



TREBLES ALL ROUND: choristers gather round the tree; (right) a kick-around in Dean's Yard; (below right) Organist and Master of the Choristers James O'Donnell



A CHORISTER'S CHRISTMAS

The trebles of Westminster Abbey Choir spend most of the festive period at school, but the music-making and camaraderie guarantee an exciting time, as *Ashutosh Khandekar* discovers

It's Christmas morning. The church bells are ringing and you're dreaming of all those presents waiting under the tree. But when you wake up, you discover that you're still at school and there's plenty of work to be done. While the rest of us unwind in the bosom of our families for the festivities, for the trebles of Westminster Abbey Choir, Christmas means business as usual. This is the busiest time of the year for a choral institution that has been at the heart of ceremonial life in London for almost half a millennium. The 30 choirboys, between the ages of eight and 13, have to eat, sleep and rehearse intensively on site at the Abbey school over Christmas for a series of liturgical undertakings starting with the traditional Service of Lessons and Carols on

23 December, progressing through Midnight Mass and the Great Service of Christmas Day. They are only released from their duties after their usual 3pm evensong, when their parents can finally whisk them home for

IT TAKES RIGOUR AND DISCIPLINE TO THRIVE IN THE ABBEY ENVIRONMENT

turkey with all the trimmings and a well-earned break.

James O'Donnell presides over musical traditions that have their origins in the late 14th century, and first became institutionalised under Elizabeth I. He is the Abbey's 29th Organist since 1559, and

also Master of the Choristers (a post first held by the composer and dramatist William Cornysh in 1479). It's an unseasonably balmy October day when I meet O'Donnell in his office in Dean's Yard, a green oasis tucked

behind the Abbey and a tranquil setting for Westminster Abbey Choir School. Perhaps it's the warm sunshine bathing the orderly paperwork on his desk, but Christmas seems a long way from O'Donnell's thoughts. 'The thing about the choir,' he explains, 'is that we sing eight services a week throughout the year.

We do look ahead to things, but we're used to dealing with the music quickly and using our time to prepare things that are close at hand. We're doing Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* at the beginning of December, so we'll be starting to rehearse that shortly; but the meat-and-drink Christmas repertoire we put together in a matter of weeks running up to the actual Christmas period.'

Westminster Abbey has the only choral foundation in the country where every single one of the boys, all borders at the Choir School, participates in the daily round of ecclesiastical services, as well as singing in great occasions of state, from royal weddings to memorial services for the great and the good, and grand ceremonies marking historic events. Each academic year, there is an intake

of around nine boys aged eight, who are taken on as probationers, initially sitting in on services to learn their trade. A year later, these boys become part of the singing choir. It is only in his last year or two, before leaving the choir at the age of 13, that a singing boy becomes one of the ten fully fledged choristers of Westminster Abbey, distinguished in the school by their red ties.

A chorister's life is demanding. Weekday rehearsals start at 8:15am and, before evensong at 5pm, boys have a full day of academic school to fit in. It takes rigour and self-discipline to thrive in an environment like this. How do O'Donnell and his team decide that a boy is right for this kind of life? 'It's a difficult thing to assess someone aged seven,' admits O'Donnell. 'We look at the

overall picture of a child who we think will respond positively to this environment, who is interested in it, who has a voice without any inherent technical difficulties, who responds to music well – which is obviously important. But we're not looking for any previous training or even experience.'

Does it take a pushy parent to ensure that an applicant has the right sort of ambition to succeed? 'We're not auditioning the parents,' insists O'Donnell. 'Of course, we talk to parents, but most importantly, we're looking at what's right for the child and what's right for us. We take our time with the process of selection because we would not want somebody who isn't suited to this life. There's no checklist or spreadsheet with a formula to give you the right result. If a civil servant were ►

PAUL GROVER, MALCOLM CROWTHERS

AN ABBEY CHRISTMAS

A run-down of this year's services



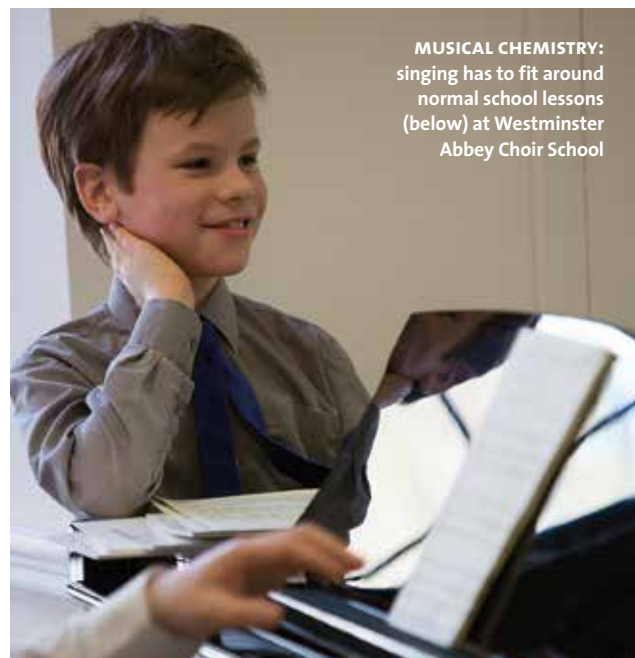
GLORIOUS ARCH: the Abbey's Victorian quire

This year, Christmas at Westminster begins on the 27 Nov with an Advent Liturgy by candlelight. On 1 Dec, the Abbey Choir and St James's Baroque will perform JS Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, conducted by James O'Donnell. The choir's annual Christmas Concert on 15 Dec promises a wide range of festive choral works alongside traditional carols for all to sing. On 18 Dec, Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols* is the centrepiece of the Abbey's Christmas Meditation, prefaced by a reading of The Christmas Proclamation. On Christmas Eve, families can hear the Nativity story and join the blessing of the crib at the 12pm Crib Service. There will also be the Service of Lessons and Carols at 4pm, before Midnight Mass at 11.30. The main service on Christmas Day begins at 10.30am, and the day ends with choral evensong at 3pm. *Tickets may be required for concerts/services during Christmas. Visit westminster-abbey.org*

to be assessing the process of selection here, I think they'd find it most unsatisfactory.'

