

Rodolfus Choral Academy - Hackney

End of Year 2 Evaluation

June 2023

The Project

The Rodolfus Choral Academy was set up in September 2021 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 – The Hackney Children’s Choir - 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 Mary’s Stoke Newington and Holy Trinity Dalston and the main activity is **weekly choral sessions** led by George Cook, a highly skilled professional singer and choral leader.

The **repertoire** Mr Cook 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.

In addition to the core musical skills, teachers have noticed children are **better behaved**, having learnt how to listen and pay attention in singing lessons; and children with delayed speech and language have greatly benefitted from the musical rhythms which naturally breakdown difficult words into their individual syllables.

Performance is a central element in the project. The two schools came together in a joint performance of *Noah and His Floating Zoo* (by Flanders and Horowitz) last July 2022. The performance took place in a local church and featured professional instrumentalists providing the accompaniment and an octet of Rodolfus Choir singers. Over the last year they have been performing in assembly and prepared Christmas carols for a seasonal performance in December 2022. They are currently preparing for a performance of *Ahoy! Sing for the Mary Rose* By Alexander L’Estrange which will take place in July 2023. [see appendix A & B]

Methodology

Building on our 2022 Evaluation which involved a quantitative questionnaire to teachers and face-to-face interviews with children at St Mary's Stoke Newington, for this evaluation we conducted face-to-face interviews with mini-groups of children at Holy Trinity, Dalston primary school.

The focus groups were conducted on 14th June 2023 with Year 3, Year 4 and Year 5 children.

Key Findings

The children we speak to are chatty, happy, thoughtful, confident and polite. They cheerily talk about their singing lessons and break into song to demonstrate tunes they are particularly enjoying or that they remember fondly. Their comments, while predominantly positive, also raise key areas for improvement as we enter the third year of the project.

1. The young people we speak to are all enjoying the lessons:

"He's [Mr. Cook] a really good teacher, the lessons go very well" (year 5)

"At first I didn't like it, then I liked it. At first, we were just singing classical, but we got into more songs and I started to like it." (year 4)

"I'm the opposite of them. I enjoy the classical music. When not at school I sing at St Paul's Cathedral and places like that. I like classical and church music" (year 4 boy, singing with Hackney children's choir)

2. They readily discuss the different songs they are singing or have learnt in the past, and share anecdotes about singing them at home or in the car with family members.

I liked the Noah's Ark song, 'Ninevah city' [all break into song singing a verse - 'Ninevah city was a city of Sin.....well bless my soul']. I liked it because it was telling a story [and they evidently enjoy the upbeat jazz-style] (year 5)

"We're singing Ahoy which has lots of sea shanties. One called Greensleeves is my favourite" (year 5)

"I liked 'Badgers and Hedgehogs' we learnt before. Jonah and Whale too (Jonah man Jazz)" (year 4)

"Consider Yourself, we did that in year 3 [all join in singing it]" (year 4)

"Noah and His Ark we did last summer was good" (year 4)

"We like the songs, Ahoy songs. We like learning new songs" (year 3)

"There's a song I miss, called Hedgehogs, it was the first song we learnt" (year 3)

3. They fluently share several musical terms and their meaning

"Pitch, tempo, dynamics, structure, pulse, texture, rhythm. The pulse is the heartbeat of the song." (all the year 3 children)

"piano means softly and mf means louder" (year 4)

4. They like to be challenged:

"[when it's quite complicated] It makes it more interesting. Not too complicated because then it's harder to remember" (year 5)

"We're doing a song which is a mix of What shall we do with the drunken sailor....and Past Time with Good Company. I like it because he gets us to do two different parts [simultaneously]" (year 5)

"He tells us the origin of words and what they mean. It's hard to understand otherwise or to say it. I like to know what you're singing. If you're singing in Latin I like to know what the words mean." (year 5)

"Sometimes he [Mr Cook] shows us the piece of music and it looks a bit complicated, but I always believe in myself. At first, you're like, what is this, but then when you try it it's ok and you want to do this again and again and again." (year 3)

5. They enjoy song with actions, especially in the younger years

"I like songs where you can do actions. The songs are nice and fun[in music lessons]" (year 4)

"Actions are like games or patterns. Fun to do when playing around in the playground." (year 4)

6. They enjoy the way singing makes them feel

"It makes me feel calm" (year 4)

