

Harmony in Diversity: the societal impact of Liverpool Cathedral's egalitarian music outreach programme in the Liverpool City region¹

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Abstract

Liverpool Cathedral makes a substantial contribution to society through its choral music outreach activities with highly positive impacts on the Liverpool City Region that it serves. This is the focus of impactful research that studies the social value of the Cathedral's expansive music outreach programme, building on extensive, longitudinal data collection to investigate the benefits and impacts on participants from diverse backgrounds. The focus is significant, as scholarly discourse on cathedral music outreach programmes remains scarce and rarely incorporates empirical research involving participants. This paper introduces the research design, methodology and literature context, and delves into some examples of this impact, emphasizing the pivotal role of choral outreach for music education and social mobility, social capital and belonging, beauty and emotion, and health and wellbeing. The research contributes valuable knowledge for academic and non-academic audiences to the intersections of choral music, community and place. It fosters a deeper understanding of how Liverpool Cathedral's choral music outreach continues to shape and enrich the diverse fabric of the Liverpool City Region, providing a template for other institutions seeking to make meaningful contributions to their communities through the transformative potential of music.

Introduction

Music's evolution and refinement have been intrinsically linked to religious institutions, notably the church. Even so, it is irrefutable that over the preceding century, religion has undergone a rapid decline within the Western world, primarily attributed to the profound influence of secularization, modernization and the global spread of capitalism (Evans, 2006; Franck and Iannaccone, 2014). In response to this challenge, religious institutions have witnessed a "postmodern restructuring" by placing a greater emphasis on inclusivity alongside economic objectives, while still being underpinned by their ecclesiastical purpose, which they achieve by crafting a distinctive brand identity and expanding their cultural offerings, thereby proactively adjusting their services and devising innovative strategies to engage a broader audience (Arnold, 2016).

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Liverpool Cathedral's postmodern restructuring is marked by its new innovative brand identity that is inspired by the building itself and represents the sheer depth of offerings and experiences people get from the Cathedral—faith, arts, culture and events.² The brand emphasizes the special experience that the Cathedral offers to its people, while showcasing the city's warmth, hospitality, culture, heritage and welcoming nature. In doing so, the Cathedral encourages and extends an open welcome to visitors and congregations, with importance being placed on "inclusivity of all" in its offerings and experiences.

Liverpool Cathedral's egalitarian ethos

Under the slogan "An encounter for every age", Liverpool Cathedral offers one of the widest "music outreach portfolios" of any cathedral in the UK (Figure 1), marked by religious inclusivity and musical omnivorousness. The music outreach programme facilitates the inclusion of a significantly broad spectrum of individuals, encompassing various age groups, diverse musical proficiencies and socioeconomic circumstances among participants, who may not typically partake in classical choral music and/or the church's services, choirs or musical events.

This musical egalitarianism illustrates the Cathedral's desire to ensure equitable access and opportunities for individuals to engage with music, irrespective of their background, socioeconomic status or abilities. It fosters an environment of musical inclusiveness facilitated through increased participation and engagement among marginalized segments of society.

² A marketing firm has been engaged to develop and launch the new brand of Liverpool Cathedral in 2024; see <https://pokemarketing.co.uk/work/liverpool-cathedral/>, accessed September 20, 2024.

