

Beyond Access: Disabled Children's Experiences of Belonging in UK Cathedral Choirs

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May 2024 to June 2025

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Funded by: Laidlaw Scholars Leadership & Research Programme



Abstract

This study investigates how disabled children experience participation in UK cathedral choirs using semi-structured interviews with two choristers with neurodivergent conditions alongside their parents, as well as questionnaires of five Directors of Music. It uses the social relational model of disability, alongside other approaches from critical disability studies. Inductive thematic analysis revealed difficulties choristers faced when negotiating access in traditional spaces; the investments of time, energy, and trade-offs; and their complex experiences of belonging and being different. Together, these emphasise the importance of structural support and willingness to learn, centring disabled children's voices as active participants and knowledge-holders in creating change. This study demonstrates that disabled choristers already belong in cathedral spaces, asking us to reimagine the traditions we inherit to not just include but lead change for and with disabled choral singers within and beyond the cathedral music sector.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

I feel huge gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Bennett Zon and Dr Sam Horlor, without whose never-ending patience, constant support, and kindness this project would have never been (at long last) completed. I also thank the whole music department at Durham University, and many other academics, who have generously offered their time and support throughout this process. Finally, my friends who have put up with this research being the centre to my brain for over a year, listening, reading, and caring through ever setback and struggle, I could not have done this without you.

This research is dedicated to every disabled person finding their place in music. We will build the future together.

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Introduction

Cathedral choirs, with child choristers at their heart, have been described as “central to Christian worship” in Britain (Cathedral Music Trust 09/22, 4). They represent a unique and enduring intersection of religion, culture, and the arts. These choristers engage in professional musical performance and participate in centuries-old traditions, contributing to daily liturgical life (Mould 2007, xv). Choristership offers rich opportunities for musical, spiritual and personal development (Dong and Kokotsaki 2021; Dong and Ward 2023). However, the invitation to participate in these elite and tradition-bound spaces may not always be straightforward, particularly for disabled children, revealing tensions around access, inclusion, and belonging.

Research acknowledges the wide-ranging developmental benefits of choral singing, including improved musicianship, self-discipline, confidence, cultural experiences, and teamwork (Barrett and Zhukov 2023), for all young people including those with disabilities (Dingle et al. 2013). On a broader scale, studies on performing arts, education, and disability have explored benefits (Onyx et al. 2018), barriers (Levy and Jindal-Snape 2017; Collins et al. 2022) and effective accommodation strategies to promote inclusivity (Hammel 2025; Abramo 2015).

However, much of this research has focussed on community music, mainstream or SEND educational contexts, or music therapy (Cheng, Ockelford, and Welch 2009; Jellison and Draper 2015; Pickard 2018), and reviews which have considered elite, performance-driven environments have tended to focus on instrumental music (Mawby et al. 2020). Although attention has been given to questions of gender and racial diversity and inclusion, research into choirs has largely avoided questions of disability (Noble 2020; Cathedral Music Trust 09/22). Cathedral choristership in particular has largely been examined through a lens that implicitly frames these spaces as designed for the ‘able’ child.

Choristership offers a unique opportunity for immersion in musical excellence, contributing to personal discipline through intense training (Barrett 2010), and creating opportunities for musical futures and careers which many choristers go on to (Dong and Kokotsaki 2021). These practices contribute to the distinctive aesthetic of cathedral choirs, prizing excellence, control, restraint, and professionalism (Day 2019). Within this framework, the choir functions as a moral space, where ‘good’ behaviour is linked with effort, respectability, and worthiness (Barrett 2010).

While these behavioural norms cultivate shared identity within the choir (Barrett 2010), they also create potential challenges for disabled choristers whose bodies, behaviours, or cognitive processing may ‘misfit’ rigid expectations (Garland-Thomson 2011). The cathedral environment is intense, perhaps particularly for disabled choristers who face historic yet often inaccessible spaces, normative expectations of discipline and stillness, and fast-paced rehearsals with little preparation time. Yet it simultaneously offers deep community, pride, and spiritual meaning (Barrett and Zhukov 2022; Barrett 2010).

