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Between worship, learning and musical practice: mapping the shifting functions of the contemporary cathedral

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical comparative analysis of three musical contexts at Liverpool Cathedral: liturgical services, educational programmes and wider choral outreach. Drawing on data from online questionnaires and qualitative interviews, the study examines the sociodemographic profiles of adult participants, including congregants, alongside the patterns, motivations and barriers shaping their engagement in cathedral music life. Through an interpretive reading of these data, the article explores how participants relate to the cathedral as a sacred site of worship, an educational partner and a civic cultural institution, while illustrating the structural and cultural dynamics underpinning choral participation across the three contexts. The discussion reflects on the shifting functions of the contemporary cathedral, showing how musical affect, cultural capital and evolving forms of belonging reshape the role of Anglican cathedrals in twenty-first-century public life. Liverpool Cathedral emerges as a multifunctional institution in which worship, learning and musical practice are refocused as sites of civic engagement, cultural inclusion and religious adaptation.

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Introduction

Anglican cathedrals today inhabit a complex landscape where sacred tradition, civic responsibility and cultural engagement intersect. In recent decades, they have become multifunctional spaces of worship, tourism, education and music (Francis 2015; Muskett and Francis 2015; Platten 2017). Choral music plays a key role, expressing theological beauty and helping cathedrals to reach beyond their congregations.

This article contributes to cathedral studies by offering a comparative analysis of choral participation across three domains of musical life: worship, learning and musical practice. While previous studies have examined the value of cathedral music outreach (Krüger Bridge 2022, 2023a, 2023b), this study focuses instead on patterns of participation: the sociodemographic backgrounds, motivations and experiences of participants engaged in liturgical services, educational initiatives and outreach choirs. Drawing on original empirical data, it explores how individuals negotiate musical affect, cultural

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capital, identity and belonging through their musical relationship with the contemporary cathedral, illuminating Anglican cathedrals as dynamic institutions of religious pluralism, civic engagement and musical inclusion. By tracing these engagements at Liverpool Cathedral, the UK's largest Anglican cathedral, the article enriches debates around the sustainability and accessibility of choral traditions in Britain.

Liverpool Cathedral is a compelling case study. Situated in a socioeconomically and religiously diverse city marked by significant deprivation, it has developed a broad music outreach programme, aiming to extend participation across class, age, gender, ethnicity and belief. This reflects both continuity with Anglican musical tradition and a deliberate reimagining of the cathedral as a civic and educational institution. The article contributes to wider debates in cathedral studies about the shifting functions of cathedral institutions in contemporary society.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it introduces the three choral contexts, outlines the research context and establishes the research question. Next, it analyses the findings, focusing on participants' sociodemographic composition, engagement patterns, motivations and barriers. It then offers a discussion synthesising the findings within a broader interpretative framework, before concluding with reflections on the cathedral's evolving role as a multifunctional institution and the research implications.

The contexts for choral participation

This research draws on three distinct contexts of choral engagement at Liverpool Cathedral, each revealing different aspects of the cathedral's contemporary function as a sacred, educational and cultural site. They reflect responses to challenges facing religious and heritage institutions, maintaining sacred tradition while expanding cultural relevance, accessibility and engagement.

Liturgical services and events

Liverpool Cathedral's liturgical calendar offers many occasions for choral participation, with Christmas highlighting the interplay of music, ritual and collective identity. Advent begins with the candlelit *From Darkness to Light* procession, where the nave is illuminated, evoking Anglican symbolism and a powerful experience (Liverpool Cathedral 2022a). Among the key services is *The Holly Bough Service*, a uniquely Liverpool tradition dating to the early twentieth century under Dean Dwelly, culminating in the symbolic act of carrying a holly bough from crib to cross to mark the theological arc 'from incarnation to passion' (Liverpool Cathedral 2022b). Here, sacred music functions as liturgy in sound, drawing participants into what Begbie (2007) terms 'sonic theology'. This service, with carols, choral repertoire and ritual, resonates with local tradition while welcoming broader publics. Other Advent and Christmas services, such as *The Lighting of the Tree* and *Blessing of the Crib*, blend popular carols and storytelling for younger audiences, using music as a force for ritual, memory and collective emotional expression (Vogel, Klomp, and Barnard 2023).

The schools singing programme (SSP)

The SSP, part of the Cathedral's music outreach, partners with local primary schools, many in areas of high deprivation, engaging children across the Liverpool City Region

with high-quality singing delivered by cathedral staff and culminating in large-scale cathedral performances, enabling children and families to experience collective music making in one of Britain's most iconic ecclesiastical buildings (Krüger Bridge 2025b). This programme enhances music education and vocal development, while contributing to broader goals of social mobility and cultural inclusion. It serves as an entry point into cathedral musical life, cultivating early skills and shaping perceptions of the cathedral as a civic space. The programme aligns with research highlighting how musical participation fosters confidence, identity and educational aspiration among young people from underserved communities (Hallam 2010, 2015; Hallam and Himonides 2022; Welch 2017; Welch et al. 2020).

The choral outreach programme

The choral outreach programme expands the Cathedral's musical ecology for all ages, offering pathways for sustained musical engagement that foster discipline, confidence and growth. It includes junior, youth and adult choirs, as well as early years music, instrumental and GCSE tuition. The Junior Choirs, based in Liverpool, Knowsley, and Sefton, provide after-school choral training through weekly rehearsals, and perform in outreach concerts and cathedral services, offering musical inclusion and progression into the professional cathedral choir. For older youth and adults, groups like the Gilbert Scott Youth Singers and Liverpool64 maintain engagement with varied repertoires, frequently participating in Evensong and other services. Beyond choirs, the programme offers non-choral initiatives such as early years music, theory courses and performance opportunities. Overall, music outreach nurtures musical ability and offers social connection and personal growth, exemplifying cultural capital 'in action' (Bourdieu 1986) and highlighting the relational and emotional dimensions of musical participation.

Research context

This article is situated within cathedral studies, informed by sociology of religion, music education and music sociology. As Francis (2015) notes, Anglican cathedrals function as both sacred institutions and civic actors, reflecting the interplay between ecclesiastical tradition, cultural participation and public life (Muskett and Francis 2015). Recent shifts under neoliberal and secularising trends (Franck and Iannaccone 2014; Guest 2022; Platten 2017) have intensified scholarly interest in how cathedrals adapt liturgically, educationally and culturally. Liverpool Cathedral's choral initiatives across worship, learning and community choral practice offer a lens through which to examine this changing musical ecology.