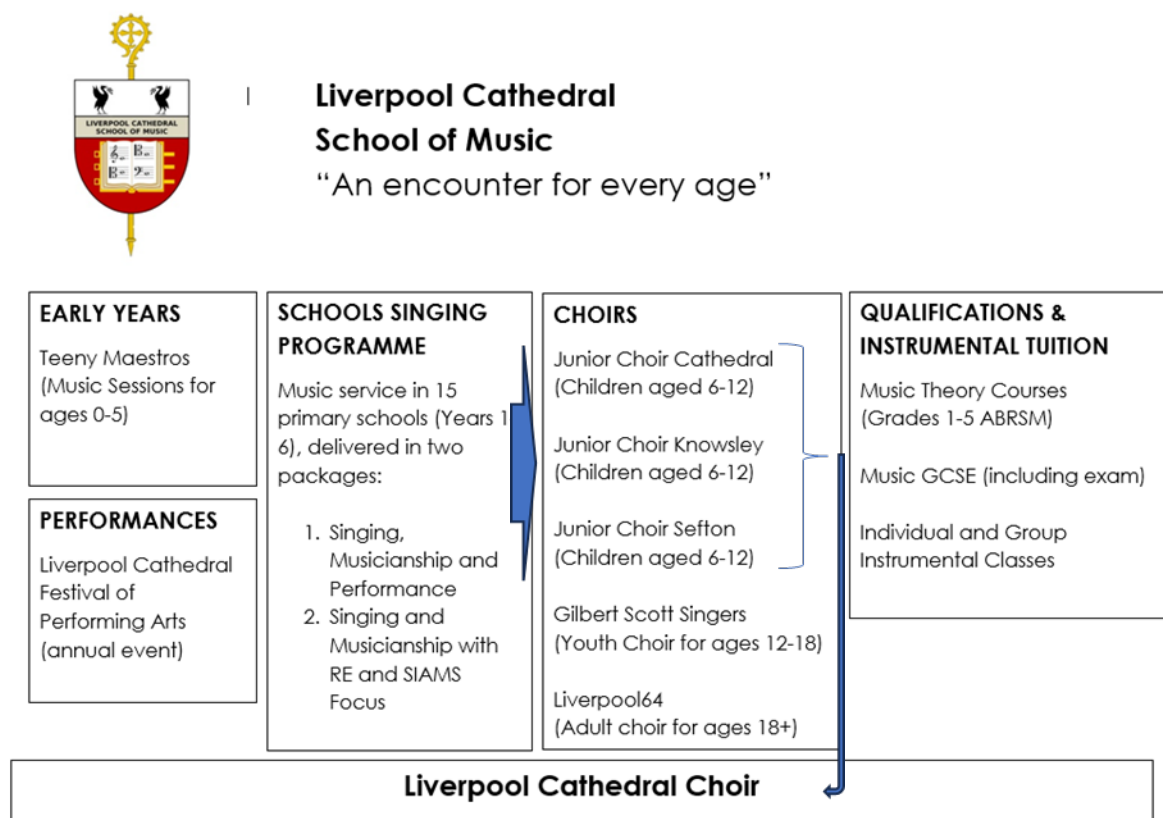


Figure 1: Liverpool Cathedral's School of Music outreach programme structure 2024.

Local context

The research is duly contextualized within the socioeconomic circumstances of the Liverpool City region (Figure 2), which faces significant levels of deprivation, with several of its local authority districts ranking among the most deprived areas in the UK (Liverpool City Council, 2020).³ Within the Liverpool City Region (LCR), Knowsley ranks 2nd and Liverpool ranks 3rd on the IMD2019 index, indicating high levels of deprivation compared to other districts.

Liverpool itself is the third most deprived local authority area in the country, with high levels of income, employment, health and housing deprivation. For example, 33.6% of children in Liverpool live in poverty, significantly impacting their life chances. Regions like Sefton and Wirral show more mixed levels of deprivation, with some areas faring better, though pockets of deprivation remain. Compared to other parts of the country, the Liverpool City Region, as a whole, struggles with higher-than-average levels of economic hardship and social inequality.

³ The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019 measures relative deprivation across small areas called Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs); there are 32,844 of these areas across England, including 298 in Liverpool. An overall IMD score is based on seven different domains of deprivation: income, employment, education, health, crime, barriers to housing and services, and living environment (Liverpool City Council, 2020).

This context underscores the societal impact of Liverpool Cathedral's music outreach activities. By offering educational opportunities, artistic engagement and community building through music, the Cathedral's music programme provides critical support to children and families facing social and economic challenges. In such a deprived environment, the Cathedral's outreach plays an essential role in enriching lives and fostering resilience across the Liverpool City region.



Figure 2: View of Liverpool Cathedral and surrounding areas from Jamaica Street.
<https://thesecret.app/secrets/3291/jamaica-street-view-of-liverpool-catherdra/> (acc. 21 September 2024)

Literature Review

The research is situated in and contributes to three disciplinary fields as follows:

First, the research is situated within the Sociology of Religion, which examines how religious beliefs, practices and institutions intersect with societal structures, often reflecting broader socio-economic and cultural shifts. Relevant here is Mathew Guest's (2022) broader concept of neoliberal religion to help contextualizing the postmodern restructuring of Liverpool Cathedral where innovative branding and identity construction reflect broader market-driven dynamics across modern cathedrals, which sits alongside more tangible solutions to cathedrals navigating financial adversity through adaptive strategies (Platten ed., 2017). Within this context, the research contributes to the newer field of the science of cathedral studies (Francis ed., 2015), alongside a growing interest in the contributions made by cathedrals to their local economies (ECOTEC, 2004; ECORYS, 2014, 2021).

