



News from the Choir Schools' Association

CANTEMUS!

Welcome to the Pentecost edition of **CanTEMUS!**; the CSA's termly magazine for our members and wider network.

Our recent conference, brilliantly hosted by Richard Murray and his team at Christ Church Cathedral School working with colleagues from the College and Cathedral gave a welcome opportunity to take stock of where we are both as an organisation and, more broadly, as a sector.

While there are undoubtedly many significant challenges facing our schools and choirs, the overriding atmosphere was one of optimism and a renewed determination to promote and celebrate being a chorister in our wide range of different settings and to support national initiatives to ensure that all children have the opportunity to sing regularly.

We were particularly pleased to welcome representatives from many linked organisations across education and church music, because we can do so much more when we collaborate, and conversations started at conference are already leading to new connections and partnerships.

Madeleine Davies, Senior Writer at the Church Times, attended the conference and subsequently published an article on the importance of making singing accessible to all children, and the growing role of schools, cathedrals and churches in supporting music education and widening participation. You can read Madeleine's full article [HERE](#).

The end of the summer term will be here very soon. For those leaving our choirs (and for their families) there will be sadness mixed, no doubt, with the anticipation of slightly freer weekends in the Autumn! Probationers are already waiting in the wings, ready to begin their chorister journey.

The CSA is here to support that journey working with our members. Please get in touch if you would like to suggest new ways for us to do this.

Rachel Hicks, Executive Director



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**Financial support for choristers and
CSA members in 2025 / 2026**

**The CSA has awarded
£230,200 in bursaries
to support 117
choristers**

**7 members have
received grants to
support choral activity
totalling £16,500**



The Power of Song

Composer Joanna Forbes L'Estrange MA(Oxon) FRSCM

500 years ago the great English Renaissance composer William Byrd wrote about the power of singing to improve body, mind and spirit.

Those of us involved in choir schools witness these benefits every day and need no convincing of the value of communal music-making. Sadly, in many state schools singing provision is minimal or absent altogether. This is one of the reasons why Alexander and I have spent the past twenty years composing accessible 40-minute works for SATB choir, unison children's choir and jazz quintet.

The aim is simple: to give primary school children the chance to experience the joy of singing as part of a large-scale performance.

We are delighted that the series has now grown to seven choral works. The model is wonderfully effective.

A host choir, whether a school, choral society or chamber choir, invites local primary schools to join them in performing one of our works, often in their local cathedral.

We provide all the learning resources teachers need so that the children arrive fully prepared and ready to sing alongside the main choir. Our professional jazz ensemble, the Call Me Al Quintet, adds the all-important groove!

The benefits are enormous for everyone involved. Audiences grow as families and friends come to support their children, while the children themselves experience the excitement of performing with hundreds of singers and professional musicians in a spectacular venue. For many, it is their first visit to a cathedral - an unforgettable experience.

Our latest piece in the series, *Wellspring! The Way of Water*, was premiered last year in Wells Cathedral. Inspired by nearby Glastonbury, it explores the healing, spiritual and life-giving power of water. Commissioned by Millfield School, the performance united hundreds of primary school children in a thrilling concert which was met with a prolonged standing ovation. You can watch it on YouTube - <https://youtu.be/aNLJ6UoAZaw>.

