded the fees if I hadn’t won the scholarship so it gave me the benefit that I could carry on my education for another five years. As a music scholar, you are expected to lead in the music of the school and to join the orchestras and the choirs. You have free music lessons as well where they expect you to practice and you are pushed quite hard. You have to earn your discount on the fees. (1411)*

*Ex 7: “I got a music exhibition when I went to Durham School and the King’s Scholarship which meant my mother didn’t have to worry too much about the fees.” (0111)*

The above seven examples show the great advantage choristers have because of their music ability; to get a music scholarship to the next school seems quite normal for them. On top of that, an academic scholarship was also achieved by some very capable young choristers (see *Figure 6: Academic progress and personal development alongside choir commitment 5.3.1 Time management*).

## (2) Possibility of doing music as a career

Many choristers have gone on to musical careers, but, equally, others have followed totally different career paths:

*“I have sung at Trinity College Choir for 3 years. The whole time I have been here, I have been told that I should keep singing semi-professionally **but I don’t want to do that as my career.** I see maths as leading to a career in technology instead, while singing is something I will probably continue **as a fairly intensive hobby.**” (2811)*

Not all that many actually go into a music career. Based on my interview data, less than ten participants out of the thirty took up music as a career in later life. As the interviewee below explained:

*“Lots of choristers don’t go on to do music as a career but I think lots of them excel in whatever their chosen field. Whether that is due to the chorister experience who knows. Well, I guess, I think choristers have a range of abilities. Two of the choristers who were there with me were called the Finn twins, Jonathan and Benjamin Finn. [They] wrote Sibelius music software, their company and they were mathematical geniuses. I wouldn’t say that choristers were all artistic or skilled. There was a range of some that were artists, some were good at languages, some were good at science and some were just reasonable at all of it. I mean various sorts of businesses; some people are psychiatrists. There was a couple of musicians certainly”. (1311)*

On the other side, ex-choristers with strong music skills might keep it as a hobby then use it when there is a chance:

*“Most of the choristers I remember who continued music became church or cathedral organists. Wherever you find a cathedral organist, you will find possibly a chorister school background. ... By 1977 I was ordained into the Church of England and that was when all the music I had learnt became very useful as a parish priest leading worship. Besides becoming a parish vicar, I also was the choir master and able to teach other people to sing. I eventually built up the choirs in my churches. That was where I actually think it probably all came to fulfilment.” (0311)*

With reference to the sub-heading of this section, the music proficiency of ex-choristers can be seen in the interview transcript below, where an ex-chorister explained how he got his current job in a publishing house:

*“I think when I was at university I didn’t know what I wanted to do for a career. I knew I wanted to do something in music but I didn’t know what. My wife got a job in London so we moved to London when I was still doing my PhD here. I applied for many jobs with anything to do with music such as orchestras, music school librarian or song copyright administrator. I got my first copyright job with the Performing Rights Society. **I didn’t know anything about copyright but I just learned and I had a lot of music knowledge that helped.** Then I worked at a printed music publishers of hymn books and church and school music. I did that for three years and then I joined Audio Network ten years ago. So I think the fact that **I started here at Durham learning music aged 8 has made me follow a musical path all through my life with studying and then with employment.**” (1411)*

Even those who did not consider pursuing a music career eventually returned to music, as the skills they learned as a chorister were always there and never left them. Here is the case of an ex-chorister who studied brewery and distilling at University:

***“I tried to get away from music - but there is no escape. I did other things [after leaving the choir school], tried new hobbies and activities and spent time messing around with friends like any other normal boy. I then went up to university to study brewing and distilling in Edinburgh ... I started singing in the cathedral there, which was quite good as a student because they paid you some money which is always useful when you are a student. And then from there I went to Gloucester Cathedral and got a job singing there and teaching in the school which I did for two years. I then thought I had had enough really and moved to London, moved into publishing and carried on in various sorts of bits and pieces which I have done for the last twenty years. Now I am producing scores, producing editions of music that no-one else is doing. I am also doing a PhD on the music of Antonio Lotti.” (1311)***

For a cathedral chorister to become a sound designer does not seem out of the ordinary: what is rather unusual is the way in which his cathedral experience plays an important part in the music he now creates:

***“Initially I wanted to be a doctor like my dad but then he said I would not be a good doctor which I think is fair enough, as it is not really my personality type to be in healthcare... When I was a teenager I played in bands and I wrote music largely around rock music but when I got to university I had stopped completely for two years until I started making music in the third year. I started making some dance music but mainly more experimental electronic music. Some of the music commissioned at the cathedral was avant-garde with some really challenging pieces to perform. At the time I don't really remember how I thought about it but I have always liked quite experimental music from quite a young age. I suspect it is partly because I was exposed to it and performed it when I was very young. I have ended up where I am now in work because I started making music for commercials and for short films, realising quite quickly that I preferred sound design as it was interesting. I like to explore where possible. I like to use very long reverberation on a lot of sounds which is related to the experience of producing sound when I was young in this giant space. I often use cathedral type, reverb sounds as that sounds so good and I value these kinds of acoustics. I don't know how much it is related but I have always assumed if I hadn't been brought up musically in that kind of environment, then I wouldn't be so obsessed with those kinds of sounds. Expressing the inexpressible and feelings that are out of the ordinary: that is definitely something I like to do with the stuff I make.” (2211)***

For some ex-girl-choristers, being professional singers seems a straight-forward choice, as the interviewee mentioned below:

*“When I left the choir school, I just felt I really wanted to learn a bit more about what I was singing and just get a general understanding so I decided it was best to go to University. I did do a lot of academic modules- I chose to. **I sang in the cathedral occasionally. I was in Cathedral Consorts in first and second year but I left it in third year.** I didn’t do anything like the same amount of choral singing in my third year because I was trying to focus more on my degree, I did operas as well...**I am now a professional classical singer** so I have been very lucky, to be honest; I have gone straight into it and I am singing regularly now with The Sixteen and other big choirs in London...I think now I have **reached my goal in choral singing** because you can’t really sing with any better choirs than The Sixteen. So I think maybe **I would like to test myself more and go to Music College and start singing solo. So there is always a bigger goal.**” (2021)*

These examples above demonstrate how ex-choristers eventually found a very satisfying use for their chorister training, although not perhaps in a way they would originally have imagined. But, as an earlier interviewee put it, “there is no escape”, as other interviewees have demonstrated, and there is *always* a possibility to pursue some sort of career within that broad framework called “music”.

In summary, choristers’ choral singing skills get to be developed through daily intensive practice, which covers many aspects such as controlling breathing, balancing individual voices, producing a bright sound, singing in very different styles, and keeping exact time. All this training leads to a significant singing proficiency which can last all one’s life. For some choristers, singing solos is a rewarding experience, although it is never easy to begin with, they have learned to manage their nerves in public and take control of their own voice. This confidence becomes extremely useful in later life, in all sorts of ways.

Many participants mentioned that as a consequence of this systematic music training, ex-choristers are always able to join a choir at any stage of their life. It seems that having once been a chorister the individual retains much of what they had been taught, no matter how many years they may not have been involved in singing of any kind.

Apart from the vocal proficiency, the data also show that choristers are highly capable in their instrument proficiency which enables them to explore a subsequently wider range of music, a lot of them enjoyed playing in a band or chamber group later on. Some choristers mentioned that when they were young, they were exposed daily to the sound of the organ and found it somehow attractive. Though few were taught how to play it, they gradually picked up the skill



based on self-learning. In addition, some choristers mentioned that their conducting skill was subconsciously developed through their choir training, although it was not taught while they were in the choir school but was something they watched all the time.

On top of all these benefits, this holistic music education in English choir schools often enables former choristers to move on with a music scholarship or take up music as a career.

#### **4.3.3 Life-long interests in music/appreciation of music**

The last theme relating to music outcomes is the life-long interest in music that ex-choristers have. An interesting phenomenon that several people brought up is that at some point they walked away from music but later came back to it; many of them might not have taken music up as a career but instead regarded it as a life-long interest and hobby.

Here is an example below from a student at Durham University who studying for a MSc in Business. This student stopped doing music related activities after leaving the choir school at the age of 13 and only returned to singing during her second year in University as she found the cathedral a familiar environment and liked going there.

*“Since leaving the choir school, I lost the motivation to practice and sing. It has only recently just come back over the past two years. At Durham in fact I did no singing in my first year at all because I just decided that I wanted to do other things. Obviously, I regret that now but yes that is what I did... Now I enjoy singing again in church. I will still take my music up and I will still be singing but I don't want to do music as my career.” (0621)*

In some cases, ex-choristers kept singing in nearby choirs but eventually gave up as they thought the standards were rather poor compared with the choir in the cathedral. For this reason the interviewee stopped singing in the choir but she kept up other music activities:

*“I sang with St. Chad's chapel choir last year. I had a really fun time but I found it quite frustrating sometimes if people couldn't sight read at all or there were so many sopranos. It wasn't the music standard that I would have liked. I feel really bad saying that.” (0621)*

Another interviewee had a similar complaint about his experience in a small parish church after he had sung in cathedrals both at Durham and Edinburgh. He moved down to the south with his family and started singing regularly in a local church in Suffolk. However, he found it difficult to accept the poor quality of that choir and would rather not sing at such a low standard:

*“I sing in the church choir in Suffolk where we live, a very small church. For about 20 years of my life I have sung in either Durham or in other cathedrals to a very good standard but now to sing to a lower standard I find it really hard. A lot of very elderly ladies who are very much wanting to sing well but are often out of tune. **It is like a curse. You are almost cursed by having a taste for brilliant music and then the rest of your life, if you don’t reach that level, you are forever thinking I would rather not sing at all than sing a lower standard.**” (1411)*

However, this ex-chorister explained to me that he had broad interests in different types of music, and over the years has continued doing music activities as a hobby. He also enjoys pop music, has played in a lot of pop bands, has written songs in the 1980’s and even made a CD last year. Later on he became a director overseeing a company’s music publishing activities. This all seems related to his previous experience as a chorister and the solid music foundation he got from the choir school.

*“**My voice became my sort of first instrument.** I joined the Cathedral Choir at university and then started having singing lessons for the first time. **I loved pop music when I was a chorister.** I played in pop groups until a couple of years ago, a Beatles band, a soul band and occasionally still sing in choirs like the one where we made a CD last summer. **It is great that it gives you the appreciation of music in general**” (1411)*

In the example below, the former chorister tried opera singing in her spare time and made some efforts to prepare for a diploma in singing by taking individual singing lessons, although she is not a music student but majoring in French & Italian Literature in the university:

*“I had such good singing lessons throughout school so I just thought it would be good idea to have a singing lesson every other week, just work on pieces then I won’t forget the technique. I am working on diploma pieces at the moment for the step after Grade 8. It is very hard but at some point I want to work towards it then I will have a repertoire for that.” (0621)*

This kind of long-term engagement with music can be seen in many interviews. Here are three more examples, the first from a retired music teacher, the second from a salesman and the third from a secondary-school student who just left the choir school a few years ago. The participant in Example 1 later became a music teacher after leaving the choir school; although he is over eighty now he is still involved in various local music groups as he said ‘*it never leaves you*’. The interviewee in example 2 also did quite a lot singing after leaving their cathedral choir, such as being part of their next school’s choir and singing in stage productions. Now he is in his fifties and still sings regularly in his local choir. Most importantly, he is confident with his singing skill and admitted that he is still a good singer. The ex-chorister in example 3 was an

A-level student when we met. He obviously enjoys music, especially pop music, in his senior school. ‘Persisting with music activities after leaving the choir’ is a recurrent theme that has emerged from the interview data.

*Ex. 1 “So I finished up teaching at Ferryhill Grammar School and did some lecturing along at New College and playing in a dance band and conducting Operatic Societies, all sorts of things. So **it never leaves you**, the music is always there even if you do something else. The music is still there when you have done it every day all this time.” (0211)*

*Ex.2 “When I left the choir school, I went to Barnard Castle School. At the beginning, I sang in a number of stage productions by this all-boys school: my first role was a bridesmaid, I sang two pieces two years because I had a treble voice and could sing very well. Now I sing in a normal church choir, three hours a week. That is a rehearsal and a service on a Sunday. I occasional sing in Selby Abbey. I have just been asked to sing as a professional in one of the solos. **I will admit I am a good singer.**” (1211)*

*Ex. 3 “I am still in the chapel choir and still like playing piano in ensembles. I practice the piano about three hours a week but don’t play every day as it’s mostly recreation. I also play jazz in my school’s jazz band and like listening to pop music.” (1511)*

For most ex-choristers, music remains one of their hobbies at different stages of their lives, a common phenomenon in the interview data, but for various reasons. In the first example below it was the participant’s father who persuaded him to keep singing, and he became very involved in his father’s choir.

*Ex 1. “My father was in the Choral Society. He was a founder member so when my voice settled down when I was about 17, he asked me if I would go and sing in the Choral Society with them to see how I got on there. I have been singing on and off since then. When I was back in England, I would always come back and sing with the Choral Society. **I have been Chairman of the Choral Society twice over the years. I like singing in a small group**, so if people want a choir for a wedding then we will put a group together and go and sing for them.” (2311)*

Another ex-chorister was so inspired that he took on the task of establishing a new music department in a technical college, and went on to set up a local choir, produce comic operas regularly and even organised two festivals for the Old Choristers’ Association.

*Ex.2 “I have had an enormous amount of satisfaction and I have always been enthusiastic about music. I set up the music department in a technical college. I had a very good choir and we used to put on a comic opera every year with the whole college and so on and I enjoyed myself there... I am obviously a classical musician and choral musician...I was actually the chairman of the*

*Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Association. I managed to run two Festivals in 1993 and 2005 and they have both gone down extremely well.” (0111)*

Many ex-choristers commented that they were still keen to keep music as an important part of their life and really enjoy it, and had been singing or playing instruments on and off over the years, although the focus of life had changed due to various circumstances such as having young children to look after, as in example 3:

*Ex 3. “I am not singing in any choir at the moment. It has been too difficult to fit in with work and now I have changed jobs one of the things **I want to do is spend more time doing music**. So the concert you saw my wife at, I would have been at home looking after the boys. In theory, we would swap over for the next concert. We also belong to a big semi-professional orchestra locally, but it tends to be that one of us plays and the other stays at home and looks after the boys” (1812)*

Ex-choristers sing in all sort of choirs or singing groups and sing a wide range of music. They regard singing as a life-long hobby, no matter what job or career they have. Some of them said they never want to return to singing in church but instead sing in various non-church groups for pure enjoyment:

*“I moved to Rowntree’s chocolate firm into the sales office. I did that for five years although in 1965 I packed it all in and joined Barclay’s Bank. At that time banks didn’t like their employees having a second income because they correctly or incorrectly thought that if you had a second income that meant you couldn’t manage on the bank’s income and you would probably be tempted to take some out of the till. That’s why they didn’t like people having second jobs. **In 1990 I left the bank but I had been singing for about ten years and little by little it just snowballed. I was singing jazz songs but not church music; I never got back to singing in church.**” (2411)*

(b) Appreciation of music:

It is also interesting to see that Anglican choristers initially do not always regard church music as having as much value as, say, pop music --- but their perception of music changes because of the immersive education they have had in the choir school, where they are being introduced to church music in a very intensive way:

*“As a boy and I remember at the time thinking that the early English music was really quite boring. Byrd, Tallis, Tompkins, Weelkes, Gibbons, all of whom I eventually came to love and study at Durham as an undergraduate and doctoral student, at the time seemed a bit the same.” (1411)*

The appreciation of music in general had been emphasised by the interviewees as the most important point from their choral singing experience. Music is seen by them as a ‘wonderful gift’ which can help people attain a relaxed and soothing feeling.

Here are two good examples of how choral training can continue to enrich people’s lives well into retirement. The first respondent below has problems with his vocal cords so he cannot sing any more but he enjoys listening to CDs and singing along ‘in his mind’, whereas without that training, he could never achieve this normally.

*“All those musical scores I read like a book, so even though I can’t sing I get the CD out and I get the score out, whatever it is, and **sing away in my mind**. It is a relaxing, soothing wonderful hobby to be able to go anywhere and sing chants...**I look upon it as a divine gift growing up that widened and broadened one’s interests and led to other things, not just music**. Not just the playing of it but the reading of it and the history of it. Looking back over 500 years you hear William Byrd’s music for mass, **it gives you a great enjoyment, a great thrill and so it is very helpful in lots of ways for people, particularly in this day and age where there is so much racing about.**” (0311)*

The other example shows how music made one senior citizen keep feeling young. In this case, the music they sang as a chorister deeply impressed them and inspired them to become further involved in all kinds of music making.

*“It makes a difference, because I can’t remember a house without music in it...It is the church music which I still love... The way I look at life, when you get a bit older, you do what you are capable of doing and I play the piano every day and I have just bought an electronic piano about a year ago. It is good. I do a lot of work writing music out for people and whatever you play on that piano comes up as printed music on the screen. You just type the words in and the words go underneath the notes.” (0211)*

Therefore, for older choristers now in their seventies or eighties, music can be a way to improve the quality of life, even if they cannot sing any more, as they have these never-fading music skills. It makes the appreciation of music possible, which lifts the spirits and promotes a greater sense of life and living.

#### **4.4 Summary**

The data show that music education for choristers in English choir schools maintains very high standards, not only focussing on singing but also instrumental and music theory learning, thus forming a solid foundation to enhance the development of an all-round musician. Children gain significant sight-reading skills alongside their choral singing skills. At the same time a certain level of instrument skill is being cultivated through regular scheduled practices and weekly individual lessons. Music theory and the whole understanding of music as a subject is prioritised as seen in the time and effort invested in it. Those who board in a choir school as choristers and practise music for over twenty hours a week may also gain an interest in conducting and organ-playing through watching their own choirmaster conduct the choir every day and listening to the organ playing during every service. Most importantly, all choristers gain an appreciation of music and high standards of public performance which last a lifetime. Choristers find it relatively easy to pursue a music career if they want one, and most ex-choristers keep a passion for music which is not necessarily limited to choral singing.

Singing as a chorister is an experience that sets youngsters up for life in a particular way, giving them confidence and valuable opportunities (a music scholarship to enter the next school, for example). Most choristers start their singing career at the age of 8 and leave the choir school at 13 (for some girls, 13 to 18), and receive what is seen as a superlative musical education, performing like professionals daily in the cathedral, with a good chance of appearing on television or radio as well as at different concert venues all around the world, plus recording CDs.

Overall, participants identified the development of strong sight-reading skills as the most important part of their chorister training, though their instrumental training was also rated highly. Many continued to make music in some ways after leaving the choir and mentioned their holistic music education as the foundation for their continuing appreciation of music and their desire to remain musically active.

## Chapter 5: Findings Part 2 - Choristers' Personal Development

### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine how choristers develop their personal, social and academic skills alongside their music skills. The analysis of interview data is focused on life skills choristers may gain through their choral musical training and overall school experience. It has been divided into two main themes: (a) boarding school environment and (b) academic and personal progress. The aim is to see if and how the transferable skills individuals gained from their musical training as choristers contributed to their later academic, social and personal development.

Boarding is still compulsory for young choristers in certain choir schools, the more well-known examples being St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey Choir Schools, London, and King's College School, Cambridge. Twelve choir schools in fact only accept choristers who are willing to board (see p.10). Among the thirty ex-choristers interviewed for this study, the majority were boarders; only four attended non-boarding choir schools.

The effect of boarding on family relationships is an important theme emerging from the data. However, every story has two sides. In this following section we will examine the positive effects, while the negative side will be discussed in *Chapter 6: Findings Part 3 - Challenges of Being a Chorister*.

Boarding, with its strict regime, teaches a child new skills, cements bonds and keeps choristers focused. Some participants strongly agree that there was a level of professionalism that was not usual for children of such a young age, such as dedication, discipline, self-discipline, team spirit, leadership, time management, confidence and independence, as can be seen from Figure 4 below.

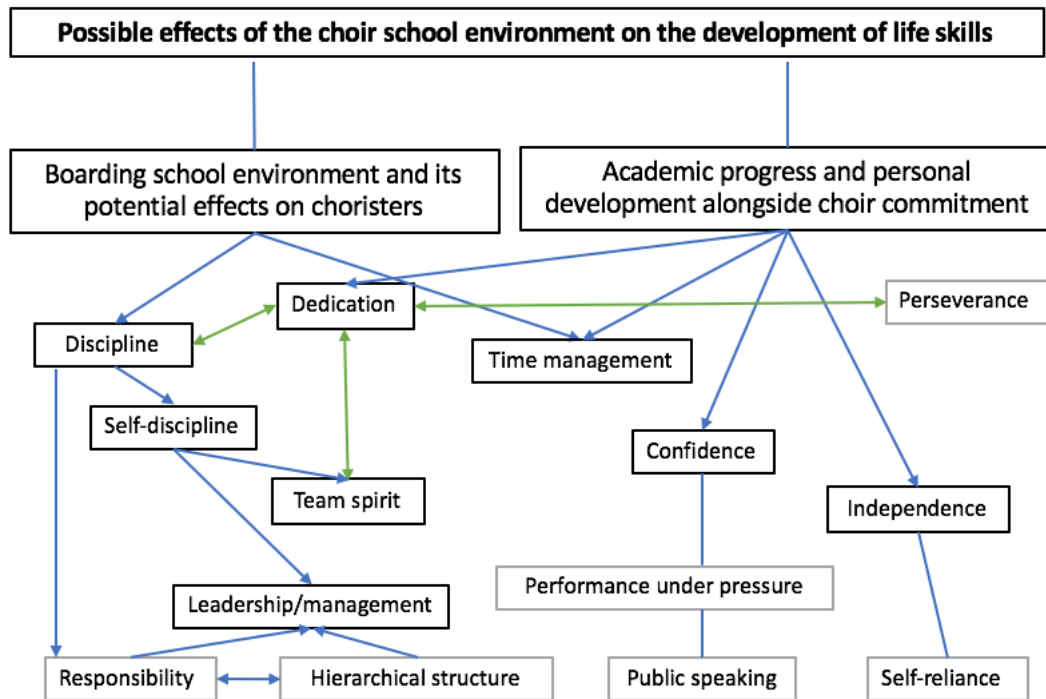


Figure 4: Possible effects of the choir school environment on the development of life skills

## 5.2 The boarding school environment and its potential effects on choristers

Young choristers were separated from their parents and siblings, so instead they formed a new ‘family’ with other boarders, looked after by ‘house-mothers’ or ‘house-masters’. Most ex-choristers remembered their very tough beginning in the boarding school; for a child starting to board at the age of eight or thirteen, life is never easy. A girl chorister who started boarding at the age of eight told me that the more she saw her parents, the more this unsettled her in the boarding aspect:

*“There was a pay phone, and my parents used to phone it pretty much bang on 8.15 every night. I used to cry on the phone. Having said that, what would bother me was seeing my parents. If I saw them in a week when they would come and visit me I would always be a bit tearful saying goodbye, but then I would be fine for the rest of the week.” (2021)*

Even for a girl chorister who started boarding at age thirteen (Year 9), it was very stressful as most choristers in her school could only go home once a week if they lived close enough:

*“There was something I was told in year 9 by one of the girls about a couple of weeks in. She said **there was not a single person that lived in this house that hadn’t cried themselves to sleep at some point or another.** Certainly I saw everybody I knew in my year and everybody younger than me doing this*



*at some point. It was just difficult, really busy and stressful, and you did miss your family...” (0721)*

One interviewee recalls going to a choir school further away from home when she had one next door. This is an example of a sacrifice made to gain a higher standard of education (most boarding schools are based in the south of England where there is much more competition for a place as a chorister):

*“If ultimately you want to choose the best for your child it probably will not be next door. Guildford Cathedral for instance is very near us. I could have gone there and not boarded but we made that sacrifice because Salisbury is a better cathedral choir. I think definitely parents don’t want to send their children away, I think it is very hard. My Mum definitely struggled but ultimately I think she thought ‘well, this is the best for my daughter’.” (0421)*

In most cases, boarding is very strict with no exception even for those who live very close to the school. In one case, an ex-chorister could see his home from the school:

*“My parents lived on the south side and I could see my house pretty much from the high windows in the school. My mum would come all the time but whether I would see her I don’t know. **It is almost like a military unit in a way...a very illiberal environment**, so if my Mum had come, **I might be able to see her but I wouldn’t have been able to engage with her.**” (2211)*

Furthermore, the interview data shows that many choristers only returned home during the half-term or school holidays as they came from other parts of the country, so the time they could spend with their families was very limited:

*“In those days, you had to board at the school if you were a chorister so I had no option. My parents lived 150 miles away, so I didn’t go home that often because we lived so far away. Some parents came every weekend to visit their child but others didn’t. It is certainly hard...but then after a year or even less than that, it became normal, it became my life, that’s how it was.” (1311)*

Daily life in the boarding house is still quite strict, as perhaps it needs to be, but back in the 1940s, the regime was quite shocking as this example shows:

*“**I think people may be horrified at the atmosphere and that we didn’t know any different.** Schools then accepted a certain amount of corporal punishment and teachers used the cane and so on. A terrible thought for you young people now. I think it was the tradition of the old monks to beat out devils, so **the headmaster could give you a whacking if you were naughty.**” (0111)*

In the choir itself the regime is also quite rigorous. Daily rehearsals instil discipline and attention to musical detail and help choristers to achieve a tradition of high musical standards. Although they were young, their role in the service required hard work and commitment so each chorister was responsible for contributing to the success of every rehearsal and performance.

