

CHOIR SCHOOLS' ASSOCIATION CENTENARY CONFERENCE 8/9 MAY 2018

Keynote speech by Chairman, Paul Smith

We have much to celebrate and it is wonderful, looking back over our history, to note how much our organisation has grown, what it has achieved and the impact it has had, which extends far beyond the reaches of our membership. CSA has every reason to feel proud of the influence it exerts on young people, helping to forge a transformational experience in so many. It's an experience that few will ever forget and for which many will be forever grateful.

I said at the end of my address last year that CSA was established in response to a perceived threat to the existence of choir schools. It was Reverend W.E Morgan of Westminster Abbey Choir School, who together with Mr C.R.Jelf of King's College School and Reverend R.H. Couchman of St Paul's Cathedral School who, in 1918, decided that they had better be proactive, rather than await the unintended consequences of a new Education Act which they feared would impinge, even destroy, our choral tradition. I wish that I could add that today proper fore-thought, planning and insight would never allow a repeat of such concerns amongst our membership, and that the values and principles upon which our schools are based are much better understood and appreciated by legislators and politicians. I wish I could say that, but I suspect that the risks to our CSA schools today, are as great, if not greater, than they were in 1918.

Back in 1918, there were understandable and justifiable concerns from both politicians and educationalists about the effectiveness of educational reform in our nation – progress was simply not being made quickly enough to accommodate the needs of the country. One significant factor impeding this progress was the prevalence of child labour, and in response to this, the MP Herbert Fisher, under Lloyd George's coalition government, introduced an Education Act that raised the school leaving age to 14. Fisher's Act, as it became known, included many other improvements, and also incorporated amendments to The Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act, 1904. Of particular note to our Founding Heads would have been the inclusion within the amendments of the following specific restrictions, and I quote: *'the employment of boys under the age of fourteen years and of girls under the age of sixteen years for the purpose of singing, playing or performing, or being exhibited for profit'*. Of course, Choristers were paid for their choral duties, but fortunately these specific restrictions, whilst necessary to help improve the quality of state education, did not apply to choristers and therefore did not represent the threat that our founding Heads feared. However, as a result of their unnecessary concerns, the meeting of minds and the sharing of ideas and experiences had been established, and CSA was born!

Since 1918, there have been numerous other concerns that have occupied the thoughts and actions of CSA. Some concerns have represented more significant threats than others, but I do not intend to give you a history lesson today: there are several people here, much better qualified than me to do that. I will, however, point you in the direction of Richard White's article, *Some Key Events in CSA's History* which is located on our website, and is well worth a read. As is Alan Mould's book, *The English Chorister, a History*, and we are delighted that Alan is able to be with us today. How much reference is made to CSA in Howard Tomlinson's very recent publication, *Hereford Cathedral School, A History Over 800 Years* I cannot say, but as he is my immediate predecessor at Hereford, and a former Chair of CSA, and is sitting in the audience today I feel obliged to give his book a plug.

I also said last year:

If there are to be choir schools in another 100 years then we will need a CSA that continues to represent the interests and concerns of individual members, whilst also providing a unified front and a public voice on broader issues.

There has been little over the last year that makes me feel these words were overly pessimistic. For those of us in the independent sector, there can be little doubt that we have few friends at the moment. Politicians, of all shades, seem hell bent on issuing ill-informed edicts, based upon lazy stereotypes, which purportedly seek to ensure the independent sector does its bit to justify charitable status. In my more controversial moments, I cannot help feeling that 'charitable status' is a red herring, a stick with which to beat the sector, whilst the real motive is to bully independent schools to help make amends for the ill effects of successive government imposed initiatives on the state sector. These initiatives have continually impaired the overall quality of state education, and undermined the efforts of hard working teaching professionals.

The independent sector is an embarrassment to governments, because their schools have the audacity to invest and nurture in a broad holistic education, not a narrow results driven curriculum, and in doing so independent schools highlight the ill effects of a continuous stream of reforms imposed upon the state sector. We know that most state school headteachers and their staff value music and the creative arts as much as we do. They recognise the benefits of providing children with a broad range of opportunities, and fully appreciate the effects that such opportunities can have on children's self-esteem. They know that music making and singing have a multitude of positive effects on pupils and their learning. And yet, once again, we see the rug being pulled from beneath their feet so that the chances of state educated pupils being introduced to an enriching, stimulating and fulfilling arts curriculum is being diminished as I speak. Instrumental music and choral singing should not be the preserve of the independent sector, any more than art or drama or sport should be.

