



THE CHOIR OF ST GEORGE'S CHAPEL, WINDSOR CASTLE

# Being a Chorister at St George's Chapel

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 2022

**The choristers of St George's Chapel choir all attend St George's School. There is provision for up to 23 choristers who are each awarded a generous scholarship by the Dean and Canons of Windsor towards their education at the school.**

#### **What is special about St George's Chapel?**

St George's Chapel is a Royal Peculiar. This means that, unlike a Cathedral, St George's is free of the authority of any bishop or archbishop and is, in effect, self-governing. The Dean and Canons (who are collectively known as 'Chapter' and are the managing body of St George's) are directly appointed by the Sovereign. The only other Royal Peculiar is Westminster Abbey. The College of St George, with St George's Chapel at its heart, also includes St George's School, St George's House (a consultation centre for independent discussion and debate), the Military Knights of Windsor, and a number of other College buildings surrounding the Chapel. The College covers roughly a quarter of Windsor Castle, but is independent of the Royal Household (and as such is not a Chapel Royal like Hampton Court or St James' Palace) as the College was given freehold of the land it sits on by King Edward III when the College was founded in 1348. St George's Chapel is the spiritual home of the Order of the Garter, the oldest order of chivalry still in existence. More information about The College of St George can be found on our website: [www.stgeorges-windsor.org](http://www.stgeorges-windsor.org).

#### **What kind of music does a chorister sing?**

During their time as a chorister, a child will sing a whole range of music from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and will develop an increasing sense of style as they get older – it is amazing to see the different styles of music that each child enjoys: it is not always what one might expect! This country's choral tradition has the highest respect amongst musicians from other countries, for the range and standard of choral singing achieved; there have been choristers singing in the chapel since 1348.

#### **When does a chorister usually join the choir?**

The majority of children will usually join the choir at age 8-9, when they begin Year 4. Depending on vacancies, we have sometimes had children join in Year 5 or 6. Choristers then remain in the

choir until they leave St George's School for senior school in Year 8. Towards the latter stages of being a chorister, some boys may find that their voices begin to change and our vocal tutors and wider team will help them through this transition. Should they become unable to continue singing treble in choir, they will still retain their chorister scholarship as 'non-singing choristers' until the end of Year 8.

### **What is the difference between a probationer and a chorister?**

A probationer is a training chorister, and in choir they wear a red cassock. When a child first joins the choir, they attend all the weekday morning rehearsals (and for a period the probationers will usually work separately from the choristers, building up their musical and vocal skills) and observe a couple of services a week. As their skills and confidence develop, they will start joining the choristers in singing parts of a service per week, gradually adding in more weekday services, before finally adding in some Sundays (usually towards the end of Year 4). By the beginning of Year 5, they will be singing all weekday services and most, if not all, Sundays, adopting the complete chorister schedule in advance of becoming full choristers and being presented with their white surplice which is worn over the red cassock (usually in the spring/early summer of Year 5).

### **How many places are there?**

There are usually 4 choristers in each year group, who are all on a generous scholarship which is paid for by the Dean and Canons of Windsor (for more information on school fees please visit [www.stgwindsor.org/Fees](http://www.stgwindsor.org/Fees) - additional limited means-tested bursaries may also be available).

### **How is the Choir made up?**

The choristers form the top or treble line of the Choir. The altos, tenors and basses, called 'Lay Clerks', are professional auditioned singers. The Choir is conducted by the Director of Music and accompanied by the Assistant Director of Music, and the Organ Scholar (a student).

### **Does a chorister have to board at St George's School?**

Yes, our choir does board and the reason for this is that the choristers' duties often require them to be in Chapel early (e.g. midweek morning rehearsals). However, our choristers go home on Friday nights (and have the option to go home on Wednesday nights too) and are back in School on Sunday mornings ready to enjoy breakfast at 0830. Boarding can actually make life easier for chorister parents, rather than more difficult, and a happy and healthy chorister enjoys the family atmosphere of the boarding house. As a probationer, they will begin boarding on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays initially, though some probationers do board fully during the week from the start.

### **Who looks after the choristers?**

There is a full team around each child, which involves our House Parents (one of whom is the school's Head of Safeguarding), the Chorister Chaperone, who accompanies the choristers in all their choir duties, our boarding team, the School's Head and his wife who live on site, the Director of Chapel Music and the chapel music team, Director of School Music, the form tutors and our wider School Wellbeing team. Creating a family atmosphere is central to our commitment to every child's happiness and wellbeing, and the wider team involved with the choristers work very closely together to monitor the child's development and pastoral needs. Communication and our partnership with parents is also essential to this.

## **Don't they have to sing rather a lot of services?**

One of the reasons a chorister's training is so valuable is that they learn, essentially, to be a professional musician; and it is the act of performing so regularly which provides this. Apart from a few occasions in the year, the choristers do not sing on a Saturday or on a Wednesday evening.