### 5.2.1 Dedication

There is another, more lasting image I hold after having interviewed the thirty ex-choristers: They got up early, practiced their instruments, had breakfast, came to choir rehearsal, had lessons, came back for more rehearsal then sang services, in accordance with the rules. There is a kind of rhythm, a daily rhythm. They have school music lessons as well which are not part of the choir but they are still singing and taking part in school music. This is one of the specialities of choristers' music education and one of its strengths in that they must spend at least three hours a day on musical activity, possibly more because they were singing at weekends as well. Many ex-choristers mentioned that without strong discipline and dedication they could not have performed to a standard that has lasted into later life.

Certainly, they lived under a very strict regime, almost a military-type one, and had to adapt to the new environment very quickly and be able to function as a unit. They soon realised it **had to** become their way of life and that they **had to** work as a team, pushing themselves to support each other when anyone could not cope. The Figure below hopefully gives readers a clue as to how I structured my analysis for part 1- boarding school environment and its potential effects on choristers.

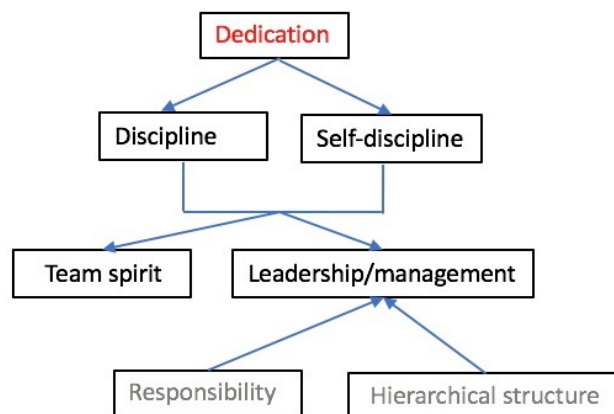


Figure 5: Boarding school environment and its potential effects on choristers

By dedication I mean the ability to take on something really tough and keep working hard to the end; even when exhausted physically. For choristers, they live and sing as a unit and it's the team that allows them to have this incredible trust mechanism to put themselves on the line and sing to this standard every day. I once had a conversation with a choirmaster who told me that the quality of voice is not the primary criterion when they select choristers. The more important things were 'a good ear and musical feel, plus commitment, dedication and the ability to concentrate'. Meanwhile, when selecting choristers, it is not only about such qualities in the child itself but also must take into account the parents, since the collaboration of parents plays a vital part in the development of a good chorister. They are the people who actually ferry the chorister back and forth on time endlessly. They do sacrifice their precious family time, but in other ways they demonstrate their own understanding of their child's commitment and greatly help the child to understand it as well. The participant below believes this is an important aspect to consider:

*"I remember going back to the abbey a couple of years ago, I saw the Headmaster and he said to me that he selects the students based on what their parents are like more than what the student is like. That is what he said to me and it was interesting he said it is never about the child but always about what the parents are like." (2911)*

In this study, the data shows that all participants understood their choir commitment and kept to it. Although it is not an easy job being a child under the age of thirteen, having to sing up to four or five times a week throughout the school term and beyond, most ex-choristers valued the dedication that the discipline of choir life brought them, particularly the ability to work together as a team.

The development of 'team spirit' through being a chorister is a theme that stands out in the interview data. To make choir members work together needs every individual to spend time learning music and creating a dedicated emotional attachment towards a common musical goal. If people do not have that dedication then the choir will not succeed. A very simple example is if someone turns up late they will ruin the rehearsal and cause annoyance to others, as the following quote illustrates:

*"People feel guilty if they don't turn up for choir practice because it will reflect badly on the rest of the choir. And if you have been in a choir that has a certain standard you can appreciate that so you don't like it if someone else turns up late." (1021)*

Choristers, especially boarders, soon learn to be dedicated. As I mentioned above, the majority of them are not from the local area so only return home once a week or once every six weeks (school half-term), which adds more challenges on top of their long singing hours. However, choristers soon learned to dedicate themselves to working hard by simply accepting the tough side of their singing career, which possibly converts into a unique capacity – to keep working at something, no matter how demanding it gets, in order to achieve a group success.

Below, two of the participants give us examples of how choristers devoted themselves to their very busy Christmas schedule, a very unforgettable experience:

*Ex.1. “It was always quite an intensive schedule. Christmas felt really tough often because it got very cold so lots of us were ill. We all lived together so we were all ill together. We were doing at least two services every day, sometimes three, and all of the learning as well. Then it ended with midnight Mass followed by the morning Eucharist. It was kind of horrible as you just went to sleep and missed the rest of Christmas.” (0721)*

*Ex. 2. “We all boarded, we stayed at school for the whole term. On December 16th or 17th, all the other boys [non-choristers] would leave the school and just the choristers would stay until Christmas Day...We were doing all the other services, concerts and carol services all the way up to Christmas Day and then all the parents would turn up and we would have a big Christmas lunch at school which was usually horrid, and then we had a three-hour drive home...” (1311)*

The above experiences have been described as ‘really tough’, ‘horrible’ by the ex-choristers, as they did get very tired in the end. However, the valuable thing is that they learned to become dedicated singers.

Choristers have to get up very early on a daily basis to finish their instrument practice plus a choir rehearsal before 9 am when the school starts, which is not an easy job for children at that age.

*“In term time it was very difficult, especially if you were boarding. I didn’t get all that much time really to do my own thing. There were times when it just did feel quite a lot of hard work and you just thought ‘I wish I could be a bit normal and not have to get up so early’. But in the end, for the whole experience, I am very glad I did it. You learn how to do hard work early on, which is a benefit.” (0421)*

However, the interviewee above was glad she had been through that and saw being a chorister as a treasured experience.

Several interviewees recall their time in the choir school and thought it intensive and hard, and there were times when they wished they were just a normal school child with a normal life; but when they looked back, they felt proud of their contribution to the choir and very satisfied with what they had achieved through hard work, as seen in the following quote:

*“Obviously, there are some moments when you think ‘Oh, I’d really rather just be relaxing this evening rather than going to sing.’ But a very obvious example that springs to mind amongst many is when the Queen came. It was a Eucharist on Sunday morning and the Queen came and we were just singing, she was sitting about where that table is in relation to us and **it was just such an amazing experience**, I will always have very fond memories about it. When you are in the full cathedral, and you feel like you are really singing well, it all really pays off because it is absolutely full and you really notice that the sound you are making is really quite impressive with the choir. You just think: ‘Oh, I am so lucky and I am not going to have this really ever again’. I will always have fond memories about it.” (1121)*

The participant above is now studying at a top university and she treasured her once-in-a-lifetime experience to sing in front of the Queen. It was a fond memory based on a lot of hard work. Only those who have experienced something like this can possibly understand the power of the sound made by a group of musicians in such a building, but even so, without perseverance and dedication, this amazing result simply cannot be achieved.

In addition, dedication is not required solely from choristers. The following quote shows that even their families also have to give an enormous commitment to the cathedral. For example, for five years, the choristers are required to stay at school until the very end of the Christmas Day services. Indeed, in these cases the traditional family Christmas Day revolves round the choir's timetable, and many of them will not get home until late in the evening.

*“There was dedication to our cause. When Christmas term ended all the day pupils would go away on holiday while the rest of the choristers remained at school up until Christmas Day. It was a tough timetable **over the five years** that I was a chorister. To **invest your time solely in one thing**, no matter what, was something that I learned to do. I just had to get on with it.” (0511)*

Overall, choristers are able to dedicate themselves to difficult tasks for long periods of time. Although the life of being a chorister is regimented and sometimes harsh, it certainly teaches young people dedication and discipline. The interview data and analysis below tell us that in the choir stall, they have to be **disciplined** professional musicians.

### 5.2.2 Discipline

Interviewees remembered how they were told what was expected from them as soon as they joined the choir. From then on they assumed responsibility for their own behaviour as a member standing in front of the congregation:

*“You are given responsibility from a very young age and just have to learn to behave. You know what is appropriate in certain settings such as behaving in a service or not speaking when you step into the cathedral. In a service you just get used to having your manner and that everything has its practices... we were contributing to the choir as much as everybody else. I think that has definitely lasted.” (0621)*

The ex-chorister below commented that, at the time, he felt discipline was very strict and drilled, ‘a little bit like being in the army’, but it quickly trained him to understand how to behave in the choir setting. More specifically, from the time the choir walked into the cathedral they were expected to be respectful of all who came there for worship:

*“You learned discipline, we were taught in the church you should be quiet because other people may want to be quiet. Some would say that being a chorister is a little bit like being in the army; it is drilled into you.” (1211)*

The head chorister plays an important role in terms of disciplining the junior choir members. For example, the walk from choir school to song school (the place for rehearsal before the service) would be under the head chorister’s charge, not an adult’s. Two interviewees below mentioned that the discipline was overseen by them (they were both head choristers), and that the choir is like a small organisation with a definite hierarchical structure. The senior choristers, particularly the head and deputy-head chorister, are in charge of the younger ones when they work/sing together:

*Ex.1 “At my choir school, I was head chorister. My responsibility was keeping discipline. Two lines of choristers going into the cathedral and looking angelic usually has a head chorister up there keeping the younger ones from running riot. You find yourself...trying to stop choristers chattering away during a sermon; the ability to look down the line and see if they will shut up.” (1812)*

So in the choir context, discipline is led by the head and deputy head choristers. They are the leaders in the choir, working together with other choristers and have to be good examples for the rest because they are not officially allowed to shout at the others to get into line; the special role of these senior choristers is to exert their authority without recourse to bullying:

*Ex.2 “There is a head chorister and a deputy head, **one person who was really, really musical**, a really good singer, could play the piano, and **one***

*person who could be really tough. Basically, a real singer and an enforcer. It would always happen that you would have at least two people with slightly different roles. When I was head chorister...my deputy was very, very cool and incredibly popular. He was the one that did the discipline.” (2611)*

Meanwhile, the choirmaster certainly plays an important role in letting the choristers know how to behave themselves. His very strict discipline was necessary to achieve a higher purpose - the creation of music- and most choristers would adapt to that fairly quickly.

*“There was a real fear, the organist could make people feel really, really bad if they made mistakes. If you were not looking like a boy behaving well you were punished, so you would learn very quickly not to fidget and at least to look like you were concentrating.” (2211)*

The emphasis on discipline is clearly very strong in many of the interviews. It not only teaches choristers how to behave during services but also educates them in how to meet deadlines, to be in place on time and to produce work on time. The examples below demonstrate how choristers learned to organise themselves and develop the essential life skills of self-discipline and seeking the highest possible standards.

### **5.2.3 Self-discipline**

The ultimate goal of discipline is to help choristers become people who behave well on their own --- they get a constant message that everything they do as individuals matters to the choir as a whole so they soon adopt a strong self-discipline to follow the rules (see analysis below), and this leads each chorister to become mature, responsible and independent. Only through the mature, self-disciplined efforts of each singer could the individual and group potential be realized.

In the interview quote presented below, the participant reflected that discipline is not just about someone telling you what to do but also how you discipline yourself and do things you are supposed to do. She particularly mentioned instrument practice, where self-discipline aided her development of music skills and musicality when she moved to secondary school:

*“Discipline is not just about someone telling you what to do but also for yourself. You are made to do things like music practice when you are just put in a room by yourself with a piano or with your instrument and you have to do it. That definitely helped me when I got to secondary school as I certainly didn’t have someone telling me to practice because I was used to doing it.” (0421)*

Self-discipline and planning skills were fostered through the highly-structured life in the choir school. One ex-chorister said that she dislikes her current unstructured life at university because her previous life in the choir school was very much based on a regular routine - choristers were trained to be organized and do things at the right time:

*“Now I look back on it, I realise it was actually quite strict. If I stay in bed ‘til ten that is like lazy. I think that might be due to being a chorister. I find it quite hard to have a really unstructured day because at school it would be like rehearsal, school, lunch, school, choir, prep, bed. It was very like structured.” (1121)*

An ex-chorister who now is a computer consultant said that the discipline he now has was learned from being a chorister. Therefore, at secondary school he had no difficulty finishing homework on time or preparing for exams as he was taught to stick to plans and follow them through:

*“The choir school has a very good academic reputation, it always has. Part of that is the discipline. I never had a problem, for example for GCSEs and at university studying, because I know the discipline. When I was a chorister, we had prep from seven to eight every night. I was always told don’t work on the night before an exam. I used to go to the cinema but I had done all of my preparation. I learnt that from being a chorister, discipline and planning.” (1211)*

The above two examples show that self-discipline has been instilled into some choristers.

Overall, the discipline in the choir school has been described as ‘very strong but not nasty’. Choristers were taught to respect others and respect the choir as a whole. In addition, the ‘discipline’ gained through choral training was not just obeying the rules, but also developing an inner strength to maintain an intensive pace of life and persevering with their plans until they accomplish them. I believe a key to their hard work lies in the sense of responsibility they feel for their work; when things get tricky, they carry on working as a team.

#### **5.2.4 Team spirit**

An outstanding choir is the result of efficient rehearsals where the highest standard of behaviour is expected. The choristers interviewed in this study learned of their own accord to do the right thing in the absence of instruction or authority as they were recognised as a group of effectively professional singers. They seemed to believe that they were much better as an ensemble than any of them could hope to be individually. They spend more time together compared to the time



they stay with non-choristers in the same school, and sing, play, work and have fun as a group. Here are two examples, one is from a boy chorister and the other is from a girl chorister:

*“There was competition over things like solos but I remember that actually because you are all living together, we were relaxed and all really good friends. There were occasional arguments but no one managed to have an argument for more than two days. We would just get bored and **you have to live with each other it was so small, like family**. There was a strong sense of community, of doing everything together and that you are not alone during the day and became used to working with other people.” (3011)*

*“I mean being a chorister you are working in a team with all these other children so you learn a lot of social skills, I mean it is not like you are just seeing them 9.00 to 3.30 or whatever, you are there with them during the day, during the night time.” (2021)*

Indeed, choristers form close bonds with each other, becoming a special social group. Over the five years they do all sorts of things together, such as going on tours:

*“**We were certainly banded together** because of course we would be going on tours together and also when the rest of the school finished we would be staying around for things like Christmas. The rest of the school would finish about the 10th December and we had to do another two weeks so **the choristers were quite close. Certainly, some of my best friends were choristers.**” (2611)*

It is very important that they learn how to bond with each other to achieve common goals. From the singing perspective, if anyone fails then the team will not function properly:

*“You learned how to work as part of a team because you are in the same boat. **You cannot not get on with people if you are making music with them.** You have to be there and you have to see each other all the time as well so that really helps in later life when you are in other situations.” (0421)*

The above interviewee believed that choristers need to be able to help others and this day-to-day collaboration produces the teamwork which carries across into real life. Through day-to-day singing in a choir, they developed certain levels of teamwork skill:

*“I think it does help your teamwork skills because **you have to ‘breathe’ as one**. Everybody has got to be at the same level. If they are tired you help other choristers out. **There is an element of teamwork that carries across into real life.**” (2911)*

Ex-choristers all have first-hand experience of constantly living with others and getting frustrated. They know sometimes dealing with personal conflict can be difficult when everyone

is tired. However this experience actually made most of them more tolerant persons for they have to be when making music together since no one wants to affect the singing:

*“It was difficult at some points living in constant contact with other 16 – 17 other girls. I think it **developed skills of working together** because not only are you in a choir- and the conductor always used to say this- if there is a personal problem going on between girls then that is going to affect the singing because you are singing and living together. Everyone has to **learn to become slightly more tolerant** really, working together as a team.” (1121)*

The experience of being a chorister teaches young people how to be part of a team but not only when singing in the choir. They learn how to become a listener or a ‘peace-maker’ since in a group environment a person whom others want to turn to for help is always needed. The example below is recorded from a senior girl chorister who joined the choir school at age of sixteen:

*“In the dorm, I did not really have any problems with the girls but when they had problems or arguments amongst themselves, they would always come to me. So being the oldest there (apart from one other girl), I became the peace-maker in the house, and they knew they could come to me.” (1021)*

Overall, choristers work as a team so that their performances can be appreciated and a life/study balance can be achieved. This practice teaches them to listen to varying perspectives of the same situation and to be tolerant to differing opinions. Also working as a team hones their communication skills and helps them to deal with and resolve conflicts in more amicable ways where possible.

### **5.2.5 Leadership/Management**

Sir David Calcutt, QC, a former chorister at Christ Church, Oxford, once said a chorister ‘did a man’s job at a boy’s age’. For those who had been promoted as head or deputy head chorister in the choir, significant confidence and management skills were built up by being a model for younger choir members. As I mentioned before, choristers understand that what they are doing matters to others and people come to watch them sing and demonstrate their appreciation. They also further get a sense of pride when they are chosen to take certain responsibilities, especially when trusted to lead the rest of the group. From there, management skills can be developed.

To talk about management skills and leadership, we could start from a choir’s hierarchal structure. As part of this structure, within the framework of the cathedral’s hierarchy most choirs retain the structure they have inherited from long-standing traditions. That is, a head

chorister provides leadership by being an example of excellence while a deputy head chorister supports the choirmaster in organisation. Underneath them, the choir as a whole is further graded. For example, at one choir school choir boys and probationers all had numbers to show their positions in the choir, as mentioned below:

*“All the probationers and choristers had a number in those days and your progress was monitored. If you were doing better than somebody who was above you, you would switch places. When two boys left the choir, me and the number two probationer then took places fifteen and sixteen.” (1311)*

The order was constantly changing and gradually a probationer could rise up from a double-digit to a single digit position. No one wanted to be demoted as that was seen as a punishment.

*“When you were a probationer the numbers changed quite a lot. So one week you could overtake somebody who had overtaken you the previous week **but when you were a chorister the numbers changed occasionally. It was a big deal if someone else got moved down and you got promoted.**” (1311)*

Everyone has their own number and the number refers to some sort of responsibility. For example, number two chorister was the librarian who collected the music for the rehearsal then made sure it was returned, numbers three to six were in charge of the music for each vocal part and made sure everyone got the right music to sing. Others might have smaller responsibilities like getting pencils ready or opening the door for the choral scholars.

*“I was the number two chorister, the librarian, responsible for all the music, making sure that the music we needed to rehearse was taken from the chapel to the school and back. The next four down were sort of my deputies, responsible for different parts of the music. Then there was a boy who was responsible for the pencils, making sure everyone could write instructions in the copies. One of the boys had to look through a small hole in the door and when the choral scholars came he would open the door, to let them in” (1311)*

This number system also can be seen as a ranking system, from which every chorister's position and progression can be noticed, and it can be used as a way to encourage children to compete with each other:

*“Eventually I moved up [number] and I didn't have to carry music any more. The Number 16 chorister would then carry the heaviest box of music. We would get cakes before the service and the Number 1 chorister would get to choose from all of them [while] Number 16 would get the cake nobody else wanted. **That is why you wanted to rise up the ranks because everything revolved around your number at that time.**” (1311)*

The number system also can help with the development of leadership and management skills as choristers of 11 or 12 years of age are expected to show qualities such as prompt and accurate musical entries, advanced sight-reading skills and exemplary discipline, both in public performance and during choir practice. Choirs such as Durham also have a hierarchal structure as a part of their tradition, where different positions mean different responsibilities. The example below shows the head chorister helping the organist to follow the conductor of the orchestra during a live broadcast performance back to 1940s:

*“If you were deputy head of the choir you were then the organ boy and you had the responsibility of putting out the organist’s canticles and all that in the organ loft ready for the organist. When I was organ boy they used to have concerts in the cathedral with an organ. I used to have to stand on a beer crate up in the organ loft so I could see over the top to the conductor and tap the organist on the shoulder with the tempo from the conductor.” (0111)*

This interviewee later became the music director of a choral society and believes his skill to manage music groups was acquired from his previous experience as cathedral head chorister:

*“There are a lot of transferrable skills in management, you see. If you are running a choral society, an orchestra or especially a comic opera, you have got to know the strengths of your team of singers. You have got to get the best out of them without upsetting them. You have got to stretch the elastic as far as you can without it snapping, and that is a very good secret of management. I was told you have got to give people room to grow.” (0111)*

Other ex-choristers also averred their management skills had been fostered through chorister training and that it helped them in their later careers. One is now a financial team manager, and in his eyes management skills include a good personality, confidence and the ability to engage with people from different backgrounds, all first learnt from a young age in a choir:

*“I was a team manager in a team of about 35. I was probably about the fourth most senior person there and on a day to day basis I would always have people working for me. I am very collaborative and I can stand up and speak in public with confidence, engaging people in what I am saying. I think a lot of that came from being away from home at a young age in a choir.” (1812)*

Therefore, some choristers obtained leadership and management skills through choir training, especially when they were made head or deputy chorister in their final year. It gave them opportunities to take up responsibilities and be a model for others, making them feel more involved in the choir life when they sensed that the choirmaster valued and trusted them as individuals.

### 5.3 Academic progress and personal development alongside choir commitment

As a part of the interview questions, all participants were asked what their impressions were of the academic education in their choir school, and whether they got good support in relation to the academic study alongside their music training. The aim here was to see whether choristers could strike a balance between their general academic study and their music life, and how they invested their time to fulfil their needs. The result interestingly indicates that choristers seem to learn how to manage their time efficiently around their busy schedule; as one interviewee once joked: ‘Give a job to a busy man because it will get done.’ (2311)

Among the thirty interviewees, almost all thought that their choir schools offered them very good academic education and were satisfied with the academic standard they had reached when they left the choir school, though not all liked their schooling. One said he did not do very well while a chorister because he was not academically inclined, and one said she could perhaps have done better if the school had pushed her a bit in her studies, but she was still very happy with the singing standard she had reached. Later on she chose to read Music at university and became a professional singer.

There are some reasons why choir schools’ academic education is considered superior to that in state schools. The first reason is the excellent student/teacher ratio. This next interviewee originally came from a mining village (where the local school probably had very large classes) and who was a chorister in the 1940s. For him, getting a chance to be a chorister and be educated in the cathedral school was a privilege which changed his life. At that time, the school only had choristers and they were all boys. This interviewee deeply believed that the choir school education set him on the road to winning more scholarships and becoming highly skilled in academia:

*“In the senior class the staff/student ratio was incredible. We had two staff and only 24 students so the ratio was one staff to 12 students. It was absolutely superb, you couldn’t get better. With 24 students in the whole school there was a lot of individual tuition as well, which was an advantage. Every year four or five students would leave but another four or five would come in. We had to work through a curriculum and we did it very largely by sitting next to the teacher so there was a lot of supervision.” (0111)*

Now there is only one choir school in the country where they still have small class sizes as the whole school is just for 36 boy choristers. Several interviewees from that school mentioned:

*“I think the teaching at the Abbey was really good because we were in a small class of six. It was almost like tutoring. When I got to secondary school, the things I had learnt at choir school lasted until my GCSEs”. (2911)*

Secondly, participants who entered the choir school in the 1980s noticed that the school had specialist teachers to give lessons --- very different at the time compared with state schools. This could possibly be of benefit to children in the choir school as the university educated teachers probably had a better understanding of their own subjects.

