

## THE GREAT HERITAGE OF CATHEDRAL MUSIC— WHAT OF ITS FUTURE ?

by LIONEL DAKERS

Recently, the Dean and Chapter of Exeter decided that a number of the collections should be specifically set aside for 'The Maintenance of the Cathedral and its Worship'. Soon after this was announced, people told me, in no uncertain terms, their opinions on this matter and then went on to say that everyone in the city knew that the cathedral was rolling in money, etc., etc.

The belief that the cathedrals are still the once wealthy foundations which many at one time were, is held by people up and down the country. Those who voice such views obviously know nothing of the great struggle which most Deans and Chapters are experiencing in order to try to keep their cathedrals solvent. Because our cathedrals are lovingly cared for and because those responsible believe that only the best is worthy in these historic examples of our heritage, the average person tends to think that great financial reserves make these things possible. They fail to understand, as they walk round a cathedral, that what they see now is the fruition of craftsmanship throughout hundreds of years. They utterly fail to realise, in these days of the welfare state, that Deans and Chapters themselves, and not a Government department, or some other fairy godmother, are responsible for the upkeep of a very large and old fabric in need of constant repair, which can only be done by skilled craftsmen, and the cost of repairing continually eroding stonework is a slow and very costly task.

Those of us here today know something of the function of a cathedral, its place as the Mother Church of the Diocese, its daily offices sung with all the beauty, dignity and reverence possible, worthy of the building and sung as an offering to Almighty God on behalf of the whole Diocese and indeed of the Church at large; for it is in the cathedrals alone, because of their musical and other resources, that these things are possible. The average person is quite rightly impressed by all this and by the sense of tradition going back many hundreds of years. The 'out-of-this-world' atmosphere of quiet weekday Evensongs appeals greatly to the visitor who happens to visit a cathedral at service time. It is good that people should be inspired by this and even better when people realise the purpose of the daily sung offices and do not look upon them as a recital of music.

It is a sad reflection when I realise that in all the cathedrals I have known and been connected with, there have nearly always

been troubles and problems of one sort or another which have affected the basic sense and purpose of it all. Too frequently weighty decisions have had to be made, affecting adversely the whole crux of the cathedral musical system. This afternoon I want us to consider some of these problems because I am convinced that the average man in the street is unaware of what is now at stake. and, alas, very often cares little.

Most of the difficulties spring in the first place from financial problems—the heavy commitments which increase year by year. The simple fact is this, that the income of most cathedrals is entirely inadequate to deal with the continually rising costs, which of course affect the cathedral establishments just as much as you and I are personally affected by these things. I feel, myself, that unless severe steps are taken, the whole cathedral system, as we know it, is liable, eventually, to be snuffed out through economic reasons. Even in my short lifetime I have seen drastic changes—choir schools have closed and sung weekday services have been curtailed; how many cathedrals are now able to sing weekday mattins—how many cathedrals find it easy to replace lay-clerks? Let us now deal with the reasons for some of these present problems and see how difficult it is to find really satisfactory answers.

**Choir Schools.** The choristers are the life blood of the cathedral choir and it is a distressing fact to realise that so few *real* choir schools now exist. The reason for this is obvious—the very heavy costs of running small schools which are anyhow so often inadequately endowed. Some cathedrals have partly solved the problem by increasing the size of the school and taking in non-singing boys. The school then runs economically, for the cost of maintaining a school with seventy boys is not all that much greater than of running a school with thirty boys; the basic staffing—headmaster, teaching staff, matron, cooks, cleaners, etc., is virtually the same, but (and this is an important point), the intimate and family-like atmosphere of a school composed of choristers disappears to a great extent when the school virtually becomes a normal size prep. school in which twenty boys happen to be choristers. Much of the tradition and atmosphere is lost when choir schools have to be closed and choristers drawn from a local school, for it is the corporate life of a choir school, housed in the cathedral close, and forming part of the community itself, which not only makes an integral part of the life of any cathedral, but—and this is a very important aspect—it has such an influence on the choristers themselves who thus spend four or five of their most impressionable years in these surroundings—though the boys themselves may not realise this at the time.



In pre-war days the standard of scholarship was far less competitive than it is today, when 'eleven-plus', 'thirteen-plus' and Common Entrance demand many more hours of study and a much higher all-round standard than was previously the case. The chorister may well sing (either rehearsing or at services) for upwards of three hours a day, not to mention extra services, such as weddings and funerals. Despite these considerable intrusions into the normal school life, the chorister must still achieve the standard of Common Entrance and perhaps even scholarship level. No distinction is made in these examinations between choristers and ordinary prep. school boys who spend so much more of the day doing school work. It is a great tribute both to the teaching staff and to the boys themselves that so often the choristers not only pass these examinations but gain excellent scholarships in addition, for the discipline and training in the cathedral, the responsibility and the fact that they are doing work in which they are treated as adults, has its immediate and lasting influence, not only in their school work but in the moulding of their future characters.