## **What happens at Christmas and Easter?**

Although school will have broken up for the holidays, the liturgical calendar means that there is still a call on the choir to provide sung services for Christmas and Easter. For both times, we have what is called a 'stay-on' when the choristers return to school to board, rehearse, sing services and also have fun at various parties and other social activities. The Year 4 probationers do not usually take part in the stay-on, but by Year 5 it is likely that they would participate, in preparation for becoming full choristers later that year.

At Christmas the choristers usually go home after the end of School term, returning to School a few days before Christmas to prepare for and sing at the popular Nine Lessons and Carols services, Midnight Mass, and Mattins and Evensong on Christmas Day. The chorister families join their children for lunch in school, and following Evensong the choristers resume their holiday until school term begins again.

A similar schedule takes place at Easter, though the exact timings in relation to the school holidays depend on when Easter falls in the calendar. Once again, a family lunch is hosted at School, and the choristers are then free to go home following Evensong.

In addition to Christmas and Easter, there may be other ad hoc services that come up from time to time that could necessitate the choir coming back to sing during the holidays, but these are infrequent.

## **What is 'Garter Day'?**

As the spiritual home of the Order of the Garter, once a year the Knights of the Garter meet in Windsor Castle and process to St George's Chapel for a Service of Thanksgiving. The ceremony has much pageantry and pomp and is attended by Her Majesty The Queen and other members of the Royal Family. The Choir has a central role in the service, singing a *Te Deum* and an anthem. You can find out more about the Knights of the Garter, on the Chapel website. Today's Knights are appointed to reflect their significant contribution to public life.

## **Apart from services, what else does the Choir do?**

There are a number of Royal and other important occasions in the Chapel for which the Choir sings. It also undertakes concerts or special events (in Windsor and beyond), broadcasts on radio (such as Choral Evensong on BBC Radio 3), records CDs and occasionally travels abroad.

## **Do choristers have to play an instrument?**

Yes – maybe two! A chorister will learn up two musical instruments at St George's School. Often this will include the piano and an orchestral instrument. The piano provides an excellent foundation for senior school GCSE music courses, and an orchestral instrument allows choristers to play in a range of musical ensembles whilst at school. Each morning, choristers have 30-minutes of supervised practice time on their musical instruments, and some go on to accomplish great things at their senior schools. Choristers also receive music theory and singing lessons at school to help their development as all round musicians. The School's Director of Music will help advise choristers on their choice of instrument.

## How do we apply for a choristership?

Auditions are usually held annually in the spring. However, Mr Vivian is happy to meet any prospective chorister applicants for an informal audition at any time. If you would like your child to be considered for a choristership, please be in touch with Chessy Alden (contact details below). Becoming a chorister is a commitment for the child and their family. For the five or so years that a child is a chorister at St George's Chapel it is expected that choir duties take precedence over other activities and engagements, but the benefits of being a chorister, for their education and personal development, are significant and many.

## What happens at the audition?

The audition process is informal. Generally, there is a preliminary audition and then shortlisted candidates are invited back on a different day for a second audition. At these auditions, candidates will be asked to sing a simple song (which needn't be of a sacred nature) or a hymn. We sometimes hear *Twinkle, twinkle, little star!* Candidates will then be given some ear tests (singing back single pitches from the piano as well as notes from two- or three-note chords; clapping a rhythm that is played twice; and singing back a melody that is also played twice). We may also ask a candidate to read aloud a passage from a book just as they might at an assembly or in class. The whole process usually lasts around ten minutes. Listening in the room will be Mr Vivian (Director of Music (Chapel)), Mr Bond (Assistant Director of Music (Chapel)), Mr Wilkinson (the School's Director of Music) and perhaps one of the choir's singing teachers. At the second audition, Mr Wilkinson may also ask for a candidate to play an instrumental piece that they have been learning (although we appreciate that some candidates may not yet be learning an instrument and this will not count against them).

In addition, external candidates who are shortlisted for the second round will be informally assessed by the school. This is important to ensure that choristers are able to cope with the chorister commitments on top of their academic studies. Through observation the school will determine whether they will be able to cope with the demands of a choristership alongside school life.

Following the second audition we will shortlist further, and invite those candidates to attend a 3-day school and 2-night boarding taster.

If you have any questions, please be in touch with Chessy Alden (The Chapel Music Administrator) who will be happy to direct them to the appropriate person:

+44(0)1753 848797

[music@stgeorges-windsor.org](mailto:music@stgeorges-windsor.org)

### Useful websites:

St George's Chapel: [www.stgeorges-windsor.org](http://www.stgeorges-windsor.org)

St George's School: [www.stgwindsor.org](http://www.stgwindsor.org)

### Social Media:

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