*“Because you had specialist teachers from around age 10, you would have been taught Latin, Maths or Science by teachers who were university educated in these subjects. This was different from state schools at that time, which had teachers that were non-specialists... I was interested in sciences because my parents were both pharmacists but practical work in a laboratory at age eleven was unusual for a state school and didn’t occur in primary schools. From that time on, I wanted to study science at university.” (2511)*

Thirdly, others believed that the choir school’s education was more tailored to fit the individual’s needs and the child’s ability. If a child was particularly good at one subject then he/she would be moved up to a higher, more advanced class to study alongside older children.

*“It was based on ability. For example, we had a boy whose father was the Professor of Oriental Studies. His son was brilliant and he moved up the school. He didn’t stay in a class of his own age, he moved up because he was capable of studying with the older boys so it was on merit eventually and then age came into it as a secondary consideration.” (2111)*

Furthermore, some participants who wanted to remain in the independent school system realised their education in the choir school hugely helped them to prepare for exams which enabled them to get scholarships into reasonably good schools when they left the choir.

*“Our curriculum was written to help us move on to public school<sup>16</sup>. It was different to state schools as it was a curriculum similar to a preparatory school. They promoted the more able a year forward to a higher class so that they ended up in a small scholarship group in their last year. So when the*

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<sup>16</sup>. “Public school” in the UK means a student-selective, independent fee paying secondary school.

*other people of their age had left school having done their normal common entrance you would be left at the end with just a small group of people being prepared for academic scholarship exams. (2511)*

So eventually some ex-choristers found themselves among the best pupils in their choir school despite their busy singing duties and other music commitments. It might relate to the regular prep time (homework time) they have every night from the age of nine (Year 5). As the child gets into the routine and can do their homework and revision in an environment where everyone else does the same, then this routine helps them to absorb what they learned from school lessons naturally.

*“Actually some of the choristers were frequently among the best pupils in the school. I don’t know why but they were used to working quite hard and never seemed at a disadvantage. I got the school’s highest scholarship to Winchester and I was head chorister at the same time. I just never had any trouble with it. I think the junior up until Year 5 had half an hour prep time with an hour’s prep time in Year 6 and 7. You would have an hour and a half to do your prep in Year 8 and certainly chorister things almost never interfered as the school was very careful to make sure that we were back from Evensong on time. Evensong was at 5.30 and finished about 6.30. When we came back, there would be a meal laid out for us to eat. We would always be ready to do our prep at about 7 o’clock.” (2611)*

The last two quotes show that choristers in Year 5 (aged 9) get half an hour prep time, which increases to an hour a day for those in Year 6 and Year 7, while choristers in Year 8 get 1.5 hours every night to do prep even if they are busy engaging with music activities. This could be seen as a reason for the choristers’ high academic achievements and explain how it is possible for some of them to be one of the best students in the class. The data published by OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) in 2014 shows that British 15-year –old students spend 4.9 hours per week on homework on average which is lower than the hours Year 8 choristers (aged 13) spend on prep (7.5 hours per week) (OECD, 2014). Therefore it is clear that the time choristers spend on homework, revision, self-learning or digesting the knowledge they gain every day is markedly above the average level for this country.

In some of the very best choir schools, choristers had been pushed to their limits in the last two years and the academic outcome was very impressive. According to the interviewee below:

*“It was ridiculous and it was why I think so many of us ended up at Oxbridge, because they had this very strict system. Everyone will be taught as if they are going to be a scholar until the last two years when it is streamed. I was*

*in the top set the whole way so I was being pushed to get everything academically out of me. It was a unique education that I wouldn't have had if I hadn't been a chorister. I don't think anywhere except the choir schools offer that in this country any more as it really does push children as far as they possibly can. It was only when I went to my grammar school in Southampton that I realised that by the age of 13 I had done GCSE standard biology and chemistry and physics, achieved A-level standard Latin and had exceeded English literature beyond A-level standard.” (3011)*

*“I wasn't the cleverest or best musician in my year, when I was released into the general population as it were I realised how good I actually was. At Pilgrims for example I wasn't that good at Latin; it was actually the one subject that I really struggled with because I am not linguistically gifted. I was getting 30% to 60% whereas my friends were getting 90% – 95% but as soon as I was enrolled into a normal school, I was getting 100% every time.” (3011)*

So when all the evidence participants provided me with about UK choir school's academic education is sifted, it is very evident that all those aspects mentioned above significantly contribute to the choristers' academic development.

To start the data analysis for 5.2, the mind map (figure 6) below will help readers to follow the sequence of my analysis:

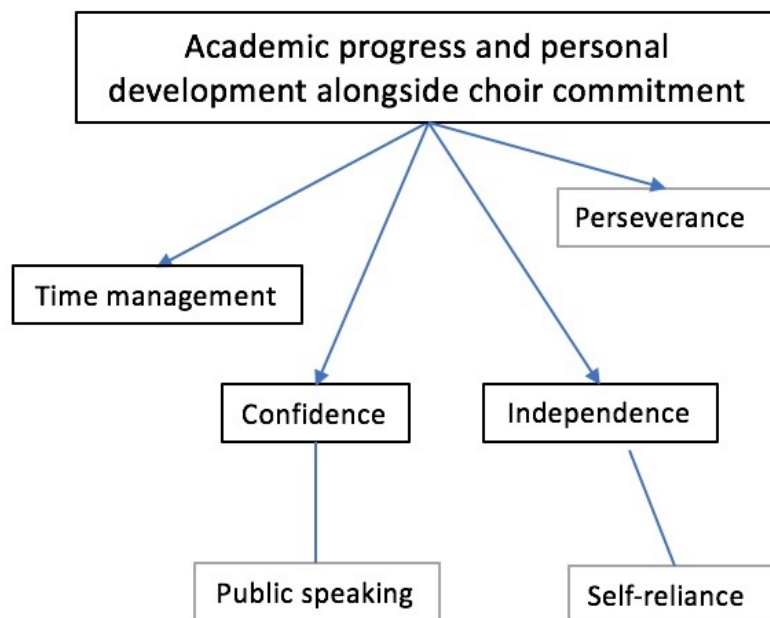


Figure 6: Academic progress and personal development alongside choir commitment



### 5.3.1 Time management

The discussion above draws our attention to the allocation of prep time (homework/revision) and its potential influence on choristers' academic achievement. The question now is how choristers manage to do so much on top of their regular twenty hours' music activities every week?

The intensive schedule of a chorister's life was simply described by one of the interviewees in the quote below, presumably a common impression choristers had for their time in the choir school.

*“Looking back on it and thinking about it, no, there wasn't much free time but at the time I never noticed it. There was so much happening, there was always something going on that I never really got annoyed at it. I never really felt like I was being deprived.” (2611)*

As I explained in the previous section, the choristers' schedule is very intensive but they get a fixed length of time to do study in the evening, which increases as they grow older to protect their academic standards in the face of extra singing duties.

*“There was a tension between the academic work that we had to do and the choir and sometimes there was a tension between the headmaster and the master of the choristers in those days.” (0111)*

In the interview data, the time management skills first come from the attitude a child has toward winning a 'competition'. Participants often mentioned they realized their life as a chorister was highly structured and their day had been divided into small slots so if they did not manage their time cleverly then they would end up losing competitiveness. So, if a child wants to do well in all aspects then he/she has to be well-organised and develop time management skills.

*“Because the day was divided up into so many different periods where you had your music practice scheduled at one time and choir practice and lessons at others, everything was so organised that **I think since then I have always just structured my day in some way. I got very good at allocating time and I became very ambitious as it was a little bit competitive as to who was the best in the choir.**” (2911)*

The above example shows that, on the one hand, choristers were fully occupied but, on the other, they were able to boost their time management skills and structure their very limited spare time.

It is important to remember that all children at that age need time to relax, play, do sports and socialise with their friends, and choristers are exactly the same, except how to squeeze in the time for play is a skill they have to learn, to let them enjoy themselves in-between singing and studies. The girl chorister below thought she developed the time management skills to finish her revision and homework as soon as possible in order to have time to relax:

*“I think **time management** was just essential to be a chorister. My time management skills were hugely developed because we still had a lot of revision to do for exams at school, a lot of work to do, a lot of extracurricular activities to do. You didn’t want to just do singing: I wanted to do sport or the other things that the school offered as well as getting my work done so it did develop my ability to think, ‘okay, now I am going to do this work’...I think **I organised my time quite well and I would get my work done on time, I had time to relax if I wanted to. I was one of the people who always wanted to be in someone else’s room just relaxing with them or watching TV with some of the other girls.**” (1121)*

What the above two quotes show is that if a young chorister wants to do well both in the choir and in the school, or wants to have time to participate in sports or other activities the school offers, or simply just get time to relax, then for a busy chorister, time management skills are fundamental and probably stays with the child throughout school.

Apart from the above two potential drives of establishing time management skills, the everyday routine in the choir school can help the chorister in the long-run. Because the idea of ‘structuring your day’ or ‘time-management’ had been introduced to this group of musicians at such a young age, the outcome of choral and boarding school training seems to become a part of their life skills, and choristers just do it automatically. The following quote shows how one chorister gained the ability to structure her spare time efficiently, which helped her to be organised and set up her own routine when she moved to a school with more freedom.

*“Personally, with time management I find **it builds a structure into your day when you are so young.** You have practice every single morning and sing services every single day apart from one day a week that **you just get into a routine...** It was quite a liberal school [her senior school] in which you had to organise your own time so whenever you had a free period you would go and use it to do music practice...Most evenings I would have music practices, rehearsals, it wasn’t the same as cathedral school and I didn’t have the early mornings when I had to sing before school or anything. Nobody forced me but I just knew that I had to do it and it wasn’t a struggle because I had learnt this routine and so I just got on with it.” (0621)*

Young choristers learn how to adapt to priorities in a busy schedule and how to plan ahead and consider which activity requires the focus, energy and time when time is very limited. This is not only time management but also prioritisation, or in other words, doing the thing that matters most first. It needs a long-term practice so that people can alter their schedule when one area of their life must take priority such as exams or instrument practice:

*“By my last year [in the choir school] I was running on the athletics track for an hour or so at least twice a week, I was competing at county standards and then going home and doing homework, probably doing cello practice, then kind of collapsing in bed. **So you learn how to be very good at managing time and I am sure that really does help you when you come later in school, when you have got to manage your way through exams. But then in work as well because you will be always planning ahead and you can adapt to priorities, such as when I cannot go out at the weekend because I need to get something done. So it teaches you that kind of thing.**” (1812)*

The time management skills children learned in the choir school might apply to their later schooling. The two examples that follow demonstrate this clearly. One participant mentioned that he kept practising two instruments at a very competitive public school after he left the choir:

*“I made the most of sport at Winchester though I kept doing two of my instruments. In fact I did more music at Winchester than Westminster as it turned out because they just pushed me into every single group: wind band, orchestra and choir. Anything that meant playing classical music. It took up all my time but in hindsight that was a good thing.” (2711)*

The other said even when he had moved to university, the time management skills he learned from the choir school still helped him with that transition.

*“I still have a diary that is very structured but when I was at university I had a board with everything marked out to the hour with what I was doing. It was a fortnight timetable because in Cambridge everything in the law faculty worked on a fortnightly timetable. Thursday through Thursday was my way of living, I have never understood people who can live without a diary. How do you get through the day? Leisure is really important and **it all starts when the mini bus leaves at 3.33.**” (3011)*

The above quote, especially the last sentence, “*The mini bus leaves at 3:33*”, is a very typical thing for choristers as they always need to be somewhere on time. What those young choristers have experienced through having to be accurate to the minute has made them able to manage their time precisely and stay with the plan.

To end this section, I would conclude that the data show that choristers develop to some extent their own personal time management skills to cope with the demands of academic study, which is why some of them could be one of those top set students according to their academic performance. However, I also found in many cases, participants believed themselves already academically above average before joining the choir school. This echoes the information on many choir schools' recruitment websites as all choristers in major cathedrals are asked to sit English and Maths exams while they went for the vocal trial. Before a child can be admitted as a probationer, the school needs to make sure the child is fairly capable academically or at least not behind. Therefore, the standard a chorister manages to reach by the end of their school journey is not only based on that five years' schooling in the choir school but is also related to the child's previous educational background. This has been mentioned at the beginning of 4.3 *Music Achievements* and will be discussed in the Chapter 7.2.1: *The role of family influence*.

### **5.3.2 Confidence**

Being given the chance to sing solo has been considered a wonderful opportunity to boost a child's confidence, which has already been largely discussed in Chapter 4 (see 4.2.2.1 *Vocal Proficiency*). For many ex-choristers, singing solos meant conquering their shyness or nervousness and developing confidence.

Usually this was a privilege for older choristers. But the following example illustrates how a younger first-year chorister was selected to sing a solo for a new choir CD.

*"I remember when I was in my first year they did a recording and I was given a solo. I think all the older boys were a bit peeved that I had been given a solo on the recording and they hadn't. I remember that was a bit of a confidence boost and that I got them more regularly after that. The experiences I had will last with me forever because although still nervous, I am actually comfortable in stage performances because I have the innate confidence you develop from performing every day from the age of eight."*  
(2711)

It appears from the above example that success for a first-year chorister can enhance the child's overall feelings of confidence and self-esteem. As the training has begun from a young age, the above participant believed that he had developed an 'innate confidence' through everyday performance as his ability has been confirmed through recording a solo on CD, so later he had no worries about stage performances because of this experience.

Meetings with various important people in the cathedral, minster or collegiate chapel after services are a quite normal experience for choristers. Sometimes, if the whole team has been invited to sing in a special event, a senior chorister is invited to give a short speech to thank the host. Also, from time to time, they might see some extremely well-known public figure turning up to a service but they soon take this in their stride, since the older members of the team will have re-assured them that it makes no difference to their performance. Talking in a confident manner to people they do not know is something they naturally acquire:

*“You learn confidence, something that I learnt as a chorister because sometimes you would get to meet the dean, you would get to meet the bishop; you would sometimes have to talk with the other people of the choir that you didn’t know. I have used that a lot in my later work. Now I work in sales, I can go to talk to anyone and have no problems about confidence. Inside I might feel a little bit worried but I can give an exterior confidence.” (1211)*

Many ex-choristers agreed that the most important outcome through singing in public is the confidence which has been boosted through public performance. It is a daily practice, as the participant here mentioned:

*“There is a certain degree of self-confidence certainly from performing every day that is very easily transferrable to standing up in front of a room of people and talking.” (1311)*

Singing in front of a big congregation has also helped some develop the ability to speak in front of a lot of people without fear, since choristers have automatically learned to manage their nerves and take control of their own voices. This confidence becomes extremely useful in later life, as in the first example where, at the age of 13, the participant was suddenly asked to speak to a group of 80-year-olds in Westminster Abbey but had confidence in his abilities to do this. He believed this all came from his singing as a choir boy.

***Ex 1 “You do gain a certain amount of confidence because you are performing from such a young age. I remember as Head Boy, a load of old boys came around Westminster Abbey, who were about 80 years old and I was 13 and had to give a speech... But it is singing and being a part of the choir and doing solos by which you gain a certain amount of life confidence which I don’t think leaves you.” (2911)***

In the second, third and fourth examples, the interviewees all believed their cathedral choral singing experience helped them to gain the confidence in public speaking. Again, this confidence (or this talent) was not something acquired naturally but had to do with the sheer amount of time that they sang in the choir which gave them that boldness:

*Ex. 2 “My public speaking skills were definitely improved by being a chorister. Also my stage performance playing was never a problem after being exposed to audiences as a chorister.” (2711)*

*Ex. 3 “Being in the Minster choir in a very tourist-orientated city you got used to people looking at you and listening to you. It’s a great advantage in later life. I did like public speaking, definitely. One of my friends said: ‘it must take an awful lot of talent and confidence to do that’, and another said: ‘He has just got the cheek. That is all it is, cheek’. But it is more than that. It is the ability to stand up and sing.” (2411)*

*Ex. 4 “Public speaking was really easy for me. As a 14 year old I was delivering half hour long lectures in school to everyone up through the sixth form. By the time I was 15 or 16, I would do a talk about poetry if it was the Byron Society or about cohesion of the Roman Empire or the campaigns of Caesar if it was the classical society. I talked about things like bioluminescence in the Science Society in **complete comfort; standing up and reciting any topic because if you have done a talk before and read like I have in front of 3,000 people as a chorister, a classroom has no fear for me. Having those experiences as a small child was so normal.**” (3011)*

In the fifth example, the participant explained the link between childhood singing experience and his ability to recite a long piece in Old English, born of singing long psalms during Evensong, the musical core of Anglican worship.

*Ex. 5 “I have no problems standing up to speak, I will show you the certificate I had to stand up in front of the Chamberlain of the Court in the Guildhall and recite this big long piece in old English and he said: ‘absolutely wonderful, most people can’t say it.’ and I said: ‘well, I am used to it because I am doing it all the time, I used to recite the Psalms of David through every month, the whole book, each month.’” (2311)*

### ***Performing under pressure***

The other skill mentioned by participants is the ability to stay calm and manage their anxieties and perform under pressure. As I mentioned in Chapter 4 (Section 4.2.2.1-(d) *Ability to sing solos*), most children feel nervous when they are given their first solo, but after a few times they improve significantly. This ability comes in handy in later everyday life as well.

The first example came from an ex-chorister who had left the choir four years earlier and was in his last year in secondary school when I interviewed him. He gave me an example of how singing in the cathedral helped him to overcome nervousness in his recent driving test.

*“About the performance aspect, that was something we could do nigh on every day as choristers. I just sat my driving test yesterday, and the instructor*

*said 'Oh, you don't look very nervous' when normally everyone is shaking to hold the steering wheel. I would say I owe my steadfastness and immovability to just the sheer amount of performance that I did as a chorister so I wasn't shaking. I was sort of in the zone and I passed. I have definitely got a skill of being able to perform in whatever context it is taken in." (0511)*

In the second example, the participant also believes that his experience as a chorister hugely helped him make speeches in public in his later career. He said, as a chorister, the child understands his/her role is to deliver something with assurance and has practised this so regularly that the ability to manage his/her anxiety comes out naturally.

*"Singing in public, perhaps because it was in church, I thought what a privilege it is so it didn't use to frighten me at all, I wasn't anxious about it. I did do some solos and enjoyed them. I have never been frightened of public speaking either. I have always enjoyed public speaking, this speaking was never by itself an ordeal. It maybe that **I owe something to being a chorister and it all goes into helping you become skilled in public performances and understand that you are in a role that you are obliged to deliver.**" (2511)*

In addition, it is recognised as a quite unique experience that in the cathedral setting children and adults perform on the same level and feel equal partners in ensuring the music they make together is of the highest quality, as seen in the next example:

*"I was better at speaking to groups of people than a lot of my peers at grammar school which I think had a lot to do with performing on a regular basis in choir with adults. It helped significantly with presentations and public speaking." (2811)*

The last example emphasises the importance of the ability to perform under pressure by managing one's anxiety. Performing in the cathedral setting for a live broadcast was quite a common experience for choristers. The interviewee below mentioned that he had difficulty getting through this at first but quickly gained this ability to respond effectively to pressures and stresses, which is important in any line of work.

*"You gain experience about how to manage your anxiety when you are under pressure...at the age of 11 and 12, you are live on the radio and having people listen to choral Evensong, like two million people; you are vaguely aware that that is what you are doing but you are able to just manage your way through it. I think that is really useful when it comes down to work, because you know how to perform in certain situations and you can keep yourself calm rather than getting into a panic about it." (1812)*

Through being a chorister, children acquire a great deal of confidence: performing for large audiences in the cathedral or appearing on TV and radio are normal for them. They are able not

only to perform their music in a way that touches their audiences but also to stand up and deliver speeches with equal engagement, all without any obvious signs of fear or anxiety. This skill, a type of professionalism, can so often transfer into so many aspects of everyday life.

### 5.3.3 Independence

As I mentioned before, many ex-choristers I interviewed in this study were boarders while singing for a cathedral or collegiate choir. From the boarding perspective, some children quickly adapted to it whereas others felt that it was really a struggle. The quote below is a boy-chorister's perspective on boarding, it was hard for him during the first year but he also enjoyed the other five years very much:

*"I boarded for six years at Pilgrims where certainly for the last five years it was a dream. I had so much fun I would not have wished it any other way. The first year and particularly the first term were a bit difficult because my parents were 20 miles away. I didn't see them that often and certainly I did get a bit homesick and found it all a bit difficult and a bit too much in the first year. In about October of my second year my parents moved into Winchester and so they would occasionally come to Evensong and I could occasionally see them at school. From that point on it was the easiest thing in the world, I loved it so much, but, yes, the first year was tricky." (2611)*

As a consequence of living away from home, choristers soon realise parents are no longer supervising them and that they have to work out on their own how to get on with people around them and form a healthy relationship with each other. They do have quite unusual childhood, far busier than their peers, so some ex-choristers called themselves 'young workers'. However, whether it was a smooth transition from home to boarding school or a slow adaptation process, many ex-choristers saw this as a precious experience which offered them a certain amount of independence and confidence:

*"You learn how to be more independent because obviously you are not with your parents every day, you are on your own. You learn how to meet new people and just get on with your life. For most people it helps them open up to the world. You just become more confident. I think it is good." (1511)*

For some ex-choristers, boarding was a normal way of life as they had no other childhood to compare it with. In the case below, the participant lived in boarding school until the age of 18 then went on to university. As a chorister in a world-famous choir, he had to stay there much longer than others out of the term time due to his singing commitments. The way he saw boarding was just something quite normal since he had not lived with family during term-time from the age of eight.



*“I think it teaches you a certain amount of independence and self-reliance, being a chorister even more. Because you have to stay boarding for much longer than everybody else you watch all the other boys going home, hugging their parents and getting in the car while you stay. It is certainly hard, there was lots of crying and some unhappiness and unfamiliarity with the whole thing but then after a year or even less, it became normal as children adapt very easily, and it became my life. I didn’t have a lot to compare it to, and I liked it, and I continued to board at another school until I was 18.” (1311)*

When people moved on, some realised that boarding was not a bad thing. The experience of living in a boarding school taught people how to look after themselves which benefitted them in the long-term. One of the interviewees said that as an ex-chorister, he felt quite alright when the army sent him abroad during the war as he had got used to being away from his home and family.

*“Between choristers and college, at 18 I had to do two years national service. I was sent straight out to Singapore. I had a wonderful time playing piano at the Raffles in Singapore, but really, you had to look after yourself when you were abroad. Now it was funny when I was in Singapore, there were guys there of 18 and you could hear them having a bit of a sniff under the bedclothes, the first time they had been away from home. 18 year olds! It didn’t bother me. **I think it helped me to look after myself.**” (0211)*

This independence also plays an important part in academic progress as choristers need to be able to do their homework independently and voluntarily, as no one in the boarding house really checks on them or even gives them guidance. This is especially true of students in higher year groups, such as the girl choristers who took part in this survey.

*“Being a boarder **helped me to work more independently** because I had a very strict timetable, you have to go to lessons. After that I learnt to write my essays on my own, without prompting, as they didn’t hunt me down and try to make me do it. **There was prep time when you had to do your homework but no one really checked so I guess it was independent working.**” (1021)*

The dimension of independence expands more when senior choristers (those girl choristers who sing for the choir from 13-18) reach their last year in the choir. It plays a crucial role in helping them prepare for university life as they were trained to be independent and be sensible about doing what they are supposed to do:

*“Obviously you are not going to have someone watching over you the whole time so technically you shouldn’t be using your phone between 7.00 pm and 9.00 pm. That is when prep is supposed to be but **if you do want to use your phone then no one will stop you texting. It just depends how honest you are I suppose. Obviously you are 17 and 18 so you might want to work late into***

*the night. You have more independence then. That was quite free, like university.” (1121)*

Choristers come from all different parts of the country, which often makes it impossible for them to return home every weekend. Due to the distance, their parents could not visit them often either; but some dedicated parents managed to turn up to weekend services, enabling them to use the three-hour break between services to take their children out for a meal. That is a normal limit of family contact as the chorister cannot be taken home for overnight stay during most weekends. So, what is the result of this and does it influence family relationships? See Chapter 6 section 3.

