

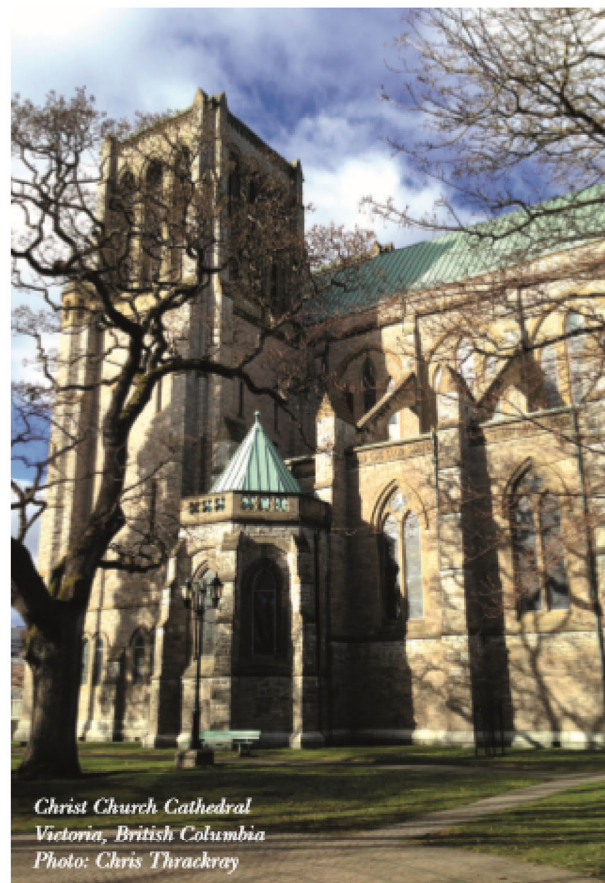


Christ Church Cathedral choristers with Donald Hunt far right

All photos by Catherine Allen Whale except as marked

BUCKING THE TREND

While cathedral chorister programs in North America are few and far between, a flourishing new program on Canada's West Coast proves the exception.



Christ Church Cathedral
Victoria, British Columbia
Photo: Chris Thrackrey

Patricia Pitts

It's still dark outside as 14 boys and girls assemble in front of two long rows of choir stalls to start their vocal exercises. With hands on their hips and their Christ Church Cathedral School uniforms variously tucked in, they continue the centuries-old tradition of Anglican church choristers, warming up their young voices.

But this isn't a scene in a British cathedral city. This choir practice is held on the far reaches of Canada's West Coast, in Victoria, British Columbia, where the city's Christ Church Cathedral has launched Canada's first and only fully immersive chorister program based in a cathedral school.

"I fell in love with this tradition in the UK and always wanted to start a similar program in Canada," says Donald Hunt, a Canadian who was recruited as Director of Music at the cathedral from Edinburgh, where he was Assistant Organist at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral.

As the youngsters hit their high notes, the soaring vaulted ceiling in the cathedral's Chapel of the New Jerusalem amplifies even the most tentative of voices. "The children are developing the sound that I was aiming for much more quickly than I thought they would," says Hunt. "Perhaps it has something to do with this wonderful space."

The scene invokes a centuries-old tradition, but it is illuminated by the dawning sun shining through striking

stained glass of modern design in a chapel less than 30 years old. And while the year-old chorister program pays tribute to its musical and spiritual roots, its location and the modern lifestyles of its Canadian choristers and their families are also taken into account.

Where British choristers' lives are likely to revolve mostly around their cathedral and education schedules, Canadian participants often combine their music practices and study with various extra-curricular sports and other outdoor activities. One young chorister, Elysse, arrived at a recent 7.30am practice having already played ice hockey at a regional rink, while fellow singer Alyssa balances singing with dance classes. Alyssa recently took part in a performance by the visiting Royal Winnipeg Ballet's production of *The Nutcracker* undertaking, among other roles, 'a fuzzy-wuzzy polar bear'.