It is an interesting fact that choristers are perhaps the one instance we know of, in which adults are dependent on children, for if the soprano line is in trouble, the men are also likely to be in difficulties. The music scholarships to public schools, which in many cases are won by choristers, mean that, for the boys concerned, much added work has to be contended with, as here again, the required standard is, in most cases, high. In order to qualify for a music scholarship, many public schools demand proficiency in two instruments and a standard of up to Grade V Associated Board in one of them. Because parents are aware of the extra demands to be made on their children as cathedral choristers, a great number of people are not willing to send their children to choir schools in these days when the rule of life is, alas, so often, as little work as possible. Many of us find fewer boys coming forward for voice trials and I know this to be one of the reasons, coupled with the strange fact that although parents are willing to pay upwards of seventy guineas a term in an ordinary prep. school, many feel and expect that tuition in the choir schools should be free in return for services rendered to the cathedral. I believe the maintenance of the choir schools to be one of the most pressing and urgent tasks facing Deans and Chapters, for therein lies the life-line of our cathedral choral system. The training of a cathedral chorister is both a unique and important example in our country of specialisation at an early age, as Sir Thomas Armstrong is continually reminding us. Because of this training we have cause to be grateful for the many instances of choristers who in later years have contributed so much to the life of our country, both musical and otherwise.

**Lay-clerks.** Gone are the days when cathedrals were virtually swamped with applications for a lay-clerk vacancy. Nowadays one dreads an impending vacancy and knows only too well the difficulties there may be in filling it. The average lay-clerk salary is now around the £200-£250 mark, a salary totally out of line with present day finances, but few Deans and Chapters are in any position to radically increase these salaries, much as they might well like to. As a result of this, although there may be a number of interested—and qualified—applicants, there is little chance of filling the vacancy unless additional work can somehow be found to augment the stipend. A limited number of lay-clerks are, in some cases, employed in other work in the cathedral, such as looking after bookstalls or as a verger, and in some cathedrals lay-clerks are on the teaching staff of the choir school. Another problem which often arises today is that in which, whereas in pre-war days an employer was often only too glad, and indeed proud, to allow one of his employees to sing in the cathedral choir, nowadays fellow employees resent preferential treatment to any one member of the staff who is allowed to be away singing in working hours, so much so that pressure is sometimes brought to bear on the unfortunate victim himself. As a result of all this it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain weekday Mattins and for this reason they have had to be discontinued in many cathedrals; in fact, weekday Mattins are very much of an exception. Evensong is now generally sung in the late afternoon so that lay-clerks are able to attend after having finished their other work. The short supply of lay-clerks often means also that older singers due to retire, or who should have retired already, go on singing far too long, simply because there is no one to replace them. Also, because of these problems, far too many amateur and virtually untrained singers are becoming lay-clerks, men who may be keen and willing, but know little or nothing of the style and tradition which the work demands. All these problems are very real ones and I see no immediate answer, indeed, I feel that the future, in the light of the present, may well augment the difficulties we are now experiencing.

**Minor Canons.** There seem to be so few young priests who are really qualified for this work. Many are keen to work in the cathedrals but comparatively few possess the necessary approach to the particular style of singing required and even fewer have the voice or the musicianship, though many think they have the qualities. Too few are able to intone accurately, keep the pitch or judge the 'feel' of the building and to sing with the deliberation which a large building demands. The situation is not helped by the fact that, of the young priests who may have the qualities



required, many quite rightly feel that their vocation lies in parochial work.

**Organists.** One cannot but deny that the cathedral organist has lost some of the prestige and position which was once his. The days are past when he was *the* musician, for the focus has now tended to shift towards the star orchestral conductor and although the cathedral organist still does, to a very considerable extent, become, or should become, the leading musician of the diocese, the criticism has often been levelled at cathedral organists—and with some justification—that they are interested only in church music and in playing the organ. The danger of this happening is much less now than it was a hundred years ago and the average cathedral organist is a broadminded musician—in fact, he has to be, and there is now the danger of the pendulum swinging in the other direction, for this reason: whereas fifty years ago he could live comfortably on his salary—with house provided—at the present time the salary has risen little in line with present day costs of living, therefore he has to take on outside work, especially if he has a family to support. Much of this part-time work—teaching in schools, lecturing in training colleges, examining and adjudicating—can be most lucrative and as such, apart from the pleasure of doing this work, is very tempting, *but* it does lead to the possibility of the person concerned being away from his cathedral far too often; although he may well have a competent deputy it is bad for the continuity of the choir work and I am certain that the standard of the choir must be affected adversely through this.