This research is grounded in the social relational model of disability (Reindal 2008a). This model explores both the personal and social effects of an impairment which lead to disability (defined as the effects of social constraints which ‘disable’ individuals with impairments, on top of the personal restrictions they may already experience as an effect of their impairment, functioning as a form of oppression) (Reindal 2008a, 143–44). This model was created in response to criticisms of the social model of disability, to allow for discussion of both “additionalities” which may be needed for a setting to adjust to a person’s experience of disability, as well as “exposing the in/exclusive mechanisms” which operate within the setting (Reindal 2008a, 144).

It also creates the opportunity to explore how impairments (which Reindel refers to as “reduced functions”) “both enrich and restrict one’s experiences” without relying on an individualised and deficit-centred approach to disability (Reindal 2008a, 144). This research also draws on Garland-Thomson’s concept of ‘misfitting’, which focusses on the barriers and friction created when a relational mismatch between bodies and environments emerges (Garland-Thomson 2011). Along with other approaches from critical disability studies, these lenses highlight how impairment does not inherently entail exclusion but emerges in contexts which fail to accommodate difference (Reeve 2004).

As a disabled choral scholar, I have approached this work with both academic and lived investment (Seymour 2007), engaging reflexively with all aspects of the process in the hope of more accurately and sensitively represent the voices of disabled musicians, and advocating for inclusion and wider participation (Finlay 2002). I acknowledge this in light of concerns raised by disability studies scholars about research by non-disabled researchers potentially framing disabled people through a deficit lens or focusing on individual accommodations rather than cultural change, as already explored (Barnes 2003). A simplified version of this report has been created for the young participants in order to ensure they are able to access and understand the research they have generously taken part in, and is available on request.

This study is centred around the question: How do disabled choristers experience participation in UK cathedral choirs? Rather than focussing on individual barriers or adaptations, this research explores the cultural, relational, and structural conditions that shape disabled children’s participation through three questions:

1. How do disabled choristers and their families experience inclusion and exclusion within the cultural and physical environment of UK cathedral choirs?
2. In what ways do institutional expectations and behaviours shape disabled children’s access to and experience of choristership?
3. How do choristers, parents, and staff negotiate accommodations, and what does this reveal about the flexibility or rigidity of traditional choral spaces?

By centring the voices of disabled choristers and their families through thematic analysis, this research contributes to understanding inclusion in cathedral music and to wider debates about access, belonging, and institutional change in religious and musical life. It offers practical and conceptual insights into accessibility in elite music-making, in the hope that understanding these challenges and adaptations will foster

inclusivity and help to address the “long-term sustainability crisis” facing cathedral choirs (Cathedral Music Trust 09/22).

Methodology

This study combined semi-structured interviews with online questionnaires to capture multiple perspectives on inclusion and exclusion for disabled young people in UK cathedral choirs. Rather than seeking a single, objective ‘truth’, this research sought to foreground the voices of young disabled participants, exploring their lived experience, reflective of a non-positivist approach (Braun and Clarke 2013).

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through volunteer sampling. Initial contact was made with all UK Anglican cathedrals maintaining choristers who sing three or more services per week (n=43). Directors of Music (DoMs) were invited to participate regardless of whether they had previously worked with disabled choristers and were asked to forward recruitment materials to all chorister families. Only families with disabled children, or children with long-term conditions, were invited to participate.

The initial recruitment period during the choir summer holidays proved unsuccessful, prompting additional recruitment strategies. The Cathedral Organist Association assisted by sharing study information with their members, and follow-up emails were sent to encourage participation.

The study ultimately recruited four Directors of Music from English cathedrals (all of whom stated they had worked with disabled choristers), and two choristers with neurodivergent conditions and their parents: Bartholomew (an older chorister), and Noah (a younger probationer – junior chorister in training). Both chorister participants were male and selected their own pseudonyms for use throughout the study. All DoMs have been assigned numerical identifiers to ensure anonymity.