## 5.4 Summary

In terms of social and personal development, ex-choristers mentioned that, as a result of living away from home in a boarding school and working with adults from a young age, they soon adapted to a strong discipline and became dedicated members of the choir. In addition, a hard-working attitude and dedication were fostered early on as every chorister had to learn to face up to the super-busy seasons of the liturgical year such as Christmas and Easter. Without perseverance and dedication, an amazing music standard simply cannot be achieved. This experience helped choristers develop self-discipline and time-management skills, thus enabling them to cope with the demands of everyday life. Meanwhile, this unique practice (singing, studying and living together) teaches young people not only team spirit but also tolerance towards each other as they have to put up with each other's differences in a boarding environment. Children who had been promoted to head or deputy-head chorister, also developed significant leadership and management skills by being models for the younger choir members in many cases.

With regard to their academic progress, the data indicated that ex-choristers generally were satisfied with their academic development in the choir school, although on average they spent twenty hours on music activities every week, which may not seem to have left much time for study. Interestingly, in reality, some choristers managed to be the top students of their classes and win academic scholarships to their next schools. The training of time-management skills to find the balance between academic demands and choir commitment enabled children to boost their ability to structure their spare time effectively.

Through repeated practice, performing on the same level with adults and given equal importance, choristers gained the confidence to at least manage their anxieties and to perform under pressure, as well as gaining the confidence to talk to people of all sorts. Furthermore, with so many opportunities to sing in front of large audiences or sing for live broadcast, several choristers accumulated significant confidence in public speaking. What we can see here in choristers' overall education, learning about a disciplined way of life beyond the singing, living away from home and having a far more busier life than their peers, a young chorister can gain a great deal of independence thanks to the fast pace of life in the choir school. For those who were keen to make good progress academically, independence and self-reliance were essential, especially when parents might be living many miles away.

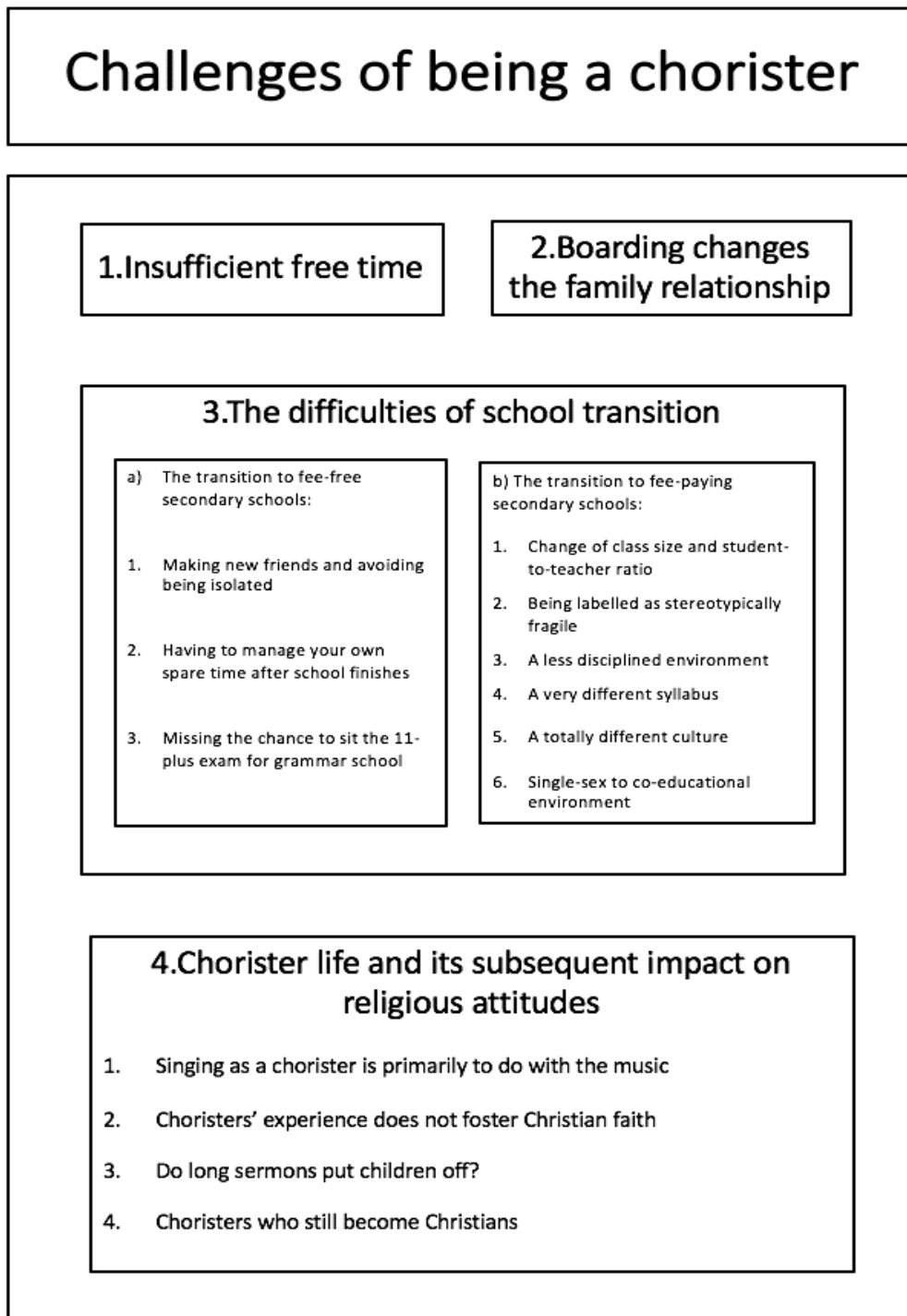
Overall, participants identified the development of dedication, through continuous disciplined hard work, as the most important aspect of being choristers. It is a huge commitment for every chorister and for their family since they sign a contract with the cathedral to keep their child there up to the age of thirteen. When people listen to the famous carol service in one of the Anglican rites, they might think it is the preserve of a small elite group of children who live and are educated in a precious and rarefied environment, but it should be remembered that the wonderful music they sing is the result of hard work and an often punishing schedule for a highly committed group of boy or girl choristers and older singers. Do these highly musical, intelligent, hard-working choristers miss out on any aspects of a normal childhood? The question will be considered in the next Chapter.

## **Chapter 6: Findings Part 3 - Challenges of Being a Chorister**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the analysis of the different challenges choristers may have faced at one time or another and is summarised in Figure 7. Section 6.2 is concerned with the fact that choristers are given very little time to play freely during those years in choir school, especially boarders. Section 6.3 explores the changes in family relationships for those who were packed off to a boarding school and asked to sing intensively for the cathedral. It often created a dislocated scenario for the boarding choristers when they went back to living with their parents and siblings. Section 6.4 examines choristers who have reached the age of thirteen and are moving onto state or independent secondary schools; many of them could recall finding it very challenging initially, while others continued to be challenged, causing them not to do well in their later education. Section 6.5 explores the consequences of this ritual immersion without proper preparation. Spending many hours in church services, choristers often found it difficult to engage with the sermons and had no particular interest in religion. In the beginning I thought it might not fit here as it cannot be classified as ‘a challenge’ since choristers are not forced to have ‘religious beliefs’, but seeing that many ex-choristers perceive themselves as not being religious at all, it makes me think how they felt when they ignored the faith while singing for God every day for several years.

Here is the chart summary of this chapter:



*Figure 7: Challenges of being choristers*

## 6.2 Insufficient free time

Choristers are always supposed to be somewhere according to their highly-organised timetable and there is little time for them to simply relax, play or ‘chill out’ and do nothing. The two quotes below, one from a boy chorister and the other from a girl chorister, both show that they had very little time left for themselves every day:

*“Virtually no free time, morning break and a little bit at lunchtime but that was it.” (2511)*

*“I would say certainly in term time it is very difficult, especially if you are boarding. I think I didn’t get all that much time really to do my own thing.” (0421)*

Another participant mentioned how the choir school environment allowed him no freedom, unlike the freedom he had at home:

*“It was very strict here and one of the things was that there was no free time when you were a chorister. But you were a boarder there so what else do you do? It was quite a strict regime, you couldn’t go and lie on your bed. You went to the bedrooms, dormitories to sleep. You couldn’t lie on the bed and play with a play station or watch telly.” (1211)*

As I mentioned in a previous chapter, the choristers’ life is a bit like army life. And because of the intensive singing choristers commit to, they have to give up other personal hobbies such as sport:

*“I certainly had to give up sports to a certain degree towards the end. I was always able to play at school but, for example, I got into County football then couldn’t progress because I didn’t have the time to progress, which I suppose that could be seen as negative.” (0511)*

All children need time to themselves, but being a chorister means having a non-stop working routine which does not suit everyone. They feel very homesick and unhappy, but that is a life they have had to accept at that time:

*“Looking back I see I wasn’t too happy but I think at the time little boys accept what they are given even though they are homesick quite a lot. It really affected me a lot, the choir school’s way of life. There wasn’t time as you were kept busy, morning to night, there was no private life or anything like that.” (0311)*

The following quote demonstrates to us how much a chorister felt he had missed out on when he never had time to play --- free time was a luxury for them.

*“I think I never really got the hang of how to play because I wasn’t allowed to really because I was a chorister. So now when I have free time I will go and read a book or play the piano or the trumpet or compose. I might do some other work or read something interesting or talk to people but the idea of sitting in front of a computer game or doing the things that normal people do wouldn’t cross my mind because I didn’t do that in those formative years as a child. I am very aware that that was something I missed out on because my playtime was very short... In practical terms parents and school need to be really aware that they are actually working children a horrendously long day.” (3011)*

It seems quite unusual that this child (he is an adult now) still did not know how to play, but in reality choristers’ lives are filled with activities; even when they do not sing, they live as a team so there is no spare time for any unstructured play or any private space.

However, play or some available free time is usually considered essential, especially for choristers since they have such a structured stressful way of life and need time to relax. This is actually an issue that needs to be handled well, otherwise it can change the relationship with other family members, as the following quote illustrates:

*“My mother made a really interesting observation about a year ago. She said: ‘I couldn’t work out whether you didn’t like me because I sent you to a boarding school because every weekend when you came home you went straight up to your room and played with your toys.’ I said: ‘well, I was a small child, I had no time to myself all week I wanted some time to play with my toys.’ The fact that my mother was downstairs thinking ‘Why doesn’t he want to talk to me?’ didn’t even cross my mind as a child and that I as a child needed more time than the choir school allowed - to be by myself and just to play.” (3011)*

Another interviewee mentioned that “having free time” is particularly important when choristers grow older and become teenagers:

*“I think boys need time just to loaf around a bit. I think you need just a little bit of time to yourself, but we didn’t have any. They used to say choristers were all very well directed and sort of precise but they needed more space for themselves to develop.” (0111)*

Although choristers are professional singers, they are children and adolescents as well so they need more space for themselves and need to move at their own pace according to some of the study’s participants. Through having time to themselves, these youngsters would possibly have discovered areas of interest that the choir school did not give them access to.



Some modern choir schools now have boarding girl choristers who sing for the church from age of 13 to 18. Having more time and space seemed quite significant for some of the female participants in the study:

*“It wasn’t so much a problem in the younger years but in sixth form, when I was 17-18, it was a bit like ... your friends who aren’t in the choir are enjoying their freedom, starting to go to the parties, just going to people’s houses and the more sociable side of things...I thought I would be able to have a bit more freedom as we are near going to university but it wasn’t. I knew that is what you sign up for, you are pretty much a full-time chorister. There were certain girls who had many more problems with that and would really express that more than I did and I just thought that is something you just have to accept. (1121)*

The school needs to be aware they cannot apply the routine they have for 8 to 13-year-olds to those senior girls, as they will soon be entering universities, so they need to be prepared for that new environment by being allowed more freedom, trust and personal space. However, the choir schools’ strict regime simply cannot fulfil these young ladies’ needs. As another senior girl-chorister said:

*“I only came when I was sixteen, and until then I could do pretty much what I wanted at home, where I went out and **I drank alcohol and stuff like that**, but I think that loads of the girls that have been boarders in the choir school since they were in Year 9 or earlier, had become accustomed to that restricted life and never **had the ability to just go out when they wanted and do what they wanted so it could probably be quite difficult when they came to University, where you are quite free to do whatever you want.**” (1021)*

The final quote below seems not directly related to the theme of this section, but from a young chorister’s point of view, it tells us how much he wants to be just alone:

*“A few times in the middle of the night I used to sneak upstairs and go and sit by one of the windows overlooking London. I could see Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament from the window. I would just sit there with the window open for half an hour because I really enjoy taking it all in.” (2711)*

I guess his way of finding private time for himself in the middle of the night had given him some kind of comfort that helped him withstand the pressures and stresses of that extremely busy environment.

To sum it up, having no free time for themselves seems a big challenge for choristers. It is something that needs to be changed to make sure children actually get a chance to be children.

It is very easy to forget that, even when choristers are performing at a level that compares with that of adults who have been to conservatoire, they are still just children.

### **6.3 Boarding changes the family relationship**

The boarding aspect and its impact on the family relationship were mentioned by several interviewees in this study because of a sudden lack of emotional contact with their parents.

One ex-chorister realised he had lost some of the ability to relate to his family, which he felt might be a result of being a boarder away from home from a very young age:

*“Obviously one thing it could be is that I am very itinerant now. I am always going to different places to work, or to live, or to do concerts. I spend comparatively very little time at home compared to people of my age. I guess you can say that is partly because I wasn’t at home so much as a kid.” (2611)*

The above participant was a university student when I interviewed him. He used the word ‘itinerant’ to describe himself nowadays and noted how little of his time he spent with his family. Similarly, another ex-chorister said of boarding school:

*“I am sure it changes things. Certainly I feel like I was always very independent from my parents in many ways and I felt that I knew what was best for me, like a lot of kids do. Every teenager thinks their parents are wrong and they are right: that is just part of the act of coming of age, isn’t it? But I wonder if that kind of relationship would have been a bit less extreme if I had been at home all the time. I mean they felt the need to apologise to me later when I was a teenager.” (2211)*

Although this participant did not clearly explain to us what the obvious negative influence on him in terms of boarding was, he did mention that it was something his parents apologised for later on. On the other hand, he did admit his independence and sometimes over-confidence might relate to his boarding school experience and went on to say he guessed children became defensive as a natural response to having been brought up in an environment in which if you let your defences down, you risked ridicule. When his time at the choir school was up, he insisted strongly on going to a state secondary school and told me he would never send his own children to any form of boarding school, unless they themselves wanted to go down that path.

Another ex-chorister mentioned that their family relationship had been affected as they were not used to living at home after being boarders for several years:

*“I worry about how much it affected my relationship with my parents. Not just the fact that you are boarding but the fact that you are also working at the weekends as a child. We had Saturday school until 3.00 o’clock and then Evensong. Saturday was called a half day but it wasn’t, it was a whole day and then Sunday could sometimes be a whole day as well. I might go two weeks without seeing my parents so by the time I left school the main culture shock was actually having to be back in a family home because I knew my teachers, matron and my classmates and dorm far better than I knew my parents.” (3011)*

When returning to normal family life, the above ex-chorister felt his own family home was an unfamiliar scenario and found it hard to attach to his parents, which was a very sad thing. What choristers learn in boarding choir school is team-work and how to be independent at the same time, but the intimacy and an understanding of the need of other family members may be something that is missing. Although they could be very socially engaged with people around them, intimate relationships, especially towards to their own parents, was something they suddenly felt hard to deal with. The effects of living in “a home away from home” may emerge as a bigger issue than the person had realized.

Relationships with siblings could also be a challenge as choristers rarely had time to grow up with their siblings:

*“I suppose I couldn’t grow up in the same way that most children would do: to get to know my parents as well as other people did. Although I had a sister I didn’t see much of her except in holidays. Boarding was one of the reasons.” (2511)*

*“I have three elder sisters and it used to annoy them because Sunday was **my** day, so everything had to work around Mum and Dad coming to see **me** - and I think they resented that.” (1211)*

From the above two quotes we can see that in addition to the primary rupture with the parents, there is a secondary rupture that damages sibling relationships. For those siblings who did not go to the choir school, the lack of comprehension of the reason for the difference in treatment may cause jealousy or, even worse, a lifelong rift.

It can be more problematic for children sent to a boarding choir school from overseas:

*My mum was [working] in school and I saw her maybe once a day for ten minutes. **I had friends for whom that was much more problematic and whose relationship with his parents never really recovered.** I think that is something that has to be handled really carefully and I do get the sense that*

*some parents send their children to those schools to get rid of them and that is now common. I mean being in a school in Hampshire where children are sent from Russia or China and only go back home once a term, or maybe they stay with someone else for the holidays so they only see their parents once a year. That is really unhealthy. For me, only seeing my parents briefly once every week or two was hard. (3011)*

The above example shows that boarding choir schools can be disruptive to family relationships and I cannot imagine the consequence for those young international boarders. Children who become boarders have to learn that sense of having to pull themselves together and become happy boarders and choristers. Those international boarders from Chinese or Russian families became cathedral choristers because their parents could afford it and ‘valued’ this type of education. Although the parents think they are doing the right thing and believe the child can cope, in fact the kids are just kept incredibly busy so they do not feel sad, even if they do not feel exactly happy.

To end this section I would say boarding is not an option which suits every child since every child is different; in some cases it could even create big problems in later life. It is not worth it to risk or damage the family/sibling relationship by sending a talented young child to a boarding choir school, even if overall it seems a good education: if the child is unhappy this can ultimately lead to a sad outcome. The challenge for parents is surely to strike a balance that allows their children to reach their potential without pushing them beyond their personal comfort limits. Although boarding is compulsory for some leading choir schools in the UK, there are more valuable means of promoting success and happiness in children than being a chorister away from home for four or five years.

#### **6.4 The difficulties of school transition**

School transition is often a big issue because of the parents’ financial situation according to some ex-choristers. We can see from evidence in this section that a lot of children were actually only able to become choristers because they got some sort of financial support such as a bursary or charity funds. For instance, the cathedral/chapel will often waive 50% of the tuition fee, while the Choristers’ Association attached to each choir school might be able to provide further help. In addition, the Choir Schools’ Association, a national body, administers a Government Choir School Scholarship Scheme which can provide additional funds for the most promising candidates, following strict means-testing. The Association also has its own limited Bursary

Trust Fund. But this all stops when they reach the age of thirteen and have to leave the choir school. Then many would simply move to a state secondary school, since their parents could not afford the extremely high cost of further private education.

Because of most choir schools' limited finances to cover the cost of the above awards, they have to take in non-choral pupils (called 'commoners' in the school mentioned below) whose parents can afford to pay the full fees.

*“As is tradition, my choir school admitted commoners, which again is a terrible term. The reason commoners were admitted was to pay for all the people who were there on choral scholarships as the cathedral couldn't afford to have the school without the fee-paying commoners. Annoyingly, that is the only way it works.” (3011)*

It is one of the reasons why the schools were made accessible to students who were not actually going to sing in the cathedral choir but were there for a “better education”. Many cathedrals could not afford to have a choir if they didn't have non-choristers paying huge amounts of money. For choristers who came from less wealthy families, part of their fees was paid for by the wealthy non-chorister students in the same school and by the cathedral/chapel. Here is an example showing how choristers were recruited from various backgrounds and not necessarily from well-off families.

The interviewee below (now in his eighties) came from a family in a mining village. He told me “the only big buildings I had seen were the pits on the ridge, and my vision of Durham when I first saw it was incredible, this huge place”. Here is his family background that shows the struggle of his family, the difficulty's his mother went through and her attempt to raise up an educated child:

*“My hometown was a mining town called West Stanley. I was a schoolboy in Stanley, born in 1931. Unfortunately my father died just before the war broke out. He was a businessman who had a shop, and my mother very courageously decided to continue with the business. I was at school, coming home and letting myself in and looking after myself but really I needed a more secure framework. I had a good singing voice at the ordinary school but I also sang in the church choir at St Andrews church. My mother, a very keen church woman, must have discussed my future with the curate at the time, and the curate had said: ‘he has got a very good voice, why you don't you try him for the Cathedral Choir?’ We were just ordinary family, my mother, you see, wasn't particularly rich and she was struggling to run a business which was difficult during the war.” (0111)*

During economic downturns, some parents are forced to give up on fee-paying education, so choristers' recruitment becomes more and more difficult, meaning that fees have to be raised:

*“During the economic downturn, people weren't sending their children to boarding schools. The joke was that those schools would lose out to Eton and the schools in London because they were too far away from Harrods and Oxford Street for the mothers to do their shopping and from the City for their fathers to do their work. It used to be a local thing but ... nowadays, certainly in the south, they will be recruited from all over the place, the world and the country. Not so much in the north because very few people will come to the north from further afield. Certainly at my old choir school, there are at the moment two choristers who are Russian and Chinese - not first generation immigrants but boys who are actually dropped off at the airport to go back to their own countries.” (3011)*

What is obvious from the above quote is that the financial competition is now more important than the music because it used to be that the school had the financial ability to support very talented children and provide them with a music education. Now the schools are really struggling financially, that to sell a music-only education is almost impossible.

Back in the 1940s, for children like him from ordinary families, becoming a cathedral chorister meant a promise of food, lodgings, clothing and education. Many years after he had left, things had changed a great deal:

*“When I was here the fees were £5 a term. In those days that was a lot of money. Well the tuition fees are quite high now; choristers' fees are £3585 a term including full board, while the day pupils pay £3595.50 per term.” (0111)*

As can be seen from the quote, there is not much difference nowadays between the fees for choristers and the fees for day pupils, but, back in the 1960s, boarding choristers only needed to pay about 25% compared to day pupils (non-choristers).

Most children wanting to be choristers now need help with fees; the following quote gives us a rough idea about the modern fee rate in UK choir schools:

*“I was only able to attend because the Dean and Chapter subsidized most of the cost for each student. The fees were £4000 a year for my family with £16,000 paid for by the Abbey. The Abbey has the money to do that, though most cathedrals don't have that sort of money sloshing around. It was cheaper than other private schools I think.” (2811)*

Obviously, that is not the sort of money a normal family can afford to pay for their children's education and that is why so many have to apply for bursaries if they really want their child to be a chorister:

*"I had someone who helped. I had a music scholarship and then I also had a bursary. But - I don't know if it was exactly a charity or some anonymous donor that offered the cathedral school money to pay for choristers, they helped towards my education there. I mean things have got a lot harder in recent years because of the economy." (2021)*

*"My Dad is in the army so actually the army paid 40% of the fees as well as me having a 40% scholarship separate to that. I obviously had a really good education but my parents haven't had to pay so much for it." (0621)*

So from the above two quotes, we can see choristers could get various forms of financial support to enable them sing for the cathedral. Families, the church and the wider society (some charities) would do their utmost to help a child if he/she is a right candidate.

As I mentioned in the beginning of the section, after the summer of Year 8, most choristers transfer to another school to start Year 9 when funding ceases. There are basically two options for this transition: fee-free education or more fee-paying education.

#### **6.4.1 The transition to fee-free secondary schools**

Many participants in this study told me that their parents had no money to send them to an independent school after they left the choir and the school transition was very challenging as a result.

According to the data, three challenges have been identified:

- i: making new friends and avoiding being isolated;
- ii: having to manage your own spare time after school finished;
- iii: missing the chance to sit the 11-plus exam for going to grammar school.