Much of the future policy and shaping of matters concerning cathedral music obviously lies in the hands of the organists themselves and I am sure that great care must be exercised in the training of the young men who one day will fill these posts. There was very much to be said for the old system of articulated pupils, though, as with all the aspects we are reviewing, this is generally impracticable now for economic reasons. It had its dangers for the training was confined to the cathedral itself, whereas two or three years in addition, either at university or at one of the colleges of music, broadens the outlook and musicianship of the person concerned. But I do believe, wholeheartedly, in the system of training whereby a young student, in addition to university or college training, becomes the assistant organist at one of our major cathedral establishments, for at least three years, before he himself becomes a cathedral organist. In that way he learns of the daily routine, not only of taking boys' practices, but of what to rehearse and what to leave unrehearsed in the light of generally inadequate practice time; he learns, by experience, of dealing with lay-clerks, and of course,

he learns the repertoire and becomes soaked in the style and the tradition. I know, personally, how ever mindful I am of all I learned from Sir William Harris during my five years at Windsor (I know he will forgive me saying 'in the hard way' because I know he was right and that it was good for me!). He certainly made me work hard, he made me think about many things—musical and unmusical—and I know that, consciously or unconsciously, much of my life now is based on what he taught me, day by day. I do know, also, after those years at Windsor, how much more confident I felt when I went to Ripon, rather than had I gone there direct from being a student at the R.A.M. To my way of thinking, far too many young organists aspire to a cathedral post without this rigorous training and in it I can foresee dangers; the young organist learns his job by making the inevitable mistakes we all made, and it is far better—and to one's credit—to do this as an assistant, when, anyhow, one is expected to make mistakes, rather than as a cathedral organist, when one is not. As an assistant, one sees, without being directly concerned with it, the question of relationships between the Dean and Chapter and the musical people, as well as with the choir school. One cannot but deplore the bad relationships which do sometimes exist, for only by mutual co-operation and understanding are we going to overcome the problems of the future. In all these misunderstandings neither party is entirely blameless and it is a question of goodwill on either side, a sense of at least trying to understand the other person's point of view and of all concerned remembering that they are working for the Glory of God. So often in cathedral circles there is evident delight in maliciousness and bad feeling which the general public inevitably hears about in a cathedral city and which does so much harm to the cause of the Church, for the public are ever ready to criticise the Church.

There, at some inevitable length, because these things must be made abundantly clear, are some of the reasons why many of us feel cathedral music to be so much threatened in the future. What then is the answer? There is no easy path, for today everything ultimately depends on money and it is, as I have said, the solving of huge financial burdens that Deans and Chapters are now concerned with. The average business man often asks if the large sum needed annually for the maintenance of the daily offices is justified. Those of us connected with church music know, for obvious reasons, that the expense is warranted and that it is not easy to see how it is possible to reduce the commitments even if it were desirable to do so. The Cathedrals Commission recently published its report on 'Cathedrals in Modern Life'; the report makes far-seeing suggestions and is admirable in every way, but it is only a



report with recommendations and it provides no immediate answer. The ideals of the Friends of Cathedral Music are praiseworthy, but money is needed to put those ideals into practice.

As I see it, there are two partial answers :

1. The people who come to the cathedrals as worshippers or visitors must contribute much more than they do *now* towards the maintenance.
2. The cathedrals must publicise themselves and their services to a far greater extent than has hitherto been the case.

Concerning the first point, congregations must be asked to give more at each service—a minimum of at least 2/- per head, per service, for the collections in most churches show an amazing and disgracefully low average per person. As I said earlier, and I must stress this point, many people share this erroneous belief that the cathedrals are wealthy and so there is no need to give; it is the duty of the cathedrals to dispel this belief. If all the cathedrals were to appeal on these lines then the cry would be a national one and would command attention. Our cathedrals are frequently used for large services connected with county and other organisations; these bodies, many of whom seem to think of a cathedral as a central and conveniently sized building for large gatherings, also appear to think that a cathedral can be hired, as it were, for next to nothing. These bodies should be made to pay far more for the use of the cathedral (and for the privilege); anyhow, most of the organisations concerned could well afford more and some, no doubt, would be willing to pay more. Visitors to a cathedral derive much pleasure from what they see, yet few think of leaving a contribution as a thankoffering. A notice, obvious to all, and so worded as to attract the attention, might well be placed at all exits and it should be in such terms as to embarrass anyone not intending to give. The notice could well tell the visitor that what he has seen and heard could never have been so had it not been that successive generations had helped to pay for its maintenance. 'Will YOU now give not less than 2/- as a thankoffering for all the beauty and pleasure which we hope you have derived from your visit? This will help to assure the future.'

As to publicity, this is now a potent factor in everyday life, something which is becoming more and more competitive, be it advertising on I.T.V., be it the enormous hoardings telling of the virtues of various brands of petrol, or be it simply toothpaste or cornflakes. The cathedrals have much to offer but generally little attempt is made to inform the public in a both attractive and novel way; indeed, most cathedral publicity is far behind the times.

To sum up; the English cathedrals and their choral foundations are a great and traditional part of the English way of life. We are now in danger of eventually losing much of this musical heritage and it is a sad, yet revealing, reflection to know that the public generally are not aware of this and that perhaps many do not care very much anyhow. But it must be brought home to the countless thousands of worshippers and visitors to our cathedrals, that their giving, person by person, will help to maintain for future generations the beauty and inspiration, for which we, in our generation, have so much cause to be thankful.