This low response rate creates multiple reflexive concerns and potential limitations. Many cathedrals did not acknowledge recruitment emails, suggesting they may not have forwarded information to families. However, this may also reflect broader institutional dynamics identified in research on elite and traditional settings, where organisations often seek to manage external narratives and protect participants from perceived research scrutiny (Bourdieu 1996). One cathedral explicitly cited previous negative experiences with EDI-related research as influencing their concern around participation, potentially suggesting sector-wide trust issues may have affected recruitment.

There is, therefore, uncertainty about whether non-participation reflects an absence of disabled choristers, or institutional concerns around engaging with disability-related research, though comments made by participants suggest other disabled choristers are currently singing in cathedrals.

Furthermore, participating cathedrals may represent institutions or individuals already committed to inclusion work, given the voluntary nature of participation. This self-selection bias potentially shapes the tone and substance of findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Durham University Music Department Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent after receiving detailed information about recording procedures (where applicable), anonymisation processes, data usage and storage, and right to withdraw without explanation up to two weeks post-participation.

Specific diagnoses and identifying details have been anonymised or ambiguated throughout the process to protect participant privacy while preserving the integrity of their experiences.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online with choristers and their parents, exploring experiences of inclusion, barriers, accommodations, and belonging within cathedral choirs. Paired interviews (parents and choristers together) were chosen for safeguarding reasons, and to support choristers in discussing emotional experiences of exclusion and barriers.

Online questionnaires (through Microsoft Forms) were completed by parents of chorister participants and Directors of Music.

Data Analysis

Reflexive inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify latent patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006) using NVivo 14 (2023). This approach allowed themes to emerge from participant voices rather than imposing predetermined frameworks.

The analysis process was as follows, following Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006):

1. Initial familiarisation with data through repeated reading/listening
2. Multiple cycles of systematic coding of all textual data
3. Identification of patterns and potential themes
4. Review and refinement of themes
5. Final theme definition and writing

Analysis

Through thematic analysis of interviews with disabled choristers and their families, alongside Director of Music (DoMs) questionnaires, three key themes emerged: Negotiating Access in Traditional Spaces; Time, Energy, and Trade-Offs; and Belonging and Being Different. Each will now be explored in detail using quotes from participants, linking these to theories and models from critical disability studies to situate them in a broader framework, and provide context and deeper understanding.

Negotiating Access in Traditional Spaces

Access to cathedral choirs for disabled choristers was clearly an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a singular achievement, shaped by both individual attitudes and physical/cultural structures. Access emerged as both the ability to physically be in the space (often through inaccessible buildings, but also through fatigue and other impairment effects), and as conditional on the cultural and behavioural norms that space is structured around.

Here ‘space’ is used to refer not just to a physical ‘place’, but also to the social and cultural practices which govern behaviour in that place, emphasising the ways in which a space structures the interactions which take place within it on both physical and cultural levels (Freund 2001).

Access was often reliant on parental initiative and advocacy. Parents described adapting strategies from school to choir settings, sharing what worked in response to noticing their child struggling. As Noah’s mother explained:

“I go through my life making reasonable adjustments for [Noah], which I probably don’t even realise I do, and so I’ve kind of been quite instrumental in, you know, getting things in place for him” – Noah’s mother

This kind of access work can be emotionally labour intensive and is often invisible, relying on anticipatory and relational labour (Laurin and Andersson 2024). It highlights how access was often negotiated reactively rather than through embedded processes, reliant on individuals to notice and respond. This criticism of ‘reasonable adjustment’ as a response to disability (focussing on individual needs as additional to, or deviant from, the norm) rather than cultural change toward universal design is a systemic issue but can be countered on a cultural level within institutions such as cathedral choirs (Gilbride 2023).

