

Rodolfus Choral Academy - Kennington

End of Year 1 Evaluation

July 2023

The Project

The Rodolfus Choral Academy in Kennington was set up in September 2022 by The Rodolfus Foundation as part of its **Education and Access programme**. The aim is to give young children from diverse backgrounds regular, high quality choral singing lessons that enable them to join a local community choir at St John-the-Divine Church, Kennington - and become skilled young musicians. The ultimate ambition is, in due course, to welcome children from the Choral Academy on a Rodolfus residential choral course on a full bursary.

The project runs in two primary schools, St John-the -Divine Primary and John Ruskin Primary and the main activity is **weekly choral sessions** led by Phoebe Tak Man Chow, a highly skilled professional organist and choral leader.

The **repertoire** Phoebe covers is wide ranging and challenging and includes hymns, specially written choral works for children which are broadly classical but designed to be fun and upbeat and Christmas carols and other pieces appropriate to the seasons.

As part of the teaching, children learn about **musical notation and musical terms** and about **vocal technique** including breathing, articulation and using the head voice effectively. The children test their **memory skills** by learning complex songs often with several verses, an aspect that they find both challenging and rewarding.

The scheme is still in its early stages and our initial focus has been to set up a regular habit within the choral singing lessons such as warm up songs, and to encourage participation in the after-school community choir. As we move into year 2, we will create joint performances and workshops to enhance their choral learning.

Methodology

Building on our 2022 and 2023 Evaluations of our Choral Academy in Hackney, which involved a quantitative questionnaire to teachers and face-to-face interviews with children at our two schools in Hackney, for this evaluation we conducted face-to-face interviews with mini-groups of children at St John-the-Divine, Kennington

The focus groups were conducted on 4th July 2023 with Year 3, Year 4, Year 5 and Year 6 children in groups of 6 children each.

Key Findings

The children we speak to are thoughtful and polite. They talk positively about their singing lessons, in particular recalling the warm up songs they have learnt each week (“Bungalow” which is a name-learning song as each child take a turn singing a verse and inserting their name, and ‘1-2-3-4-5’ which is a song to learn the intervals of notes while singing up and down the scale and jumping across larger intervals)

During the focus groups, they readily break into song to demonstrate tunes they are particularly enjoying or that they remember fondly.

Several children have also started attending the community choir at St John-the-Divine Church and they discuss this as a key part of their lives, enjoying the weekday rehearsal with the choir leader Ben Vonberg Clark and the Sunday morning services where they sing to their parents and the community. A highlight for the community choir members is a residential visit to St John’s College Cambridge where the children stay in dorms, eat in college and sing in the chapel. This is also widely discussed in the focus groups and you can sense great pride amongst who will be attending this summer.

Our project is having a very positive effect in embedding choral singing in the school and deepening the community links between school and neighbouring church and the two communities. The strong link between our project in school and the community choir is a key element in giving our work meaning by presenting a path of progression which includes singing at a Cambridge college. It is this horizon-broadening element that makes choral singing a powerful tool in social mobility by not only showing these children the wider world but enabling them to inhabit it confidently.

1. The young people we speak to are all enjoying the lessons. They readily discuss the different songs they are singing or have learnt in the past and are enjoying the variety of songs.

“The way [Phoebe] sings is really pretty and she tries to make us sing like that. I really like it” (Year 3)

“I like the one about the little boy who defeated the giant....Daniel and the Lion. It goes ‘boom boom’ and we march” (year 3)

“I like the songs that Phoebe teaches us. They’re really fun to learn, especially the Goliath one....it’s a cool beat and a rhythm to it.” (Year 4)

“I like when we play games with Phoebe...the warm up song ‘Bungalow’” (Year 5)

“I have enjoyed the singing, a few different songs lately and really enjoyed it.” (Year 6)

“I’ve enjoyed the variety of things. Played games, different types of music. Sometimes just explore types of music.” (Year 6)

2. They are enjoying learning other things like musical terms, singing technique and how to pronounce certain words which become easier to understand when they are set to rhythm and tune.

"I like *do re mi so fa la ti do*. This time phoebe arranged it in different ways and we had to sing it in different ways and it was really fun. She showed you can write your own music at home this way" Year 3

"We've learnt the names of the beats. Semi breves." (Year 4)

"Taught us how the bar lines work" (Year 5)

"As we are singing she [Phoebe] tries to incorporate the general knowledge with it so we know what we are singing about." (Year 6)

3. They enjoy songs with actions, especially in the younger years, while older children enjoy moving their bodies expressively with the music.

"When we do dances with songs, clapping, stamp your feet. I like that. Gives you free will. Sometimes choirs don't do actions or move, or have fun with dancing, they just sing. But Phoebe gives us the free will to do that" (Year 6)

4. They particularly seem to value the expressive outlet that singing provides, enjoying the upbeat happy songs as much as the slower, sad songs. Exploring the full range of human emotions through music helps them understand, and offers an outlet for, their own emotions.

"Sometimes it makes me feel a lot interested. Some of them are sad songs, but they still, I like the tune [even though it] sounds sad" (Year 3)

"[singing] Makes me feel happy. I like to sing almost every day." (Year 3)

"Music and singing lets all your sadness come out of you" (Year 4)

"It makes me feel calm and relaxed. I can just express my feelings and show other people my voice" (Year 4)

"[singing] makes me feel happy and everyone around me disappears and I sing in my head." (Year 5)

"My favourite song is '*Look at the World*' by John Rutter. Every time it just makes me cry....it goes so well together...talks about all the beautiful things [in the world]" (Year 6)

5. They like the team work and support of class mates that the experience of singing in a choir gives them

"Singing by yourself would feel different. If you're with your whole class it feels better because if you forget the lyrics your class mates are singing along and you can ask them for help." (Year 4)

"Singing in a group makes me feel...I'm not that shy anymore because people sing with me. It gives me confidence." (Year 5)

6. They value the community spirit of seeing friends and making new friends

"My favourite part of going to the church choir is to see our friends and to make new friends." (Year 3)

7. The Children all see positive benefits of performing in front of family and friends, such as feeling a sense of achievement after hard work and a little nervousness, a feeling of pride and of approval from family and friends.

“Performing makes you feel excited and nervous.” (Year 5)

“It feels great because I get to show what I’ve been learning to other people and my family feel good...they feel proud.” (Year 5)

“I feel a bit nervous [about a performance] but once I’m done I feel really satisfied because I know I’ve done well. My family say that’s really good and that it’s a really lucky experience to be singing with the choir.” (Year 6)

“[the people listening] will think we are all superstars and they will let you go on a world tour.” (Year 4)

“They [the audience] are like how are these children doing this? I don’t think I could do this....they would think we have a super power.” (Year 3)

Conclusions

The choral singing lessons have become a welcome and regular fixture in the life of the two schools in Kennington and the children clearly enjoy them and greatly benefit from them in many ways.

The children are clearly becoming confident about using their voice and fully entering into the different musical styles Phoebe is introducing them to.

The strong connection with the community choir at St. John-the-Divine Church is an important element, providing a pathway for the children and a strong sense of identity as young musicians and talented, valued individuals within their community. The opportunities provided by the community choir, such as singing in a Cambridge College, offer real potential to transform these children’s self-identity and give them the confidence to aim high.

Developing the Choral Academy in Year 2

As we approach the second year of the choral academy, we plan to enable as many children who wish to join the community choir by exploring a ‘walking bus’ or chaperone to accompany the children to the after-school choir practice.

We are also keen to organise more performance opportunities for the children, both within school and within the wider community. They are currently learning songs which tell the story of David and Goliath and are working towards a performance in October.