

St Mary's Music School choristers – a unique life

St Mary's Music School Choristers: a unique education in life and music

✖ St Mary's Music school has a proud record and deep roots in the city it calls home. With a list of alumni that includes pianist Steven Osborne, conductor Garry Walker, composers Helen Grime and David Horne, soprano Susan Hamilton and well-known comedian, television presenter and classical singer Alexander Armstrong, the Edinburgh based school has made a rich mark on the music world in Scotland and beyond.


The school is Scotland's only independent specialist music school, opened in 1880 to provide the choristers at the newly built St Mary's Cathedral with an academic education. It was originally located beside the Cathedral in Palmerston Place and began taking in instrumentalists in 1972. By 1995 it had outgrown its existing buildings and moved to its current home at Coates Hall in Grosvenor Crescent.

The school is a non-denominational, co-educational centre of music and academic excellence for the whole country. It attracts day and boarding pupils from across Scotland and beyond who are aiming to hone their musical gifts. Entry to the school is by audition and assessment, based on musical ability and potential, and regardless of personal financial circumstances.

The school has a wide range young instrumentalists, composers and singers, including a number of pupils who perform on traditional instruments such as bagpipes, accordion and clarsach. The school currently educates 80 pupils, with the choristers (all day pupils from P5-S2) making up the majority of the school's younger pupils.

The chorister programme is unique in Scotland and is highly regarded for its focus on developing high levels of musicianship and performance from an early age. In accordance with the ethos of the music school and as Scotland's only member of the Choir Schools' Association, the programme fosters important life qualities of dedication, discipline, and teamwork and provides strong foundations not just in music but in the lives of the choristers more generally.

Former St Mary's Music School pupil Alexander Armstrong described the experience of choristership as the "single greatest leg-up a child can be given in life", due to the skills nurtured as part of the chorister programme. Ken Taylor, Headteacher at St Mary's Music School, agrees, highlighting the focus on developing high levels of musicianship and performance at an early age.

 Dr Taylor says: "While the education and experience of being a chorister is hard work, it is also full of opportunities. Not only do musically gifted children benefit from a total submersion in music, but also from the daily opportunities arising from this unique form of education."

"St Mary's Music School is extremely proud of our rich heritage and unrivalled track record in educating some of the most talented young musicians in the country."

The choristers combine their school day with daily rehearsals and services, learning music from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century and learning to play two instruments in addition to their singing. They participate in concerts and performances in the Cathedral and across the city, country and abroad, singing in some of the world's greatest concert venues. There are frequent television and radio broadcasts as well as the production of acclaimed CD recordings, the most recent in conjunction with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and featuring music by Stravinsky.

Closer to home, the small group of young people form close and lasting friendships throughout their years of study and performance. Whether rehearsing Christmas carols or playing football or preparing for a concert with a professional orchestra, the close-knit choristers experience real educational benefits through this shared experience.

Applications to join the chorister programme are open to girls and boys aged 7 – 9 who love to sing, and successful choristers will undertake a year's probationary training three times a week before entering the school, usually at the primary 5 stage. All choristers are provided with a bursary either through the Cathedral or the Scottish Government for their tuition at the Music School.

Information on concerts given by St Mary's Music School can be found <http://www.st-marys-music-school.co.uk/>.

The school also has an informative Facebook page which can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/stmarysmusicschool/> and a busy Twitter account at https://twitter.com/stmarys_music.

The choristers sing with the Choir of St Mary's Cathedral and details of Services and Choral Evensong can be found on the Cathedral's [website](#).

More information on the chorister programme and application process can be accessed from Duncan Ferguson, Organist and Master of the Music, who is always happy to meet with prospective parents and pupils in advance of an audition to offer advice.