Three of the four directors asked about disabilities and long-term conditions during the chorister application and audition process, however one did not. As information sharing was frequently emphasised by parents as a positive factor in inclusion, an awareness and understanding from cathedrals at the earliest stages of auditions for a chorister may help to ensure the support they need is in place from the start, which is undoubtedly positive. However, if not asked, there may be further burden placed on parents to manage and disclose disability.

Additionally, tensions are often felt by those disclosing disability in elite environments, creating further strain as individuals seek to manage stigma, feeling they must 'prove' that they deserve to be there 'in spite of' their disability (Goffman 1990).

Disclosure and information sharing are part of the complex landscape of navigating access, fitting into a wider structure. When flexibility is not part of the standard landscape of a tradition, inclusion can feel fragile for some – conditional on their performance of normative participation (Bourdieu 1996).

Additionally, while DoMs were described as open and proactive (for example, at one cathedral, discussing changes and learning strategies at weekly meetings with their choir school), both chorister families still described feeling uncertain about information sharing processes within the cathedral and whether adaptations were consistently in place (Eliassen 2025).

One factor which can create difficulties around information sharing in the cathedral setting seemed to be frequent changes of staff. The prevalence of volunteers in choristers lives, such as many churches rely on, as well as yearly-changing choral and organ scholars (young people working for a year at a time in the cathedral choir, often as part of a gap year), created an unstable staffing team who may not always know about a child's disability, or about the accommodations they need to take part. Describing the challenges of staff continuity, Bartholomew's parents noted:

“There are many members of staff... some may not be aware of his condition and therefore wouldn't think to accommodate or to empathise” – Bartholomew's parents

Similarly, Noah's mother observed:

“I'm not sure how much information is shared between the staff at the cathedral because... it's not a secret... you can understand a bit more of “why is he doing that?”” – Noah's mother

This lack of continuity across staff posed a particular challenge when impairments were not visible, leaving choristers vulnerable to misinterpretation or discipline rather than understanding, and exposing a tension between privacy and the need for awareness. However, these challenges were not only due to lack of individual knowledge, but also perhaps of general awareness of disability and an acceptance of differing behaviour or needs, as addressed later.

The historic nature of cathedral buildings also creates significant accessibility challenges. DoMs frequently cited physical barriers when asked to consider access issues in their cathedrals, with steep stairs and long processions as common factors. When asked what accommodations they had made to support choristers, only one director had previously made changes to the physical environment (by providing alternative seating). One director noted:

“Wheelchair access in both Cathedrals would be difficult, but not insurmountable if the need arose.” – Cathedral 1

Another explained that while recent changes had levelled floors, choir stalls remained problematic:

“We haven't ever had a chorister who uses a wheelchair: we certainly would not exclude them, but it would be difficult for them to sit in the choir stalls, so we'd need to think about what adjustments to make, in order to ensure that they didn't feel singled out or different – Cathedral 4

In these cases it is clear that no deliberate exclusion was intended, and there is awareness around physical access issues. In the hundreds of years since most cathedrals were constructed, the landscape of society, and legal standards around accessibility, are very recent developments (Gleeson 2002). However, it is possible that, when considering adaptations to cathedrals to make them more accessible to the public, clergy and choirs may not be considered as much (for example, putting a ramp to the entrance, but choir stalls or alters remaining inaccessible). It is also possible that this is due to the large costs related to physical access changes, as one director suggested informally, for which grants may only be accessible if a current need can be proven.

Thus, hypothetical openness to disabled choristers did not, and does not, always translate into material preparedness for their presence, creating a situation where disabled children cannot see others like them as choristers (particularly those with visible disabilities, or who use mobility aids, and may not currently be able to physically access the space), and thus may feel the space is not open to them. Additionally, on a more positive note, cathedral spaces sometimes created informal support, particularly for sensory needs (Cockain 2023). Bartholomew described one such space:

“It's like a quiet area... So, if it's like too loud and you just go in there... It's like for everyone. But most people don't really use it so.” – Bartholomew.