Despite their busy schedules, the youngsters arrive for practice "charged up", says Hunt, who has gradually introduced his choristers to the cathedral congregation once or twice a month at its Wednesday Evensong service. He says there's a different feel to the service as the choristers' families now mingle with the regular congregation. "One of the chorister's grandmothers shed tears of joy after an evensong. People get quite emotional when they consider what it means to the future of our church."

The chorister program is also attracting interest in the adjacent cathedral school. "We were hoping that the program would be a draw to the school, and we're delighted to have had five or six new applications already," says Stuart Hall, the Head of School. With the growth of interest in the school, which is nearing capacity, and in the chorister program, Hall is hoping to increase scholarships to reward qualified children and encourage new applications to the school (which already has a music program). "We hope to raise the level of music tuition, which in turn will give Donald a larger talent pool to work with," says Hall.

Sarah McDonald, Canadian-born Director of Music at Selwyn College Cambridge, and Director of the Girls' Choir at Ely Cathedral, spent much of her youth in Victoria and knows the cathedral well. She's always believed the cathedral school had tremendous untapped potential for a chorister program. "I'm delighted to see this going ahead," she enthuses.



Christ Church Cathedral choristers

Successful applicants to the chorister program currently receive scholarships to help offset the cost of their school tuition. All but one of the current crop of choristers are students at the kindergarten to Grade 8 (age 13-14) cathedral school, which was founded in 1989.

Aspirations to establish a chorister program have been percolating for several years among the cathedral's leadership. Now that it has finally been realised, Christ Church Cathedral is reaping the benefits – according to the present dean, The Very Revd Ansley Tucker, who herself sang for 25 years in a semi-professional choir specialising in Early Music.

"The people who come are elated to see the children singing, and the children themselves are in an activity they enjoy. It's so enlivening for people to hear children making music of this quality." She praises the youngsters' ability to learn difficult music quickly, which in turn expands their knowledge of liturgical music and its history. "You've got nine-year-olds memorising magnificats and being introduced to texts of scriptures and prayers through music, and this strengthens a musical and spiritual tradition."

Sarah McDonald would concur. "It is fantastic to have a new generation of children learning to love the great choral repertoire. Choral singing is hugely important to so many people, and it seems obvious to be training [children] up from a young age so that it will thrive into the future." Sarah sees this as the cradle of the next generation of choral singers and church musicians, and an engine of growth for the church.



Christ Church Cathedral nave

"There is a regeneration of Choral Evensong [in England], with cathedral congregations rising during the week, despite a decline on Sundays."

Apart from belting out the national anthem at sporting events, Canadians are a reticent bunch when it comes to public singing, and are becoming less vocal at mainstay church services, such as Christmas Eve carol services, says Tucker. But she feels that engaging a new generation in a chorister program is a step towards changing that. "The fact that we're teaching children, especially boys, that music is important and requires skill and ardour is a bonus all round."



Jude



Alan
Photo: Donald Hunt

Two of the boy choristers, Alan and Jude, both 12, were already keen choir members when they joined the program, and they play various musical instruments in addition to singing. Both particularly enjoyed a recent road trip to nearby Shawnigan Lake boarding and day school where a video recording was made of the service they sang in the chapel. This recording clearly influences how they sing:

"I smile a lot more now," says Jude, who sang in the Victoria Children's Choir and the cathedral school's choir before becoming a cathedral chorister. While both children enjoy the repertoire of the program, Alan says he likes to "switch it up every once in a while" and sing non-church-related music on occasion. Both boys will be encouraged to join the cathedral's back row when their voices change, and their participation in a chorister program will provide lifelong benefits.