Cathedrals and worship

The first context (liturgical participation) is rooted in the tradition of sacred music as an experiential, affective and theological medium (Begbie 2007; Evans 2006; Harper 2012; Stacey 2024). Begbie (2007) argues that music in Christian tradition does more than accompany belief, revealing theological insight through sound, form and participation. His idea of music as 'resounding truth' frames how cathedral music mediates spiritual experience and relationality, even for those with marginal or non-traditional beliefs. For many congregants and attendees, cathedral architecture, acoustics and musical repertoire

produce moments of 'resonance', creating deeply affective experiences and spiritual connection beyond doctrinal boundaries (Corbett and Moerman 2024; Rosa 2019). These encounters evoke the 'beauty of holiness', aligning with Anglican views of music as integral to divine encounter (Rijken 2022). Such aesthetic engagement with music, light, ritual and space functions not only as worship but as cultural identity and spirituality.

Cathedrals and learning

The second context (educational participation) intersects with broader literature on outreach music education through the lens of the Schools Singing Programme (SSP), which prioritises foundational choral skills, musical development and confidence building among children. Research underscores music's multifaceted benefits. Hallam (2015) and Hallam and Himonides (2022) show musical participation enhances cognitive, emotional and social development, while Welch (2017) and Welch et al. (2020) highlight singing's role in wellbeing and social inclusion, crucial in Liverpool's context of high deprivation (Liverpool City Council 2020), echoing Saunders et al. (2012) in their evaluation of a chorister outreach programme where sustained, high-quality musical engagement fostered musical excellence, confidence and community cohesion. This literature frames the SSP as a strategic social intervention, fostering social capital and cultural confidence, and shifting cathedral music from elite to inclusive practice (Krüger Bridge 2025a, 2025b). The programme's 'pipeline' into the Cathedral Choir represents a model for social mobility that challenges historical exclusivities (Krüger Bridge 2025c), while sustaining Anglican choral tradition (Ashley, Miller, and Pinder 2022).

Cathedrals and musical practice

The third context (outreach participation) reflects cathedrals' growing role in lifelong musical engagement (Ashley, Miller, and Pinder 2022). McKenna, Francis, and Jones (2024) describe cathedrals as 'deeply Christian and serving the common good', offering publicly accessible experiences grounded in moral and cultural values, reinforcing their role as both sacred institutions and civic musical providers. Davie's (1993) 'believing without belonging: A Liverpool case study' conceptualises the persistence of the sacred in contemporary society despite the decline in churchgoing. Arnold (2016) argues that sacred music serves vital aesthetic and spiritual functions even in secular contexts, offering spaces for transcendence, reflection and collective identity-making beyond religious frameworks. Cathedral music, though liturgically rooted, operates across cultural, emotional and civic domains. In such non-religious contexts, music matters (Hesmondhalgh 2013), enabling people to negotiate emotion, sociality and ethical meaning through shared aesthetic practice. This helps explain cathedral choral participation, where non-religious adults often describe involvement as spiritually resonant, socially meaningful or emotionally sustaining, maintaining cultural and affective ties to the sacred through music and community.

Research question

This article investigates people's engagement with Liverpool Cathedral across three distinct contexts of choral participation: liturgical, educational and cultural. Given

that research is limited about the demographic, motivational and social profiles of participants in such programmes, the central research question is: How do adult participants across three musical domains differ and converge in their sociodemographic backgrounds and relationships to the musical life of the cathedral, and what are their motivations for choral participation and perceived values and barriers? This question is pursued through a comparative framework that aims to illuminate the structural, cultural and spiritual dynamics underpinning their choral participation. It addresses not only who participates, but *why* they do so, what meanings and values they attach to their musical engagement, and how these shape their sense of identity and belonging to the Cathedral.

Methodology

Procedure

This interdisciplinary study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating questionnaires and interviews to examine adult participation in choral programmes at Liverpool Cathedral. The research was informed by the researcher's emic positioning as a parent participant and Liverpool (L64) singer, fostering a reflexive perspective (Mostowlansky and Rota 2020). Data was collected via three online questionnaires, tailored to each context: Holly Bough Service (QU1), Schools Singing Programme (QU2) and Choral Outreach Programme (QU3). These questionnaires combined closed-choice items and open-ended prompts to elicit sociodemographic data and reflections on choral engagement (Allanson and Notar 2019). Recruitment used in-person calls, flyers, emails and printed cards. Semi-structured interviews, conducted between January 2023 and July 2024, explored participants' motivations, experiences and perceived value of choral participation. Altogether, 187 questionnaire responses yielded quantitative data and around 45,000 words of qualitative material. The 18 interviewees represented diverse participants, including adult choir members, parents and one Cathedral Choir Choral Scholar, generating approximately 100,000 words of transcribed data offering insights into experiences, motivations and values across choral contexts.

Participants

The study includes three distinct participant groups, corresponding to the contexts of choral engagement:

- Liturgical participation: 41 adult respondents to QU1, surveyed during the 2022 Holly Bough Service.
- Educational participation: 24 parent and teacher respondents to QU2, focused on the 2023 Schools Singing Programme.
- Outreach participation: 122 respondents to QU3, encompassing adult choir members, parents and general attendees of music events and services across 2023–2024.

Participants represented diverse socioeconomic, religious and musical backgrounds, enabling a textured and inclusive perspective on cathedral choral engagement.

Analysis

Analysis followed an interpretative framework combining descriptive statistics, thematic analysis and analytical induction. Questionnaire data were examined for participation patterns and thematic insights into values, motivations and barriers. Interview transcripts were coded iteratively to capture emergent and theoretical themes, drawn from participants' language and refined through analytical induction. This approach integrated statistical patterns and narratives into a coherent account of choral participation.

Results

Liverpool Cathedral's choral programmes attract diverse adult participants, reflecting broader sociocultural and religious dynamics. This section analyses participation across three contexts: the Holly Bough Service, Schools Singing Programme (SSP) and Choral Outreach Programme. It focuses on sociodemographic patterns, and participation relationships, motivations and barriers. Findings show how choral participation is shaped by intersections of religiosity and secularity, class and cultural capital, and personal identity, revealing complex dynamics of participation, diversity, accessibility and inclusivity.