Furthermore, both choristers found the structure and routine of choir to be actively enabling.

“I think the structure of it I think is helpful, from my observation.” – Noah's mother

“I think I might prefer choir just because like. We like do services like more often and it's more regular. So I have it in my mind a little bit more” – Bartholomew

This reflects Schillmeier's discussion of the way objects and spaces contribute to enabling (or disabling) disabled people's interaction with the world (Schillmeier 2008). When a disabled chorister encounters a space that is “care-full” within the

cathedral (accepting and deliberately accounting for multiple ways of being human) (Boys 2018), this enables their relationship with the wider space of the cathedral.

Furthermore, their use of this space may mediate the way it is used in future – as with Bartholomew and the quiet space, if cathedral staff are aware this is an enabling factor for him as a neurodivergent chorister, they may suggest it to other young people, allowing new disabled choristers to also use the enabling space. Thus, the space becomes, in Boys’ words, “crippled” – mediated in its function through its use by disabled people (Boys 2018).

Beyond physical access, cultural expectations around behaviour sometimes posed challenges. As one director explained, choristership may not suit every child, disabled or not:

“If a young person is unable to [conform to behavioural expectations], I would normally speak to the parents and suggest that another, perhaps less 'straitjacketed' musical environment might suit them better... I always present this as trying to find the right fit and absolutely not that they have failed at being a chorister.” – Cathedral 1

Such negotiations may be unavoidable within highly traditional institutions with long-standing norms (Bourdieu 1996). Yet even when phrased carefully, young people may experience this as a negotiation of legitimacy and belonging, despite the neutral framing of “finding the right fit” (Collins et al. 2022; Maher et al. 2023), again demonstrating the emotional labour involved in navigating belonging and access to such spaces (Graham and and Slee 2008).

Perhaps despite tradition, accommodations to behavioural and cultural expectations were much more common. All four directors described adapting their rehearsal process to support disabled choristers, and three had made accommodations to support social times in choir. Many staff were actively working to change internal culture, particularly focussing on how disabled choristers were perceived by choir members, congregation, and staff, despite none of the directors had receiving training on working with and teaching disabled young people at any point (whether at previous cathedrals, university/conservatoire, or any other part of professional training). One director emphasised:

“We just need to re-educate [those who view different behaviour as naughty/disruptive/attention seeking] ... and try to get them to see what a positive impact choristership has on a young person’s life!” – Cathedral 1

While timelines for change varied, some cathedrals had begun addressing access structurally, planning moves to new rehearsal spaces with fewer stairs, adjusting rehearsal formats, and coordinating support between school and choir staff. As suggested above, the work of challenging current culture by reframing assumptions and advocating for understanding was seen by families and directors as particularly

necessary both for individual choristers and the future of cathedral music. One DoM suggested:

“If cathedral music in its current form is to survive, we have to find ways to highlight the lack of barriers to it” – Cathedral 3

However, this optimism for the future coexisted with the recognition that disabled choristers continued to experience issues in accessing and belonging in choirs. Directors reflected on how current accommodations could inform future practice:

“I hope the needs of our current cohort will make us more actively accommodating to future choristers and encourage us to be more open about our accessibility.” – Cathedral 2

Still, even in supportive environments, the emotional cost of negotiating access remained. Describing a difficult period of exclusion which left Bartholomew struggling to remain in rehearsal, his mother recalled:

“It didn't really create a very safe space for him at that particular time.” – Bartholomew's mother

While this led to more sustained staff attention, described by the family as “really helpful”, it again highlights the reactive nature of accommodation and access, in response to harm or struggle rather than proactive, or standard as part of practice (‘The Reactive Model of Reasonable Accommodation’ 2022).

