

# Creating a culture of singing: How one music department inspires teenage boys to sing

By **Debbie Madden** and **Richard Sampson-Marr**



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In an era where teenage boys are often reluctant to sing, our Music Department has managed to reverse the trend by embedding singing into the fabric of school life. From the moment boys join us on their Year 6 induction day, the expectation is clear: everyone sings. This ethos continues through class lessons, assemblies, and chapel services, making singing a natural and celebrated part of our culture. We are an 11-18 state boys' grammar school with a co-ed Sixth Form. Our choir structure is Lower School Choir (Years 7-8), Middle School Choir (Year 9-11), Sixth Form Choir (Year 12-13) which are open to everyone, and we also have an auditioned SATB Chapel Choir of 40 students.

For GCSE Music students, participation in the Middle School Choir is strongly encouraged. Regular following up non-attendance gives the impression that it matters. This non-auditioned ensemble is designed to be inclusive, with music carefully chosen to suit their cambiata voices. Colleagues often source or arrange pieces to ensure accessibility while maintaining musical variety. Repertoire choice is crucial, so we avoid unison pop songs using backing tracks. Examples of pieces include Years 9 to 11: *Down by the Riverside*, building from unison to two-, then four-part harmony all chordal textures; own arrangement of *Bohemian Rhapsody* in four-parts; *Wellerman*; *Viva la Vida*; and *Zadok the Priest* with the Sixth Form Choir. Rehearsals begin before school and extend into tutor time, avoiding clashes with other extra-curricular activities which in turn maximises attendance.

(We are convinced it is nothing to do with boys choosing to miss Assembly!) I think getting SLT outside for this is an important point. Moving choir from lunchtime to registration time is one factor which has significantly boosted attendance. A choir has to have enough students initially to reach a tipping point where 'choir' is normalised and no-one feels exposed.

Our rehearsal process is often structured as follows: first learning parts, then building familiarity through repetition, and finally refining dynamics and expression to communicate meaning. The result is that performances are not only polished but engaging for the boys. Not all our choir directors are trained singers, but this is not a barrier to running a non-auditioned choir.

Role models play a vital part. Sixth Form Choral Ambassadors lead by example, demonstrating that singing is both aspirational and enjoyable. We support these senior students to prepare for university choral auditions and give them solo opportunities in addition to coaching those who are interested in learning to direct a choir. It really helps that members of SLT and all staff attend a weekly Chapel service which includes singing a hymn at the beginning.

School services, such as the annual Services of Nine Lessons and Carols and the Benefactors' Service, provide

formal occasions for collective singing, reinforcing its importance. Assemblies and concerts have choral items, and we often include a massed choir item at the end of each concert, sometimes with orchestra such as Christopher Tin's *Baba Yetu* and Sanctus from *The Armed Man*.

Performance opportunities abound, from informal showcases to major events, including a biennial European tour. Workshops with visiting professionals, for example leaders from the National Youth Choir have been hugely enjoyed by the students and staff alike. They offer fresh perspectives and have often introduced new repertoire which can be used in concerts, for example *Bring Me Little Water, Sylvie*. We often challenge singers to perform from memory, fostering confidence and musicality.

For those eager to take their passion further, we signpost external opportunities (singing with *Armonico Consort* or auditioning for summer schools such as Rodolfus Foundation), ensuring that keen singers can continue their journey beyond school. It is always a joy to hear from the numerous alumni who return for the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols to share their enthusiasm for the choir they have joined at university. And so, the enjoyment of singing continues. Watch our Voices Together video here to see this lively culture in action.