Second, the research contributes to academic music studies that ask questions about the role of music to people in everyday life (DeNora, 2000; Pitts, 2005) and music's

sociocultural meanings (Clayton *et al.*, 2012; Shepherd and Devine, 2015). This focus differs from earlier music studies on musical value that typically focused on musical aesthetics, taste, class and distinction in Western art music (Bourdieu, 2010; Levinson, 2015; Weber, 2015).

Third, the research contributes to applied music scholarship that aims to harness the benefits of music for improving people's lives, including the "power" of music in education (DfE, 2022; Hallam, 2015; Hallam and Himonides, 2022), and the value of music to people's health and wellbeing (MacDonald *et al.*, 2012). Relevant to the cathedral context is June Boyce-Tillman's work on role of music as a spiritual practice that nurtures holistic wellbeing, integrating emotional, cognitive and spiritual dimensions of human experience (2016), which highlights how musical experiences can facilitate transcendent and transformative states that contribute to a sense of inner peace and connectedness.

Research aims and questions

This research aims to understand whether, why and how participation in LC's music outreach programme has value to people in the Liverpool City region, and what evidence from the data highlights the positive benefits of music outreach for participants from diverse backgrounds.

Three sub-questions ask more specific questions, while informing the subsequent methods for data collection:

1. What do children, youth and adults perceive to be the social, cultural, educational and wellbeing value of music participation?
2. What immanent meanings do participants attribute (explicitly and implicitly) to specific music outreach activities?
3. What are the barriers to music participation, and why do some families participate in LC's music outreach, while others do not?

Methodology

This interdisciplinary research is a multifaceted exploration of the intricate connections between music, community and place that employed a range of qualitative and quantitative methods as follows.

First, the research was underpinned by the researcher's own experience-based ethnographic position as both a long-standing parent of a Junior Choir and chorister child, and weekly participant-observer of Liverpool Cathedral's rehearsals and classes during the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020-2022 (Krüger Bridge, 2022, 2023a, 2023b) and until the present (Krüger Bridge, in press).

Second, three online questionnaires were designed in the university-approved Online Survey software, containing qualitative data groups of answer choices describing qualities or characteristics relevant to a range of questions to engage deeper-level cognitive reflections (Allanson and Notar, 2019), followed by open-ended question

prompts along with further entirely text-based questions. Questionnaire participants were recruited using convenience sampling through postcards, flyers, emails and callouts by cathedral ministry. Collectively, the questionnaires returned a total of 176 responses, including numerous statistics and ca. 25,000 words text-based qualitative responses.

Third, journal writing was used as an elicitation technique with primary school children (Jones and East, 2010) via an anonymous weekly reflective Choir Journal, which was provided to one thousand pupils aged 8 -11 years from across sixteen primary schools in Merseyside and completed during Liverpool Cathedral's Schools Singing Programme April-July 2023 (Krüger Bridge, 2025).

Fourth, ca. thirty hours of open-ended qualitative interviews were completed with volunteering adult singers, parents of choir children and music ministry to explore perceptions and meanings in more depth, while allowing flexibility for interviewees to provide longer anecdotes and stories of specific experiences for rich case study material.

The data analysis was informed by an interpretative framework and grounded theory approach. The qualitative data were analyzed through an inductive approach, underpinned by a coding framework of emerging concepts and themes, while the quantitative and multiple-answer-choice data were analyzed using cross-variable analysis and interpretation, and subsequent corroboration and triangulation with relevant academic literatures to reveal overall patterns in people's perceptions and identify themes behind the data.

Results

The research explores the impact of Liverpool Cathedral's choral outreach programme, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected from participants. The results are grouped under four emergent themes, followed by barriers to music participation to identify potential challenges and areas for improvement.