Access therefore emerged in these choristers' experience as a constantly negotiated process, shaped by institutions' willingness to move beyond tradition when necessary. The presence of disabled choristers both revealed and reshaped the limits of cathedrals' flexibility, reflecting the social relational model's conception of inclusion as an ongoing relationship between people, practices, and place, rather than a one-time adjustment (Reindal 2008a).

Time, Energy, and Trade-offs

The intensive nature of cathedral choristership requires significant time and energy commitments. These almost inevitably involve trade-offs with other activities, rest, and family resources (Barrett and Zhukov 2022). Yet as choristers and parents reflected on these trade-offs, they notably did not explicitly frame them in relation to disability, and instead as part of the broader landscape of demanding but meaningful choir participation. This perhaps reflects wider dynamics of visibility and invisibility in how disability is discussed, where disclosure and ‘passing’ as non-disabled may be used as strategies to manage stigma and protect belonging in an environment which does not fully affirm difference (Titchkosky 2006).

The time demands of choir participation limited other musical opportunities for Bartholomew. His mother described how choir prevented him from pursuing additional activities:

“He can't join anything else like the orchestra... He just hasn't had that time. Or the timetables clashed, and he hasn't been able to.” – Bartholomew's mother

For her this represented a loss of more varied opportunities to engage with the activity Bartholomew loves. Yet Bartholomew himself framed the trade-off as a pragmatic choice, viewing it as strategic and ultimately beneficial rather than a limitation:

“I think [the intensive nature of choir] it's like a good thing because like, too many things at once... like if I joined in year nine, then [I would be] better [at my instrument] as well.” – Bartholomew

However, the mental and physical demands of frequent rehearsals and services created noticeable fatigue. Noah spoke of feeling tired after rehearsals, yet maintained huge enthusiasm for performance:

“I kind of feel a bit tired a bit [at breaktime], because all of the songs.
Interviewer: How do you feel about the service you're about to sing? Evensong?
Noah: I kind of feel really, really excited. [nods enthusiastically]”

His mother highlighted the broader commitment required to sustain his participation as a struggle, but one that the family took on knowing it meant a lot to Noah:

“It would be lovely if it was able to be a bit more in his, you know, day-to-day life rather than us having to find it by taking him to the cathedral, which is a massive commitment... It's a shame that he can't get some of that through his education, really.” – Noah's mother

These experiences illuminate important theoretical questions about how we understand the trade-offs between participation and impairment. While the pressures of choir are common across all choristers, they may have intensified effects for disabled children. From a social relational perspective, it is important to distinguish between personal constraints caused by impairment (direct impact on a person's functioning) and social restrictions (imposed by inflexible and inaccessible spaces in society) (Reindal 2008b).

While some fatigue or need for routine may reflect impairment effects and possibly be mitigated by individual accommodation such as reduced schedules (as one director suggested), the disabling factors often lie in surrounding structures: unclear rehearsal communication, misunderstandings of behaviour, or expectations shaped by neurotypical and non-disabled norms that fail to accommodate difference (Oliver 2009; Graham and and Slee 2008).

However, these effects do not negate the child's agency or desire to participate, and respecting autonomy in decisions around participation by fostering the young person's self-advocacy is essential (Menna-Dack and Bowman 2024). Recognizing that effort and fatigue can co-exist with satisfaction and joy challenges simplistic binaries of limitation and ability (Collins et al. 2022).

Bartholomew's strategic thinking about managing multiple commitments and Noah's simultaneous tiredness and excitement demonstrate the complex negotiations disabled young people navigate in accessing meaningful participation. As Collins argues, disabled people often engage meaningfully in intensive creative practices, and their participation must not be read through a deficit lens (focussing on what they cannot or are struggling to do, rather than what they can achieve or aspirations for them), no matter how difficult it may seem to outsiders, as it would for any other young person (Collins et al. 2022).

Importantly, the tendency for families not to explicitly frame these trade-offs in relation to disability may link to broader patterns of how disabled young people navigate belonging in spaces not made with them in mind. As suggested, disabled people often downplay impairment effects to preserve belonging or avoid standing out (Shakespeare and Watson 2010).

