

Blackburn Cathedral Music & More Online Supplement No. 21

MY MOST AMAZING YEAR

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BBC Radio 2 Young Chorister of the Year, 2012.

One day last July my Mum was browsing the BBC website in search of the latest Daily Service featuring the Cathedral Choirs.

Whilst she was looking she came across a bulletin advertising the search for a new 'BBC Radio 2 Young Chorister of the Year', after checking that I fitted the correct requirements she asked me if I wanted to enter. Although I was doubtful about my chances, it sounded very exciting and in the end I decided that it couldn't hurt to give it a go. However since it was already the middle of July and the closing date for the competition was the 31st the schedule was quite tight as we had to complete mountains of paperwork, and prepare a CD in what seemed like a miniscule amount of time.

I recorded the CD at school while my parents waded through seemingly endless amounts of paperwork and eventually we sent it off to be judged. It was odd knowing that everything from here on in would take place behind closed doors and that I wouldn't know the outcome until September. I continued my summer more or less forgetting about the competition, little knowing the deliberations going on at the BBC.

Firstly, my entry along with thousands of others was reviewed by the team from the BBC Religion and Ethics Department, who shortlisted the entrants that would progress. My entry was then reviewed individually along with the best of the other entrants, by a Music Producer/Director who thankfully put me through to the next stage. Finally this shortlist was then reviewed together by a panel made up of the Music Producers and Directors who had reviewed entrants individually and from this process the final four girls and four boys were chosen to compete in the final at the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square in London.

I was contacted by the BBC in September and told that I was through to the final, and that I would be competing with three other girls for the chance of winning. I just couldn't believe it, I was a finalist and I would be performing not just for a live audience including four prestigious judges, but also for BBC Radio 2's 15.3 million listeners. As far as I was concerned this was already more than I could have ever hoped and when I finally did compete on the 28th of October 2012 I just went to enjoy myself.

This was made possible due to the wonderful support of all the BBC staff, as well as the other girls, who made it a wonderful day I will never forget. I performed 'My Song is Love Unknown' by John Ireland along with the 'Quia Respexit' from the Bach Magnificat and of course you all know what happened next...



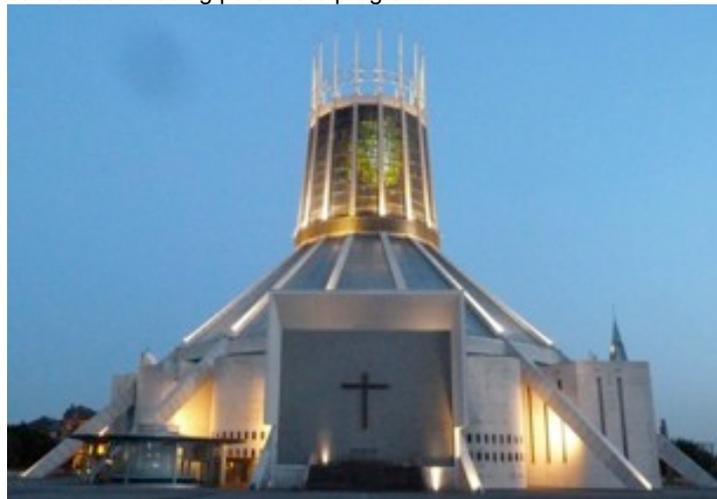
After the final audition of 8 shortlisted candidates, 4 boys and 4 girls, from 1,000s of applicants, Aled Jones stands with the two winners at St Martin-in-the-Fields: Isaac Waddington from Chichester Cathedral and Louisa Stirland from Blackburn Cathedral.

Since winning the title of BBC Young Chorister of the Year, I have had the most amazing year and have been given numerous opportunities to sing with some of the country's top producers, musical directors, orchestras, musicians and conductors.

My first official engagement as young chorister was a *Songs of Praise* recorded a little closer to home at Liverpool's Metropolitan Cathedral and broadcast in January 2013. We had arrived at the cathedral in plenty of time which gave us the added opportunity to meet the producer **Matthew Napier** as well as his team of producers and technicians.



They were all really friendly even showing me how they filmed their shots and sewed them together. It was really interesting to get a behind the scenes look and by the time the other young chorister Isaac arrived, I was really looking forward to getting behind the cameras and being part of the program.