Sociodemographic patterns and trends in choral participation

Religious identity, secularity and participation

Religious identity shapes participant profiles across cathedral choral contexts, revealing tensions between tradition and secular engagement. At liturgical events like the Holly Bough Service, 78% identify as Christian, reflecting ties to congregations and religious communities, whereby attendance at Christmas-themed services constitutes both an expression of personal faith and communal identity. The Holly Bough Service was described as 'something deeply meaningful, tied to my faith and the seasonal rhythm of our family traditions' (QU1, congregant). It is 'a way of feeling part of something larger … history, community and God all in one place' (QU1, congregant). This explicitly religious motivation contrasts markedly with the other choral contexts.

Participants in the SSP show significantly reduced religious affiliation (59% Christian), with a notable proportion (36%) declaring no religion at all. This context predominantly engages parents and teachers whose primary motivation lies within the perceived educational and developmental value of music rather than religious identity, as a parent explained: 'My child's singing at the cathedral is about cultural enrichment; religion doesn't enter into it much for us' (QU2, parent). Thus, educational outreach offers a secular entry point into cathedral activities, attracting participants who may otherwise not engage with explicitly religious contexts.

The Music Outreach Programme occupies a mediating position between these poles, with a predominantly Christian yet notably more diverse religious profile (78% Christian, 18% non-religious). Participants often frame their choral involvement through blended spiritual and secular narratives. An elderly male L64 choir member described his

engagement as 'primarily musical and social, yet undeniably spiritual, not in a religious sense, but in the way it lifts and centres me' (Interview, L64 participant). This reflects how choral outreach mediates between sacred and secular participation, serving as an inclusive bridge within the Cathedral's community.

Socioeconomic status, education and cultural capital

Choral participation is notably shaped by socioeconomic status and educational background, reflecting cathedral music's associations with cultural capital and class differentiation (Preece 2024). Holly Bough Service attendees have a notably privileged socioeconomic profile, with high educational attainment (46% holding degrees), professional occupations and 33% being retired professionals. This underlines that liturgical participation remains closely intertwined with middle-class identities, aligning with traditional Anglican cultural affiliations.

By contrast, the SSP and Choral Outreach contexts display broader occupational representation, though still largely middle-class. Educational attainment remains high (77% university-level in SSP; 60% in Outreach), yet interviews suggest the SSP reaches more diverse occupational groups. Parents emphasised the cathedral's accessibility for Liverpool communities, suggesting that the cathedral music outreach broadens participation to first-time attendees and beyond traditional class structures. As one parent observed,

> It's the first time we've been in the Cathedral. My child's face lit up being able to sing there. We felt welcome. (QU2, SSP parent)

Another participant noted:

> When we did one of the Christmas concerts and I looked at the little children, who are from some very impoverished areas in Liverpool, and I looked at the parents in the congregation who were so proud to see their children. And I did think, I bet some of those parents, you know, have never thought about them joining a choir . . . . It's not that it's shut off from them, it's just how do they access . . . with the kids, they're doing it very successfully because they're going out into the school and recruiting actively and breaking down the barriers. (Interview, L64 participant)

Yet despite outreach efforts, underrepresentation of participants from manual or service-sector occupations persists, indicating structural barriers and reflecting trends in classed participation in classical music (Bull 2019; Green 2012).

Inclusion, accessibility and diversity

Ethnic diversity across choral contexts remains limited. White British respondents overwhelmingly dominate participation (89% Holly Bough, 88% Outreach, 73% SSP), though the SSP shows slightly higher diversity, suggesting educational initiatives may foster more ethnically diverse and inclusive engagement.

Accessibility in relation to disability and health conditions further complicates inclusive participation. Liturgical events such as the Holly Bough have the lowest disability representation (8%), reflecting accessibility challenges inherent in historic cathedral architecture and traditional worship formats. Interviews revealed older adults and those with mobility issues face particular difficulties, highlighting barriers not always immediately evident from quantitative data alone.

The SSP reported notably higher disability representation (24%), aligning with more inclusive school education, particularly for SEND-related disabilities. The outreach programme sits intermediately (11%), suggesting choral singing offers accessible forms of participation beneficial to health and wellbeing. One adult singer, living with a chronic condition, affirmed the therapeutic benefits of choral engagement: 'I think I would have been lost without the singing… it's very healthy and the breathing, control which you're not thinking about really… I think that's the case, yes' (Interview, L64 participant), highlighting how singing helps with fatigue and emotional uplift. Others cited enhanced confidence, reduced anxiety or emotional resilience as enabling factors in their continued participation. Experiences of wellbeing are thereby entangled with participation itself, reflecting a pattern of sustained musical belonging.

Gender, sexuality and participation dynamics

Gender dynamics across contexts reflect broader societal patterns in music, spirituality and community life. Liturgical events and educational programmes demonstrate less pronounced gender disparities (61% women Holly Bough, 52% SSP), reflecting traditional gender roles associated with religious attendance and parenting involvement. The Choral Outreach Programme shows the largest gap (73% women), consistent with research on female participation in community choirs conducive to social bonding and emotional expression (Parkinson 2019).

Sexual orientation across contexts indicates cathedral music engagement remains predominantly heteronormative (over 80% in all contexts). Nevertheless, small but meaningful representation from LGBTQ+ participants in the Holly Bough and Outreach contexts suggests that cathedral choral activities provide relatively safe spaces within broader Anglican contexts historically resistant to sexual diversity. One openly LGBTQ+ participant described Liverpool Cathedral's choral outreach as accepting and inclusive in practice, even if not always explicitly, signalling incremental progress towards greater inclusivity within traditional religious spaces:

> It's accepting, you come in, you are who you are, and you're not judged for who you are. You're here because you want to sing, come on, let's sing. (Interview, L64 participant)

The comparative analysis of sociodemographic patterns and trends reveals intersecting patterns of religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, accessibility and gender dynamics shaping choral participation at Liverpool Cathedral. Liturgical events primarily attract older, Christian, middle-class, predominantly White British congregants. Educational outreach engages a more socioeconomically diverse, younger and secular demographic, while broader musical outreach spans age groups and religious affiliations, creating inclusive spaces that bridge sacred and secular motivations. Ethnic diversity remains limited across contexts, and gender and sexuality patterns reflect enduring traditional structures yet show potential for progressive inclusivity. These sociodemographic insights illuminate the cathedral's evolving role as keeper of traditional Anglican identities and champion of broader societal transformations in contemporary Britain.

