

An Evening with
Castlecomer Male Voice Choir
with Harriet Jones (Mezzo-Soprano)

Saturday 30th October 2010, Hamilton Street Church, Hoole, Chester

It was wonderful to welcome the Castlecomer Male Voice Choir from Ireland (south of Dublin) to take part in the well varied concert series at Hamilton Street Methodist Church on Saturday 30th October. Many of their friends had travelled from Ireland with them, and it was splendid to share a warmly uplifting evening's music-making together. The 28-strong choir was formed in 1985 and has performed as far away as Jersey, Vienna and Prague, as well as competing in national competitions, and two years ago produced a CD dedicated to the memory of deceased members. Geraldine Murphy has been their musical director since 2001, and from the enjoyable performances this evening it is clear that she is an excellent musician, drawing a fine response from all the members. Ian Belton was their guest piano accompanist on this occasion; he is well known in this area, especially for his work with the Brymbo and City of Chester Male Voice Choirs, and there was an excellent rapport between him, Geraldine and the Choir.

John Evans (the Church's organist and concert organiser) introduced the choir, Geraldine and Ian, and then members of the choir introduced each of their items with many points of interest, sometimes adding humour to the happy, warm atmosphere. They opened with a group of five sacred items: "How Great Thou Art" made a strong start to the concert, followed by a lovely contrast in "The Lord Is My Shepherd", which featured much attention to detail, including variety in dynamics, gentleness and an effective descant in the last verse. "All In The April Evening" was gentle and moving; "Dona Nobis" flowed really well, with well-balanced contrapuntal lines and clear diction of the Latin words, while "Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer" brought the first group to a stirring, uplifting conclusion, with good dynamic contrasts.

The middle of each part was given over to Harriet Jones, and John was delighted to be able to introduce her as a member of this Church, who had recently achieved a distinction in the ABRSM Singing Diploma examination. She introduced all her items, the two in this part of the concert being quite substantial and she had sung both in her singing diploma examination; from her performances this evening, she fully deserved the award of distinction! Michael Williams, one of Chester's finest and most experienced musicians, accompanied Harriet expertly at the piano, bringing out all the details most effectively (these piano parts originally being for orchestra), in excellent balance with Harriet's outstanding interpretations. First came Galatea's aria "As When The Dove" from Handel's wonderful "Acis and Galatea" of 1717/18, in which Harriet made a powerful opening entry, followed by a beautiful lifting feel to the main section and a sensitive contrast in the central section, with superb command of Handel's fluid vocal writing. "On Mighty Pens" (she remarked that "Pens" refers to "wings") from Haydn's oratorio "The Creation" of 1796/98 again showed her fine control of vocal techniques, combined a vivid interpretation, this being about the creation of birds, with much imaginative writing by Haydn. This performance was a great joy, with a marvellous range of expression, contrasting lightness and power. She also referred to her love of gardens and birds, so appropriate for both these items by Handel and Haydn.

To conclude Part One, the Choir returned to sing five folk songs from different countries, starting with "Sheanandoah" from the USA, with a lovely, quiet, flowing opening and well-balanced contrapuntal lines later on, and a moving, gentle ending. They brought out much humour and lively jollity in "Waltzing Matilda" from Australia, with fine rhythmic vitality, clear diction, and a brilliant precision in the quiet, comical ending! More jollity came in their singing of "The Foggy, Foggy Dew" from England, with another fine ending, followed by further contrast (well displaying their splendid versatility) in the Negro Spiritual "Lil David", in which they really

caught the atmosphere with fine syncopated rhythmic vitality, notable precision in quiet parts, and enhanced by Ian's fine piano playing. Finally came Robert Burns' "My Love Is Like A Red, Red Rose" from Scotland, in which they sang unaccompanied with excellent part singing, full of expression; really beautiful.

At the start of Part Two, John Evans announced that the next concert will be Nigel Ogden's welcome annual visit (he presents BBC Radio 2's "Organist Entertains") on Friday evening, 3rd December, which also marks the start of the Church's wonderful Christmas Tree Festival. The Choir opened this part with a varied group of five items, starting with two popular songs: a lively, cheerful performance of "Love Is All Around" (used in the film "Four Weddings And A Funeral"), and "You Raise Me Up" (an Irish piece, from 2001/02 – Brian Kennedy) which was full of feeling, with a steady rhythm and good dynamic contrasts. "Bring Him Home" from "Les Misérables" was pleasant and gentle, with an effective piano accompaniment. "Sunset Poem" is a setting of Eli Jenkins' "Evening Prayer" from Dylan Thomas' "Under Milk Wood", to the music of Troyte's Chant, and their unaccompanied reading of it was beautiful, full of spiritual feeling. This was followed by a great contrast of mood in a vigorous, cheerful performance of "When The Saints Go Marching" with clear contrapuntal lines, a splendid piano accompaniment and a brilliant conclusion which caught out the audience with much applause before the actual end – great fun!

Harriet returned and gave interesting introductions to her group of four songs, starting with "Voi Che Sapete" from Mozart's opera "The Marriage of Figaro", sung in Italian with excellent diction, beautiful tone and expression, and full of characterisation of the young boy Cherubino who sings this in Act 2 of the opera. She showed her admirable versatility in the range of her songs: next came the delightful song "Villanelle", the first from Berlioz's wonderful song cycle of 1840/41 "Les Nuits d'été", which she sang in French with superb attention to diction and detail, notable for delicacy in this exquisite performance, with Michael adding so much in the piano part (Berlioz also orchestrated these accompaniments). Before singing an early but characteristic song by Elgar, "The Shepherd's Song", Harriet thanked Michael for his superb piano accompaniments, this song being the last in which he took part, and the two of them gave a delightful performance, again with much feeling and good characterisation, being in another different style to her other songs in this concert. Finally, she introduced Stephen Adams' "The Holy City" (published in 1892), which she had been requested to sing, and for which she welcomed John Evans to accompany her at the organ, moving to stand at the top of the steps by the organ console; the wonderfully uplifting performance brought members of the audience to their feet in a well deserved standing ovation! Throughout her performances, Harriet's facial expression and hand movements added much meaning to the music.

The Choir opened their final group with a splendid, vigorous performance of "The Soldier's Chorus" from Gounod's opera "Faust", and followed it with a lovely reading of the Irish folk ballad "The Fields of Athenry", notable for a memorable, quiet opening and, later on, effective contrapuntal lines. "The Palatine's Daughter" (an Irish folk song) was particularly jolly, with a brilliant ending! – well contrasted with the popular Italian song "Softly As I Leave You", in which there was some beautifully-toned singing, effective command of key changes, and a moving section with Ian's fine piano playing alongside humming by the Choir. Then came some presentations which added to the joyful atmosphere! – members of the Choir said words of thanks as they gave presents to John, Ian, Roy Gallimore (of the City of Chester Male Voice Choir) for inviting them here, Harriet, Geraldine, plus a special mention to the Mayor of Wrexham (Irish connection!). John then gave an excellent vote of thanks to everyone, and one of the Choir members introduced the final item: "An American Trilogy", which Mickey Newbury composed in 1972 using three 19th century songs – "Dixie", "All My Troubles" and "Battle Hymn Of The Republic" – and given a gloriously sonorous performance, being a glorious ending to a splendid concert! The Choir and their superb conductor, Geraldine, were also given a standing ovation by the audience of 100, and showed much enthusiasm throughout the evening, in a particularly friendly atmosphere with many Irish visitors! It is hoped that they come here again!

Ian Milnes – 3rd November 2010