"It can be relaxing. Some of the songs make you sleep because they are so relaxing and I'm tired" (year 4)

7. All the children are very excited about performing to their family and friends

[how do you feel about the concert?] *"So happy....I'm in heaven"* (year 4)

"I'm anxious just feeling that what if someone messes up the song?" (year 4)

[what do you think the audience thinks?] *"they get a surprise, like, oh this is my child! They're going to wave. It's going to be really cool all the parents waving."* (year 4)

"It shows other people that are listening that we can sing....it helps us build confidence" (year 5)

Despite the many positives, the children make some important points about how the lessons could be improved

8. Discipline is an issue in one year group – a group of year 3 girls complain that the boys are always talking and disrupting the singing lesson for the rest of the class.

9. Repertoire is central to the enjoyment of the year 5 children who enjoy more upbeat music and lyrics which tell a story

"I don't like one we're learning now – 'the Water is Wide'. It's very slow, about someone's love building a boat and both them row it, like a boat date." (year 4)

Conclusions

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

The children are clearly become confident and knowledgeable about song repertoire, showing clear preferences for styles and genres. On one visit, I observed the Year 6 class at St Mary's performing songs from the musical *The Wizard of Oz* with such confidence and accomplishment that would not have seemed possible 18 months ago. Several children took solos which they sang tunefully and musically, without embarrassment or fear of performing; just fully enjoying themselves.

We would like to have achieved a greater number of children attending the Hackney Children's Choir than has been possible and we are addressing the barriers to attendance with the team at Hackney Children's Choir. We have regularly talked to the children about the opportunity, and given them flyers and letters to take home to their parents.

Talking to the children, who largely seem enthusiastic about joining the choir, there are clear barriers that are out of their control, particularly a lack of time and an inability to physically get to the choir practice each week.

- Fitting an extra-curricular activity into their already-busy schedules is a challenge, particularly when siblings' activities are taken into account as mum or carer is usually responsible for more than one child
- Even when the desire to is there, physically getting to an after-school choir practice is the biggest barrier of all. Many parents are working and rely on on-site after-school clubs or a childminder taking care of several children. Only in year 6 might some children be allowed to walk by themselves to an after-school club. This problem is widely recognised by community children's choirs and the solution is to provide a chaperone who collects children from school and walks them to choir practice. Parents are usually able to then collect their child at the end of the practice.

Organising a chaperone to walk the children to choir might address the issue of transport, taking away the burden from parents and carers.

Developing the Choral Academy in Year 3

As we approach the third year of the choral academy, one aspect of our project which has not gone to plan is children's attendance at a Rodolfus residential choral course.

We understand the main barrier to attending a residential course is the vast leap of faith necessary from both child and parents. A residential course away from London is a daunting prospect for any child and only works where a teacher who is well known to the child and family reassures and persuades over the course of several months. Ideally, the teacher attends the course as well so there is a guaranteed friendly face on the staff. This puts a great deal of pressure on the teacher to liaise with children and their families with no guarantee of success. If time simply doesn't allow for this level of engagement between teacher and child/family, then the child is unlikely to ever take the leap of faith and attend a residential course.

Because of this, we are keen to explore offering mini-courses in Hackney which might be only 1-day long, or even as short as a 2-hour workshop after school, that gives children the flavour of working more intensively.

Workshops/mini-courses

2-hour After-School Workshop

This would be a one-off workshop that takes place in school or at St Paul's Church, West Hackney so we can invite children from both schools and further afield.

The children would learn a new piece in whole-choir sessions and sectional sessions (age related groups), coming together towards the end of the session to perform to parents/carers as they collect them.

We would provide sandwiches and snacks and include fun and games within the session to keep the children focused and engaged.

Day-long Mini-Courses

These courses would follow the same structure of the 2-hour workshops but over the course of a day. They would take place in Hackney during the half term, ideally 3 times in the year.

The advantage of these short, local courses is to provide a friendly, accessible entry point into the Rodolfus choral training that gives the children a taster for the longer courses such as the Hackney Choral Course which takes place across 5 days in the summer holidays and the Rodolfus residential choral courses which take place over 6 days in venues outside London.

The workshops and mini-courses would be as well as the weekly choral singing lessons in our two schools but would be marketed more widely to children in the borough.



CONCERT - 12TH JULY 2022 St Mary's Church, Stoke Newington

Children from the primary schools of St Mary's, Stoke Newington and Holy Trinity, Dalston.