About choral participation: patterns, motivations, barriers

This section presents a comparative analysis of how adult participants engage with Liverpool Cathedral's three choral contexts by exploring their relationship to the cathedral, their motivations for participation and the barriers they encounter, illuminating the ways in which the cathedral functions as a space of religious, educational and cultural engagement.

Relationship to Liverpool cathedral

Participants' relational proximity to the cathedral varies notably across the three choral participation contexts. At the Holly Bough Service, regular congregants (27.8%) and relatives of choir members (27.8%) formed the largest respondent groups. This reflects a participation pattern deeply rooted in ecclesiastical tradition and familial legacy. The service's strong connection to the Christmas liturgical calendar further reinforces its appeal to established members of the cathedral community, who perceive the event as both spiritual observance and communal ritual.

In the Schools Singing Programme (SSP), respondents largely participated through educational affiliation. Over half (57%) attended to support their child or relative, while 17% were involved professionally as teachers or school leaders. In this context, the Cathedral emerges less as a religious site and more as a civic partner in musical education. Although many had previously visited the Cathedral, their relationship was shaped by the programme's educational framework and its delivery in partnership with state schools.

The Choral Outreach Programme revealed the most diverse relationships. While 39% were connected to the Cathedral through family ties, a significant 34% described their involvement in terms of attending concerts, services or rehearsals without being regular worshippers. Active choir membership (e.g. L64 or Junior Choirs) was the most common form of sustained engagement. Interviewees confirmed this diversity: for some, the cathedral was a symbol of musical excellence and personal memory; for others, it was a welcoming space discovered later in life. Some participants self-identified as non-religious while describing singing in deeply affective and quasi-transcendent terms:

> I would say it's quite a religious experience in a very broad sense in that you can feel quite spiritual . . . . I'm not religious . . . but you can sort of lose yourself in it a little bit in that kind of spiritual way where all your daily cares aren't there. (Interview, L64 participant)

> Just being in the Cathedral is just sort of uplifting. I do feel a presence of God in the building. . . I find that really quite, quite moving. (Interview, L64 participant)

> Whenever I sing in the Cathedral, I feel a sense of emotion. . . when it's an actual performance I find it very uplifting. . . there is a real sense of emotion. . . I just feel an emotional high. (Interview, L64 participant)

These sentiments reflect deeply resonant expressions of non-religious yet spiritually and emotionally significant belonging, highlighting how participation helped redefine the Cathedral as a civic and cultural space, rather than a strictly religious institution, particularly for those initially uncertain about their place in such a setting.

Motivations for participation

Participation motivations differ across the three contexts, reflecting each programme's structural and symbolic focus. At the Holly Bough Service, motivations were overwhelmingly liturgical and aesthetic. The vast majority of respondents attended 'to enjoy the music' (82.9%) and specifically the choral singing (74.3%). Other significant factors included marking the Christmas season (68.6%), appreciating the beauty of the building (57.1%) and attending as a personal or family tradition (48.6%). These responses underscore the role of sacred music in reinforcing cultural memory and religious identity. Interviewees echoed this sense of ritual continuity, commenting: 'The Holly Bough service is part of Christmas', which is a 'family tradition to attend', therefore, 'why wouldn't you love it! The quality of the choir and setting is superb. I have come since a child and is a tradition'. (QU1, various congregants). Clearly, the Holly Bough service, with its music, readings and architectural grandeur, is integral to a participant's sense of Christmas:

> It's Christmas and . . . being in such a grand space and worshipping and . . . seeing the vast amount of people there as well. It's quite overwhelming. And . . . I'm there to see my daughter and my niece. The sense of pride. And then once they start [singing] how beautiful it all is . . . It's . . . layers of emotions . . . [and] the sound is so beautiful in that setting. (Interview, chorister parent)

> Yeah, I do remember not being able to speak . . . . It was just like overwhelming in a way. (Interview, Gilbert Scott singer/former chorister)

> To sing in a cathedral choir is very prestigious . . . and it does give you goose pimples when they're singing. (Interview, chorister parent)

In contrast, SSP participants were primarily motivated by educational and familial concerns. Supporting their child or pupil was the dominant reason for attendance (57%), followed by a general desire to enjoy the music (35%) and experience the cathedral atmosphere (30%). The performances were valued not only as musical achievements but as moments of pride and celebration. As one parent noted:

> I was immensely proud seeing my child singing with so many others in such a beautiful setting. It brought tears to my eyes. (QU2, SSP parent)

While religious motivation was largely absent, respondents nonetheless expressed appreciation for the Cathedral as an inspiring and inclusive performance venue:

> The whole experience is fantastic for our children's sense of pride, belonging and musical development. . . To encourage them, you know, and to see them here [Cathedral] was just fantastic! [. . .] What it's giving to them and to their parents . . . it will be giving them self-esteem, self-worth . . . joy and pleasure. (QU2, Headteacher)

The Choral Outreach Programme was characterised by layered motivations. The most cited reason for participation was the enjoyment of music (84%), followed by interest in the Cathedral as a cultural and architectural site (63%). Social engagement (43%) and a sense of belonging to a community (41%) were also frequently mentioned, especially by those involved in choirs such as L64. Interviewees regularly linked their musical motivations to emotional and communal wellbeing, conveying the sentiment of personal fulfilment, ownership of time and deep presence with comments such as:

> [It] sounds crazy but it is the highlight of my week to do something independently for myself, by myself. I'll never be the world's best singer, but I know my voice has improved. . . I love the challenge, and I love the music, and I love the people. (Interview, L64 participant)

For some, choral outreach participation also carried a spiritual or quasi-spiritual dimension, even in the absence of explicit religious belief, specifically the resonance of harmony, focus during and the inner stillness after rehearsals:

> It's very calming. I come out feeling lighter. Not every rehearsal is perfect, but there's a rhythm to it . . . and that silence afterwards. It's like something lifts'. (Interview, L64 participant)

Several participants noted how choral engagement helped during the post-pandemic transition, since L64 offered a balance of structure, musical challenge and manageable time commitment. One respondent stated:

> I decided after the pandemic I needed to do something [and] when I found the choir I was just like, 'oh this is great' because it's just the right amount of time for me to allow me to do other things, and it's got just the amount of complexity for me to keep me interested. (Interview, L64 participant)

These affective motivations, emerging not from religious doctrine but from the embodied experience of singing, listening and gathering, speak to the Cathedral's capacity to facilitate emotionally resonant, culturally meaningful participation across belief systems.