Daniel Cook, Westminster Abbey's Sub-Organist, auditions potential choristers alongside O'Donnell and is a keen observer of family dynamics: 'If a child is really keen but the parents are not, that can be just as bad as the other way round. Children often have powerful gut feelings about these things and I've known some boys who have to persuade parents who may initially be reluctant – that usually works fine. On the other hand, a lot of boys here have fathers who are choristers and want their sons to have the same experience.'

These days, even an institution as august and prestigious as Westminster Abbey



MUSICAL CHEMISTRY: singing has to fit around normal school lessons (below) at Westminster Abbey Choir School



has to try harder than ever to recruit the best talent: 'In the old days, church choirs around the country ensured that there was a steady stream of boys who were immersed in a culture of music and singing from a young age,' says the Abbey Choir School's headmaster, Jonathan Milton. 'Nowadays, we

a high price tag. They would, however, be wrong, as Milton explains: 'The Abbey pays 80 per cent of the fees, so most parents are asked to pay a balance of around £7,000 a year for full boarding. But I have to emphasise that money is no bar to sending a boy here. There are a range of scholarships that we reserve

'ON CHRISTMAS DAY, OUR PARENTS COME IN WITH PRESENTS FOR US'

need to get the message out that a chorister's life is one that strikes an ideal balance between superb academic training and tremendous creative fulfilment – and is open to anyone.'

With small classes of around seven offering plenty of individual attention, and excellent facilities for borders, many people might think that the Choir School offers the sort of intensive private education that comes with

for any boy who we think will grasp the opportunities we offer.'

Boarding is a necessity given the full schedule of rehearsals, services, concerts, recordings and touring that each year brings for the Abbey Choir. And being away from family life at Christmas is perhaps the most heart-wrenching proviso of all for parents contemplating this type of education for their sons. Orlando is Head Chorister at



SONGS OF PRAISE: James O'Donnell rehearses the boys in the song school; (above right) in full service regalia



and I've incorporated a lot of these new carols here in our services at the Abbey.'

What, I ask O'Donnell, makes a good piece of Christmas music? 'I suppose we think of Christmas as being jolly and celebratory, but I think some of the best Christmas pieces are mysterious and numinous – they cut the tinsel and lights away and leave us to experience a more contemplative aspect of Christmas that lies at the very heart of Christian worship.'

Daniel Cook, who will be in the Abbey organ loft for much of the festive period, has his own views on how to make Christmas special: 'I do try to sound a bit more effervescent than usual,' he says. 'One of my goals at Christmas is to see if I can pull out a few stops that will make James smile unexpectedly.' 'That's a tough one!', O'Donnell concedes.

Entertainment and fun is part of the Christmas mix, but from the Advent Carol Service on 27 November through to Christmas Day, O'Donnell's focus is on fulfilling the needs of a Christmas liturgy as well as infusing the Abbey with a mixture of musical splendour and spiritual contemplation. He hopes that the boys and the 12 professional lay clerks in the Abbey Choir will be fully engaged in what is, in essence, an important liturgical task in the ecclesiastical calendar: 'I don't just want the choir processing to the stalls and singing what's in front of them without thinking about what it means. They have to know what they're doing, why they're doing it and to understand as much about the music and its context as they can.' He adds that even for the youngest of boys, singing at the Abbey at Christmas is acknowledged as a real privilege. 'If any boy misbehaves at any time of year, the worst punishment I can threaten them with is to say that they won't be able to sing with us at Christmas. That brings them back into line immediately!' ■

Westminster Choir School. He is preparing for his final Christmas at the Abbey this year, having already won a place to Eton in 2017. He's keen on Classics and takes his responsibilities in the choir very seriously, though he tells me that in spite of singing in a Christian context for five years, he's yet to be convinced that God exists. 'I decided to opt out of confirmation classes – it's not something I feel ready to commit to yet,' he explains, showing a thoughtfulness beyond his years. I asked him if being away from home at Christmas had been difficult: 'I think some of the younger boys do get a bit homesick, but we look after each other. There's an emphasis here on making sure we're well taken care of, and everyone makes a special effort at Christmas.'

Orlando explains that Christmas is very different from the usual school routine: 'You're in the school building, but it doesn't feel like school. We have lots of free time, and you're with your friends so there's lots of table tennis when we're not singing. The school looks very

decorative – there's a great tree and we decorate our cubicles. We bring decorations from home, so it all feels very festive. On one of the evenings we go to a play, and on Christmas Day our parents come in with presents for us. There's also a present from the headmaster, which we can choose on Amazon ourselves.

What about the music, I wonder? 'It's an incredibly important part of what Christmas means to me,' says Orlando. 'Although I do get a bit bored of *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. It's good to try new things.'

James O'Donnell is faced with the same difficulty of making sure that the 1,000-year-old traditions of Westminster Abbey are well served at Christmas, and that popular expectations (such as singing *O Come, All Ye Faithful* at every opportunity) are met, while at the same time bringing new, stimulating material to the table. 'The annual new commissions from King's College, Cambridge have been a vital part of the renewal of Christmas music traditions in this country,

PAUL GROVER