Belonging and Being Different

Both choristers and directors emphasised that belonging emerged not through conformity, but through embracing difference (Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2013). Experiences of pride, connection, and inclusion were deeply valued, even as the choristers navigated subtle forms of othering within the choir community. Emphasising the importance of information sharing and disclosure, Bartholomew described how adults in choir treated him, framing difference as inviting care:

“If they know, like, I don't understand something, like with, like social stuff, then they'll be a bit more patient. So, like, it is different for me but in a good way.” – Bartholemew

This complicates the binary of exclusion vs. assimilation (Runswick-Cole and Goodley 2013). Research suggests that when disabled children find supportive contexts, they express pride in their identities rather than attempting to hide differences (Shakespeare and Watson 2010), and this seemed to be the case in many of Bartholomew's experiences. Both families described building relationships with Directors of Music and other staff at the cathedral, expressing how dialogue and open communication allowed them to create an environment that supported their child.

Furthermore, emphasising the importance of connection and relationships within the choir as well as for parents and staff, one DoM described a chorister who developed a condition during their time in choir:

“[they] were still part of the team... I wasn't going to ask them to leave the choir because they weren't able to fulfil the normal expectations” – Cathedral 1

This reflects choir's value far beyond just musical training – it is a strong source of identity, belonging, and community. This was also true for Noah, whose experience in choir was a valuable way to transform his sense of self and experience pride in his abilities. His mother observed a stark contrast between school and choir contexts. At school, Noah often used humour to deflect from challenging tasks (Slee 2011), but in choir:

“I think he doesn't want to look different... he's sort of looking left, looking right, getting his cues... whereas at school he stands out... I've noticed he just wants to do what they're all doing and be like them.” – Noah's mother

This desire to belong didn't erase Noah's long-term conditions but shifted the focus from what he couldn't do (deficit) to something he enjoys and gains a genuine sense of achievement and connection from. Where the school system marked him as different, choir allowed him to feel “the best at singing, best at listening”, taking pride in his focus and effort. His mother marvelled at this transformation:

“[Noah] has targets at school of trying to concentrate for about 15 minutes... when I watch him in the choir, I find it incredible that he is sat there... I can't believe that this is the same boy.” – Noah's mother

Yet this belonging remains fragile and conditional. Bartholemew's mother described a mocking incident which led him to stop disclosing his diagnosis:

“There have been several times where he's felt comfortable and safe to want to divulge to everybody... but some of the boys were taking the mickey out of [disabled] people... that really scared [him]” – Bartholemew's mother.

As Goffman notes, in these environments disclosure of disability and ‘passing’ (masking difficulty or disability) become strategies for managing stigma and protecting belonging (Goffman 1990). However, as Garland-Thompson argues, it is the environment that creates this ‘misfit’ rather than the person, and therefore it that must shift in order to affirm and include them (Garland-Thomson 2011). Belonging cannot be assumed when access is technically available but is a product of cultural systems and norms which affirm difference – something, as suggested above, that many cathedrals are working to create.

Dynamics of belonging also shaped individual experiences of time and progression (Ahmed 2012). Noah's mother reflected on the uncertainty surrounding when he might be “made up” into a full chorister:

“I suppose we're just feeling our way a little bit, aren't we? [Noah nods]” – Noah's mother

In cathedral choirs, timelines can often seem rigid and predetermined (Dong and Kokotsaki 2021). Yet Noah and Bartholomew demonstrate how disabled children navigate these systems with agency and purpose, often transcending or re-negotiating assumed timelines and norms. Their trajectories may reflect what Kafer terms “crip time” – non-linear and flexible paths that resist normative expectations (Kafer 2013). These paths are incredibly meaningful in part due to their self-directed nature, allowing disabled people to progress at the pace they need, and through doing so help create a system which is more equipped to handle difference and diversity.