##### ***i: making new friends and avoiding being isolated***

Some ex-choristers mentioned that they found it difficult to fit in at their new school as its ethos was so different from the choir school's, and that it was also hard to make friends with teenagers brought up differently:

*“It was difficult to make friends at the state school because I was different. I had come from a different type of school, very formal, with strict rules and regulations and it was difficult to make friends at the school because I had been brought up in a different way... You were made to feel special at the choir school, and that caused problems when I went back to normal school, because I thought I was special and I got some bullying because I was different.” (1211)*

It seems the worst thing for a teenager is to feel suddenly isolated, after their experiences of the close-knit society of the choir school. For an ex-chorister who moved to a state secondary school, this sense of rejection unfortunately seems to have been very strong:

*“That was hard. Actually most of my social life was outside school because the reality was I hadn’t much in common with ordinary children. I carried on doing lots of music outside school as part of a youth choir. I was part of lots of music theatre groups, doing stuff with people who were at [...] College or had been brought up in the same environment. I was keeping in with that same circle of friends.” (3011)*

In another case, an ex-chorister mentioned he had been brought up in an environment using different vocabulary but not speaking with the local accent led to him being singled out when he went to a comprehensive school:

*“It was very different. I had never been to a school with girls and I spoke in a totally different way because the vocabulary was different; in the choir school I had been in an environment with lots of people with southern accents. As soon as I got into the local comprehensive school, I stuck out like a sore thumb. I think people thought I was strange.” (2211)*

## ***ii: having to manage your own spare time after school finishes***

Another problem was when these youngsters suddenly realised they had a lot more spare time outside of school hours. Some people however could adjust well: *“When I went to secondary school, it was a bit of a shock that I had a lot more time than I had ever had before. It was amusing to my friends that I took up a lot more music and sports”*. Unfortunately, others just started drifting around, not knowing what to do with those free hours since as choristers, they were used to having a full daily schedule:

*“I went on to a school in Wakefield, so I went back to my home area really. The transition to the next school was actually very difficult for me and it is one of the reasons I didn’t end up going any further in education because I found the change from the very structured and very encompassing environment that I had been involved in at the choir school difficult. I didn’t go to a boarding school, I went to just a day school and I could never really get to grips with the fact that if I wasn’t at school I still had to do things for*



*school, like homework. That was challenging and I imagine that others have similar sorts of things.” (0811)*

It seems contradictory with the findings in the previous chapter 5.3.1 *Time management* that some choristers should find it *difficult* to organise themselves when they were alone. As I have mentioned, some participants seemed to achieve significant time management skills and discipline themselves in most situations. However, the quote above shows that, though a chorister’s life may be structured by the school ethos, it does not mean they would all be self-structured; it just means that choristers can follow a provided plan once there but not necessarily formulate a plan by themselves when none exist. The findings suggest that some adapted and organised themselves but others became lazy because up to then they had had things organised for them all the time. It seems that the individual chorister’s ability to adapt to a new school environment depends in part on his/her personality. The following three examples show how, when a teenager left the busy choir, they could possibly feel all at sea as they did not know how to organise their spare time:

*“Then when it all finishes your voice breaks and you leave school. I went to a school which was much nearer to where my parents lived. My time had been completely regimented and every bit of the day was accounted for and suddenly I had all this free time and that was a bit of a culture shock as I say, but eventually it didn’t take long to quickly go. ‘Oh, I can do what I like.’ I wasn’t the greatest academic in the world so maybe that was an issue. But, we still had two hours of an evening where we were supposed to be working and doing our homework but there was the potential to not focus on our studies quite as much as we did. We were largely un-supervised so we did go off the line quite a lot as young teenage boys will do.” (1311)*

Especially when having the freedom and spare time to play computer games, young people would find it easy to lose self-control and spend their free time less productively than they had at a choir school:

*“I wasted a lot more time playing video games when I had finished my homework as I was no longer supervised as I had been as a boarder.” (2811)*

Sometimes, ex-choristers who had once been highly regimented at choir school could unfortunately become the exact opposite, becoming over-relaxed after they left the choir, as this next quote shows:

*“It is a kind of crazy schedule. You got one hour off a day, because you had to get up at six in the morning to start rehearsals. Apart from that, there were two days a week where you had a free evening, Sunday and Thursday. For the rest of the time you were basically working or rehearsing or eating until*

*7 o'clock, having one hour off before bed. I suppose that level of pressure of not having time for yourself just allowed me to go the other way. My reaction was: 'Great, I don't need to do anything' --- and I just relaxed. It was almost like a holiday after the choir school because in those five years there it was like a full-time job. I pretty much stopped doing anything really until I was 18." (2211)*

The above quote tells us how young people could react when they moved away from a highly intensive schedule and did not really want to make any academic effort.

### ***iii: missing the chance to sit the 11-plus exam for going to grammar school***

Grammar schools are state-funded schools which select their pupils using an entrance exam for children aged 11, commonly called the 11-plus, usually involving tests in Maths, English, Verbal Reasoning and Non-Verbal Reasoning. Most choir school across the country however are Preparatory Schools (or prep schools), selective, fee-charging independent primary schools, that educate children from the age of eight up to approximately the age of 13, which means they usually miss out on the chance to take the 11 plus exam as they are being prepared for the Common Entrance Examination at about 12 to get them into a private independent secondary school, including the prestigious English public schools. In England and Wales a public school is an older, student-selective, fee-charging, independent secondary school which caters primarily for children aged between 13 and 18. The term "public" should not be misunderstood to mean that these schools are part of the public sector (which is funded by the government's taxation of the public). They are in fact part of the private sector.

From other interviews, I noticed, there is a 'timing problem' for the school transition, because ordinary children move to secondary school (state or grammar) at the age of eleven, whereas most choristers can only move at the age of 13, because of the contract their parents sign. Despite having read and signed that contract, some parents still seemed to think they had the right to withdraw the child from choir school at the end of year 6 and send him to a non-paying grammar school, which is a common first choice for many not so wealthy families in the UK. Unfortunately, the best age for choristers to contribute to the choir is around Year 7 and Year 8, so the choir won't let them go as they are leading models for younger choir members (unless the parents pay back all the scholarship and bursary).

Here is a very sad and extreme case, where a family with a chorister in one of the best choir schools in the London area withdrew their boy as the parents realised that they could no longer afford to keep the child in a fee-paying school system:

*“I only stayed just over a year as the obvious thing for me was to progress on to a local grammar school that required no fees. This meant passing the 11-Plus exam which my school did not prepare choristers for. If I had stayed to age 13 at the choir school then it would have been too late to have taken the 11-Plus and staying on would have meant entering my local state comprehensive at 13 as **my family would not have afforded a private secondary school.** I left for this reason. **It was very hard and sad for me when I left the choir school because I had a lot of fun there and I was leaving my very closest friends at the time. At the time I couldn’t appreciate why I couldn’t have stayed for another two years.**” (2811)*

During this interview I could see how disappointed the participant was (he is an adult now) and that leaving his choir friends and the school he liked so much was a really bitter experience for him, but it was simply due to his parents’ financial situation. Here was a family wanting to give the child a top-class education but one they could no longer pay for. This case highlights the crux of the matter: being a cathedral chorister means a contract between the family, the child and the church until the end of Year 8, so automatically most choristers miss the chance to get into a free grammar school as their selection process can only happen when the child is in Year 6.

The data shows us there is a huge potential challenge for the child once he or she has been moved from an independent choir school into a state secondary school. The adaptation process is very tough and is sometimes a struggle for children educated in such a rarefied atmosphere:

*“I couldn’t believe it when I went to my secondary school. My peers didn’t know how chromosomes worked, they couldn’t read Virgil or Tacitus and they didn’t know who Bruckner and Brahms were. **They had never been exposed to it and I was horrified.**” (3011)*

Another participant commented on how much lower the standard of education was in the state school seen from his personal point of view:

*“In most subjects I was ahead not just because I had come from a choir school but because I had also been privately educated. It was interesting to see how far behind those state school students were just because they hadn’t been taught as well up to that point. Academically choir school benefitted me because by the time I left I had had more individual teaching and was able to move ahead in maths.” (2811)*

Overall, it is obvious here that the school transition is extremely hard for those moving from a choir school to a state secondary school, bringing as it does so many new problems.

#### **6.4.2 The transition to fee-paying secondary schools**

As was stated in 6.4.1 iii, the education of the children in prep schools is primarily aimed at getting them into public school and it seems many ex-choristers continued their education there,

*“At one time, most people who went to a choir school would go on to one of the many major public schools --- Winchester, Eton or Harrow. Go south yes and occasionally you would go up to Scotland as well but over the last 20-25 years it has become much more localised so that the majority of people will go from, say, Durham choir school to either Durham School or Barnard Castle School or RGS Newcastle or a little bit further afield. If they get music scholarships they will still go to some of the southern schools. I mean there are exceptions --- people who go back to their local state school.” (2511)*

It is interesting to see here, how, two decades ago, choristers from a northern cathedral would go down to well-known public schools in the south to continue their education, but how, more recently, the choice for senior schools seems to include more local, either independent or even state schools.

Some of the choristers went from the choir school to an independent boarding school, supposedly a similar environment to that which they had been used to, yet this transition (from Year 9) was still a challenge which had been described by ex-choristers as a ‘*culture shock*’ and not at all easy.

According to the data, six challenges have been identified for those who transfer to fee-paying secondary schools, which are discussed in detail below:

- i: change of class size and staff-to-student ratio;
- ii: being labelled as stereotypically fragile;
- iii: a less disciplined environment;
- iv: a very different syllabus;
- v: a totally different culture;
- vi: single sex to co-educational environment.

***i: change of class size and staff-to-student ratio***

The first problem ex-choristers found was “*being a small fish in a big pond*”, as choir schools are much smaller than many secondary schools.

*“A lot of people said to me when I was leaving that you are going from being a big fish in a small pond to a small fish in a big pond. They were really drumming it in and I think I was anticipating it. It is funny because at the Abbey school it is very easy to be the best at sport but then I went to my secondary school and I was the worst.” (2911)*

An ex-girl-chorister told me she found it was also difficult moving from a small school that emphasised music to a bigger school full of other excitements:

*“It was very difficult at first to adjust to having so many other classmates. Because the cathedral school was very, very small, there had been only seven girls and boys in my year while at my new school there were 140 people in my year. I had to adjust from coming from a very small selective school that focused on music to a school that focused on so many other things. I was really in a minority as well, being a music scholar, and people looked at me a bit funny because of that.” (0621)*

In one secondary school, ex-choristers soon noticed the huge change in the staff-to-student ratio:

*“At first it felt very unsatisfactory as a selective school as it lacked the ridiculous staff to student ratio of my choir school. This was doubly hard because there I had been given my own maths to do in class but at my new school I wasn’t so I got bored.” (2811)*

***ii: being labelled as stereotypically fragile***

More problematic was a choirboy being labelled as “*stereotypically fragile*” by his contemporaries in an environment full of masculine teenagers. People laughed about the way he dressed as a chorister (in a choir robe) and assumed he had not been brought to play aggressive sports in the choir school.

*“Knowing that I had been a choirboy, they would say I wore a dress and was a girl, so that was quite hard to deal with.” (1411)*

*“A choirboy was stereotypically fragile and I think I probably fitted into that stereotype in that I was never going to play many rough sports. I never played aggressive sports. I played a bit of football, a lot of tennis, a lot of squash, a little bit of cricket but I never played rugby or anything like that.” (2711)*

### ***iii: a less disciplined environment***

Some ex-choristers found the independent secondary school could also be cruel. Compared with their choir schools, the discipline seemed much more lax and things like stealing and teasing happened a lot:

*“Class sizes were larger and a certain amount of teasing went on that the teachers couldn’t stop. One guy in the year above me was notorious for stealing people’s things so discipline and structure was a lot worse than the choir school. (2811)*

### ***iv: a very different syllabus***

The fourth ‘shock’ is caused by the different syllabuses or contents taught in choir schools and secondary schools. This participant found that for Maths lessons, his choir school laid the stress on algebra and geometry but taught no mental arithmetic or long multiplication/long division. Basically, it seems a totally different education systems so students had to adapt to different curricula, which is a very interesting point, especially related to Maths education:

*“The last two years of the choir school we were in a class of eleven, and then when I went to grammar school I was in a class of twenty-eight, so that was a shock. I was way beyond my contemporaries in all my subjects except maths and that is because maths was taught in a very particular way as problem solving to prepare you for a scholarship. I had no mental arithmetic; I had never done long multiplication or long division and never used a calculator because everything I did was algebra. I had only ever done complex problem solving and geometry and I was going into a system that was completely different.” (3011)*

### ***v: a totally different culture***

Fifthly, some ex-choristers reported the feeling of being exposed to a very different culture in terms of music, poetry or politics. In the choir school they had not been exposed to pop music or television culture that much like ‘ordinary’ teenagers, and had little in common to talk about, which made it hard to make friends in the new school:

*“The culture shock was striking because I had been in a situation where we hadn’t listened to popular music but to classical music. As a nine-year-old I was listening to Messiaen’s Quartet before bed and that was the sort of music that fired me and got me excited. I had three different recordings of Brandenburg concertos all with different orchestral weightings and depending on my mood I listened to a different one. Then I came into a culture where people didn’t know poetry, they didn’t know anything about politics or the world, didn’t know anything about real music as I saw it at the time. Most of them didn’t play instruments or that sort of thing so I didn’t make many friends except for a few people who were on the same wavelength as me, those who were intelligent in school but found it hard to be sort of like ‘What*

*was on television last night'. I didn't know because I hadn't really watched television for the last five years. I saw the middle of every Simpson episode because between Evensong and dinner there was a 10 minute break but that was basically it for me for popular culture." (3011)*

***vi: single-sex to co-educational environment***

The life of choristers is very unusual, with limited access to popular culture and for those choir boys who had no girls in their choir school, moving from a single sex school to a co-educational environment is another challenge to face:

*"I guess it is a weird environment that you don't get the same exposure to lots of different types of people or even girls because you don't grow up through the school with girls around you. Going to secondary school I was in a year of 150 with many girls; it was a big change. I remember being more polite than other kids and more well-spoken. I remember being very conscious of the fact that I was a little bit different and then I sort of changed to fit in." (2911)*

In some of the worst cases ex-choristers who had been educated in a boys-only choir school felt it much more of a struggle when they moved to a co-educational secondary school, since obviously the choir school did not prepare him well for 'how to talk to girls':

*"That is an issue because you are not used to dealing with girls at all; you are isolated from them completely and it took me a long time to adapt." (0811)*

*"To be fair I think I am less confident around girls than I would have been if I had gone to a mixed school. Actually, it was quite a big shock at university." (2711)*

For the participant below, the change-over was the hardest time in his life because of the degree of bullying in the independent secondary school his parents managed to send him to:

*"It was a big change, one of the hardest things I have been through in life actually. Change from all the confidence and responsibility of being at the top of the choir to being at the bottom of this school where 18 year olds looked like men to me. There was also the difficulty that it was an all-boys school and they liked to tease each other. It toughened me up as I wasn't sporty and couldn't fight. It taught me to try and be funny and to try to impress people in other ways. I started smoking, thinking it would impress people. It was hard." (1411)*

For some ex-choristers however the school transition was not so hard. The first example is from a girl-chorister who actually thought that moving school at the age of 13 was better than at the age of 11 in her case:

*“I think actually it was better for me, as I felt more ready to move on when I was 13 than I was at 11. I think there is a big difference. I think you grow up a lot socially just in those couple of years. When you join a new school everyone already has their friendship groups, that was a bit of a challenge but actually I think in the end it was the right thing to do rather than moving on at 11.” (0421)*

The second example shows how, as the participant’s older brother had already been in the same school, it helped him settle down much more quickly:

*“It is quite easy because my brother had been here earlier and I already knew a few people because I played rugby so I knew some of the sporty people... I was fine coming here, as there is quite a lot of people from my choir school who came like Isaac. I had spent a lot of time with him at the choir school. I was happy with that.” (1511)*

Particularly, for those ex-choristers who moved to an independent secondary school with strong choral tradition in the same area, the transition was smooth:

*“If you look on a map [...] College is literally just across the road from my choir school so singers from my choir school also went to the college to sing, I was moving to a place I knew incredibly well because of the massive links between the schools. We would go over there for services, talks or concerts so I knew all the buildings and some of the people. And of course it was in the same town where my parents live so it was the easiest move you could ever imagine.” (2811)*

From the above three positive examples of school transition, we could see the reasons why it is challenging for some but not difficult for others, as everyone’s situation is different. If the child already had an older sibling in the same school or moved to an environment which was reasonably familiar, or transferred to a school which already had close links with the choir school then the transition was smoother.

Overall, for most choristers the move is a challenge, which might strengthen young people or might make them feel depressed, since a choir school is such a unique environment - very small, with a fully arranged schedule and lots of singing. The findings suggest that this is a crucial point in the choristers’ life---one where the school teachers and parents should make a special joint effort to help make it as smooth as possible.



## **6.5 Chorister life and its subsequent impact on religious attitudes**

It is not surprising that many ex-choristers mentioned their personal views about Christian faith and revealed their perspectives about the link between singing and their religious upbringing. This may well have potential implications for the Church's approach to childhood spiritual development as it is strongly connected to the child's efforts to understand the meaning and causes of life in general and will be discussed below.

### **6.5.1 The religious background of the family and the influence of the school**

The data shows most choristers continue their singing in churches because they enjoy the music but not necessarily the religion. Did their intensive church experience during childhood have a negative influence on them and drive them away from religion? Participants provided some interesting points-of-view regarding this. But before we look into what the potential negative influence the church environment had on choristers in terms of the development of Christian faith, it is worth mentioning their family religious backgrounds, as family influence can also be an important element contributing to a young person's spiritual development.

#### The influence of the family

Some choristers in this study came from some form of Christian background; perhaps their parents, or even grandparents might be the persons who introduced them into the church environment and got them familiar with things like prayers or hymns:

*“My Granny was extremely religious. Actually my parents used to do the Lord's Prayer and everything every evening so I think they are religious to an extent, I mean nothing intense but they would definitely class themselves as Christians.” (2021)*

*“My mother is reasonably Christian but the rest aren't too bothered. Since I was a chorister she went to more services.” (1711)*

*“My Mum is religious, I think, but my Dad I am not sure if he is. He doesn't talk about it and we definitely don't go to church... She [his mother] does go to church weekly, she goes to the cathedral. She is a Sunday school teacher.” (0511)*

For those choristers who were from a religious family, going to church regularly was part of their childhood life already before they joined the choir school:

*“We always went to the church, went to Sunday school and there was singing there and we got put into music contests and particularly myself and one of my sisters as a group.” (0111)*

However, others were from non-religious families with no particular interest in Christianity:

*“My parents only come to cathedral to see me really. I would do about two services a week and they would often try to go to one. They were very supportive but they are not fantastically religious at all.” (0721)*

Thus for those from non-Christian families, joining the choir was actually their first experience in a church setting:

*“The Abbey was really my first experience of going to church regularly; I hadn’t really gone to church before that. **I didn’t pay attention to the sermon and just sat quiet. It was just a boring bit of the service where you had to sit still.**” (2811)*

*“I wasn’t from a Christian background as my parents are not Christians. **I didn’t know the liturgy or totally understand what we sang.**” (3011)*

From the above quotes we can see a diversity of family religious backgrounds for ex-choristers. Some only went to church after becoming a chorister; even though they sang as a chorister regularly in the church, they might not have understood the meaning of the words they were singing. Most interestingly, some choristers’ parents became religious through sending their children to choir schools, perhaps because of spending so much time in church while visiting the child and becoming involved in church activities. But it might not apply to the choristers themselves:

*“My parents actually, they weren’t religious when I started at all but my Mum of course came a lot to the cathedral and she became quite involved with the cathedral community through my being a chorister. She met lots of people there and even though of course my sister and I are long since finished, she still volunteers at the cathedral. So I guess you could say **my Mum has become religious or more religious at least through my being a chorister but I myself ... not really.**” (2611)*

*“Now even though I have left the choir and my brother has left the choir, my parents still go to the cathedral services and my Mum in particular, so they do Evensong quite a lot even though none of her children are singing, she has found that she really likes it.” (0421)*

But in the end, the choir school pays more attention to what the child’s voice is like, not to what the family religious background is:

*“I was singing in the choir at my local church and the choir master said: ‘you know, he has got a good voice and why don’t you put him in?’” (0211)*

### The influence of the school

Choristers do not necessarily have to believe in God. As I mentioned in the *Introduction* of this study, choristers are not required to be religious but only have to respect the ritual procedure when they sing in the religious settings. This has been confirmed several times among the interviews:

*“I was never religious and when I came to [...] they told us very specifically, we don’t care if you are religious or not but if you sing here you join in. I do not go to church unless I am singing.” (1021)*

Choristers do not discuss religious/faith among themselves. One ex-chorister said that religious topics were never something they talked about in the choir as everyone felt they had spent long enough time in the services:

*“I was never kind of terrifically engaged by the whole thing and certainly not that many of us were. I don’t know if we were too young or we just heard it too much, we spent every day in the cathedral and so we didn’t want to talk about it when we weren’t. I don’t ever remember discussing religion when I was at school and certainly I didn’t feel particularly religious then.” (2611)*

People might imagine that a choir school would have special emphasis on religious education, especially Christianity, but, in reality, this does not seem to be the case.

*“To be honest I wouldn’t say they are taken completely seriously for the messages of faith and ethos that are put across. I would say **it is more something that you just have to do rather than something that’s a continuation of their education per se or informing them about the world.**” (0511)*

Most problematically, the choirmaster sometimes might not bother to explain the meaning of the words to the choristers so they had no idea what they were singing:

*“To a certain extent you read what was on the page in front of you and didn’t think about it. At the time in [...], **I basically had no idea of the meaning of what I was singing.** I just made sure I sang notes with correct pronunciation.” (2811)*

‘Confirmation’ is in Christianity a public profession of faith prepared for by long and careful instruction, called "affirmation of baptism", and a mature and public profession of the faith also mentioned by several ex-choristers. Most choristers were confirmed while in the choir school but little effort had been made to help them understand what it meant. ‘*It is what everyone else does*’ is the message choristers get:

*“I was confirmed about 11 because everyone felt that was the kind of thing that choristers should do. Certainly there wasn’t much discussion.” (2611)*

*“It became a thing that within the choir you would get confirmed around the age of 11 but actually I do think it was quite young to get confirmed. I don’t really think you have an understanding of what you are doing until you are a bit older.” (2021)*

One chorister who now is a trainee priest even got angry when he looked back at his experience of being confirmed as a Christian in a famous southern choir school:

*“I was told I should get confirmed so that I could receive communion because that looks better if everyone is doing it together --- a terrible reason. I was baptised 20 minutes before my confirmation and it was done with the bare minimum of confirmation classes. I mean it was ridiculous, even criminal, looking back on it.” (3011)*

Therefore, what the church and the school might need to consider is how to deal with children’s spiritual development and how to link the singing duties with the religious education, instead of giving choristers the message that it is just a job they are supposed to do. Whether it is advisable to separate choral music education from its ritual background is beyond the scope of this study, but would be a good topic for further research. I shall attempt to reflect more on this in the *Discussion*.

### **6.5.2 Singing as a chorister is primarily to do with the music**

For those ex-choristers who still regularly sing in a church environment, however, most of them stated that going to church is just for the singing and does not necessarily have anything to do with the religion. Three ex-choristers simply told me:

*“My wife is probably more religious than I am. She will go to the church because of the religion, I go to the church because of the music.” (AP)*  
*“Certainly I wouldn’t feel a compulsion to go unless I were employed singing there definitely.” (1211)*

*“I think the attraction for choristers is the music. I like going to cathedral services and it is **certainly the music I appreciate the most. But it is probably quite nice to just get away from it.**” (0912)*

Another ex-chorister explained to me he had spent a large part of his early life in the church but it had not made him want to learn more about religion, so he would only go to the church for the music:

*“There were a few times that it dawned on me **that I had spent forty percent of my entire life between the ages of 8 and 13 in a church which is quite a long time.** I spent so long in a religious institution but not so much that I felt*

*that I needed to go and pray. At the moment I would go to church for the music rather than the religion.” (2711)*

Here are another two quotes from ex-choristers, both now university students. The first participant sings professionally in one of the Britain’s leading college choirs as a choral scholar; and the other is now an organ scholar in one of the top UK universities. They both still spend intensive hours to enrich the choral music but again, it is not because they feel the need to pray or be a religious person:

*“I wasn’t thinking anything in particular but just trying not to be bored out of my brains. A bit of whispering went on between choristers and **I don’t think anyone really paid attention to the sermon...**Even now I only pay attention about half the time. We sing Evensong three times a week but when the priest lines up communion **only a third of the choir go up while the rest remain seated.** This demonstrates to me the interesting divide between choir members who are religious and those who are only there for the music.” (2811)*

*“I sang services six times a week when I was a chorister and now at Cambridge I sing three times a week and go to many services as an organist. Also during the holidays, I have two jobs as an organist so most Sundays when I am here at home I will be playing the organ for church services so **there has almost never been a point in all my life where I have not been in church for most Sundays over the year.** Apart from in Columbia, **when I was on my gap year, I never went to a church service.**” (2611)*

We can see the above two are not only normal university students but can be labelled as musicians although one of them is in fact a maths student. The music level they reach is outstanding and their childhood experience of being cathedral choristers no doubt provided them with a solid music foundation which enabled them to be music scholars in Cambridge University, which perhaps has the best college choirs in the world. However, even though they take part in the services most days, they do not feel the need to pray or connect to the religious content of the services, which is quite common for musicians in Britain’s churches.

