

## Choristership at St John's College School A Risk Assessment

Parents choose to send their children to be Probationers (and thereafter Choristers) in the College Choir and boarders at the school because of the enormous benefits to be gained from an outstanding education in the Choir and the school.

The College funds a Bursary covering two-thirds of the boarding fee, in addition to which instrumental music tuition and singing tuition are funded by the College. It is the College's intention that no child should be prevented from taking up a Choristership for financial reasons and funds exist to provide further support to this end.

### **Admissions**

While a number of children currently in the day school become Choristers, they and others from beyond the school are auditioned through informal and then formal Voice trials.

Academic testing is undertaken to ensure that children can cope with the combined demands of the school curriculum and the Choir.

Prospective parents receive the Handbooks for Boarders and Choristers, are given tours of the school (often by current choristers), are invited to attend a choir rehearsal (and may also attend Evensong) and meet with key members of staff to discuss the implications of Chorister life for children and their families. They are often put in touch with existing Chorister parents to gain a greater understanding of the decision they are making.

In all, prior to admission, every effort is made to ensure that the children will cope with and benefit from the demands of choristership and that the parents are fully aware of the nature of the commitment.

### **Outcomes**

Choristers achieve very highly, both as musicians and in general. They receive a specialist musical education and almost all choristers will gain music scholarships to Senior Schools. Many will return to Cambridge University in due course, some as Choral Scholars. Quite a number will go on to become professional musicians.

The confidence that the children gain as performers in an outstanding choir and the self-esteem that comes from knowing that one can achieve at the highest level, as well as the ability to get the best from oneself under pressure, all benefit the choristers in other aspects of school life and in later life. The wider experience of the world that they gain, from performing concerts and from touring nationally and internationally, is certainly perceived by them as a great benefit. All in all, in addition to musical benefits, personal and interpersonal strengths are very often a beneficial side effect of our choristers' education.

The school recognises, however, that the demands on the choristers are significant and that the nature of their lives as choristers carries risks with it. These risks are carefully identified and strategies, arrangements and procedures are put in place to remove such risks as far as possible. The following **analysis of risks** relates to those risks specifically associated with Choristership rather than boarding per se.

## Abuse

The Choristers are at increased risk of abuse when their work as choristers takes them out of the school, exposes them as performers to a wide range of adults and requires them to be accommodated off-site when on tour in this country and abroad. Therefore:

- All adults who might have unsupervised access to the children are subjected to DBS checks at the highest level.
- Training in child protection is given to all adults responsible for the care and supervision of the children, including Organ Scholars and the Lower Voices of St John's Choir.
- When in the College, the children will be in the care either of the College Director of Music or will be supervised by a member of the school's staff.
- When on tours involving overnight stays, one medically qualified person (at least first aid trained) and one person with pastoral responsibility for the choristers must be present. Normally, both of these adults will be members of the school's staff.
- Choristers are given a talk about staying safe before embarking on a tour.
- A magistrate's licence is secured for all such tours and this requires scrutiny and approval of all relevant arrangements.
- All staff who accompany the children when they are performing will be Licensed Chaperones with Cambridgeshire County Council.

Rehearsals take place in the School's Song School, the College Chapel or the College's Song School. The College's Song School provides changing room space and lavatories exclusively for the use of the Choristers. The Song School was redesigned in 2009 to increase the separation of the Choral Scholars and others from the children within the routines of the Choir. Physical arrangements for safeguarding children are routinely risk assessed for any engagement or tour.

The document 'School Staff Supervision of Choristers in College' sets out the daily routines of the choristers and the duties of the school's staff with regard to their supervision.

### Onerous demands

There is a risk that the children's health, happiness, academic progress and broad development will suffer as a consequence of their commitment to the rehearsal and performance routines of the Choir.

The availability of choristers for non-routine engagements during term time and within the school's holidays is constantly reviewed (See document: [Availability of Choristers for engagements and tours](#)).

This document sets out the periods when children may and may not be available and concludes as follows:

*The maximum amount of school (weekday) and holiday time that will be lost to touring, recording and commitments in College will be no more than seven weeks in the course of an academic year (including Half Term stay on commitments). Within this overall amount, the minimum possible number of school days will be lost to routine or non-routine Choir commitments.*

Of the abovementioned seven weeks (35 days), 15 days relate to the Choristers remaining in school for the weekends of each Half Term to fulfil their University Term commitments in College.