Barriers to participation

Barriers to participation, while present across all contexts, varied in character and intensity. At the Holly Bough Service, physical access and transport posed challenges, particularly for older participants or those with limited mobility. Respondents noted parking difficulties and the Cathedral's internal layout. Interviewees confirmed that while the event was cherished, its accessibility was uneven:

> The city centre location and difficulty parking may be an issue for some; also the sheer size of the building. My mother has mobility issues but does not use a wheelchair [so] she simply could not enter at the main entrance and walk to the seating area which is a great shame. (QU1, congregant)

In the SSP context, barriers were mostly logistical. Parents and teachers identified scheduling difficulties, school-based communication issues and childcare responsibilities as obstacles to attending concerts. For some, the timing of the concerts conflicted with work commitments and others noted that attending events in the evening could be challenging for younger siblings or extended family members.

In the Choral Outreach Programme, barriers were broader and more systemic. While some respondents and interviewees described lack of public transport to evening rehearsals, the high cost of taxis, family responsibilities and the need for flexible participation, others felt the Cathedral could appear exclusive or intimidating, particularly to those unfamiliar with its ecclesiastical traditions. As several respondents put it:

> You can see in their faces [and] they're like, 'ah this is not my church and da da da, what am I doing here? . . . or I don't belong here, or I shouldn't be here'. When really, yes of course, you should be here! (Interview, L64 participant)

> Even free museums need to do a bit of work… It is cultural barriers that are invisible. (Interview, adult participant)

> Yes, and if that has been passed down by generations… they will feel like their grandmas never came here, so why would they? (Interview, parent participant)

> I got cold feet twice about coming and then I eventually turned up and felt very welcomed without being overwhelmed. So I've been coming since then. (Interview, L64 participant)

Others expressed concern about audition processes for certain choirs or the perceived elitism associated with cathedral music. As one participant described: 'That again was quite exacting, as it was highbrow stuff, it was not for the masses, but we did try … [laughs]' (Interview, L64 participant). Here, the perception of value, or what kind of participation is rewarded, who belongs and how accessible it is, profoundly shapes engagement decisions. Even so, participants emphasised that the value of participation itself can sometimes mitigate barriers. As one respondent put it:

> I struggle because … I have to go to work …. But I never regret coming … I always feel like I've, you know, just exuded some positive energy rather than maybe the hassle of the daily grind … I never feel like I'm in a bad mood when I've come out, so that can only be positive. (Interview, L64 participant)

For others, especially those with mental health conditions, the predictability and regular structure of weekly choir rehearsals that made logistical obstacles more manageable. Thus, programmes such as L64 were frequently cited as more accessible alternatives, which points to the importance of non-selective, low-barrier models of musical participation in expanding the Cathedral's reach. Ensuring the continuation of non-auditioned, socially cohesive groups like L64 is therefore essential to maintaining an inclusive participation landscape.

This comparative analysis underscores the multifaceted ways in which participants connect with Liverpool Cathedral through choral music. The Holly Bough Service represents a traditional mode of liturgical participation, closely tied to religious identity and seasonal ritual. The Schools Singing Programme exemplifies a civic model of engagement, wherein musical participation becomes a vehicle for educational inclusion and cultural outreach. The Choral Outreach Programme blurs these categories, fostering sustained and diverse forms of community involvement anchored in music, place and shared experience. Interview data further reveal how choral participation, whether religious, educational or cultural, is often experienced as transformative. For many, the act of singing within the Cathedral produces a sense of belonging and emotional resonance that transcends doctrinal boundaries. At the same time, recurring barriers point to the need for strategic planning around accessibility, inclusion and perception, especially for those outside of traditional cathedral life.

Discussion

This section turns to critical reflections on the shifting functions of the contemporary cathedral, showing how musical affect, cultural capital and evolving forms of belonging reshape the role of Anglican cathedrals in twenty-first-century Britain. Liverpool Cathedral emerges as a multifunctional institution in which worship, learning and

musical practice are refocused as sites of civic engagement, cultural inclusion and religious adaptation.

Sacred sound and the affective logics of participation

Across the three contexts, participants described their engagement with cathedral music in terms of aesthetic immersion, heightened emotion, spiritual atmosphere or social experience.

In the Holly Bough Service, liturgical ritual and musical aesthetics produced what respondents described as 'spiritually uplifting' or 'deeply moving' experiences, confirming music's role as a carrier of religious feeling and spiritual wellbeing (Begbie 2007; Francis, McKenna, and Stewart 2024; Wald-Fuhrmann 2024). The high quality of choral performance, evocative of classical music's legitimacy as high art (Preece 2024; Thomas 2015), and the ritualised movement of the procession within the architectural and seasonal context of Advent (Francis et al. 2020, 2021; Pike 2021) generated moments of emotional intensity and spiritual beauty (Rijken 2022). Such affective resonance was not limited to believers, as cathedral music also facilitated a sense of symbolic belonging among participants who attended the service for its musical and cultural atmosphere (Davie 1993; Rosa 2019). Their affective encounters channelled memory and emotion (DeNora 2000; Hesmondhalgh 2013), supporting the claim that sacred music shapes spiritual experience in post-Christian secular society (Arnold 2016).

In the Schools Singing Programme, the aesthetic experience of singing in the cathedral was valued for its symbolic affirmation, especially by families from backgrounds unfamiliar with classical music or cathedral spaces. Some parents and teachers alluded to the performance being more than just a school concert, as they felt like the children had achieved something bigger. Parents and teachers used terms such as 'moving', 'overwhelming' or 'emotional' to describe seeing their children sing in the 'majestic' or 'breathtaking' Cathedral, expressing pride and celebration. Spatial grandeur and classical choral music intensify affective experiences of awe and wonder, especially when framed as rare or prestigious (Arnold 2024; Heylighen 2025). Singing in a sacred space for a public audience is a 'rite of passage' for the children performing and the families attending, reconfiguring participants' sense of legitimacy and belonging. This can be understood as the production of embodied cultural capital where musical and spatial participation confers symbolic prestige and self-confidence, while being tied to the spatial aura of the cathedral and the institutional credibility that comes from singing in it (Bourdieu 1986, 2010). In this way, the SSP performs a double function: it delivers foundational music education (Hallam 2015; Hallam and Himonides 2022) and cultivates upward-facing cultural trajectories that can influence life chances, particularly for children from marginalised backgrounds (Krüger Bridge 2025b, 2025c).