Music Education and Social Mobility

The choral outreach programme at Liverpool Cathedral offers significant educational opportunities, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Several participants emphasized how the programme has enabled access to musical education for those who might otherwise be excluded. One respondent noted, *"It is an amazing way of children from poorer backgrounds to receive a musical education that they would not have had a chance to otherwise"* (Questionnaire response, 18/12/22). This sentiment highlights the role the programme plays in fostering inclusivity and providing high-quality music education to underprivileged communities.

Another critical point raised by participants is how the programme enriches family life and cultural wellbeing. As one family member shared, *"There are wonderful benefits from the choral outreach programme. Our family have had our lives and cultural wellbeing enriched. We have been given opportunities and influences we would never have been given if it wasn't for the outreach programme working with people from various backgrounds. Everyone is included not just the privileged"* (Questionnaire, 13/11/23). This quote

illustrates the sense of inclusiveness and the tangible benefits experienced by families who might not typically have access to cultural experiences like this.

The programme's wide-reaching influence is also reflected in its capacity to bring together participants from diverse age groups and backgrounds. *"The Liverpool Cathedral choral music outreach gives people of all ages and diverse backgrounds the opportunity to learn new skills and ENJOY music"* (Questionnaire response, 11/12/23). This shows that the programme is not limited to children but extends its benefits across generations, further strengthening its role as a powerful tool for community engagement.

By offering a "fair opportunity" for children to develop their musical skills, the programme levels the playing field for those who may not have access to musical education at home or school. A respondent pointed out, *"I feel the Cathedral choral music outreach programme gives children from all walks of life a fair opportunity to learn and succeed with their music abilities as some children are not given an opportunity at home or school. The children are given a fantastic opportunity to excel and enjoy church life too"* (Questionnaire, 13/11/23). This testimony reflects the programme's potential to improve not only musical skills but also children's self-confidence and sense of belonging within a supportive environment.

Social Capital and Belonging

Social capital, a key aspect of the choral outreach programme, fosters a sense of community and belonging. One participant shared how their child, who suffers from anxiety, transformed in the choir setting: *"It gives my daughter a sense of belonging and being part of a new community... when in the choir she is like a different child"* (Questionnaire response, 20/12/23). This reveals how participating in a choir can enhance children's emotional wellbeing and provide them with a safe space where they feel valued.

Participation in the choir also fosters personal growth and strengthens social ties, as highlighted by another respondent: *"I feel more grounded and appreciate company of others"* (Questionnaire response, 20/12/23). This suggests that both children and adults benefit from the social interactions and communal aspects of the programme, resulting in deeper connections within the community.

Several respondents underscored the importance of the choir in preserving cultural heritage and family traditions. One respondent stated, *"Although I live in Knowsley... I feel that this outreach programme is keeping family history alive... Liverpool Cathedral is a world-famous building and a unique example of gothic architecture. Being situated where it is, within walking distance of the docks, it's an integral part of the history of Merseyside"* (Questionnaire response, 12/12/23). This highlights how the programme extends beyond the choir to include a broader connection to the cultural and historical significance of Liverpool and its surroundings.

Furthermore, participation in the choir has opened new experiences for families who were not previously engaged in religious or Cathedral life. One parent reflected, *"Since my daughter has been singing in the choir, I feel a sense of belonging within the cathedral community. I was never really religious, but this had opened the door to new things for us"*

as a family" (Questionnaire response, 20/12/23). This suggests that the programme fosters inclusivity, attracting families from various backgrounds and beliefs.

Beauty and Emotion

Participants frequently remarked on the emotional impact of the choir's performances and the beauty of the cathedral setting. One respondent described how attending services since childhood has been a cherished tradition, remarking on the *"quality of the choir and setting,"* calling it *"superb"* (Questionnaire response, 18/12/22). This combination of tradition and emotional resonance shows how the programme cultivates deep connections to the cathedral and its music.

Several participants emphasized the emotional power of the music, describing how it evokes feelings of awe and wonder. One noted that performances *"always [give] me goosebumps"* (Questionnaire response, 18/12/22), while another highlighted the transformative effect of the music: *"Awe and wonder again! Time and space for beauty and reflection"* (Questionnaire response, 18/12/22). This demonstrates how the choir's performances offer not just an auditory experience but a moment of deep emotional and spiritual reflection for the audience.

