

Saint Patrick's Cathedral



CHORISTERSHIPS

A guide for
prospective parents

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON BEING A SAINT PATRICK'S CHORISTER

If you are thinking about the possibility of your son becoming a chorister at Saint Patrick's Cathedral, you will probably have a number of questions you would like answered before putting your son forward for a chorister audition. In this booklet we address those questions that seem most frequently to arise. We hope it helps you understand the nature of a chorister commitment, its demands and rewards. We can also put you in contact with a chorister parent, if you would like to talk to someone who has experienced this way of life at first hand.

SAINT PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL CHOIR AND SCHOOL

The Cathedral Choir – what is it?

Saint Patrick's Cathedral Choir is a very ancient institution, going back to 1220. The Choir School dates from 1432. The lower voices of the choir (alto, tenor and bass) are made up of six lay vicars (professional singing men), up to four Sundaymen (gentlemen of the choir who augment the ranks for the weekends and special occasions) and up to four choral scholars (who are usually studying in Dublin, and hence sing predominantly during University term time). The Choir's raison d'être remains to provide music for Christian worship in the Cathedral. The Choir is also active outside the Cathedral, giving concerts, touring and making recordings. This part of the Choir's work has brought it international recognition. It also plays a crucial role in offering throughout the year an unparalleled educational experience, both for boys and men. The choir year runs from the beginning of September through to the end of June with a mid term break in October, short break in February and breaks after Christmas and Easter and a summer vacation of 2 months (July and August).

Who runs the music?

We are immensely proud of our Cathedral Choir School, the only such specialist school in the whole of Ireland. The musical training of the choristers is under the direction of the Organist and Master of the Choristers, Stuart Nicholson. He is assisted in the provision of music in the Cathedral by the Assistant Organist, David Leigh, and an organ scholar. The organist is responsible for the choristers' vocal training and their work in the Cathedral. He oversees their general musical education, including the instrumental tuition that they receive from visiting staff from the DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama in a unique partnership between this well respected third level institution and the Cathedral.

At what age should boys audition?

The Choir recruits choristers (as probationers) into third class (average age 8 years in September). Since the auditions are held the previous February, the best age for auditioning is 7 rising 8. But we also welcome boys a year earlier than this, not of course for entry into third class, but to be able to guide parents in making an application the year after.

What happens at the audition?

Nothing for which lengthy preparation is required. The Organist will expect to hear a short vocal solo chosen by the candidate (it could even be 'Twinkle, twinkle' or 'Jingle bells'). The Organist selects boys by spending 10–15 minutes working with them individually, gaining an idea of vocal potential, keenness of musical ear, general disposition and quickness. The 'perfect' candidate can sing 'Twinkle, twinkle' in tune, with a voice which, though not developed, is free and unrestricted; can memorise simple snatches of melody; can respond positively to the teaching given during the audition; and can smile. Children who have had a successful audition will be invited with their parents to visit the school and meet the teachers before making a final decision.

Parents may be reticent about putting their son through an audition when they are unsure of his musical abilities. Our advice is: do not second-guess your son's musical abilities, but bring him along so that we can judge them for ourselves. You can be assured that whatever his level of ability, the audition will not make him feel uncomfortable.

LIFE AS A CHORISTER

What happens in the first year?

The chorister begins his training in Saint Patrick's Cathedral Choir as a 'probationer'. The probationary period runs for around one year, during which he receives special instruction in musical theory and ear training. He joins in the activities of the Choir bit by bit, but takes on the full load (including tours and recordings) only after formal admission to the Choir.

Do choristers drop out?

During the first (probationary) year there is an opportunity to evaluate the potential of a boy more closely, but rarely does this lead to a decision not to confirm the choristership. Such a decision is very disruptive, and it is clearly better to have selected the right boy in the first place. Very occasionally a boy will find the experience uncongenial and want to leave. Here again, it is better to have sorted out his interests and preferences at an earlier stage.