Finding belonging within these existing structures clearly yields pride, identity, and joy for both Bartholomew and Noah (Ljuslinder, Ellis, and Vikström 2020). Their experiences reveal how inclusion operates as an active, ongoing process rather than a fixed state (Foley et al. 2012). Through supportive communities such as these choristers have found, disabled children can experience what it means to be valued for who all they are, potentially creating a safe space away from the conditional acceptance of broader society (Maher et al. 2023). As Noah put it:

“I feel really, really excited [to be made-up].” – Noah

Conclusions

This study has explored how disabled choristers and their families experience inclusion and exclusion in UK cathedral choirs, examining how institutional expectations shape access to choristership, and how accommodations are negotiated within tradition-bound spaces. Through qualitative data from choristers, parents, and directors of music, three core themes emerged: Negotiating Access in Traditional Spaces; Time, Energy, and Trade-Offs; and Belonging and Being Different.

Negotiating Access in Traditional Spaces revealed how both built environments and cultural expectations can create or dismantle barriers to inclusion. Architectural inaccessibility, and normative expectations around behaviour in particular present significant obstacles for disabled young people participating in cathedral choirs. Crucially, access in these spaces often depends on individual initiative and relationships rather than formalised policy. While personal actions were deeply appreciated, they also underscored how inclusion currently relies more on goodwill than embedded change.

Time, Energy, and Trade-Offs, explored the intersection between chorister life's demands and disability. Disabled choristers and their families frequently made significant compromises, reflecting broader sacrifices normalised within elite choir settings. However, choristers spoke of both tiredness and excitement, both restriction and fulfilment. These accounts challenge binary notions of ability and limitation, demonstrating how inclusion was created actively by the communities' choristers were in, and the importance of these intense creative activities to choristers' senses of self.

Belonging and Being Different highlighted the ways that experiences in these communities affected disabled choristers' identity and self-advocacy. Cathedral choirs provided disabled choristers with pride, joy, and community, yet moments of 'misfit' were still keenly felt. Disabled choristers worked continuously to manage visibility, avoid stigma, and maintain belonging, reflecting Garland-Thompson's concept of misfitting, where exclusion stems not from individual failure but from environmental inflexibility, demonstrating the ways that access was not a straightforward single step, but a process of both joy and struggle.

All participants highlighted the necessity of education and awareness. It became clear through their accounts that inclusion cannot be sustained through individual acts of kindness or accommodation alone: it requires structural support, institutional reflexivity, and a willingness to reimagine the traditions we inherit. Cathedral choirs, as deeply valued and historically rooted institutions providing elite training, have a unique opportunity to lead change towards greater inclusion and representation of disabled people across the broader choral and musical sector.

These insights carry significant implications for cathedrals, music education, youth music sectors, and arts education policy makers. They demonstrate that meaningful inclusion must centre disabled voices as active participants and knowledge-holders who can lead for systemic change. Future training for choir leaders and music educators must incorporate disability awareness grounded in lived

experience, practical knowledge, and reflexive, relational practices to ensure our arts sector is equitable, adaptable, and inclusive.

This project also highlights critical areas for future research. Comparative studies of disability across different choral contexts could reveal how the practices and cultures of different ensembles and institutions shape inclusion. Longitudinal research exploring how early choral participation influences disabled children's musical identity, opportunities, and lifelong arts access may be especially valuable. Additionally, focused studies of choral directors could provide crucial insights into their attitudes, pressures, and the institutional constraints they face, deepening our understanding of what supports inclusive practice.

This research affirms that disabled choristers already belong in cathedral choirs, despite the scarcity of professional and academic discussion acknowledging their presence. By listening to these choristers' and families' lived experiences, we not only make cathedral music more accessible but also more honest, sustainable, and reflective of the world and church it seeks to serve. The question is whether our sector will move past the difficult and labour-intensive negotiations disabled choristers currently face, evolving to fully recognise, support, and celebrate their contributions.

Wordcount: 5457

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