The emotional valency of participation in the Choral Outreach Programme was textured, with participants in choirs like Liverpool64 describing their involvement in musical or aesthetic terms, alongside priorities of wellbeing, community and belonging (Clarke, Dibben, and Pitts 2012; Pitts 2005). For many, these were experiences of personal restoration and social resonance, closely aligned with the findings of MacDonald, Kreutz, and Mitchell (2012) on the role of communal singing in enhancing mental health and emotional wellbeing. Notably, several

participants described these experiences as 'spiritual' despite disclaiming any religious affiliation (Boyce-Tillman 2006). Here, the cathedral functions as a symbolic space that enables collective ritual without enforcing doctrinal belief where cathedral music is a soft means of spiritual belonging without the gatekeeping of faith. Importantly, these affective responses point to the central role of musical participation in constructing spiritual experience, communal meaning and embodied memory. As Finnegan (2007) showed in her ethnographic study of local amateur musicianship, the value of musical engagement lies in the rehearsals, relationships, shared goals and weekly practice, and this was echoed throughout the research data. While participants were drawn by the aesthetic value of choral music itself, becoming part of a musical community underpinned the affective logic of their participation, which reflects the kind of multifaceted belonging that cathedrals in their contemporary reimagining are increasingly seeking to cultivate.

Cultural capital and the classed geographies of cathedral music

While Liverpool Cathedral's choral programmes show commitments to inclusivity, educational outreach and civic relevance, the data reveal patterns of cultural stratification that merit reflection. Across all participation contexts, classed dynamics shape who engages, how and with what forms of cultural literacy, illuminating the continuing relevance of Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital in understanding musical participation in the contemporary cathedral.

The traditional liturgical setting of the Holly Bough Service is most strongly associated with older, middle-class, university-educated participants, largely professional or retired professionals who self-identify as Christian. This group, while deeply invested in the ritual, aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of cathedral music, also reflects a continuity of Anglican cultural identity that aligns with the historically privileged constituency of Church of England congregational life (Guest, Olson, and Wolffe 2012; Page, Guest, and Taylor 2017). Here, the cathedral functions as a site for the subtle performance of cultural privilege through embedded associations between Anglican worship, sacred choral repertoire and middle-class habitus. As Preece and Atkinson (2025) and Preece (2024) observe, cathedral institutions remain powerful producers of social distinction, where the ability to interpret and value particular musical traditions signals access to broader fields of symbolic capital.

However, these dynamics are not uniform across the choral landscape. The Schools Singing Programme (SSP) complicates a straightforward reading of middle-class musical participation. Although many responding parents and teachers held educational qualifications and white-collar roles, the programme itself is delivered directly into primary schools in areas of significant deprivation, serving children living in poverty across the Liverpool City Region (Krüger Bridge 2025b). This disjuncture between the class profile of adult respondents and the lived realities of many children is significant. For pupils and families, the SSP offers cultural capital, exposing them to musical excellence, collective performance and sacred spaces otherwise inaccessible in everyday life. Several interviews described the benefits and impacts of participation in the SSP for children:

> We'd find him singing randomly, like, singing along to songs and in the car just . . . It was something he hadn't done before. (Interview, parent participant)
>
> When it comes to concert performance . . . it makes him more confident. (Interview, parent participant)
>
> He stood in that cathedral and sang . . . I cried. We're not a musical family, we've never been in that world. But for a moment, we were part of it. (Interview, parent participant)
>
> It is impressive in there, and it does give you goose pimples when they're singing . . . Now that my child is in there, you see it in a whole different light. (Interview, parent participant)

The SSP thereby acts as both a musical as well as civic intervention, offering symbolic access to heritage, fostering self-esteem and cultivating forms of cultural fluency that may enhance longer-term educational aspirations. Exposure to elite aesthetic codes can become embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 2010), whereby high-quality singing education in socially mixed contexts can foster musical excellence and broader civic engagement (Saunders et al. 2012). By operating in state schools and aligning with national and SIAMS educational standards, the SSP advances a model of structural inclusivity that disrupts the exclusivities often associated with classical choral traditions. This suggests that music education can function as a *social leveller*, through which institutions traditionally associated with elite culture become sites of public access and symbolic legitimacy. As the Cathedral Music Trust (2022) argued, cathedral outreach schemes offer vital opportunities to recalibrate the relationship between heritage institutions and diverse publics, especially when these schemes operate in partnership with state schools and regional networks (Ashley, Miller, and Pinder 2022). Nevertheless, access and participation depend on a network of enabling conditions, such as school resources, parental support or transport infrastructure, that remain unevenly distributed. As Krüger Bridge (2025b) notes, families living in poverty may face logistical and symbolic barriers to cultural participation, including unfamiliarity with cathedral norms or fear of social exclusion.

This tension reappears in the broader Choral Outreach Programme, which, despite its openness, skewed towards adults with stable incomes, prior musical experience and middle-class cultural fluency. For example, while choirs such as Liverpool64 are described by participants as inclusive and socially supportive, many interviewees noted that joining required some degree of musical self-confidence, prior musical training or social peer support. Although ultimately reassured by the choir's ethos, their apprehension points to the subtle ways cultural capital shapes perceived belonging. This pattern aligns with Pitts (2005) findings that classical community music often reproduces classed participation, even in 'open access' settings.

Yet participation was not framed solely in musical or classed terms. Many respondents and interviewees described choral engagement as emotionally restorative, socially meaningful or spiritually resonant, even where religious belief was absent, enabling moments of transcendence and identity formation. Davie's (1993) concept of non-religious belonging is helpful here to explain why individuals are drawn to cathedral music as a cultural ritual that affirms continuity, community and meaning beyond formal religious boundaries. For many L64 members, the act of singing in the cathedral does not depend on faith but enables affective regulation, temporal immersion and shared presence (Rosa 2019).