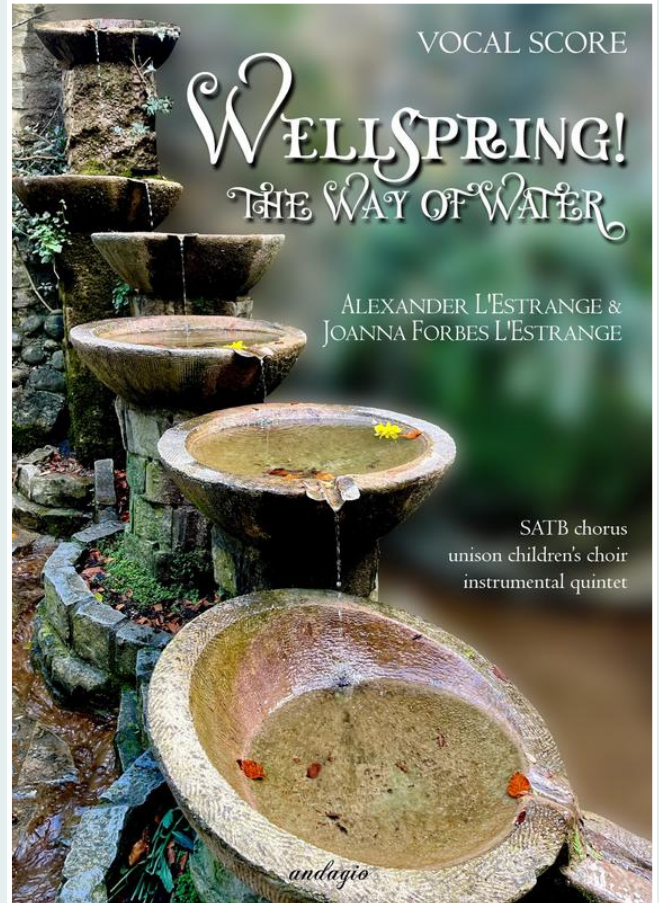
Why not consider bringing this opportunity to children in your own community by performing *Wellspring!* or its predecessor *Freedom! The Power of Song*? Or perhaps your school would like to commission the next piece in the series.

Do write to us at info@lestrangemusic.com. We'd love to hear from you.

Visit www.lestrangemusic.com for links to all our music.

Joanna

(Joanna was a keynote speaker at this year's CSA conference in Oxford in April)





CSA Conference: Connect. Support. Celebrate

This year's CSA Conference in Oxford brought together colleagues, partners and friends from across the choir school community for three memorable days of reflection, discussion, musical entertainment and celebration.

Kindly hosted by Christ Church Cathedral School, the conference explored this year's theme of Connect, Support, Celebrate, offering delegates the opportunity to engage with the shared mission and future of choir schools. The programme featured an outstanding group of keynote speakers, including Joanna Forbes L'Estrange, Bishop Richard Chartres, Andrew Gant and Howard Goodall. Their contributions offered insight, encouragement and inspiration while keeping the focus firmly on the importance of music, education, worship and young people at the heart of our work.

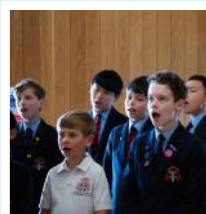
Conference sessions addressed a wide range of important topics, including partnerships, the current choir school landscape, shared tradition and the different operational models across the sector. Discussions were thoughtful, practical and forward-looking; reflecting both the opportunities and challenges facing choir schools today. The conference opened in spectacular fashion with a live BBC Radio 3 broadcast of Choral Evensong and concluded with joyful May Morning celebrations in Oxford – a fitting end to a conference that combined musical excellence with a strong sense of community and shared purpose.

You can see all the photographs from the conference [HERE](#).

Delegates spoke warmly about the atmosphere and spirit of the gathering. One attendee reflected: *"I've been to many conferences of various heads' associations — but there was a tangible sense of purpose and mission with the CSA which I've not experienced before. It was utterly refreshing. And everyone but everyone was lovely and welcoming."*

Another commented on Howard Goodall's contribution: *"Howard Goodall, I thought, spoke very well and offered a balanced assessment of the current situation, whilst focusing ultimately on our young people."*

Above all, the conference demonstrated the strength, generosity and commitment of the CSA community. Thank you to all who contributed, attended and helped make the event such a success – we are already looking forward to next year's conference which will be hosted by St Peter's School in York.



Transforming Tradition at St Paul's Cathedral School

Judith Fremont-Barnes, Head

Writing in June 2026, having just left an Evensong sung gloriously by both our top lines combined, it is now hard to imagine that, just three years ago, no girl had been or could be admitted to St Paul's Cathedral Choir in its more than nine centuries of tradition.

The project did not enjoy the most promising start. In September 2023, we didn't even have planning permission for the new boarding house, funds had not yet been raised for the project. ISI had rejected the Action Plan written to address the inspection failed the previous year on equality grounds, and we had just two girl probationers signed up to the programme.