First we were introduced to the conductor Paul Leddington-Wright along with the assembled choirs, put together from around Lancashire to perform with us. They applauded us and made us feel really welcome. After the initial run through, Isaac and I rehearsed the songs we would be performing. This was followed by a little time for R&R during which time the BBC Make-Up Artist made me feel really special by doing my hair and makeup ready for the recording.



The whole day proved to be a brilliant experience for me, although I must say it did take a lot of concentration to perform amid the film crew crawling about our feet fixing wires, sending cameras on poles hurtling towards us or whizzing past our heads. It was lovely to be told by the production team afterwards that we had performed like real professionals and that unlike some more seasoned performers we managed to do our shots on the first take.

Our next engagement had us travelling back down to London, one of many trips down to the capital we were to make over the coming months. It was a live concert in the chapel of the **Royal Hospital, Chelsea** in front of the world famous Chelsea Pensioners and invited guests including former governor of the Bank of England **Sir Mervyn King**, actor **Edward Fox**, BBC news presenter **Mishal Husain** and TV gardener and writer, **Alan Titchmarsh**.



A great night was had by all and the feedback that I received at the sparkling reception which followed was excellent, especially from **Edward Fox** who was as charming in real life as he is on stage and screen. We were later told the excellent news that the event had raised in excess of £100,000 for the Institute of cancer research which the concert was in aid of. I was really happy to know that I had helped in some small part to raise money for such a deserving cause.



As we moved further into December the weather worsened, and we began to fear the treacherous drive to Yorkshire for our next engagement at **Beverly Minster**.



The trip required some 'enthusiastic' driving from my Dad who pulled out all the stops to get us there on time, and we did eventually arrive in one piece and the wintry weather only helped to give the idyllic town a more Christmassy feel, helpful perhaps as this was a recording for a special Christmas hour-long edition of Sunday Half Hour.



some minster choristers and parishioners asking for our autographs!!!

This was the first time I worked with presenter **Diane-Louise Jordan**, she made me feel so special and was so complimentary of my voice. The Minister staff also made us feel at home and received Isaac Waddington and me so well, there were even

Christmas is always a busy time and this year was to be no exception. First I was invited by the **Mayor and Mayoress of South Ribble** to appear at their Christmas banquet in aid of their local charities.



I sang some classic Christmas carols to a packed house of over two hundred dignitaries including the Mayor and Mayoress and their invited guests who included Mayors from other Lancashire authorities as well as local councillors.

My next Christmas engagement was again for a Mayor, this time the Mayoress of Chorley as part of the annual Christmas concert by the **Chorley and District Choral Society** as a special guest.



This was performed again in front of a packed audience in the beautiful Victorian Town Hall in the market town, and afterwards we were invited for drinks in the Mayoress' parlour.

Perhaps the highlight of the Christmas season was the amazing experience of being asked to sing for the **Prime Minister at No. 10 Downing Street**. It was for a children's party for children with life limiting or terminal conditions and was hosted by the **David Cameron** and his wife **Samantha**. Arriving at No. 10 we went through security and when we got through we were mesmerised by the famous building on the secluded street.

As we walked to the door it was opened for us and I asked if it would be possible to take a picture outside the door. I got the feeling they had been asked this a lot and they simply smiled and said we could take as many pictures as we liked, however as they closed the door to allow us to get a good shot, it closed right in the face of **George Osborne** the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who looked understandably surprised. However he recovered himself quickly asking me who I was and whether I was enjoying myself, I replied that I was and he disappeared behind the famous black door.



Once inside we climbed the famous staircase, (*See next page*), walking past the images of all of Britain's past Prime Ministers eventually reaching the reception room where the party was taking place. Celebrities including **Ant & Dec**, **Michael Ball**, **Philip Glenister & Dick and Dom** were also on hand to help the festivities along and it was lovely to see how much the children enjoyed their presence.

Fellow winner **Isaac Waddington** and I sang our own special 'improvised' versions of *'In the Bleak Midwinter'* and *'Silent night'* and we received a huge round of applause as well as some lovely comments.



David Cameron said I had an exceptional voice and thanked me for performing, and internationally renowned singer **Michael Ball** said I had 'talent in spades'. This proved to be an amazing experience both for myself and for **my parents** who judging by their expressions enjoyed the occasion as much as I did.