### **6.5.3 Choristers’ experience does not always foster Christian faith**

Although becoming a chorister was once a useful avenue to a career in the church, it is not common any more. This may be due to people’s lives no longer being based around church plus the decline in churchgoing (which I have explained in the *1.2.1 Choristers and the composition of religious belief in the United Kingdom*).

For some ex-choristers, the church environment makes them feel familiar so they like to go back there but it might not have so much to do with the faith. In the example below, one older chorister (now is in his 80s) told me his generation might not be so involved with religious practice but indeed they regularly serve in the cathedral as volunteers:

*“Most of them [the old choristers] don’t go to church but they will come back occasionally. A lot of them are involved with the cathedral and help out in the cathedral and do things but they don’t particularly go to services.” (2311)*

One girl-chorister told me the acceptance of women in choral music in Britain is now much more widespread and that in the cathedral where she sang until recently as a female alto, a term often used interchangeably with “contralto” in English cathedral and collegiate choirs. She was very keen to continue her singing as a lay clerk, however, as a lay clerks’ pay is not enough to live on so she plans to find a well-paid job which allows time to sing in the choir:

*“I want to be a lay clerk. It is a changing world so it might happen that there will be female lay clerks out there. **I am a practical rather than an academic musician** but I would say that if my degree is good enough I would go to Selwyn College, Cambridge and sing there. **In England it is not very well paid so I would do something mathematical on the side but I am not really doing it for the money as I just want to spend my life singing.**” (0721)*

In the conversation with the female ex-chorister above, she clearly says that she loves church for singing. This becomes a common phenomenon seen in this study’s interviews; that ex-choristers would go back to sing or help in the cathedral but not engage with the religious practice there. Thus we can see being a chorister has little function to foster a young person’s religious upbringing.

#### **6.5.4 Do long sermons put children off?**

There is further evidence to demonstrate that, in contrast to the public image of choristers, who have been seen as “*Anglican angels*”, the majority of ex-choristers interviewed think their singing experience did not necessarily encourage them to engage with the Christian faith:

*“I think most of us switched off during the service. Sermons tended to be a bit boring I am afraid, and they were very theological and a bit deep.” (2411)*

*“I used to give most sermons a chance. I would give them maybe two or three minutes to see if they engaged me. Some sermons were obviously intended for adults and went over my head, I would draw things or make up poems.” (2511)*

Another more detailed example (the quote below) which represents many chorister's opinion when they looked back on the hours spent in the cathedral, it seems most of them did not pay attention to the sermons at all:

*“To be honest I don't think I listened to a sermon from beginning to end in my entire time as a chorister. I certainly didn't listen to the sermons and I think most of the time if I had a solo I would be thinking about the solo for the entire thing. Other than that I was probably thinking about what was for dinner that evening. In terms of the religious side at the Abbey I think I was never particularly religious.” (2711)*

The above quote demonstrates the perspectives of ex-choristers and it is admitted by many others that they never actually listened to sermons as they are not at all easy for young people to understand. In consequence, the lack of understanding about the exact meaning of sermons could possibly lead a young person to resist the Christian faith:

*“When I did try to engage with the service, I found that very stimulating. It was totally foreign to me and I found myself kind of drawn out of myself. I wish somebody had taken the trouble to encourage us a bit more and ask ‘All the psalms you sing, the hymns, the anthems --- what do you make of the words? What meaning do you attach to them? How does it touch you personally?’” (2511)*

The examples below further show choristers not only feel no engagement with the content of the services but also have the impression that they had not been given guidance on this topic:

*“I never understood when I was a chorister how people would sing in services but then not have that religious belief. Many, many times though I would be in a service and someone would read their sermon and I would completely switch off. I think religion is very important but I think choristers probably don't quite grasp it.” (2021)*

It is worth mentioning here that there is a danger that young people have to just put up with the church sermons instead of trying to understand them. Some ex-choristers did reflect on what the religious aspect meant to them after singing God's praises for many years; sadly, they found that as young children they were just obliged to do what they had been told but they still totally hated the sermons:

*“You see, sermons at [...] Cathedral were just so dire. I mean it was appalling; terrible how adults could listen to that, let alone children. Lots of sermons in the cathedral were really excruciatingly tedious.” (3011)*

Another ex-chorister, however, explained in a more neutral manner why choristers find it impossible to engage with the sermons:

*“The reality is that people who work in the cathedral are essentially theologians and academics. I don’t remember their sermons. The service isn’t, I suppose, the place for analytical dialogue. It is more that you are following a tradition. Sometimes in the sermons maybe they are weighing up some questions but I would have been more interested in the kind of books my parents were reading about it, the more philosophical side of it. I don’t feel I was exposed to the philosophical side. To be honest we never really engaged with theology in an educational context.” (2211)*

Although choristers are professional singers and their appearance and voice always adds an extra layer to ordinary services, something needs to be done by educators and church leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to direct choristers to understand their ‘job’ better. This point-of-view is illustrated in the following quote:

*“So little thought was given to spiritual development. The organists were all professional so there was never a strong sense of religion. We never prayed before doing anything and although there was formal Grace before and after each meal, there was never any evocation of a ministry being performed by choristers. (3011)*

Still, choristers could just be the bishops of the future (actually choir members are often the church’s best missional opportunity) and it used to be that a vast proportion of the Church of England’s clergy had once been choristers, but from the interviews I get the sense that choir schools do not teach much about religious education.

### **6.5.5 Choristers who still become Christians**

For some choristers the cathedral atmosphere acted as a deterrent to religion but others found it engaged them from an early age and influenced their later life. In this study, some interviewees’ perspective shows that, even if some memories are negative, ultimately the experience of being a chorister has a positive effect in evoking a sense of spirituality and some may go back to a church environment in later life. For example, this girl ex-chorister who studies in the university now enjoys going back to church not only for the singing but also for the worship:

*“Now I enjoy singing again in church. I go because I sing and **actually I think I would enjoy going even if I wasn’t singing**. I think that obviously has got something to do with the fact that I was so used to going when I was so young, especially at Christmas. **I love going, it is the centre, the base, isn’t it?**” (0621)*



Particularly among the older generation, choristers' childhood singing experience in the cathedral did influence some to take up a religious career:

*"I think a lot of them did practice religion and were influenced by it because quite a lot of the boys who were in my social group in the school actually became vicars. My best friend became a vicar. He was the chaplain at the Quayside, for the sailors, I forgot what it is called now but he was the chaplain. And the guy who was head of Decani became a vicar also so there was quite an influence."* (2111)

Even today, ex-choristers can follow the same path, even females. The example below is from an ex-chorister who mentioned her chorister peers' views about religion:

*"There was four us in my year and we went through year 9 all the way up to year 13. I said one of them is at Exeter at the moment as a Choral Scholar. Now she is very religious and wants to be a Bishop or a priest at least. She is going off to do theology at Cambridge after her year out."* (0721)

Still, I think few parents nowadays send their children for audition as cathedral chorister for religious reasons. Whilst it is a shame, at the same time I suppose it is only to be expected because religion is becoming less and less popular (see *1.2.1 Choristers and the composition of religious belief in the United Kingdom*).

Overall, the data shows that being a cathedral chorister is almost purely a musical endeavour as singing in a ritual setting does not necessarily enrich young people's spiritual development. In some cases, it even has the opposite effect and make choristers feel fed up with the sermons so they do not want to engage with religious practice in their later life. However it is common to see retired people who had once been choristers return to the church and either take up singing again or volunteer as a church steward, but for young ex-choristers, going back to church regularly is mostly purely for the singing.

In conclusion, the data indicates that a number of choristers who sing in church choirs across Britain are not so religious and are there almost entirely for the music. To end this section, I turn to the words of one of the interviewees: *'how would people sing in services but then not have that religious belief?* Whichever way you look at it, whether it means they cannot be bothered to try to understand what is going on, or whether it is that the church and choir school have not placed enough emphasis on religious education, it is a potential risk when putting young choristers into regular worship without letting them understand the sermons and is an issue that should be addressed.

## 6.6 Summary

In this chapter, four potential challenges for choristers have been pointed out.

The first was lack of free time, as being a chorister means a huge commitment to the choir and the school. Choristers spend 20 hours a week singing and on top of that have to learn two instruments and do all their academic work. Thus time to just relax and be a child is severely limited, some choristers felt they missed out on a real childhood as they rarely had experience of 'play'. Some participants mentioned the need for private space for themselves, especially senior boys and girls. The worst situation for boarding choristers is that living in such an environment where a conversation cannot often be held in private, it is difficult for them to seek out calming activities or to just be alone; no space is left for rest and they are not allowed to go to the dormitories except at bedtime or when they have to change their clothing. However, this need for unstructured time should be a crucial aspect of life for busy choristers, an essential part of their development.

The second was the disruption of family ties. Children at that age always have a sub-conscious desire to be at home, but boarding is still compulsory for 12 leading choir schools in the UK and many chorister are still sent away from home as their parents think that is the best option for them to be educated in such a 'first-class school'. In this study, the majority of ex-choristers mentioned they had little time at home as they always had shorter holidays compared with their classmates and rarely had a whole weekend without singing duties during term time. Although it seems a good education in choir schools, some choristers felt miserable there due to the strict boarding rules. Some of them became estranged from their family, as in those formative years they only could go home during half-term (every six weeks). The data shows that boarding choristers in UK choir schools were driven by a work ethic second to none and unified by a sense of purpose, but in retrospect, they sacrificed a great deal of their family life.

The third was the school transition. A choir school is a unique environment. It is very small, and usually a private school with a strong emphasis on music, where boarding choristers, separated from the outside world to a large extent, formed a special close-knit group as they had been made to live together for several years. In the choir schools many choristers had received bursary or charity funds to enable them to sing in a cathedral and be educated in its feeder school up to Year 8, when the financial help ceases and choristers move on to other

schools. According to participants in this study, this transition seems extremely hard especially for those who came from non-privileged backgrounds, as they moved from a private choir school to a state secondary school. One of the biggest problems could be the sudden change in their social set (described as '*culture shock*' by participants) --- many ex-choristers struggled to make new friends and felt isolated. In addition, the change from a precisely structured busy life into a life that has plenty of spare time seems have negatively influenced some ex-choristers' academic progress as they lost their self-control and wasted time on things like computer games.

The fourth was the different ways in which religion could affect them. The data shows that as a cathedral chorister, singing in a ritual setting does not necessarily enrich young people's spiritual development. In some cases, it even had the opposite effect --- long '*boring*' sermons can make choristers so fed up they do not want to engage with religion any more; it is quite common nowadays that people who sing in church choirs across Britain are not religious and are there entirely for the music. The data indicates there is a potential risk when putting young choristers into regular worship without letting them understand the sermons and the ritual.

Choristers lack time to play and somehow missed a normal childhood. Many of them had to live away from home which potentially put challenges to the family relationship; their schooling after leaving choir school seems a hard adaptation. Opposite to their growing appreciation of choral music, some choristers found it is hard to engage with religious worship when they were young and the hour-long sermons in the cathedral make them feel reluctant towards religion. All these should be carefully handled in order to let Britain's long established choral tradition to continue to flow. Still, overall, participants often identified the school transition as the hardest challenge they had faced. However, there are always two sides to the story, and the experience of many UK choir schools over the years has demonstrated that the training in the acquisition of knowledge and character-building coupled with the singing of beautiful music in a religious atmosphere, may give the child a new outlook on life which can bring immense advantages.

## **Chapter 7 Discussion and Conclusion**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the findings reported in chapter 4, 5 and 6, examines them in relation to existing research and assesses their implications. However, before commencing, a brief summary of the findings is provided.

The findings suggest that the music education for choristers in English choir schools are maintaining their very high standards. Choristers gain significant skills in sight-reading as well as in singing and also, to a lesser degree, in instrumental playing, through regular scheduled practices and weekly individual lessons. Thus, this training does not only focus on singing but also includes instrument and music theory learning, forming a solid foundation to enhance the development of an all-round musician. Choristers' understanding of music as a subject is above average because of the time and effort invested in it. They may also gain an interest in conducting and organ-playing through watching their own choirmaster and listening to the organist. Most importantly, they gain an appreciation of music and high standards of public performance, which last a lifetime. The interviewees found it relatively easy to pursue a music career if they wanted, though most ex-choristers retained a passion for music which was not necessarily limited to choral singing.

In terms of social and personal development, choristers are able to dedicate themselves to difficult tasks over long periods of time. Although the life of a chorister is regimented and sometimes harsh, it certainly teaches young people dedication and discipline. The emphasis on the discipline in their everyday lives comes through very strongly in many of the interviews. It not only teaches choristers how to behave during services but also educates them in how to meet deadlines, to fulfil their engagements on time and to produce work on time. In addition, the 'discipline' gained through choral training also helped develop an inner strength to maintain an intensive pace of life and persevere with their plans until they accomplish them. In day-to-day life, choristers (whether boarders or not) have to work as a team and are taught to respect others as individuals and the choir as a whole so that their performances can be appreciated and a life/ study balance can be achieved. This practice teaches them to listen to varying perspectives of the same situation and to be tolerant to differing opinions. Additionally, working as a team hones communication skills and helps choristers deal better with conflicts and resolve them amicably. Some choristers said they obtained leadership and management skills through

choir training, especially when they were made head or deputy chorister in their final year. It gave them opportunities to take on responsibilities and be a model for others, making them feel more involved in the choir life when they sensed that the choirmaster valued and trusted them as individuals.

Referring to their academic achievements while in the choir school, interviewees were generally satisfied with their schooling, because of the excellent student/teacher ratio and teachers who had a deep understanding of their particular subject. Some of them have developed time management skills to cope with the demands of academic study, which enable them to win scholarships to their next schools.

Most ex-choristers mentioned that a great deal of confidence was gained through frequent performances in front of large audiences in the cathedral or appearances on TV and radio, and that they feel quite at ease when they have to stand up and deliver speeches. This professionalism or performance skill can often transfer into so many aspects of everyday life. Those who boarded, living away from home and having a far busier life than their peers, gained a great deal of independence thanks to the fast but regulated pace of life in the choir school.

This study also provides additional insights about potential challenges for choristers. Being a chorister means a huge commitment to the choir and the school, so the time to just relax and be a child becomes very limited because of their average twenty hours' music time; and to some extent, some choristers felt they missed out on a real childhood as they rarely had the experience of 'play'. Choristers in twelve leading choir schools still have to leave home and become boarders as part of the tradition, so they have little time at home with their families as they always have shorter holidays and extra singing duties occupying every weekend during term time, which means a 'normal' family life is out of the question. This disruption seems to have damaged family ties according to some participants as they felt estranged from their family due to the boarding aspect during their time in the choir school. Moving on from the choir school to another school at the age of thirteen, was the hardest challenge for some, and several described it as a culture shock. The sudden change in their social circumstances left many ex-choristers feeling isolated and struggling to make new friends. In addition, the change from a precisely structured busy life into a life with plenty of spare time seems to have negatively influenced some ex-choristers' academic progress as they lost their powers of concentration

and “wasted time” on “unnecessary” things. Additionally, being a cathedral chorister is purely musical, and singing in a ritual setting does not necessarily enrich young people’s spiritual development. As opposed to their growing appreciation of choral music, some choristers found it hard to engage with religious worship when they were young and the ‘very long’ sermons in the cathedral made them want to maintain a distance from religion. All these points should be carefully considered if Britain’s long-established choral tradition is to continue.

## **7.2 Discussion**

In this section, the discussion has been divided into three subheadings, covering (1) factors shaping choristers’ musicianship; (2) life skills learned; (3) potential problems. The aim is to compare my research with that of others who have investigated the English choral tradition especially in respect of young choristers, to see what ideas we have in common and where we differ.

### **7.2.1 Factors that shape choristers’ musicianship**

The main effects of English choristers’ training are the instillation of a strong sight-reading skill plus a high level of vocal control and a good music appreciation; the instrumental level they reach is seen as less important, simply a by-product of the choral singing.

#### ***Instrumental skills***

To take the last point first, is there any good reason for adding instrument practice, especially piano playing, to a chorister’s already busy schedule, or even of having to choose two instruments to learn in addition to fitting in the music theory lessons after school? The interview data shows however, that what choristers might achieve through learning instruments is how to apply the knowledge they gained from singing and music theory to making music on an instrument, or vice-versa. Most importantly, instrumental learning is one of the methods by which choristers can develop more generalised aural schemata that can be utilised when they sight-read new music with little or no time to prepare.

Hallam (1998) lists the importance of aural, cognitive, technical musicianship along with performance in the development of the professional musician and explains that a variety of combinations of these may be required for different tasks or genres of the music profession. Hallam (2001) further explained that *“the process of enculturation into particular musical genres largely occurs through listening to music in the environment. Much of this learning*

*occurs without conscious cognitive awareness; the sounds are simply absorbed.” (p.28)*

As we can see from the data, from the very beginning young probationers are made to sit through the services for up to two years without singing. They are also encouraged to build up an all-round musicianship, for which learning the piano is seen as very important and in most cases is compulsory. These both form part of the process of building up the aural schemata and giving the child a sound image which hopefully helps improve their pitch discrimination and vocal accuracy. As the former choirmaster in St. John’s College, Cambridge, George Guest, mentioned, being able to play the piano, a stringed instrument or a wood-wind instrument is important for choristers, helping them to recognise pitch intervals as well as building up a sense of rhythm (Guest, 1998, p. 181).

Daily singing, learning to read music, having vocal lessons, learning at least two instruments interlink in the choristers’ daily music routine. Good instrumental performance needs to include an awareness of all the nuances of phrasing when interpreting any piece of music, while good singing needs the rhythmic discipline and academic rigor of good instrument playing.

From the quotes in Chapter 4 we can get a picture of how instrument learning fits in with the choir school setting. The scheduled half-hour per day instrumental practice plays an important role in building up choristers’ musicality; put simply, learning piano in the choir school mainly aims to help the child to become familiar with treble clef/bass clef and improve the choristers’ accuracy of intonation. It may not always help one’s instrumental development, however, because choristers have to learn two instruments at the same time, but only get 1.5 hours per week practice time for each instrument. An interesting finding concerning choristers’ musicianship was that, while several of my interviewees attained a high enough standard to become solo singers, none of them managed to become professional instrumental soloists though they were considered good enough orchestral players. The reason for this is self-evident, for studies have clearly shown that the amount of time spent in practice is one of the key factors in attaining high achievement in instrumental performance (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993; Sloboda *et al.*, 1996), which a choir school cannot provide. For those children who show more talent as an instrumentalist, this should be taken into account when considering sending them to choir school. One study shows that the numbers of hours of practice required for advanced instrumental performance varies from instrument to instrument (Hallam, 2016) but a general conclusion was reached that:

*“The majority of those who have reached a high level of expertise started early (4–6 years old), gradually increasing the amount of practice, and accumulating a large amount of practice time (7000–8000 hours) over a period of 15–16 years, before reaching a high performance level in their twenties.” (Jørgensen, 2002, p. 108)*

Furthermore, classically trained musicians tend to spend many hours in solitary practice, whereas non-classical musicians (jazz, popular and folk musicians) tend to spend most of their time practising with others or playing along with recordings individually or collectively in order to acquire particular music characteristic techniques (Gruber *et al.*, 2004; Papageorgi *et al.*, 2010). But nowadays the predominant culture for children and young people is pop music, which they find a lot more enjoyable. Referring back to section 2.3 *An overview of music provision across the UK - policy development*), we can see how mainstream schools in England are struggling to provide quality music education for the majority of students, especially in the case of those who want to take up an instrument (p.41). Although choristers make more significant progress compared with most of their peers, the continuation of music appreciation depends on developing a true interest in practice. Several interviewees mentioned they dropped their instrument as soon as they left the choir school. As traditional orchestral instruments need long hours of practice, it might be worth considering whether choristers’ musical training should not take this into account and find ways of making the learning process more attractive. Though Lucy Green (Green, 2017) is talking about music education in mainstream secondary schools, she makes a very good point that using informal learning practices in the classroom can help enhance the youngsters’ learning experience. Green divided informal popular music learning practices into five central characteristics: 1) the music is selected by the learner; 2) the main learning practice involves aural copying from a recording; 3) learning is self-directed and peer-directed, usually with no adult supervision; 4) there is no pre-designated order going from simple to complex, the skills and knowledge tending to be acquired as the music seems to require; 5) the learning process includes a high integration of listening, playing, composing and improvising. I think this informal learning practice is particularly suitable for senior choristers in Year 7 and 8, by which time they should have developed into advanced choral music singers equipped with certain music skills such as sight-reading and pitch discrimination. In addition, most of them are boarders and so have many more chances to learn new skills from each other in the boarding environment such as playing chords and improvising on keyboard. As Green (2006) concluded, informal music learning will allow them to “*get inside*” the inherent meanings of music and be “*freed for a moment from specific, and therefore limiting,*



*delineations*". If Green's method could be connected to choristers' music education in the school, a much more fruitful result might be achieved (instead of only aiming for ABRSM grade exams) as the informal learning practices could allow them to look at the music from their point of view.

My own thoughts here are that a better approach to building up choristers' instrumental skills needs to adapt to modern day youngsters' tastes – such as choosing an instrument which requires less practice but which would be more useful in pop music for example, thus increasing the satisfaction and motivation to learn. This idea should be considered more by music teachers in choir schools; it might be an interesting experiment to offer pop instruments to cathedral choristers such as saxophone, guitar or drums as their main instrumental choices.

### ***Sight-reading***

Williams's study (2012) about sight-reading echoes the findings of this research. Williams, herself a vocal teacher in one of the London cathedrals, is also the only researcher to have made an in-depth PhD study into English choristers' vocal development (mentioned in the Literature Review Part 3). In her study, she demonstrates that boys in the top two years (i.e.: 12 or 13 years old) of male-only cathedral or college choirs are expected to show leadership qualities including advanced sight-reading skills. In addition, she mentions that the breadth of their musical experiences makes them highly competent performers, such as having the ability to transpose, being able to sing parts other than the main melody and understanding the way the composer has organised the whole piece. This advantageous sight-reading skill, she says, comes as part of the English chorister's training and makes them extremely employable after their chorister days are over.

### ***All-round musicianship***

The data in this study shows sufficient evidence that English choristers' music education remains at a very high standard and is not only limited to choral singing. Along similar lines, David Willcocks (former choirmaster at King's College, Cambridge, 1957-1974) said in an interview with Doreen Rao: "*I think that whole five years should be geared towards making a boy a really good musician later in life and opening his ears to the possibilities*".

In Barrett's study (2011) we find very similar views. Barrett believed some cathedral choristers would retain their music skills and engage with music as a singer after leaving the choir school; others might continue their musical engagement as instrumental performers, since they still had

the skills. My findings suggest that if ex-choristers desire to do so, they can take up a music career relatively easily; even if they do not choose to be a professional musician, choristers can still have a very high chance of winning music scholarships at their next schools.