- The St John's College Choir sings for only 24 weeks per year. Even with additional recording or touring commitments, the overall burden on the Choristers is the least onerous of all Cathedral and Collegiate choirs. In most Cathedrals, the choir will sing for 42 weeks per year.
- Although the Choristers lose some of their school holidays as a consequence of touring and other obligations, they do not sing at Christmas or Easter and, overall, are on holiday for more weeks per year than a child in a state school. It should also be borne in mind that the children consider touring very much as a highlight of their involvement in the choir and not as a burden.
- Boarding reduces the time demands on boarders. By removing the travel time to and from home, a boarding chorister gives, on average, 12 hours fewer per week to the Choir. When compared with the demands made of a musical child who is studying two instruments, practicing every day and travelling to and from school, the time demands on the Choristers are not dissimilar.

### **Planning and monitoring:**

There is a clear structure for determining the routine and non-routine commitments of the Choristers to ensure that their welfare is given the highest priority.

- The weekly routines are planned in advance of each term by the College Director of Music, the Head and the Housemaster.
- Any non-routine event must be approved by the College's Choirs Advisory Committee, of which the Head is an ex officio member, representing the educational and welfare interests of the children. Permission for the choristers to miss school in order to fulfil an engagement is only given in exceptional circumstances and in general the rule is that there should not be engagements which remove the children from school during school term time.
- The Choirs Advisory Committee meets formally on a termly basis and any engagement proposed in the interim between meetings would require the approval of the Head.
- There is a termly calendar of chorister commitments, published to parents. Additionally, a more detailed calendar for use by the school and college staff includes a column to register any commitment which might adversely affect the children's schooling.

### **Exclusion from School activities**

Given the nature of their commitment, there is a risk that choristers will be precluded from taking part in a wide range of school activities. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, choristers cannot take part in after school activities and this prevents them, in particular, from taking a main part in school theatrical productions.

However, every effort is made to include them in productions where possible.

Otherwise the following arrangements are made for the choristers' benefit:

- The Choristers have no singing commitments on Monday evenings so that they can take part in after school activities with the other pupils.
- The Choristers do not sing on Wednesdays in order that they may participate in team sports' fixtures. .
- The day school timetable is entirely arranged to prevent choristers from missing any timetabled schools lessons. Lessons begin when chorister rehearsals end and the school day ends in time to allow choristers to have tea, do homework and go to College. In this sense, every effort is made to allow the choristers to have a normal life within the day school.

### **Poor academic performance**

Given the limited amount of time available to them for academic work outside of lessons, and given the demands on their energies, there is a danger that choristers might underperform academically.

There is no evidence that choristers suffer in this way:

- In addition to gaining Music Scholarships, many choristers have, over the years, coped with being in the academic sets that follow the very demanding Public School Scholarship syllabuses and there have been very notable exam successes.
- Others have coped with the school's curriculum and gained good exam results despite having specific learning difficulties. In such cases, it has very often been their membership of the Choir that has been the mainstay of their self-esteem and consequent success.

There are effective systems in place to monitor and resolve any problems:

- The homework arrangements allow for close monitoring of chorister homework.
- Any incomplete work can be noted by teachers and communicated to the boarding staff.
- Arrangements exist to allow choristers regular 'catch up' slots to complete any work on which they may have fallen behind.
- There is a strong and frequent dialogue between day teaching staff, several of whom undertake boarding house duties, and boarding staff.

### **Welfare within the Choir**

Given that children work towards the highest standards from a very young age, there is a risk of unhappiness for a number of reasons:

With regard to performance within the Choirs:

- Excessive expectations or discipline from the College Director of Music

Such problems are not uncommon in Choirs, given the very high level of performance expected of such young children. There are a number of protective measures in place:

- The rehearsals of the Choristers within school are all in full public view
- The College Director of Music raises any issues of discipline with the Head
- The College Director of Music does not administer punishments

The approach taken to the musical education of the Choristers is very much a collaborative one, in which the children are expected to take musical responsibility for themselves and to share their understanding of the music in rehearsals.

- **Fatigue leading to poor performances and vocal ill-health leading to absence from the Choir**

Any issues of fatigue, vocal health or health in general are fully discussed between the College Director of Music and the school's staff.

Special vocal medical attention is available to the children.

Arrangements can be made for any child to miss Choir, to miss aspects of schooling, to go to bed early etc if there are concerns.