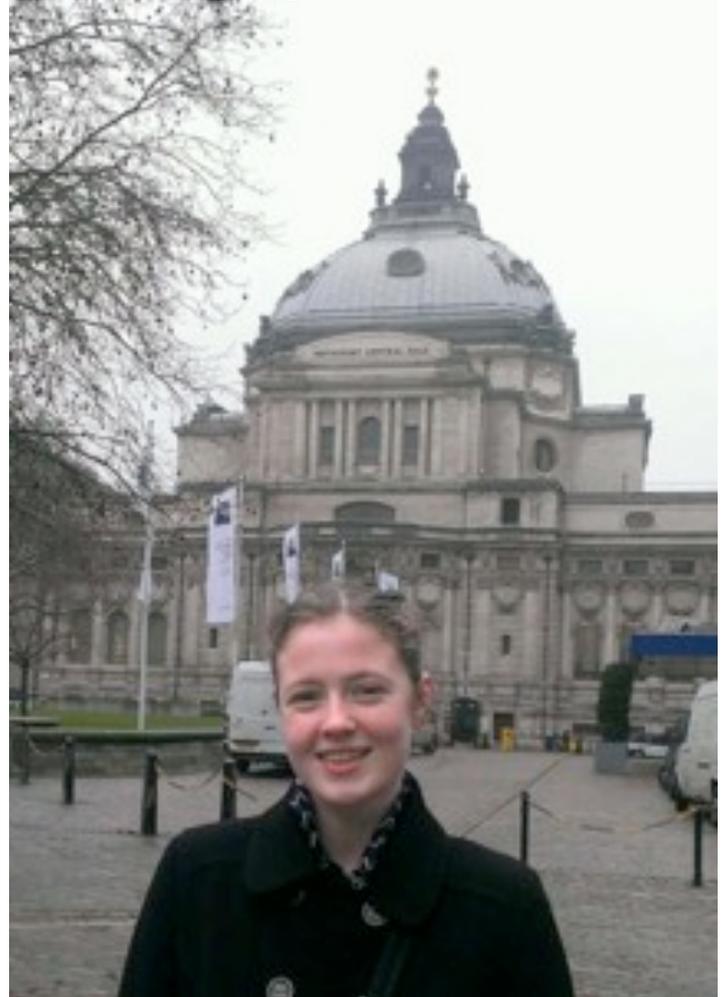
After a well-earned break for Christmas and New Year, it was straight back into the engagements, the first being to sing for a BBC Daily Service in early January with fellow Chorister of the Year, **Isaac Waddington** – just the two of us instead of their usual professional choir.

My parents and I had to get up very early on that day but thankfully only had to travel a short way to Manchester for the service which was broadcast live on BBC Radio 4 from Emmanuel Church in Didsbury.



This was the first time we had done a live broadcast and just to add the extra bit of pressure I also read a lesson.

As we approached Easter I was asked to perform at two events both once again down in London. *'At the foot of the cross'* a service featuring parts of Handel's *Messiah* broadcast from the **Methodist Central Hall** in Westminster and *'Easter Glory'* a service at St Martin-in-the-Fields, Trafalgar Square.



These required two separate trips down to London on two consecutive weekends amidst preparations for my upcoming GCSE's! However it was worth it as I got the opportunity to sing

solo with a full orchestra which is one of the things I enjoy most. On this occasion I performed the aria *'He shall feed his flock'* with the BBC Concert Orchestra. The programme also featured actress **Penelope Keith** and broadcaster Ken Bruce reading parts of the Easter story. I was also delighted to find that one of the other soloists was none other than my former singing teacher at Blackburn Cathedral **Phillipa Hyde** who sang other arias from Handel's *Messiah*.



After 'At the foot of the cross' I sang 'Easter glory'. It was so odd to be back at the place where I won the competition but it brought back so many wonderful memories.

Brian Blessed was the guest reader at this event and brought a larger than life presence to his readings and to the atmosphere. He was also a really lovely person to talk to.



Here I also once again met presenter **Diane-Louise Jordan** who at the time was talking to fellow presenter **Vanessa Feltz**. They were both incredibly friendly and Diane-Louise Jordan once again praised my voice even introducing us when we sang 'The Lord is my Shepherd' a popular version commonly known as the Vicar of Dibley theme tune. This was an amazing night and an amazing experience I will never forget!!!



