

Feature

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Photographs © Westminster Abbey

It could be argued that a school as small as this is in danger of creating a isolated environment. This is not the case. The boys have continual interaction with people of all ages both within the Abbey and outside. Most important is the daily interaction the boys have with their adult peers who are all top class, professional level London singers. Consequently, the “boys pick up on this professional ethos” Milton claims, and “this sort of interaction raises the boys’ game to the highest standard. For example, it is not unusual for them to take part in three hour recording sessions” demonstrating the kind of concentration levels that can be achieved. The boys’ experience outside of the classroom ranges from travelling to other schools in the UK to offer workshops to other boys of their age, to performing in concerts worldwide.

If the boys work hard they have the opportunity to leave at 13 and join some of the country’s leading independent schools such as Eton, Marlborough and Winchester. What is rare here is that the selection process for the Westminster Abbey Choir School is open to boys from any class or background. All that a hopeful young choir boy need do is “turn

Making all the right noises:

An interview with Jonathan Milton, headmaster of the Westminster Abbey Choir School

By Emma Trehane

Westminster Abbey is undoubtedly one of London’s most popular landmarks, and its choir renowned as one of the greatest of its kind across the globe. Few will be aware that in the midst of the Abbey, tucked away in the grounds of the former monastery of Westminster at Dean’s Yard is the Westminster Abbey Choir School, home to the young choristers who are a fundamental part of this famous Abbey choir and educated to become world-class singers and musicians.

Anybody who has watched a royal, state or national event played out on television is likely to have spotted this band of ruffed and robed little brothers singing alongside their adult peers in the Abbey pews. One of the most recent and more memorable televised events being the marriage of Prince William to Kate Middleton. There is no doubt that on taking up a place in the Abbey choir, each of the choristers becomes the beneficiary of an exceptional history and classical musical tradition that dates back to the medieval period.



On a recent visit to the school, headmaster Jonathan Milton, remarked that “we are now the only choir school in the country that is just choristers” demonstrating how unique this small school of only 30 boys actually is on a nationwide scale. In fact, there are only three other schools of this kind outside of the UK, including New York, Catalonia in Spain and South Africa. The Westminster Abbey Choir School is a boarding prep for boys aged 8-13. The day begins with singing practice in the Abbey and ends with *Evensong* (except Wednesdays). Music is at the centre of the boys’ education and besides learning to read music and respond vocally, all boys also receive vocal training, are taught to play the piano and given lessons in playing orchestral instruments of their choice. In addition, they learn

orchestral ensemble theory and aural classes, rounding off this unique musical education. “If the boys are interested in other activities, they are also offered the chance to serve in the Abbey, get involved with the Organists and possibly take up learning the organ too” says Milton. The school is designed to offer the boys the highest standard of musical education through its carefully crafted, yet flexible curriculum.

As well as music, the boys have lessons in subjects such as English language and literature, Maths, Science, History, Art and Drama, receiving the same education one would expect of any child studying from Yr 4 - Yr 8. There is a good range of physical activities on offer too, including kayaking and swimming, cricket, and a particular favourite with the boys, football!



up to the next Chorister Experience Day and see if they have a singing talent that can be cultivated” says Milton. While there is a modest fee to pay for parents from a more wealthy background, those who are less financially fortunate can receive support if there is a talent there to be nurtured. The Westminster Abbey Choir School is the “obvious avenue for any church choir boy to pursue” Milton strongly believes, so whatever a boy’s background there is an equal opportunity for all and the possibility of a unique musical education and bright future ahead.

The next Chorister Experience Day is 7th October 2017

If you are interested in finding out more about the opportunities of choristership or about life at Westminster Abbey Choir School, please telephone the school for more information or to make an appointment to visit.

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