As incoming Head, I don't mind admitting it was quite a daunting prospect. However, the extraordinary project has been a true example of the teamwork required to make fundamental change happen successfully. The whole-hearted commitment of St Paul's Cathedral Dean and Chapter and Governors, and the vision of our exceptional Director of Music, Andrew Carwood, have made a powerful combination. Everybody in the wider Cathedral community has supported us warmly.

Today our choristers enjoy a fabulous, expanded boarding house, designed to house the growing choir – named Maria Hackett House, in honour of the redoubtable Victorian campaigner for choristers' welfare. Funds have been raised for the initial project and to secure its future. We have first proved ourselves compliant and in March of this year the pastoral provision for the chorister programme was judged a 'significant strength' of the school.

Most exciting of all has been the speed of recruitment. We now field a combined force (in every sense of the word) of 48 choristers: 24 boys and 24 girls. Interest in the programme was encouraged by the international publicity we received, and by a campaign led jointly by the Cathedral's outreach programme and the school, working particularly to reach those who may never have heard of choristership and its many benefits.

Recruitment was consciously capped at 48 this year to enable the pastoral induction to happen in a pupil-centred way, with a further 12 Year 4 pupils joining in September 2026. The top lines now regularly function independently as well as together. While there will always be state and special occasions on which all 60 will sing together, the intention is that during the next academic year, as each choir grows to its limit, their schedules will separate. Additional services, including daily sung mattins, mean that both choirs have full duties: the mission has been 'to double, not to dilute'.

Very substantial financial backing is needed to run a choir of this calibre and to ensure that it is open to all. Generous donations from foundations, private individuals and livery company support have all underpinned this effort. Every one of the sixty places is available to pupils irrespective of their circumstances: Chapter covers the day fees and instrumental lessons and while those parents who can pay or contribute to the boarding fee do so, the Chorister Trust funds any in need on a means-tested basis. In the prevailing sector climate, to be able to offer 60 fully funded places in a transformational programme is a real joy.

Running a major building project on a tight central London site, with live services needing to be disconnected and reconnected daily to the existing boarding house, is not an experience I will rush to repeat. The choosing of paint colours the frequent trips to IKEA to ensure fixtures and fittings reflected pupil voice were rather more enjoyable than the discussions of acoustic testing or the endless challenges of concrete floors.



Early in the project we realised that, complex as a major refurbishment can be, the really challenging aspect of this work would not be the physical building but the important process of community-building. Great care and attention went into preparing the new boarders and their parents for community life and of recruiting an outstanding boarding team, under the direction of our exceptional Head of Boarding, Joe Gorman. Healthy and sustainable habits are our focus, with self-respect and respect for others right at the heart of the boarding house and chorister programme. The children are taught to aim for excellence but actively avoid perfection, ensuring that all achievement is securely rooted in wellbeing.

It was particularly pleasing that the full inspection recognised the quality of pastoral provision for our choristers as a significant strength of the school, noting the chorister programme has a *"considerably positive and transformative impact on pupils' lives"*. The report highlighted what it takes to make this happen: *"high-quality boarding accommodation, well-trained staff and carefully structured routines ensure that boarders are well supported and able to balance study, singing, rest and recreation."* A chorister parent commented, "The extent to which every single detail was thought through so carefully to create a warm, comfortable and comforting environment has made all the difference."

Embracing their new opportunities with maturity and enthusiasm, the girls are developing strong musical discipline alongside growing independence, resilience and confidence, just as the boys have done for generations. As one chorister observed, *"being around other people and talking to each other creates a community"*. They are experiencing 'life in all its fullness' in their new routines and opportunities.

The girls have certainly shown impressive adaptability to the demands of boarding and the intensity of the chorister schedule. They have settled quickly into community boarding life, supporting one another while building confidence in their personal development. Their sense of commitment and enjoyment is evident in their daily participation. It has been really pleasing to see the warmth of the welcome the boys have shown the girl choristers as they have settled into boarding life together. We also reflect gratefully on the confidence shown in the programme by parents of the pioneering pupils.