The following week I sang for two nights as part of the festival 'Penwortham live'. I enjoyed this as it allowed me to perform for my local community and, on the second night, for the Mayor and Mayoress of Penwortham.

The highlight of May and one of the best things I have done so far was performing live with the BBC Concert Orchestra (again) for BBC TV & Radio as part of '2day', an event

showcasing the broad appeal of BBC Radio 2 and culminating with a special 'Friday Night is Music Night' concert along with my fellow Chorister of the Year, **Isaac Waddington**.



It was filmed live at the Hackney Empire in London, on a bill which included artists such as **Elaine Paige**, **Sinead O'Connor**, **Jamie Cullum** and **Gary Barlow**. They were all very friendly with **Jamie Cullum** even writing 'you have a wonderful voice' in a personal message to me.

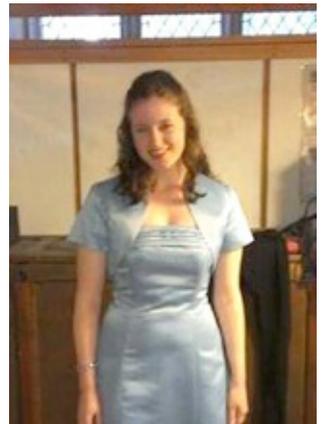


May actually turned out to be a really busy month, juggling the pressures of my GCSE's, BBC engagements and my duties at the cathedral. The BBC asked me to sing a solo piece for *Songs of Praise* broadcast from Blackburn for an episode entitled 'Lancashire Life'.



This was hosted by presenter and vocal coach **David Grant** whom I met outside Blackburn Cathedral whilst he was recording *Songs of Praise*. He was really nice and told me he couldn't wait to hear me sing, as he had heard only good things about me from people at the BBC. **This episode will be aired on BBC1 on September 1st.**

Another special moment came when I was invited to sing as the soprano soloist for the Bach *Magnificat* at the 'Pennine Music Festival' in Heptonstall, an incredibly important milestone for me, as it was the first time I was hired as a soloist to perform a whole work. It was also really nice that this occasion was attended by **Samuel Hudson** who as always, was very gracious about my performance.



On Sunday 9th June I appeared on national radio twice in the space of three hours. My first appearance was on BBC Radio 2 'Sunday Hour' where I was interviewed by Diane-Louise Jordan about my time as BBC Young Chorister of the Year, so far. It was really nice to catch up with her both on and off radio and she was as ever so complimentary. After this I was back at the cathedral to perform a live solo for BBC Radio 4's 'Sunday Worship'.

My most recent engagement to date was at **MediaCity, Salford**, where I performed the *Laudamus Te* from Vivaldi's *Gloria* with the **BBC Philharmonic Orchestra** and the BBC Singers as part of their 'Come and Sing Day'.



This piece was recorded for Radio 4's Morning Worship and was aired in July. This magical day was topped off with a VIP behind-the-scenes tour inside the BBC where I saw the sets of BBC Breakfast, BBC Sport and the famous BBC canteen.



All in all it has been an amazing year filled with such amazing opportunities and experiences. I feel like I have achieved so much because of it and feel if I can juggle GCSE's, choir commitments

and BBC engagements at the same time, then I can do pretty much anything!

Finally I would like to thank everyone who has supported and encouraged me since winning. It often goes unsaid, but without being part of **Blackburn Cathedral Choirs** it would have been impossible for me to enter and to achieve all I have in this past year.



I also have to thank the BBC for giving me such brilliant opportunities and to **Canon Hindley** for signing the paperwork at such short notice! I would like especially to thank **Samuel Hudson** for all his help, encouragement and support throughout the year, both in and outside the cathedral and to **Nicola Howard**, my amazing singing teacher, for helping me to prepare for my engagements as well as helping my voice to improve and grow.



Canon Hindley congratulating Louisa when she received the Bishop's Award for Excellence in February.

Thank you also to all the Cathedral parishioners who have taken such an interest in my year and to John Bertalot for editing this article for the cathedral's **Music & More ONLINE** magazine!



I couldn't have done any of this without the help of **my parents** who provide the most amazing amount of support and love which have helped me so much to achieve all I do. **THANK YOU!**