"There is no better foundation for the musical development of a young person than to sing in a good liturgical choir that has a wide repertoire with excellent leadership and direction," says Matthew Larkin, one of Canada's leading Anglican choral directors, also a concert organist and the conductor of Caelis Academy Ensemble in Canada's capital Ottawa, a choir he founded after he left his post as music director at that city's Christ Church Cathedral. While not a church choir, Caelis follows the cathedral practice of using boys and/or girls in the treble line. "I have lived the tradition of cathedral music almost all my life. It's part of who I am, not just as an artist but as a person," Larkin says. He admits, though, that it's increasingly difficult to establish that kind of lifelong influence on today's children, given the increasing competition for their attention. When he was a child, "It would have been unfathomable for a game [of ice hockey] to be scheduled on a Sunday morning", whereas now Canadian choir directors must consider chorister families' desire to pack as many activities, often outdoor, into a weekend as they can.

Larkin also acknowledges that "the administration aspect of a cathedral type of choir is substantial" which is further challenged by a diminishing volunteer base of parents who are less likely to have sung in a church choir themselves and are therefore generally less motivated to enrol their children in one.



Christ Church Cathedral organ case

All those challenges makes Victoria's chorister program all the more impressive, according to Larkin. "If Christ Church Cathedral Victoria can buck this trend ... it sends a compelling and exciting message. There is no stronger community than a choir. It builds confidence, expressive ability and a sense of collegiality in which friendships are made and sustained."

Larkin's thoughts are echoed by Matthew White, the acclaimed Canadian counter-tenor and Artistic Director of Early Music Vancouver, who now makes Victoria his home. He recognises the importance of the cathedral's chorister initiative and credits his early chorister days with setting him on his life's path. "It gave me the opportunity to appreciate really great music. And it provides an opportunity, especially for boys, to nurture a part of themselves that's different."

Like many Canadian boys, he juggled music with ice hockey, but it was his time in the choir that shaped his character. "You notice that different people have different talents, which can all be useful to the whole. Choral singing teaches children how to appreciate beauty and I can't imagine a higher endeavour."

Tucker agrees that the lessons learned in a chorister program extend well beyond the musical. "The great value of singing in a choir is that it's a team sport and you learn when to support and when to let someone else shine."

Internationally recognised tenor Benjamin Butterfield, now a professor of voice at the University of Victoria, spent several years at Christ Church Cathedral as a chorister along with his four brothers and sister. He thinks his university voice students would benefit from having the same liturgical music foundation that he received. "You develop an ear and discipline," he says. "In church you have to be present and listen before you get up and sing. The church repertoire teaches different aspects of music, such as a sense of structure,

music history, language and sight-reading skills. Children don't receive that breadth of training and experience in the average school choir. I also love the idea that, with church music, kids are singing about something a bit bigger than they are."

The chorister program has also engaged University of Victoria students as choral scholars to serve as mentors to the choristers and leaders to the cathedral choir sections. And while he's passionate about challenging children to expand their musical skills beyond the latest pop culture songs, Butterfield is aware of the competition for the choristers' time – but he is not dismissive of doing both. "Singing and sports can co-exist," says Butterfield. "That's what creates well-rounded kids. The children are looking for experiential direction from their parents and it's up to them to provide it."

Although both the cathedral school and the chorister program are nearing capacity, there is always room for expansion, says Hunt. "There's a wonderful base of support from the cathedral community, and strong interest from parents for activities where children can reach their full potential." He sees a bright future and believes that any child with the desire, musical interest and aptitude can succeed.

"We are moving to a steady state of 20 children, and in the future I think building two full treble lines for boys and girls is quite achievable," says Hunt. "There's also potential to expand the chorister scholarship scheme, offering greater reductions in cathedral school tuition, widening the reach of the program so that more families can explore this magnificent opportunity for their children."

As the morning practice wraps up, the choristers grab their backpacks and head out in the morning chill for the short walk to their school. Watching them, Hunt sees the embodiment of an ancient tradition but with a new generation of choristers who require a new approach. "To create something of enduring quality, it's important to build something that works for this culture," he says in appreciation of the challenges and opportunities ahead of him. "Yes, we have a deep cultural connection (to Britain) but we're also Canadians."



Photo:
Elsbeth Ford



Elysse

Perhaps no one embodies this philosophy better than Elysse. "I want to stay in this program," she beams. "I like singing Evensong — and then I go and play hockey!"