### ***The role of family influence***

Last but no means least, the role of the family is crucial in shaping the development of choristers' musicianship. Although this study contains a great deal of evidence showing how choir schools schedule individual instrumental lessons, practice slots and theory lessons to cultivate choristers' all-round music skills, it also provides examples of how much preparation parents had done with their child to help them pass the vocal audition and academic exams. And this is an important point for discussion: how much can parents do to assist their children's musical development alongside the school? Without supportive parents or grandparents who see being part of the daily worship in a religious foundation as valuable music training, these young people could not have achieved what they have.

It has been mentioned in Chapter 4 (4.3 Music Achievements, p. 101) that choristers' parents or grandparents usually give the child early and continuous access to music engagement, and the data show the importance of parental support which makes many participants in this study believe themselves to be already musically or even academically above average before joining the choir school.

Research results have shown a consistently positive effect of parental influences on student achievement, attitudes, behaviour and learning (Pomerantz *et al.*, 2005; Asmus, 2006) and the importance and effectiveness of this involvement has been found to be related to higher achievement by the child, (e.g., Izzo *et al.*, 1999; Fan & Chen, 2001; Englund *et al.*, 2004; Hong & Ho, 2005). Focusing on the parental role in children's musical development, McPherson's study (2009) demonstrates that children's musical competence/achievement and their desire to participate, make an effort and overcome obstacles are largely linked to the sociocultural environment of the family. Children form concepts of their own competence through getting feedback from their own parents in early years, so the development of their musical performance hinges largely on the goals and inspiration of their parents. Studies also found that positive teacher–student relationships and parental involvement in practice sessions led to student enjoyment of music and musical progress (Upitis *et al.*, 2017).

Young children who attended the audition for selection have in most cases been prepared by their parents. In this paragraph, I will further discuss parents' important role for choristers' success. The introduction in Chapter 1 mentions that when recruiting a new chorister, apart from the music perspectives, choirmasters usually also look for a child "*who appears to be bright and has a glint in the eye and is confident and at ease with things*", which is often the result of the parents or grandparents' love of music and the way they prepared the child. David Willcocks said he would select boys "*with good aural perception*", which is hard to achieve without any preparation. Before a child can be admitted as a probationer in the cathedral choir, around the age of eight, the school asks them to sit English and Maths exams to make sure the child is fairly capable academically. In addition, as well as giving them a vocal trial, the school needs to make sure a new recruit can cope with school work and the many other activities on offer as well as the demanding choir workload. This is no doubt a selective process, not only musically but also academically (usually it is extremely competitive to enrol in some southern cathedrals/chapel choirs such as St. Paul Cathedral Choir, Westminster Abbey Choir, London or King's College Choir, Cambridge). For example, there might be as many as sixty applying for four positions at King's College choir according to David Willcocks. Therefore, the parents themselves have to be fully aware of this and help the child focus on those special strengths the school of their choice is looking for. This is very important as these strengths may be useful in obtaining bursaries, particularly when the family may find it very hard to pay the full fees.

I personally believe that the level a chorister manages to reach by the end of their school journey is not only based on those years of education in the choir school but is also related to the child's previous educational background and, very importantly, their parents' support and guidance. However, overall, choristers received holistic music training which covers all essential elements to develop musicianship. It is probably one of the best options for children who have a passion for singing. The way British cathedrals and collegiate chapels train their choristers provides a total immersion experience for those young singers which almost automatically boosts a higher standard of all-round musicianship which will last well into their future.

As David Willcocks said: "*the time devoted by children to choir singing will never have been wasted, for they have laid the foundation for a life-long love of music*" (Rao & Willcocks, 1985).

### **7.2.2 Life skills training and character-building through being a chorister**

Furthermore, the findings of this present study also highlight the life skills developed alongside the music skills. Being a chorister is certainly hard work, involving a truly busy schedule, such as early morning rehearsals and a great amount of academic engagement from a young age. Interviewees in this study particularly mentioned the dedication, discipline, team spirit, responsibility, leadership and time management skills they gained through being a cathedral chorister.

#### ***Dedication and discipline***

Gaining a hard-working attitude and dedication are an important part of a chorister's growing-up; through this unique experience, they develop their powers of concentration. As the data suggest, without perseverance and dedication, this high music standard simply cannot be achieved at such a young age. In the Literature Review (2.3), I mentioned Barrett and Mills' (2009) narrative case study based on these two scholars' dual observation. Their study outlines how demanding a chorister's life is, which is not usual for children of that age. Having an hour's vocal rehearsal before the normal school starts (around 9 am) for five days a week requires a lot from a young child. In another study Barrett (2011) also mentioned (see p. 263) that the choir schools create this 'environmental condition' which combines individual drive, focus, and peer mentoring with structured practice. The data from my interviewees reflect this view, particularly the importance of peer mentoring. Young probationers, like new starters in any school, tend to copy their seniors and also learn a lot from each other, not only on the music side (vocal production and music interpretation) but also in all aspects of their communal life (body language and behaviour). Therefore, we could say choir schools form their own self-perpetuating organic way of educating each new generation of singers.

#### ***Team spirit***

In addition, this study shows that working as a team day by day closely with other musicians fosters the development of choristers' social skills and team spirit, as they encounter each other's differences and become more tolerant and adaptable. Although no previous study has apparently focused on how choristers' training can develop team spirit, in the Literature Review 2.2.2 *Music engagement and children's social development*, several other studies have been cited that show how better social adjustment and positive attitude are gained (Spychiger *et al.*, 1993). A recent study using data from the UK National Singing Program '*Sing Up*' also

suggested that the higher the singing development rating was, the more positive was the child's self-concept and sense of being socially included (Welch *et al.*, 2014). Hallam (2010) makes the point that most of the previous research in this field has concluded that there are a range of health and well-being benefits arising from a choir's natural team spirit, but it all dealt primarily with adult singers, although she does suggest there is no reason to suppose that these benefits would not apply to children. This research seems to support Hallam, for most of my interviewees saw themselves as part of a close-knit group of children who worked together closely on a daily basis and many of them lived together in the boarding school as well. The interactive and essentially social nature of this unique practice appears to improve adaptive social skills, such as cooperation with peers, and behaving politely and appropriately in interactions with other choristers and adults.

### ***Responsibility and leadership***

Participants in this study who had been made head or deputy head chorister valued the responsibility placed upon them by the choirmaster. They were given authority over the rest of the choir and became perhaps role models for them. According to William (Williams, J, 2012) (Williams, Jenevora, 2012, p. 126) boy choristers in Year 7 (11-12) should now be the main force to lead the singing as the boys in Year 8 could well suffer the onset of puberty. This is especially not a good thing for those that have been made head or deputy head, because they can no longer be the lead singer. William therefore suggests that boys in their second-last year should be given the leadership both in public performance and also during choir practice.

Independence, confidence and time-management were important themes to come out of the data, but everyone had had their own ways of dealing with them. Memories of that period of life were very mixed, because not every one of them was really suited to life in the choir school especially as boarders.

The data in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 both show in-depth details about the boarding school environment and the demanding timetable and how these affect choristers' development but it also shows that they produce a number of challenges.

### **7.2.3 Challenges**

The two most challenging experiences this study found were, firstly, that choristers had little time for relaxation while at school and secondly, the disruption of family ties.

Choristers spend twenty hours a week singing and on top of that they have to learn two instruments and do all their academic work. As a consequence, their free time is severely limited. Senior boys and girls especially mentioned the need for privacy, which is not to be found in a boarding environment. Nor can they be alone or, for example, simply relax with a book, which is what a thirteen-year-old usually enjoys, and most interviewees agreed that free time should be an integral part of boarding school life. However, some available free time for privacy or play is essential to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children and young people as many studies have shown (Ginsburg, 2007; Goldstein, 2012).

The data shows that boarding choristers in UK choir schools were driven by a strong work ethic, but children at that age generally prefer to live comfortably in their own home, yet boarding is still compulsory for 12 leading choir schools in the UK. In this study, the majority of ex-choristers mentioned they had little contact with home. Some choristers felt miserable there, and some even become estranged from their family due to the strict boarding rules. Schaverien (2015) demonstrates how many boarders unconsciously adopt new ways of coping, including dissociative amnesia resulting in a psychological split between the home self and the boarding school self. In another study Schaverien (2004, p. 15) also mentioned in her documentation of clinical practice how she interviewed three women whose brothers were sent away to boarding school whilst the girls stayed at home and how this in turn had a detrimental effect on them. This echoes with my data, as several interviewees mentioned, due to the fact they were boarders, the deterioration in their relationship with their siblings (who were not choristers).

Two other challenges were apparent from the data: the difficulties during the transition from choir school to state or private secondary schools and also the religious aspect (which I will return to in ‘suggestions for future research’), but neither of these has been studied as yet.

### **7.3 Implications of the findings**

This study highlights the strong music skills as well as other non-musical skills choristers can achieve through being educated in UK choir schools and being part of Britain’s choral tradition but in addition reveals the negative aspects some choristers experienced.

Britain's modern choir schools provide not only the training ground for professional church musicians but also life-enhancing educational opportunities for young choristers. When we look at the 'whole image' of UK choir schools' education, the music skills choristers learned can be seen as a by-product of choir schools' education, and many parents think sending a child to a private school attached to a big cathedral or a famous college chapel is something that only rich families could afford. It is true that this kind of education is mostly supplied by expensive private fee-paying schools, but families who cannot afford even the reduced fee can now apply for a full bursary through the government's Choir Scholarship Scheme (part of the Music & Dance Scheme) or gain financial help from the Chorister Fund of individual cathedrals. Therefore, it is an opportunity open to all.

The format of UK choir schools is steadily changing to allow them to continue to play an important role in Britain's on-going choral tradition. Some choir schools have adapted by changing from boarding to day choristers, or boys-only to mixed-sex, or some variant of the two. Two months before this thesis' submission, a well-known northern cathedral, faced with severe recruitment problems, broke its hundred-year-old boarding tradition and now admits girls and boys as day choristers, which enables local children to live at home whilst being a member of the cathedral's acclaimed Choir. Some choir schools have had to close down totally due to modern economic pressures, meaning the choirs they were meant to serve have to survive by looking for purely volunteer non-paying choristers from local schools. Even so, due to this shift of emphasis, new issues will arise. For instance, if the choir is solely dependent on local volunteer children, it can usually only practise during after-school hours, which means that their one-time high standards can only be maintained with difficulty.

The findings of this study hopefully can be a rich resource to help choir schools' educators, choirmasters and church leaders consider how best to respond to the inevitable changes and challenges. Furthermore, this study gives parents of future choristers an explanation of what the pros and cons are of sending their child to be a professional singer-chorister at the age of eight (in some cases girls can only join a choir school at the age of eleven or thirteen).

Yet, my personal view, which is the same as that of many scholars (Mithen, 2009; Dissanayake, 2012; Barrett & Westerlund, 2017), is that music is not especially the preserve of choir schools

but a universal feature of human society. As Blacking (1987, p.146) wrote: “*Music is essentially about aesthetic experiences and the creative expression of individual human beings in community, about the sharing of feelings and ideas.*” Researchers often emphasise the role of music in facilitating any child’s intellectual development and academic attainment, for example, the studies about music’s effect on IQ by Schellenberg (2004) and Costa-Giomi (2004) and also Kraus *et al* (2014) but I believe that music is an integral component of human growth and development, as has been discussed in detail in many studies (see *Literature Review- Part One*). Kokotsaki and Hallam (2007), talking about music making among university students, concluded that music making is 1) a musical act that allow them to gain a better knowledge and understanding of music; and 2) a social act that brought them closer to ‘like-minded’ people, building up their social skills and their self-esteem. However, I believe that music education should be included to a greater extent in all school curricula --- not necessarily as simply an examinable subject, but also as a time for enjoyment and recreation.

Unfortunately, singing, especially in cathedrals, is all too often seen as a waste of time for children in parts of the country where for example most talk is about football (Laurence, 2011). Sadly, there are still more cultural influences that minimise the value of this great tradition. Singing, just like language, should be for every child a link to their own personality. If a child desires to sing and has a good voice, then parents ought to realise that giving their child the chance to enjoy this unrivalled training as a chorister is just a valuable experience to develop their natural talent and also gain the confidence and the many other useful skills choristers are trained to develop. That will undoubtedly stay with them throughout their lives.

#### **7.4 Study limitations**

The author acknowledges that there are limitations to this study.

The first limitation is that the topic is only about choir schools’ education as seen from the point of former choristers, as the school’s circumstances could not allow interviews of current choristers under 16 years old because of its very heavy schedule. In addition, not everyone I contacted wished to take part in the study for justifiable personal reasons. Therefore in this phenomenological research it is not possible to use the experiences of my participants to generalise the findings to the wider population, but this could form the basis for future study. However, the findings provide useful insights which other choristers or music educators may be able to relate and adapt to their own needs and circumstances (Bassey, 2001).



The second limitation is the small number of participants, which was due to the time constraints and the limited resources at my disposal. Because of my own personal network of friends and acquaintances, the interviewees were all choristers in Anglican churches. I could not manage to interview any ex-choristers from Roman Catholic, Scottish or Welsh choir schools. In addition, because the female chorister is a relatively new idea, the number of male and female participants could not be well balanced (24:6). In the end, the thirty in-depth interviews produced a large amount of data, much of which was repeated by different interviewees as the data collection process progressed, a sign that the study was reaching saturation point.

Finally, the most challenging aspect of the current study was my own language background and culture (Chinese) which created some difficulties for me. Though I already had a good standard of English, the whole ethos of the choir school was a totally new cultural experience for me, with many totally new concepts, couched in a totally new language, and so took quite some time to get used to. Particularly difficult was the transcription of the interview data, which occupied me fully for most of my second and third years, and there is still the possibility that I misunderstood parts of what was said during the data collection.

## **7.5 Suggestions for further research**

The changes taking place in choir schools nowadays require a great deal of thought about how they should be run. There are two main areas of concern: one is about vocal training and the other is about religious appreciation.

### **1) Vocal training**

Participants in this study mentioned the clear differences between the roles of choirmaster and singing coach. It is generally believed that the individual singing lessons mainly teach choristers about singing technique, which help them project the sound better. The acquisition of some vocal skills through voice coaching can enhance vocal stamina and promote vocal health for cathedral choristers as they use their voices regularly in daily life (Williams, 2010). A vocal teacher plays an important role and can give instructions and help individual choristers to navigate their experience of singing especially during the period of voice change. On the other hand, the choirmaster focuses more on the group sound and has no time to polish individual voices. Therefore, having individual voice lessons means choristers can understand more about their own voice as a singularity instead of as an anonymous part of a choir

Nowadays almost all cathedral choirs have singing coaches to offer individual or small group singing lessons for all choristers. According to Miriam Allan (Allan, 2012), however, some choristers found this set-up challenging. Firstly they did not have enough time with their singing teacher; and secondly they could not often apply the singing teacher's suggestions in the choir stalls, which caused them a deal of frustration throughout their choristership. As a singing teacher herself, Allan also found some organists were trying to get round these two problems by bringing singing teachers into the rehearsals to further improve language and technique.

As I mentioned before (give section and page number in parenthesis), however, the employment of a *female* singing coach is a relatively new phenomenon, which only started in the 1990s, but developed quickly.

For the female singing coach, the biggest challenge now involves teaching the boys in their last year since many more now are affected with voice change than was the case in the past, which means only a few boys are able to sing treble throughout their last year in the choir. It is probably a good idea to give the boys a couple of months rest when their voices start to break. This in turn causes big problems for the singing teacher especially if it is a female, as she may have difficulty in facilitating the transition from treble to tenor, let alone to bass. She should certainly not try to get the boy to sing falsetto at this stage.

The process of learning to sing well involves a massive retention of phonemic production, where the teacher sings an example of the desired vocal behaviour and the student attempts to imitate it. This has been put forward as a reason why it takes so long to educate a singer to a high level (Nair *et al.*, 2018) and some also believe that phonemic production has long been recognised as part of the process of improving technique. It is common to see in singing lessons the student using the trial and error process until he/she can replicate the example to the teacher's satisfaction. The challenge for the choirmaster is that female singing coaches may not be able to demonstrate the 'correct' boy-chorister sounds, since boys' and girls' voices are not exactly the same. The female singing coaches have themselves been trained in "the girls' way" and may have had no previous first-hand experience of dealing with boys' voices.

The problem now arises of maintaining the traditional English cathedral tone colour, something that greatly concerns the *Campaign For the Traditional Cathedral Choir* (CTCC) as can be seen from their website (<http://www.ctcc.org.uk>). On the other hand, Dr Mackey, an academic

in York, in a Ph.D. thesis (Mackey, 2015) argues that she has found no evidence that the recruitment of boys suffers as a result of bringing in girls, although she agrees that this was a worry, initially. From my own observations of a nearby cathedral choir which has both boy and girl choristers, it was noticeable that important solo parts were being allotted more and more to top year girl choristers rather than the boys, because at that age, the girls' voices were becoming much more powerful while the boys' voices were becoming less stable, and the whole choral sound was being steadily dominated by the sound of the girls when they join the boys and girls together. However, the mixed choir (boys and girls singing together) is of necessity slowly becoming more common especially when the choir has to perform large scale works.

It is still important to keep the boy-chorister tradition alive, because therein lies the future source of adult altos, tenors, and basses, but nevertheless the girls should always be considered equals with the boys. Almost all UK cathedral and minster choirs remain opposed to mixing the two sexes, except on special occasions. David Poulter (Director of music at Liverpool Cathedral, who founded the girls' choir at Coventry Cathedral in the 1990s) compared boys' and girls' singing voices in an interesting metaphor, where he likened it to "*mixing a flute stop on an organ with a diapason stop... I do cherish the distinct difference between the tone boys make, and the tone the girls make.*" (Davies, 2016). This is an area that needs to be carefully handled and further study could explore more deeply how the phonemic production and the overall sound of the cathedral choir is going to become even more of an issue, especially with the inevitable trend towards mixed choirs and how best to use the vocal coaches of both sexes to this end.

## **2) Religious appreciation**

The most important thing choristers will do in the service is help lead the worship by their singing, for this too is an integral part of religious practice. As they take part in four or five services per week on average, it is important to help them understand the meaning and value of the worship and inspire them to fundamentally love this way of life, which can help and encourage them in every way throughout their time in the choir. Singing forms a part of every service but the rest of the time choristers are just sitting there listening but not necessarily engaging with what is being said. Although the content of the service might just have made some impression on them and influenced them when they grew up, quite a number of the interviewees said plainly that they could not engage with the services as it was all beyond their

understanding since it had never been explained to them at any time (see 6.5.4.). For me it was as if they were being shown the keyhole without being given the key, and it seems a worthwhile area for future research into how to encourage young choristers to gain some understanding of the religious side of what they are doing.

Jerome Bruner said: “*Education is a major embodiment of a culture’s way of life*” (Bruner, 1996, p. 13). In relation to the educational practice of the cathedral choristers, their day-to-day experience in a ritual setting indeed embodies a particular culture’s ‘way of life’--- supporting and enabling the continuing spiritual practice of the Church, and contributing to the promulgation of sacred choral music as a Western musical practice. However, tradition depends on change; in this study the majority of ex-choristers told me they found it hard to engage with the traditional long sermons they had to sit through and just got bored, as a result of which, as they grew up, they wanted to have little or nothing to do with religion. We need to be aware of such problems. Church leaders who had been choristers themselves are very aware of this. The previous Dean at Durham Cathedral Michael Sadgrove once said of his time as a chorister in the parish church that he wished somebody had taken the trouble to explain the ritual and encourage him to ask questions (see p.180) and he went on to say:

*“... Now [as Dean of Durham] I have done a lot of that here with all the choristers in their year groups, boys and girls separately. I have them all in regularly and we have talked about faith, we have talked about the words, we have talked about the psalms. In quite a low-key way but I just wanted them to understand what they are doing. I am not pretending that the work I have done will make any difference necessarily, I am just saying I think if an ex-chorister wanted to explore their own faith at a later date, the memory of the conversations we had might just make it a bit more accessible. Not the content of the conversations but the fact that we had them at all and it might make them less afraid to ask for help.”*

There is very little scholarly literature concerning choristers’ spiritual development, despite Britain’s celebrated choral tradition of over 1400 years of obliging young children to sit through four or more hour-long services a week. The only pieces of research into choristers’ religious development I can find are by Martin Ashley (Ashley, 2002b) and Lucinda Murphy (2015) . Ashley’s study shows that boys in a church choir admitted that they identified as part of a social group through their singing but not through a shared religious faith. Murphy also concluded that the chorister’s experience could prove an initiation into the faith but that unless they actually think about it, it has little effect:

*“The chorister experience does provide invaluable resources for faith from which an individual may draw as they come to consciously reflect on an intuitive ritual habit central to their identity formation.”*  
--- (Murphy, 2015)

My data also shows many ex-choristers were later drawn back to the Church environment purely by the musical element and some by a wish to volunteer to help in their church (see 6.5.3), but hardly anybody by the religious aspect. It would be interesting to see what might emerge if scholars were to explore in much greater depth how to cultivate religious appreciation for choristers without damaging the whole choir school tradition.

### **Concluding remarks**

This study, to the best of my knowledge, is the first to focus not only on English cathedral/minster/collegiate chapel choristers’ music education but also on their overall schooling and pastoral supervision, offering a whole new way of looking at that unique traditional education phenomenon.

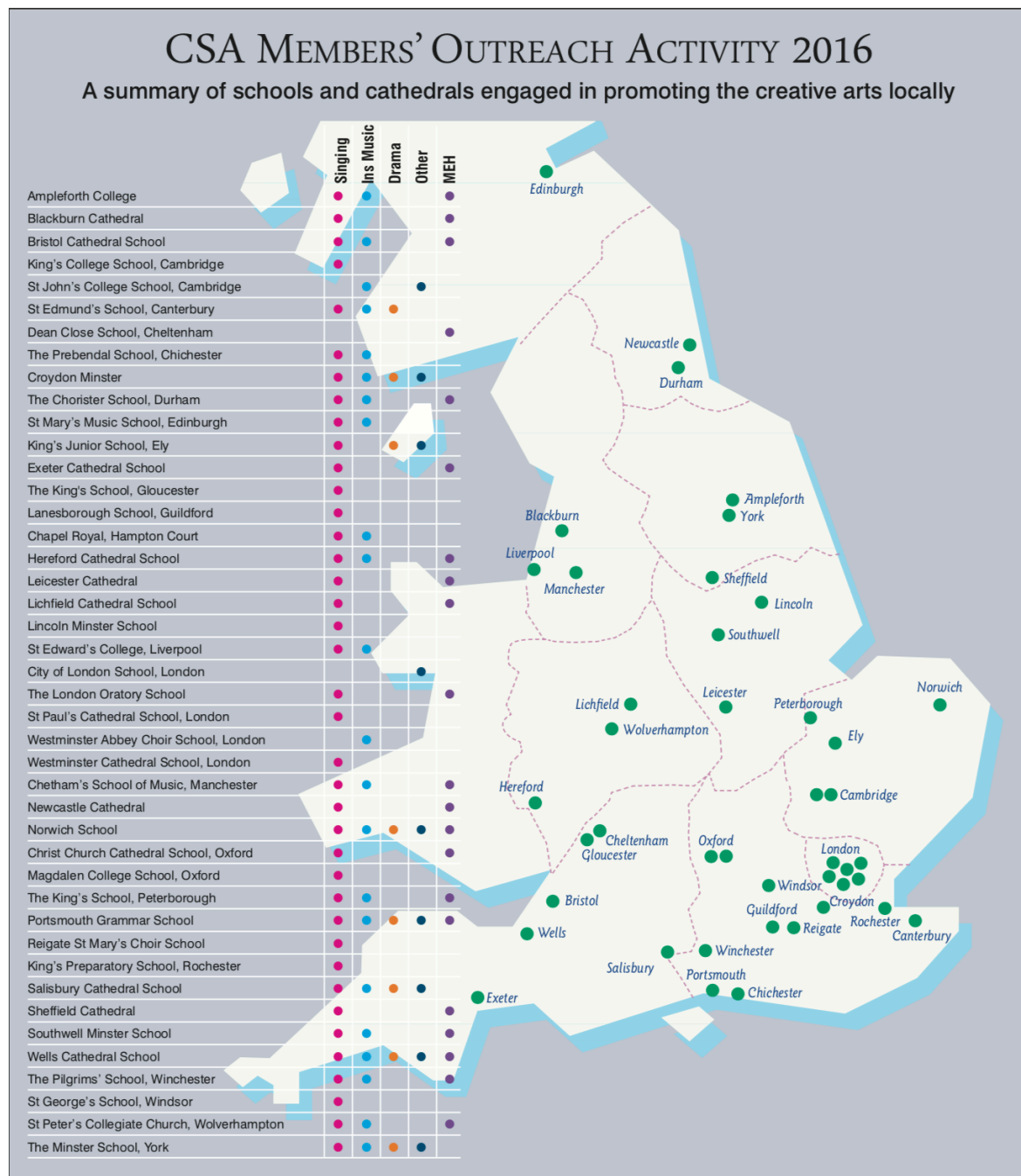
Tradition has its pros and cons, and by providing a detailed description, this study has focused on providing a better basis for understanding English choristers’ education, and provided empirical evidence about how they achieve their musical expertise. Choir schools offer a solid training in choral singing, especially sight-reading and vocal proficiency, and in academic subjects, and that strict regime they employ seems to help the general development of the individual, especially where commitment and team spirit are concerned, as the majority of interviewees agreed.