Once past the probationary phase, a chorister's place is confirmed on the understanding that he will commit his singing time as a boy chorister (generally around four to five years) to the Choir. The Choir depends on this commitment, first to bring the boy up to the level of being able to contribute effectively (this takes two years), and then to benefit from his contribution (the last two years). The worst of all scenarios is to have invested two years in a boy's training and then not to benefit from the investment. During this time the chorister will not be expected to reach any absolute level of achievement. But by hard work and enthusiasm he is expected to make the very best of his training and talents. Without exception, every boy turns out to be a useful chorister (fully meriting our confidence in his abilities), and many achieve exceptional standards. The policy of success lies behind all our efforts, and results in boys doing better than they (and indeed their parents) imagine possible.

Can they play sport?

Clearly being in the choir requires a considerable time commitment, however as many of our current choristers have found this hasn't stopped them enjoying an active sporting life on top of their Cathedral commitments.

Is there special pastoral guidance for the choristers?

The choristers' musical training offers good opportunities to identify and deal with needs of a pastoral nature. It is often evident from the way a boy sings whether he is worried about something or not. The Organist encourages parents to contact him about problems of this kind. The School staff also provide excellent care during the school day, and the Dean's Vicar and Precentor are available as another avenue for pastoral care. It is very important that choristers feel generally content: they cannot sing well otherwise.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Do you need to believe in God?

By becoming a chorister you are lending your voice to Christian worship. Saint Patrick's Cathedral is still a worshipping community, but within a pluralist society. Coming from non-Christian background need not affect your application, but children and their parents must be in sympathy with the objectives of the Cathedral's music. Parents who have concerns of a doctrinal nature should address these prior to taking their application further. The Cathedral clergy are happy to discuss such matters. It is not good to have boys who feel any sort of hostility to the pattern of Christian worship in which they engage. Also the religious education taught in school is of a Christian nature.

How do the concerts and tours figure in the boys' lives?

Concerts and tours are an important addition to the Cathedral services. They provide opportunities to sing different and exciting repertoire. All this is of considerable educational value, both musically and socially. At the same time, the boys are helping to promote on an international level the excellence of their work in Dublin, bringing this important piece of the Irish cultural legacy to a wider audience – acting as ambassadors for the country as well as for the Cathedral. The full cost of the Choir's touring is normally met by the Cathedral and the Choir's own fundraising activities.

How does being a chorister affect academic progress?

The academic loading is judged to be manageable by boys who are well-organised, motivated and bright; indeed some choristers cope with their school work at the highest level, and (in the words of one former chorister parent) move to secondary school 'with a maturity and confidence way ahead of their peers'. Where the timetable might pinch (on Tuesdays and Thursdays), time is set aside for its completion before the evening chorister routine. Choristers are expected to give of their best to school and homework. As school classes are small they receive much individual attention.

The point should also be made that their musical training is part of an educational profile – including their achievements both as singers and as instrumentalists. The policy at the School and in the Cathedral is to equip choristers as fully as possible with a whole range of musical skills. These are at an extremely high level, measuring up to professional standards in the singing, and so these can be seen to be educational advantages in their own right.

In the long term, former choristers (reflecting thirty or forty years on) point to the experience as the most formative time of their lives, teaching them all manner of transferable skills, including the all-important lesson of how to be successful through effort and application. But they also remember the time as one of deep fulfillment, leaving a uniquely rich store of experience and achievement with which to launch themselves into adult life.

Are there any other benefits to being a chorister?

Apart from the musical and academic benefits, there is a considerable social aspect to being a member of a Cathedral Choir:

- the ease at which choristers learn to relate to people of all ages.
- the confidence they gain from performing with excellence in front of dignitaries and other famous people

Will the experience and training narrow my son's career options?

Some parents may think that a specialist musical education may reduce a boy's career options. At Saint Patrick's Cathedral, choristers pursue a full and balanced school curriculum; in this sense there is no narrowing of options. Many choristers move on to study a wide range of subjects (including music) at tertiary level: afterwards, their career options are as open as anybody's. This is not to say that music becomes less important to them, or that none of them pursues a musical career, but it is to say that the chorister experience is most decidedly NOT a premature narrowing of career options.

It also opens all sorts of possibilities in later life for joining the many different choirs in Dublin and elsewhere, be they cathedral choirs, choral societies (eg the Culwick, Guinness) or chamber choirs (eg the Mornington Singers, National Chamber Choir).

Enquiries

Any other enquiries should be addressed to the Organist and Master of the Choristers, Mr Stuart Nicholson, via the Cathedral Office,

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