Today's concert is a culmination of a year's choral singing lessons which have been taking place weekly in both schools as part of the **Rodolfus Foundation's Choral Academy** project and which aims to bring excellent choral singing training to as wide a range of young people as possible.

1. **Bless the Lord – Andrew Carter (b. 1939)**, performed by the Year 3 children of Holy Trinity and St Mary's schools and the Hackney Children's Choir, directed by Tom Daggett.

Badgers and Hedgehogs

Butterflies and Moths

Grannies and Grandads

2. **My voice shalt thou hear – Joseph Corfe (1740-1820)**,

Performed by the Hackney Children's Choir, directed by Tom Daggett

3. **A Seal Lullaby – Eric Whitacre (b. 1970)**

Performed by members of the Rodolfus Choir, conducted by Elinor Cooper



4. **Captain Noah and His Floating Zoo - Michael Flanders (1922-75) and Joseph Horowitz (1926-2022)** Performed by the children of Holy Trinity and St Mary's Primary Schools, with singers from the Rodolfus Choir.

Written in 10 movements, the piece tells the story of Noah who was charged by God to build an ark and ordered to preserve mankind and all the creatures of Earth.

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 – Both schools | 6 – Year 4 St Mary's |
| 2 – Year 4 St Mary's | 7 – Year 3 Holy Trinity |
| 3 – Year 5 Holy Trinity | 8 – Year 5 St Mary's |
| 4 – Year 5 St Mary's | 9 – Year 4 Holy Trinity |
| 5 – Year 4 Holy Trinity | 10 – Both schools |

With thanks to our Musicians

George Cook (Choral Leader of the Choral Academies); Tom Daggett (conductor, Hackney Children's Choir); Elinor Cooper (conductor, Rodolfus Choir); Ginny Strawson (pianist); drummer TBC; bassist TBC.

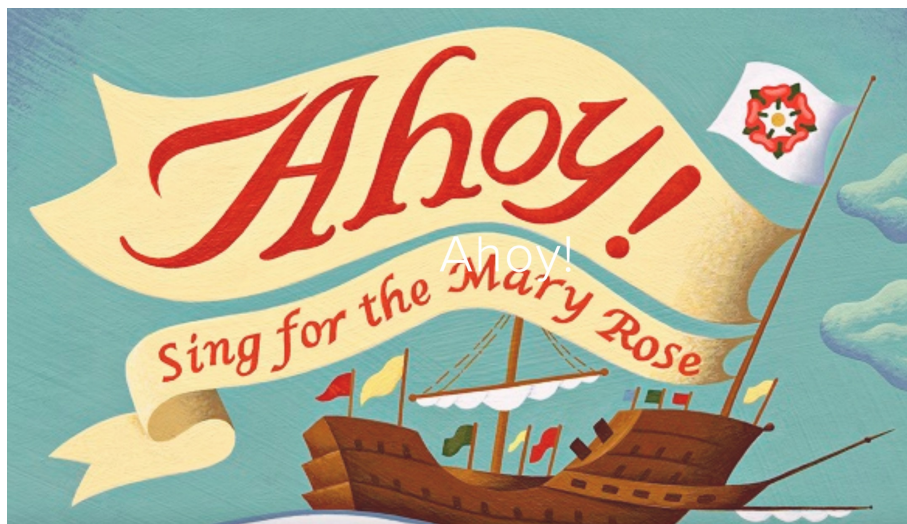
Thanks must go to Revd Dilly Baker and St Mary's Church, Stoke Newington for hosting us.

And with thanks to our private donors and our charitable trusts who made this project possible:



**THE
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FOUNDATION**
inspiring tomorrow's singers

**The Rodolfus Choral Academies of
St Mary's Stoke Newington and Holy Trinity,
Dalston present a performance of ...**



By Alexander L'Estrange

Monday 10th July , 4.15pm

St Mary's Church, Stoke Newington Church Street, N16 9ES

Join us for a joint, end-of-year performance given by the children of St Mary's Stoke Newington, Holy Trinity Dalston primary schools and Hackney Children's Choir, conducted by George Cook, and accompanied by a professional band of musicians.

Children will be rehearsing in the afternoon at St Mary's and can be collected after the concert which will end at 5pm.

We are supported by the Rodolfus Foundation, private donors and a these generous Charitable Trusts



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