With regard to relationships between the Choristers:

- **Rivalry with other Choristers over e.g. the allocation of Solos – the perception of favouritism**

It is an inevitable aspect of the Choristers' work that they will be selected for solos etc according to their ability and suitability. This is, of course, no different from sports team selection and other forms of selection by ability, although the close proximity and intensity with which the children work can make them vulnerable to worries on this score. The College Director of Music and school staff remain alert to such issues and, if they arise, they are discussed openly by the College Director of Music with the children.

- **Bullying of younger Choristers by older Choristers**

The age range within the Choirs is quite wide and the possibility of bullying exists in such circumstances. It is important to understand the very negative effects even of small acts of unkindness in the context of the children's necessarily close working relationship.

Senior Choristers are not allowed to administer punishments of any sort. In addition to conducting various duties within the Chapel and providing musical leadership, the role of the Senior Choristers is to keep a special eye on the younger choristers, to be helpful to them and to report any concerns to the College Director of Music.

There are always two or more senior choristers given such responsibility to ensure that the responsibilities are shared.

All senior choristers are expected to care for the younger ones. At the end of each year a prize (the Strasburger mortar board) is awarded to the senior chorister voted most caring by the younger choristers.

### **Welfare within the Boarding House**

Given that the choristers spend much of their time outside the school day engaged in their work in the choir, there is a risk of difficulties in their lives as boarders. There is a danger of jealousy of the Choristers' achievements among their peers and of isolation from friendship groups within the boarding house and the school.

The school deliberately integrates the Choristers as ordinary boarders within the boarding house. While special regard is given to their lives, one of the most special things is that they remain and are treated as ordinary young children.

To this end, the Choristers are fully integrated with other boarders.

- Dormitory arrangements deliberately group choristers and non-choristers, rather than separating them, as in some schools, into 'Choir dorms'.
- Although the Choristers wear distinctive clothing when on chorister duty beyond the school, within the school there are no differences of clothing and no other identifying features that would mark the children out as separate.

There is a risk that the choristers will not eat appropriately given that their routines find them required to sing at the boarders' normal supper time.

Choristers' eating needs are given special attention within the boarding house and are considered in weekly meetings of the boarding house staff and catering staff, and in the agenda of the school's Food Committee.

### **Welfare of Families**

The demands of chorister life are not felt only by the children concerned. Indeed, the main burden very often falls more on parents and families than on the choristers, who very much enjoy their lives. Family routines are significantly affected and tend to become 'chorister-centric' during term time. Families who visit their children will be spending a great deal of time at the school.

While this enhances communication between school and home, it will often mean, for instance, that siblings will also be required to be here.

- **Probationer routines**

The probationers are free for all weekends. This is a deliberate policy to make the transition to boarding easier for children and families alike.

- **Hospitality**

The school makes every effort to be hospitable to chorister families:

- Special lunches are arranged for chorister families
- Private space is available to families if they need it
- At the end of each academic year, there is a special lunch for all chorister and probationer families

### **Lack of Communication**

In order for care to be of the highest standard in the complex lives of the choristers, communication needs to be of the highest order. Otherwise, there would be significant risk of concerns going unnoticed.

### **Internal communication**

- The College Director of Music meets boarding house staff whenever rehearsals or services take place and will discuss any concerns arising within the Choir or school at such times.
- The College Director of Music meets weekly with the Housemaster to discuss any concerns arising within the Choir or school and also celebrate joys and achievements of the choristers and probationers.
- The Housemaster communicates any pastoral concerns about choristers or probationers to the Head.
- Any issues relating to choristers are communicated to all staff through weekly staff meetings.
- Any particular concerns about a child will be communicated to and by tutors at weekly Year Group pastoral meetings.
- The Head meets the College Director of Music formally each week to discuss issues relating to the Choristers.
- Records of any significance are entered in each child's entry on the management information system

### **Communication with home**

- The College Director of Music meets informally with parents at their request and meets formally with them to discuss their child's progress within the Choir during calendared 'review' meetings.
- A special calendar of all chorister commitments is created and sent to parents in advance of each term.
- Special mailings (and e-mailings) of chorister parents occur frequently to ensure that all relevant information, including e.g. arrangements for concerts, is communicated.
- A termly meeting of chorister and probationer parents takes place, with parents invited to contribute to the agenda.