This plural participation model, where Christian, secular and post-secular engagements coexist and cathedral music operates across a broader continuum of belief, culture and affect, reflects the shifting functions of the contemporary cathedral as both a sacred institution and a civic site of emotional anchoring. Liverpool Cathedral's choral programmes reach diverse people, including meaningful bridges into classical musical traditions for disadvantaged children, but participation is subtly stratified by educational credentials, musical confidence and cultural familiarity. While this does not undermine their value, it highlights the importance of reflecting on how inclusive participation can be realised in practice. As Hesmondhalgh (2013) argues, the value of music lies not only in its emotional affordances, but in *who* feels welcome to participate, and *how* that participation is structured. Cathedrals, in their drive to serve as democratic and civic cultural institutions, thereby remain alert to the hidden grammars of participation and outreach.

Beyond inclusion: the evolving forms of belonging to the contemporary cathedral

While Liverpool Cathedral's choral programmes have progressed in opening access to sacred musical traditions, closer analysis reveals that *belonging* is culturally mediated, socially stratified and institutionally contingent. The distinction between structural inclusion and felt belonging is crucial for interpreting how choral initiatives both extend and delimit who comes to feel 'at home' in the contemporary cathedral.

A central axis of this dynamic is ethnoracial identity. Across all three contexts, the demographic data reveal a striking overrepresentation of White British participants, contrary to the national trend of increasing minority ethnic Christians (Beach, Slipper, and Worthen 2020). While Liverpool's citywide ethnic diversity is lower than national averages, with approximately 84% of residents identifying as White British (ONS 2021), this highlights the ongoing underrepresentation of BAME groups in the cathedral's choral participation. The slight increase in ethnic diversity within the SSP compared to the other contexts suggests that educational initiatives may serve as a partial corrective, though the imbalance remains structurally significant. Such racialised patterns of belonging cannot be attributed solely to demographic geography. As the Cathedral Music Trust review of cathedral music in the UK acknowledges (Ashley, Miller, and Pinder 2022), cathedral choirs have historically functioned as bastions of cultural whiteness, which are sustained by traditions, aesthetics and recruitment mechanisms that often exclude racially minoritised individuals. While many cathedrals now articulate a commitment to democratisation, the structural entrenchment of financial, cultural and aesthetic capital continues to mediate access.

Institutions such as cathedrals are affective economies, saturated with histories of power, traditions and cultural coding (Ahmed 2012). The cathedral, with its architectural formality, ecclesiastical language and elite musical heritage, can produce an atmosphere of formality, grandeur and even intimidation, feelings often expressed by participants in the cathedral's outreach programme. Participants from minoritised or marginalised backgrounds often must navigate these spaces with heightened reflexivity. The question here is not simply whether one can attend, but whether one *belongs*, a question shaped by both visible demographics and unspoken cultural norms. In this regard, the presence of social connectors, such as friends, family or choir directors, can play a decisive role in

shaping participation and belonging. This relational scaffolding is central to fostering sustainable participation through feelings of belonging. As DeNora (2000) has shown, music's social power lies in the relational ecologies it supports. Liverpool Cathedral's outreach programme is a powerful site for such connections, which requires ongoing attentiveness to how participants are welcomed, supported and retained.

Gender further complicates the landscape of cathedral belonging. Across all three contexts, women constituted the majority of participants, reflecting both broader societal patterns whereby women disproportionately engage in community and cultural life (Pitts 2005; Reay 2004) and persistent gendered barriers in Anglican cathedral music that limit women's ongoing inclusion (Doyle 2020). This gendered distribution maps closely onto role expectations: in liturgical contexts, women are often the spiritual and emotional labourers of family faith; in educational contexts, they predominate as primary caregivers and teachers; and in community choirs, they anchor social cohesion and expressive culture. As Parkinson (2019) has shown, choral singing in community choirs is dominated by women, to whom it functions as a space of self-expression and social bonding, an outlet for care, creativity and connection often denied in other institutional spheres.

However, even as women form the numerical and affective centre of these choirs, men and LGBTQ+ participants report more ambivalent trajectories into belonging (see also Young, Shipley, and Trothen 2015). As one gay L64 member explained: 'I don't always know how visible I can be . . . There's still a lot of Anglican tradition in the air' (Interview, L64 singer). This aligns with Wilcox's (2002) observation that religious spaces, even when welcoming, remain shaped by residual heteronormativity and liturgical codes that subtly privilege normative identities. The cathedral's historical function as a guardian of tradition thus becomes both a strength and constraint, fostering beauty and continuity, but also reinscribing invisible lines of exclusion. While the presence of LGBTQ+ singers in the outreach choir signals progress, true cultural inclusion requires an active restructuring of belonging. Importantly, these patterns of limited racial and sexual diversity are not offset by access alone. As participants repeatedly noted, the cathedral's symbolic and affective architecture remains, for some, a source of hesitation. The grandeur, formal attire, liturgical norms and repertoire of classical sacred music carry with them embedded codes of class, race, gender and religious literacy that continue to shape who feels invited to participate.

Nonetheless, there are important exceptions that point to shifting forms of belonging. The Schools Singing Programme is delivered to pupils from schools in some of the most deprived areas of the Liverpool City Region (Krüger Bridge 2025b, 2025c). For these children and, by extension, their families, the SSP offers not only access to musical excellence but also exposure to culturally prestigious spaces, often for the first time. Parents and teachers often described the experience of performing inside the Cathedral as *transformative* for their children. This momentary inclusion, while emotionally powerful, reveals both the potential and the limitations of such programmes. The affective impact is real, but the conditions for sustainable belonging, including musical progression, regular access and broader family engagement, remain unevenly distributed.

Similarly, the non-auditioned accessibility to the Cathedral's community choirs provides a more porous and egalitarian model of belonging. Participants cited the welcoming ethos and collective joy of singing as key motivators. Here, belonging is produced not through cultural capital or liturgical fluency, but through a socially shared rhythm of

weekly rehearsal, common purpose and mutual recognition. Yet even these more inclusive settings are not immune to deeper structural conditions. Transport costs, caregiving responsibilities, time restrictions and perceived musical inadequacy, among other reasons, were all cited as barriers to sustained participation. This is echoed by Bloska et al. (2025) in their comprehensive study of facilitators and barriers to address equitable access to adult community choirs. In this regard, the difference between inclusion and belonging becomes a question of practical support and symbolic affirmation.