When I was at school, and I went to what some might call a 'bog standard' comprehensive, school plays and orchestras were widespread, and pupils learning to play instruments was common. We know that this picture has significantly changed already, and one has to ask whether there will be any such opportunities in state schools in the future. If there is not I guarantee who will be called upon to make amends. Current educational reforms (and I am talking about the Ebacc) and financial cuts in County Youth music provision are likely to have the same ill-effects on music, and cause similar levels of polarity across the education sectors, as the selling off of school playing fields has had on competitive sport. The more state provision is cut, the greater the divide, and the louder the shouts from those doing the cutting, that independent schools must do more to level the playing field. Of course independent schools have a duty to support social mobility, and that is why many of them were established in the first place, but that duty should not be viewed as some form of compensatory response to the actions of government.

We are all engaged in outreach activities and see first-hand how much children love having the opportunity to engage in music. In Hereford for example, we organise a Christmas Carol Service for hundreds of junior school pupils from across the county. Our Director of Music goes out to numerous schools and supports the staff in preparing the children to sing in this service. And do you know what the pupils all want to sing the most, the highlight of the carol service? It's singing the Hallelujah Chorus. It is fantastic to see the concentration and focus on the faces of some 400 primary school pupils belting out Handel's masterpiece. They love it and I am proud to be part of this organisation that up and down the country is working hard to bring the joy of singing choral music to young people.

CSA has a job to do: we have to support those struggling to keep music alive in the hearts and minds of young people. We are expertly placed to do so, with hundreds of years of choral tradition behind us. If we do not rise to this challenge then we will all suffer as a result. I think this is going to be a significant challenge for CSA in the coming years. Government funding comes and goes, as we saw with Sing Up! It is up to us, through this organisation, to support one another in keeping the flame alight. How apposite

then, that later today we will hear about the innovative and progressive work that Tom Daggett is undertaking with children from London Primary Schools.

Another significant threat that many of us are going to have to face in the not too distant future is how to deal with chorister funding. Perhaps this is not such a problem for our state school members, but as we know, the common model today is for choral foundations to support the education of choristers in fee paying choir schools. CSA is proud to be able to help administer, and actively support, the funding of those choristers in financial need. However, with school fees rising year on year, and congregational numbers falling year on year, with the ever increasing costs that Cathedrals, chapels and churches face, I cannot see how they are going to be able to continue to financially support choristers. The funding model at my foundation, for example, is currently under review, with the previous model no longer being sustainable. The same will be true in other foundations, if not now, certainly well before our bicentenary. I know this has been a major problem in the past, as the chapter on *Threats and Support* in Alan Mould's book clearly describes, but I do fear that we are about to enter an unwelcome renaissance of this particular concern.

There will be other threats too and we must continue to be vigilant about ensuring that the safeguarding of our choristers operates at the highest level and consistently across both school, cathedral, church and chapel. I have no definitive answers, but I make the point because whilst today is about celebration, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that the challenges facing us today and in the near future are going to be every much as significant as those prevalent in 1918.

But this conference is about celebration, and there is much to celebrate. We have the privilege of leading schools that educate the choristers of world renowned choirs. Our schools are often located in some of the most historic and beautiful cities in the country. We support a choral tradition that extends back some fourteen hundred years, and choristers, to quote from Alan Mould's book, '*are treasured as a unique part of our religious and cultural heritage, unmatched anywhere in the world.*' The historic gravitas that cathedral, church and chapel foundations impose upon our schools makes them special places to teach and learn. A sense of history, purpose, compassion and belief all help to shape and add to the ethos of our schools. The aesthetic of the surroundings, and the importance and significance of the cathedral or church to the wider community also imprints upon the school's character. We all know that cathedrals, churches and chapels can provide space and time as useful tonics to modernity, and are valuable allies to developing spirituality and mindfulness.

I am sure that like me, you too feel privileged and honoured to be associated with a CSA school, and it is indeed a privilege to be here today as we celebrate 100 years of our foundation. I have thoroughly enjoyed being your chair for the last two years and I wish Neil Chippington all the best, as he takes over from me in September: we can all be reassured that CSA will be in safe hands.

So, Happy Birthday CSA, and I trust that you will all enjoy this Centenary celebration of all that our schools represent and of all that they do in upholding the great tradition, and national treasure, of choral music. Thank you.