The culture of belonging, mutual support and shared achievement provides strong foundations as we move into our second year of co-educational boarding. Just as it should, it now feels like 'business as usual'. To all the children contributing to the programme in its earliest days, however, I suspect it will always hold particularly special memories. In the words of one of the first girl choristers: *"You know you are making history here and that's so exciting."*

Young Composers Celebrated in the 2026 Chorister Composition Competition

Young composers from choir schools across the country have been recognised in the 2026 CSA Chorister Composition Competition, held in association with the Jonathan Willcocks Trust.

The annual competition celebrates the creativity and musical imagination of choristers, offering young musicians the opportunity to develop their compositional voices alongside their performing experience. This year's competition invited entrants to compose settings of the text Songs of Praise, producing a wide variety of musical responses across two age categories; under 14 years old and 14 to 18 years old.

In the under14 category, Izzy Smith of Ely Cathedral was awarded first prize for a composition praised by the judges for its originality and confident musical writing. The judges also awarded a Highly Commended prize to Albert Barzillia of Gloucester Cathedral and Kai Huang of King's College School, Cambridge received a Commended award.

In the 14–18 category, the winner was Zino Zigan of Wells Cathedral School. The judges also awarded a Highly Commended prize to Thomas Strudwick of King's School Ely.

Judge Jonathan Willcocks praised the breadth and quality of submissions, noting *"a wide range of settings, from quite simple choral unaccompanied pieces up to more sophisticated compositions."* He added that the judges were looking for works *"that were pleasingly consistent in your chosen style and which were sympathetic to the natural rhythms and message of the prescribed text."*

He also encouraged all entrants to continue developing their musical creativity: *"However experienced we are as composers we all learn every time we create new music. Keep composing and we look forward to seeing more of your work next time the Composition Competition is held."*

The CSA Chorister Composition Competition continues to highlight the breadth of musical talent within choir schools, encouraging choristers not only as performers but also as creators of new music. The partnership with the Jonathan Willcocks Trust reflects a shared commitment to nurturing the next generation of composers and church musicians.

Zino Zigan



Izzy Smith



Member News

Historic Cathedral Schools launch the *Three Choirs Schools Group*



Three of the country's oldest cathedral schools – Hereford Cathedral School, The King's School, Gloucester and The King's School, Worcester – have come together to form the Three Choirs Schools Group, a new partnership designed to strengthen educational excellence, broaden opportunity and enhance collaboration across the three counties of Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Worcestershire.

Rooted in a shared cathedral foundation and Christian ethos, the partnership brings together schools with over two millennia of combined history, more than 2,600 pupils and a collective annual turnover of £50m.

Read the full story [HERE >>>](#)

The Three Choirs School Group (Left to Right). Dr Michael Gray, Executive Headmaster of Hereford Cathedral School, Mr Ben Charles, Head of Foundation at The King's School, Worcester, Mr David Morton, Headmaster of The King's School, Gloucester.

St John's College, Cambridge Celebrates Landmark Organ Project with Festival

Following a hugely successful tour to Sweden and Denmark in April, another significant milestone in the life of the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge, this year has been the completion of the Organ Project, culminating in an Organ Festival.

A team of specialists from Durham firm Harrison & Harrison Ltd installed 3,499 pipes - some newly constructed for the College, and others salvaged from an 1889 'Father' Willis organ and honed to precision for their new home.

Read the full story [HERE >>>](#)



St George's School, Windsor joins the St Albans Education Group to create a new through school to be known as St George's School Windsor and Ascot

The St Albans Education Group (STAEG) is a growing group of independent schools united by a shared commitment to educational excellence, outstanding pastoral care and forward-thinking leadership. By joining STAEG, St George's will benefit from the strength, stability and collaboration that come from being part of a successful and well-respected charitable group,

Read the full story [HERE >>>](#)

Established in 1918, the Choir Schools' Association exists to promote and support the education and wellbeing of choristers – the young people at the heart of the UK's world-class choral tradition.



Choir Schools'
Association

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