However, this way of life does not suit every child even if they enjoy singing, and this study has developed a further interpretation of its many challenges. Parents are looking to move away from a boarding school education but almost every choir school with a sound reputation is either a boarding school or requires their choristers to attend regular early morning rehearsals before school or stay late due to afternoon rehearsals and evensongs. This can damage family ties and preclude a normal childhood, a sacrifice mentioned by many participants. Interviewees also generally found life hard during the transition to their next school and some even had no desire to return to a church environment because of the religious aspect, though they would return for singing.

I hope this study has contributed to research and practice in several ways, giving future researchers some useful guidelines. Perhaps the research outcomes can also inspire parents and more especially those who are directly involved with choristers' education to make the education process more widely attractive and at the same time to consider the needs of the child alongside those of the school, so helping to continue the tradition.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: CSA Members Outreach Activity 2016



(a map taken from the CSA web:

<http://www.choirschools.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/CSA-Members-Outreach-Map.pdf>)

## **Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview questions**

How being a chorister might have made a difference to your life now?

Which cathedral choir school were you at when you were a chorister and did you have to board there?

In what year and at what age did you become a chorister and what age were you when you left? Were your parents musically trained or did they just love music? Was it their idea to send you to become a chorister?

Did you learn some instrument (or learn to read music) before joining the choir school, or were you already familiar with the church environment before going to the choir school?

How many instruments did you have to learn in the choir school?

Apart from teaching you to sing and to play an instrument, in what other ways did they build up your music skills (such as sight-reading or music theory)?

Were you given a chance to sing solo and how did you feel?

Apart from the music skills and knowledge, did the experience as a chorister give you some life-long skill to help you succeed in your later study/ or current job?

How do you now view that life as a boarder? Did you enjoy being a boarder or was it hard to be away home? How often you could go back to home? (every weekend or term-end)?

Did your parents need to pay for your education or boarding fee in the choir school?

From which year did your school start to take in girl choristers? Do you think there is any difference between a girl chorister's voice and a boy chorister's? Did you have boys and girls sing together all the time, or did they rehearse and sing separately but only perform together when you had a big event? Do you think in the future they will mix boys and girls together in the front line?

Do you still remember the singing routine (including rehearsal and services)?

Do you remember how many hours per week practice you had for music (including instrument practice and music theory)?

When did your voice break? Did it happen suddenly or gradually?

In your choir school, how many students were in your class?

Did you learn any foreign languages in the choir school? Did you find any benefit from learning Latin?

What subjects did you learn when you were there?

Where did you do when you left the choir school? What subjects did you choose for A-level/O-level?



Did you continue to be involved in music activity when you left the choir school?

Attitude to religion. Would you call yourself a religious person?

What were choristers thinking while in the service?

Do you think you benefitted from your experience as a chorister?

Do you think your experience as a chorister help you succeed in your work or not? If you were a boarder, did you feel that made any difference?

(Your personal details)

### Appendix 3: Research ethics and data protection monitoring form

Durham University

School of Education

#### Research Ethics and Data Protection Monitoring Form

Name: Lan Dong

Course: PhD in Education

Contact e-mail: [lan.dong@durham.ac.uk](mailto:lan.dong@durham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr. Dimitra Kokotsaki

Title of research project: Lifelong Influences of Being a Chorister

#### Questionnaire

		YES	NO	
1.	Does your research involve living human subjects?	yes		IF NOT, GO TO DECLARATION AT END
2.	Does your research involve only the analysis of large, secondary and anonymised datasets?		No	IF YES, GO TO DECLARATION AT END
3a	Will you give your informants a written summary of your research and its uses?	Yes		If NO, please provide further details and go to 3b
3b	Will you give your informants a verbal summary of your research and its uses?	Yes		If NO, please provide further details
3c	Will you ask your informants to sign a consent form?	Yes		If NO, please provide further details
4.	Does your research involve covert surveillance (for example, participant observation)?		No	If YES, please provide further details.
5a	Will your information <i>automatically</i> be anonymised in your research?	Yes		If NO, please provide further details and go to 5b
5b	IF NO Will you explicitly give <i>all</i> your informants the right to remain anonymous?			If NO, why not?
6.	Will monitoring devices be used openly and only with the permission of informants?	Yes		If NO, why not?
7.	Will your informants be provided with a summary of your research findings?		No	If NO, why not?

8.	Will your research be available to informants and the general public without restrictions placed by sponsoring authorities?	Yes		If NO, please provide further details
9.	Have you considered the implications of your research intervention on your informants?	Yes		Please provide full details
10.	Are there any other ethical issues arising from your research?		No	If YES, please provide further details.

Further details:

With the participants' permission, the interview will be recorded, but the recording will be kept secure and reference to your contribution will be anonymous.

Each research participant will be accorded confidentiality and anonymity to safeguard their identities throughout the research and data will be stored securely.

#### Declaration

I have read the Department's Code of Practice on Research Ethics and believe that my research complies fully with its precepts. I will not deviate from the methodology or reporting strategy without further permission from the Department's Research Ethics Committee.

Signed: .....

Date:.....

Proposal discussed and agreed by supervisor (for students) or colleague (for staff):

Name ..... on .....(Date)

## Appendix 4: Consent Request Form

### CONSENT REQUEST FORM

**TITLE OF PROJECT:**

*Lifelong Influences of Being a Chorister*

Have you read the Participant Information Sheet? YES / NO

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the study? YES / NO

Have you received satisfactory answers to all of your questions? YES / NO

Have you received enough information about the study? YES / NO

Who have you spoken to? Ms Lan Dong

Do you consent to participate in the study? YES/NO

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study

\* at any time

\* without having to give a reason for withdrawing

\* without affecting your position in the University? YES / NO

Are you aware of, and do you consent to any use the researcher may make of the recordings after the end of the project? YES/NO

**Signed** ..... **Date** .....  
(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS) .....

## Appendix 5: Participants' family music background

0111	We had a piano, it was a German piano but it wasn't a particularly brilliant one; it was an upright piano with the old candlesticks either side. My mother's family used to meet and sing around the piano.
0211	My father was a singer and a violinist that still is his violin in the corner. My mother was a very good pianist, used to play for the silent movies. It makes a difference a lot of its environment really because I can't remember a house without music in it, it has always been like that.
0311	My father could play the piano, he was the vicar of Ushaw Moor. My mother taught the piano and tried to teach me but I never could, I can play basic piano music but I could never pick up the skills of piano.
0421	Music is not their first thing but my Dad plays the piano and the organ a bit and my Mum has just started joining a choir so they have always been a bit musical but kind of doing other stuff.
0511	My granddad was very musical, I am told he sang and played an instrument in a band but my mother and father aren't, none of my family that I am with at the moment play music at all.
0621	My Dad is completely tone deaf and doesn't do any music and doesn't understand music at all. My Mum kind of has a kind of basic understanding but isn't a musician or anything.
0721	I do have a piano at home, an electric one. My Dad is adept so we did have a tiny little keyboard thing but it didn't have much range and we decided to get a bigger one a couple of years before I became a chorister because I really got into my singing.
0811	My father was an organist, the choir master and he had me in the local church choir from I think I was about five years old, something like that and he also made sure that I studied the piano, he didn't teach me himself, he sent me to another piano teacher and so he was quite keen that being a chorister, going to a choir school was a good thing to do he saw, it is a very advantageous thing.
0912	My Mum can play piano, she got to about Grade 6 but she doesn't pursue it. My grandma used to play the piano. About three or four years ago, my Mum heard this thing on the radio and went over to the piano and started playing it and it was like suddenly I realised that that was obviously vaguely where I had got some musical-ness from.
1021	They didn't study music but my Mum plays piano and flute and cello and sings and my father plays oboe and sings. I was in a choir in my school in Germany and in a church choir and in some choirs that my parents belong to.
1121	They like singing a bit but they haven't had any musical background. My twin sister was very musical at school, she played the violin, was also in a younger school choir and now she is at a dance school in London; my older sister again during her school years played the clarinet in the school band so we were all encouraged to participate in musical stuff.
1211	The whole family was musical, my father was a music lecturer at Darlington Teacher Training College. My mother was a good singer and she played the cello, my father was an organist and played the piano and played the viola so his career was musician.
1311	They are fairly musical. My mother was a professional musician and they met in Glyndebourne Opera, my mother was in the chorus and my father was a stage manager. My mother was then the organist at Ludlow parish church.
1411	It is quite funny, we always had music on the radio but it was all pop music, we used to watch television programmes with music but not anything to do with church music or classical music. My Mum played the piano when she was young and until she was 16, and we had a piano at home when I was growing up so I could play.

1511	They are both musical, they both play the piano and my Dad still plays the organs in churches on Sundays so they introduced me to music quite early. My brother who is two years older he was a chorister as well.
1612	My father was musical and also my grandparents. I think if you are given that start in life by somebody playing music and somebody singing - my father sang and you already have a grounding whether how much you do it but the more you practice the better you are.
1711	My parents are not musical at all.
1812	They like music but neither of them would describe themselves as musicians, my dad is an okay pianist but nothing else.
1912	My mum played the piano. But my Dad was gone for five years during the war, so things like piano which we didn't have and we lived in a very small house.
2021	They both have a love for music, my Mum was quite a good singer when she was younger but neither of my parents actually were in the music profession; I can tell you my Granny was also very musical so I think she was the one that introduced me to the choral singing really.
2111	My parents are both musical, I had piano lessons, I had a private teacher from the age of five. I was playing at it even earlier, my grandmother and my mother would sit me down. By the time I was five, I could play tunes. I also did take up the viola for a time but never made a success of it.
2211	My Mum was a music teacher and played the piano and gave piano lessons. I think my Dad played viola at school, he likes music but he is not a talent. My older sister was a very talented clarinet player, she had no serious teacher and she played in some professional productions, sort of theatrical productions. She also sings in a choir now but it is a hobby now for her and my younger sister was a good violinist but probably less interested in music I think than we were.
2311	A lot of musical people in the family, I am the least musical of the lot. My Dad was offered a place in York Minster as a chorister when he was a boy but my grandfather wouldn't let him take the place up because he was a strict Methodist and he didn't believe in the Church of England's way of doing things so he wasn't allowed to take the place up, yet he was the eldest son; Uncle Harold was the youngest son and he let him come to Ripon as a chorister. But my Dad and Mum both sang in choirs all their lives.
2411	They both loved music but I wouldn't have said they were musical. My mother bought a piano, she especially was very supportive, she loved the piano.
2511	They appreciated music but they weren't performers. My brother was a chorister at Ripon as well and went through the same process as I did and he was a music scholar at Amble School.
2611	My parents I think, when they were little they both had like a few piano lessons but they are not musical at all, neither of them can read music at all.
2711	My Dad was a chorister in New College, Oxford, so he obviously had that in the back of his mind somewhere.
2811	They are not completely tone deaf. My Mum had played the oboe and my Dad had done a little bit of singing.
2911	My Dad sings in church but he isn't very musical I would say in a traditional sense. My Mum she plays a bit of piano and she used to sing in a church choir but not anymore so very little musicality I would say but enough to I guess to pass it on. They always made sure that I had a musical upbringing as they always wanted me to learn an instrument, they took me to piano lessons before I was at Westminster Abbey so I must have been six or seven years old.
3011	My Dad really wasn't musical at all, my mother had played the piano a bit as a child, so Grade 5 of ABRSM levels but no higher than that.

## Appendix 6: Music training before joining the choir school

0111	I learnt the piano locally with the local cinema organist, he used to play all these tunes, called the Kangaroo Hop and the Coons Holiday and things like that, which were very popular and I used to pick them up. I could read music fairly well before I went to the choristers school.
1211	Before I was a chorister, I sang with my Dad occasionally in some of his choirs. I played the violin before I went to Durham, initially I learnt from my father but then we passed me on to two of his students in the area who then continued. When I was a child I was put into music competitions in Darlington and I had a tendency to win them.
1311	I had learnt how to read music or at least recognise it and you had to play two instruments before go to the school or to be a chorister in the school. So I could play the piano fairly badly and the violin very badly.
2021	Before I was a chorister I had singing lessons and piano lessons. Before joining the choir school I definitely did my Grade 3 singing and I think I did around Grade 3 piano, I can't completely remember but I would say kind of that level.
0421	I was given piano lessons when I was really small, well, we have a piano at home and my Granny was a piano teacher. And I used to, when you are a little girl a plink and a plonk on it a bit and eventually she sat me down and said "Right this is middle C" and so I started playing the piano when I was about 4 or 5 and it just kind of led on from there really. I was given theory lessons, taught by my Granny when I learnt the piano, and also in the school we had recorder lessons in the Pre-prep and we were taught how to draw a treble clef and do things a bit of theory there. I had a few and then I think my parents decided I probably needed a private formal piano teacher and so I got somebody who worked at the feeder school.
1612	My parents couldn't afford music lessons in those days, my father worked at the Railway as a coach builder and his grandparents and my grandparents had been with the Minster bell ringing and because he sang with music, he got me in.
2411	I sang in a church choir, about a year, 18 months may be before joining York Minster.
0621	I played the recorder and that was it, my parents aren't very musical and I hadn't really had any musical experience but it was just an off chance that my grandfather saw the advert and I auditioned.
1511	I started learning the piano before becoming a chorister, a separate piano teacher who I went round to her house.
0211	My mother used to play the piano, sit me on her knee and play around me like that, I cannot remember when I first started playing, maybe when I was about three. She never stop me playing the piano even if I had jam on my fingers or anything, she never said "Oh, don't touch that", she liked me to play just anything, which is good.
0721	I sang in the local church choir before joined the choir school.
1021	I had been playing cello since I was six. I play piano, not officially but a little bit and I play guitar and I have studied singing all my life. I was in a choir in my school in Germany and in a church choir and in some choirs that my parents belong to.
2611	It was just before I joined the choir school, oh, it wouldn't have been very long, it was just a couple of months of lessons with a lady where I lived and then when

	I joined the choir school, I had a piano teacher there and I had the same piano teacher for the whole seven years I was there.
2811	I think it was about one Grade a year at that point so I guess Grade 4 in piano when I joined the choir school.
2511	I had a good voice, that's it.
2911	They took me to piano lessons before I was at Westminster Abbey so I must have been six or seven years old. It was with a man and it was in his house, so I had to travel to his house on a Saturday to have piano lessons with him. I also had singing lessons which they arranged.
0311	I learned to sing because, sing the hymns at church and things like that and yes I was prepared in a way for entry into the school and I passed the voice test and the other tests but I just went to an ordinary primary school before that.
1411	We had a piano at home when I was growing up so I could play. I had piano lessons from the age of 6.
1812	Probably when I was about five, I started to play piano. I picked up cello and E-flat tenor horn when I was eight. It is a brass instrument but I gave that up when I started as a chorister. But I had also been in what is called the Southend Boys' Choir beforehand which is a, is a very well-known boys choir it does a lot of concerts in places like London so I had done things like Prom Concerts by the time I was 11.
1121	I played the piano only up until about Grade 4, singing was always more of an interest but I did get my Grade 4 piano.
2711	I play the French Horn, the Viola and the Piano. I remember being a little toddler and my Grandad putting the horn in my hands, I mean that is not really learning it, but I say seriously the horn for me would be two years, the viola for more like one year and the piano for about two years as well, before joining the choir school. I didn't do the normal ABRSM for the viola and piano, I did something called Suzuki, what happened, because with the Suzuki method you have to do a certain amount and you do like group sessions and single lessons; and with the piano, I just learned but my dad used to accompany me when I played the horn so I would do that most evenings. I can't remember how far I got but I then switched to ABRSM when I went to Westminster Abbey.
3011	I had some piano lessons at my primary school only very basic, I would have been 7. I also had some trumpet lessons at school. Well, the music teacher at my primary school was very keen to get people singing and she started a choir in the school and it was her, who sent me for auditions for the cathedral choir.
2211	Before I went to the audition, I had already sung in a group, sort of children's opera in Cambridge, called the Cambridge Boys Choir and I think from quite a young age maybe from five years old I sang in that choir. I also had some piano lessons.
1912	I didn't get any instrument lessons before the choir school, I just had a good voice.
0912	I went to a Prep School in Oxford before New College and learned piano there, about a year and then when you become a chorister you have to take on extra.



## Appendix 7: Durham Cathedral Choristers' routine in the early C 20<sup>th</sup>

1909<sup>7</sup> 12

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
7.30 - 8.30.	Breakfast & Recreation			Breakfast & Recreation.		
8.30 - 9 a.m.	School	School	School	School	School	School.
9 - 9.45	Choir Practice	Choir Practice	Choir Practice	School	Choir Pr.	Choir Pr.
9.45 - 11 a.m.	Vestry and Cathedral	Cathedral	Vestry and Cathedral	Cathedral	Vestry and Cathedral	Cathedral
11 a.m. - 12.50.	School	School	School	Rehearsal	School	School
1.5 - 1.40	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner.
1.40 - 3 p.m.	Recreation	Gymnasium <sup>2 - 3 p.m.</sup>	Recreation	Holiday	Recreation	Recreation
3 - 3.45	Choir Practice	Choir Practice <sup>3.15 - 3.45</sup>	Choir Practice	Holiday	Choir Pr.	Recreation
3.45 - 5 p.m.	Vestry and Cathedral	Cathedral	Cathedral	Holiday	Vestry & Cathedral	Cathedral
5 - 6 p.m. [Dir II Piano]	School	School	School	Holiday	School	5 - 5.45 Choir Practice
6 - 6.45	Tea and Recreation	Tea and Recreation	Tea and Recreation	Tea and Recreation	Tea and Recreation.	Tea and Recreation.
6.45 - 7.45 [Dir I Piano]	School	School	School	School	School	School.

Choir Practice 1 hr. & 30 Min: nett  
 Cathedral & Vestry 2 hr & 10 Min: gross } as at S. Paul's  
 School 4 hr & 20 Min: gross  
 Total per day 8 hrs work + 2 hours fresh air (+ sunbathing)  
 23 mus. ch.

### Chorister's Annual Holidays.

- 1 Sunday 13 days after Christmas, commencing 1<sup>st</sup> Monday after Epiphany.
- 1 Sunday 13 days after Easter, commencing 1<sup>st</sup> Monday after S.S. Philip & S. James.
- 4 Sundays 29 days in July & August between S. James day and S. Bartholomew's.
- 6 6 days in October, commencing 1<sup>st</sup> Monday after S. Michael & All Angels.

Total 61 days for boys & about 56 for Masters.

From Durham Cathedral Archives: Reference DCD/P/AE

## **Appendix 8: Durham Cathedral Choristers' routine in the early C 21<sup>st</sup>**

### **The School Day (WEEK A&B Timings):**

#### **Weekdays**

0700 Supervised instrumental practice by rota

0755 Lead on (Choristers and Probationers), except Wednesdays for girls and Thursdays for boys

0800-0855 Rehearsals in Song School and Prior's Hall (Choristers and Probationers)

0800 School opens for Day Pupils

0830 Morning Pre-School begins School starts for Prep: Form Period

0855 School starts for Pre-Prep

0900 Assembly

0925 Lessons/Games

1130 Morning Pre-School ends

1230 Afternoon Pre-School begins

1515 End of School for Pre-Prep

1530 End of School for Pre-School

1555 End of School for Prep

1600 Activities/Prep 1800 School closes for Day Pupils

#### **Monday afternoons (for Choristers and Probationers)**

1605 Lead on (boys A, girls B)

1610-1705 Rehearsal in Song School (boys A, girls B)

1710-1810 Music Theory lessons and supervised instrumental practice by rota  
(boys A, girls B)

#### **Tuesday afternoons (for Choristers and Probationers)**

1605 Supervised instrumental practice by rota (boys)

1605 Lead on (girls)

1615-1705 Rehearsal in Song School / Stalls (girls)

1715 Evensong (girls)

#### **Wednesday afternoons (for Choristers and Probationers)**

1605 Supervised instrumental practice by rota (girls)

1605 Lead on (boys)

1615-1705 Rehearsal in Song School / Stalls (boys)

1715 Evensong (boys)

#### **Thursday afternoons (Choristers and Probationers)**

1605 Free time/Leave out

#### **Friday afternoons (Choristers and Probationers)**

1605 Lead on (boys and girls)

1610-1710 Rehearsal in School (girls A, boys B)

1615-1710 Rehearsal in Song School / Stalls (boys A, girls B)

1710-1810 Supervised instrumental practice by rota (girls A, boys B)

1715 Evensong (boys A, girls B)

**Saturdays (Choristers)**

0835 Lead on (boys and girls)

0840-1000 Rehearsals in Song School and Prior's Hall (boys and girls)

1605 Lead on (girls A, boys B)

1615-1705 Rehearsal in Song School / Stalls (girls A, boys B)

1715 Evensong (girls A, boys B)

**Sundays (Choristers)**

0840 Lead on (boys A, girls B)

0850-0950 Rehearsal in Song School / Stalls (boys A, girls B)

1000 Matins (boys A, girls B)

1115 Sung Eucharist (boys A, girls B)

1440 Lead on (girls A, boys B)

1450 -1520 Rehearsal in Song School (girls A, boys B)

1530 Evensong (girls A, boys B)

## **Appendix 9: Full list of choir schools in the UK**

1. Bristol Cathedral Choir School
2. Chetham's School of Music, Manchester
3. Christ Church Cathedral School, Oxford
4. City of London School
5. Dean Close Preparatory School, Cheltenham
6. Hereford Cathedral School
7. King's Ely Junior
8. King's College School, Cambridge
9. King's Rochester Preparatory School, Kent
10. King's School, Worcester
11. Lanesborough School, Guildford
12. Lichfield Cathedral School
13. Lincoln Minster School
14. Magdalen College School, Oxford
15. New College School, Oxford
16. Norwich School
17. Old Palace School, Croydon
18. Polwhele House School, Truro
19. Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Wakefield
20. Reigate St Mary's Preparatory and Choir School..
21. Runnymede St Edward's School, Liverpool
22. Salisbury Cathedral School
23. St Edmund's Junior School, Canterbury
24. St Edward's College, Liverpool
25. St George's School, Windsor
26. St John's College, Cardiff
27. St John's College School, Cambridge
28. St Mary's Music School, Edinburgh
29. St Paul's Cathedral School, London
30. St Peter's Collegiate Church, Wolverhampton
31. St Cedd's School, Essex
32. The Cathedral School, Cardiff
33. The Cathedral School, Exeter
34. The Chorister School, Durham
35. The King's School, Gloucester
36. The King's School, Peterborough
37. The London Oratory School
38. The Minster School, Southwell
39. The Minster School, York
40. The Pilgrims' School, Winchester
41. The Portsmouth Grammar School
42. The Prebendal School, Chichester
43. Wells Cathedral School
44. Westminster Abbey Choir School, London
45. Westminster Cathedral Choir School, London
46. Whitgift School, Croydon

*(All schools are members of the Choir School Association)*

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