Additionally, performing in such a prestigious setting is a significant source of pride and achievement for choir members. As one respondent put it, *"It is always a privilege and an honour for a non-professional and relatively untrained singer to practise and perform in such a beautiful setting with the help and guidance of such gifted and talented tutors and musical directors"* (Questionnaire response, 20/11/23). This shows the programme's capacity to uplift individuals, offering them unique experiences that foster personal growth.

Health and Spiritual Wellbeing

Music is often associated with health and wellbeing, and the data reflects this. One respondent shared, *"I love the Cathedral. It always makes me feel at peace"* (Questionnaire response, 18/12/22), while another remarked on the *"magic"* of music and its ability to *"pacify people, make them happy, connected"* (Questionnaire response, 18/12/22). This highlights the programme's role in creating a space for emotional healing and connection where participants can experience peace and joy.

The programme also contributes to mental wellbeing by providing an outlet for stress relief and social interaction. One participant observed, *"It provides an opportunity for relief from the day's stresses and meeting with friends and acquaintances"* (Questionnaire response, 11/12/23). This suggests that the choir is not only a musical experience but also a community where individuals can support each other emotionally.

The choral programme also builds confidence, particularly in children. A participant reflected, *"It's good for a child's confidence to perform in public. It leads into being able to do public speaking or giving presentations which can be a part of working life"* (Questionnaire response, 12/12/23). This shows how the programme extends its benefits beyond music, preparing participants for broader life challenges.

Barriers to Music Participation

Despite the programme's wide-ranging benefits, some participants identified barriers to participation. One respondent voiced concerns about inclusivity and diversity, stating, *"I am not sure how far the choir supports diversity and a broad appreciation of musical history in different cultures, as the history of choral music is closely aligned with the church and associated colonialism"* (Questionnaire response, 13/12/23). This highlights potential limitations in the curriculum and suggests the need for a broader inclusion of different musical traditions, such as jazz or world music. The same participant also noted practical barriers such as deprivation, single-parent households, non-car ownership and different religious beliefs or sexual orientations, which could limit access to the programme. Addressing these barriers may help broaden the programme's reach and ensure that it is accessible to all sections of the community.

Conclusions

The exploration of the societal contributions of choral music outreach, particularly within the context of cathedrals' postmodern restructuring initiatives, stands as a novel subject area within the humanities and social sciences. This interdisciplinary research seeks to fill this critical gap in knowledge by delving into the tangible outcomes of Liverpool Cathedral's egalitarian music outreach programme with due sociocultural contextualization. The research uncovers not only the transformative potential of cathedral music outreach, but also the nuanced ways in which inclusive and accessible music initiatives may contribute to broader societal goals, alongside their enduring ecclesiastical purpose and increasingly vital economic objectives.

As the discourse evolves, it has the potential to inform cathedral music policies, inspire music educational reforms, and foster a deeper understanding of the intersectionality between choral music, social dynamics and cultural enrichment. It reflects a growing recognition of the profound impact of inclusive, egalitarian music initiatives in cathedrals, positioning them as catalysts for positive change in wider society.

Even so, a key challenge lies in balancing cathedrals' traditional practices with the need for greater inclusivity and accessibility under the overarching notion of "excellence for everyone". This tension, oftentimes referred to as "culture wars" (Ashley, Miller, and Pinder, 2022: 24), highlights a broader debate between elitist and egalitarian approaches to classical music practices.

The elitist perspective suggests that making such traditions accessible is often synonymous with oversimplifying, as it assumes that the public cannot grasp the complexities involved. The Anglican Church's broader trend toward lowering barriers to inclusion, referred to by Allan Breck as "dumbing things down" and a "desire to lower standards... to be cool" (2024), raises questions about whether accessibility must come at the cost of excellence. This view implies that maintaining the Cathedral's artistic and liturgical standards requires resisting efforts to simplify or modernize for broader appeal, while reinforcing exclusionary practices and limiting wider participation in these traditions.

Yet critics of such a perspective argue that the insistence on preserving high standards may perpetuate a form of cultural elitism, alienating individuals who might otherwise engage with cathedrals' choral music and worship. Egalitarian approaches instead seek to democratize these traditions, ensuring that the spiritual and artistic richness of choral music is available to all, regardless of background. The challenge, then, is not simply a choice between preserving tradition and embracing inclusivity, but rather navigating how both can coexist without diminishing the value of either.

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