Ultimately, belonging in the contemporary cathedral is not a static status but a contingent, contested and continually negotiated process, shaped by the intersection of identity and institution. Liverpool Cathedral's choral programmes exemplify the promise and paradox of this process, extending access and generating resonance and affective connection, while also revealing how cultural legacies, spatial atmospheres and aesthetic regimes continue to shape who can fully call the cathedral theirs. To move beyond inclusion is not to abandon tradition, but to critically examine its textures, and to imagine new forms of sacred belonging in an increasingly plural and secular world.

The shifting functions of the contemporary cathedral

This study contributes to a growing body of literature that explores how Anglican cathedrals are functionally diversifying in response to demographic, cultural and economic change (Guest 2022; Platten 2017). The comparative analysis of three musical contexts at Liverpool Cathedral demonstrates how choral participation increasingly mediates between traditional religious observance and contemporary cultural participation.

The Holly Bough Service exemplifies the cathedral's traditional function as a space of Anglican ritual and civic Christianity, characterised by older adults, established congregants and family groups with historic affiliations, and marked by seasonal attendance patterns tied to faith, memory and ritual. In contrast, the Schools Singing Programme illustrates the cathedral's civic and educational function, wherein religious identity recedes in favour of pedagogical value. Participation by parents and teachers, many of whom identify as non-religious, is motivated by musical enrichment and children's educational development.

The Choral Outreach Programme mediates these two poles, reflecting a central paradox of sacred music in secular society, in which cathedral music is detached from explicit religiosity, while continuing to offer aesthetic, ethical and even spiritual experiences for diverse publics (Arnold 2016), which aligns with a broader trend in which cathedrals operate as open, plural and civic institutions (Muskett and Francis 2015).

The comparative findings across Liverpool Cathedral's three choral contexts suggest a subtle but significant redefinition of what it means for a cathedral to be a sacred, civic and cultural space in twenty-first-century Britain. As participation becomes increasingly shaped by aesthetic appreciation, educational affiliation and emotional connection despite of religious belief, cathedral music is a means through which cathedrals sustain relevance, foster belonging and engage plural publics. The cathedral's multifaceted commitment as both a keeper of tradition and an innovator culturally and spiritually aligns with Guest's (2022) conception of the 'post-secular cathedral', an institution that

engages secular publics through cultural forms while retaining an implicit theological vision.

In sum, for many participants, choral participation provides entry points into previously unfamiliar traditions, and a deepened sense of belonging and being-with-others. These outcomes are significant, as they speak to the enduring power of cathedral music as heritage, sacred practice and social technology. While the cathedral remains a place *for* music, it is also a place *through* which musical, spiritual and social worlds are co-constructed. If cathedral institutions are to sustain their relevance in the decades to come, the Liverpool model highlights the importance to reach out and across theological, educational and musical spheres by promoting choral programme diversity and renewed attentiveness to the lived experiences of those who participate and those who do not.

Conclusion

This article mapped the sociological contours of adult choral participation across three distinct contexts at Liverpool Cathedral: liturgical services, educational initiatives and wider music outreach. Grounded in the interdisciplinary field of cathedral studies and informed by a mixed-methods methodology, the research illustrated who participates, how and why, thereby foregrounding the patterns, motivations and barriers that shape contemporary engagement with Anglican choral life.

The analysis revealed clear distinctions in participant demographics and relational proximity to the cathedral. Liturgical events such as the Holly Bough Service were closely associated with older, religiously affiliated and socioeconomically privileged participants, often motivated by tradition, aesthetic resonance and personal or familial ritual. Educational outreach through the Schools Singing Programme attracted a more socioeconomically and religiously diverse group of parents and educators, whose engagement was framed less in theological terms than in relation to music learning, social confidence and cultural access. Meanwhile, the Choral Outreach Programme demonstrated the broadest and most sustained patterns of participation, incorporating adult, youth and children choirs motivated by musical development, social bonding and wellbeing, and a diffuse but often deeply felt sense of spiritual connection.

The findings show that cathedral music functions as a mediator between sacred tradition, cultural participation and civic inclusion in contemporary Britain. The comparison of three choral programmes at Liverpool Cathedral demonstrates how participation is shaped not only by religious belief, but also by affective experience, cultural capital and institutional belonging. The study showed that sacred music generates spiritual resonance and social belonging even among those without doctrinal commitment, while educational outreach and community choirs open new routes into cathedral life. Yet it also revealed that patterns of inclusion remain stratified by class, race, gender and sexuality, and that the cathedral's historical legacies continue to shape who feels able to belong. By highlighting the shifting functions of the cathedral as a liturgical, educational and cultural institution, the article underscores the need for ongoing reflexivity and structural change in order to sustain cathedral music as a genuinely inclusive, affective and civic resource.

Beyond theoretical contributions, the findings carry implications for key stakeholders in sustaining and expanding cathedral music. For cultural policymakers, cathedral leaders and funders, the evidence affirms the cultural and civic relevance of cathedral

choirs as inclusive musical platforms, supporting strategies to preserve excellence and remove barriers for marginalised communities. For music ministry teams, the data reinforces the value of relational, non-auditioned choirs that foster emotional wellbeing, spiritual resonance and social connection, offering blueprints for inclusive practice. For headteachers and music educators, the Schools Singing Programme demonstrates how cathedral partnerships contribute to cultural capital, educational confidence and pupils' life chances, positioning sacred choral music as a shared civic and pedagogical resource rather than an elite tradition.

Ultimately, this study offers empirical insight into the shifting functions of the contemporary cathedral. Mapping choral participation across liturgical worship, educational outreach and communal musical practice, it reconceptualises the cathedral as a dynamic and pluralistic institution negotiating the demands of civic responsibility, cultural inclusion and spiritual resonance. The findings reveal how participation is shaped by class, belief, gender and race, and how musical experience, whether aesthetic, relational or affective, fosters belonging in secular society. As cathedrals face challenges of declining religiosity, widening inequality and institutional legitimacy, this study affirms choral music's role not merely as heritage, but as a transformative, socially embedded practice. The cathedral emerges as both a place of worship and a civic space where communities imagine new forms of relational life.

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