

Côr Cymry Gogledd America in Calgary & Banff: Where our voices found each other!

by Dr. Mari Morgan

What a thrilling time we had together! A beacon of Welshness in western Canada!

Our Côr Cymry Gogledd America (Côr Cymry) concert tour to Calgary and Banff last June was a great success. After such a long wait, it was a thrill to see each other and hear our voices in beautiful song and friendship. The key, as always, was the tremendous teamwork.

CANADA – the huge colorful letters in the arrivals hall of Calgary International Airport spelled out the *croeso* of our assembly point. Choristers and friends from thirteen American states, from Ontario and Quebec in Canada, and Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire in Wales all showed up for each other. On time!

As our tour bus pulled away from the airport curb, the travel fatigue fell away with the excitement of the journey that was beginning as our tour group of 48 friends, old and new, was enroute to our first destination. After the disappointment of 2020 and 2021 – we were really there, in June 2022!

The high decibels of chatter and laughter on the bus soon turned into an awed hush as we were enveloped in the sheer majesty and beauty of the country we were traveling through. Cameras clicked and videos ran but there was nothing that could capture that first shared experience of the wonder of nature and the magnificence of the mountains of the Banff National Park.

The Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity would be homebase for the first few days. The campus, high above the town of Banff and nestled in the mountains, would be our place of learning, inspiration and creativity.

“I’ve never seen anything like it!”, said bass chorister, Ron Roberts, as we took our seats for the welcome dinner in the campus restaurant, aptly named ‘The Vista’. The floor to ceiling glass walls provided unending views of the splendor and scale of the snow-capped mountains of the northern Rockies.

“The air is so crisp and clean, I can breathe again!” said one long-covid sufferer.

The gentle healing of nature was quietly restoring our harmony. In the safe beauty of our surroundings, the pandemic fatigue began to fade away as the possibilities began to emerge in the joy ignited by friendships old and new.

But it would be our friendships in music that would be the ultimate balm – the beauty of our Welsh songs.

The first morning of any Côr Cymry tour always involves rehearsal. The gentle stretching of muscles both body and voice beginning the journey through the songs coming alive again with the sounds of our voices. The sure footing of the piano and our pianist, Kim Lloyd Jones, supporting the growing confidence of an ensemble of singers ready to be a performance choir – ready to be Côr Cymry Gogledd America.

“Our very first in-person rehearsal was in a large room that provided a magnificent view of snow-capped mountains. And, yet we all kept our eye on our esteemed choral director!”, wrote bass and soprano, Rod and Linda Owen from Virginia.

Well, it helped to lower the

blinds on the wall of windows. The frequent breaks out on the patio to take in the sweet mountain air and to be absorbed by nature, fueled our rehearsal. We journeyed through the songs, those of composers and writers we had come to know so well during our Zoom sessions - Robat Arwyn, Eric Jones, Meirion Wynn Jones, Mererid Hopwood, Kim Lloyd Jones, Delyth Rees and more. The words beautifully aligning thanks to our Côr Cymry Dysgu Cymraeg classes with Hefina, Lisa and Dan.

Lle mae llais yn cyffwrdd lleisiau – not easy words for Welsh learners but the meaning meant so much. We approached them anew:

You’ll find a light to guide your night
And lead you through every stormy cloud;
A light that shines a pathway across the wildest sea,
A light from deep inside a heartbeat,
The light that sets us free.

...this light that’s love;
If we dare to see together
we will reach the love-lit land,
where one voice will find another,
where my hand will find your hand.

The excitement was building – we were preparing songs for their first ever performance in Canada.

“What is your desired focus and outcome for your residency in Banff?” the President of the Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity, Janice Price had asked me by email.

My answer to Janice was, “An opportunity to work, re-group and sing together again as a performance ensemble in a beautiful and safe environment that brings joy to the soul and gets the creativity juices going! To re-experience the pure joy of singing together and sharing our music with others.”

We were almost there.

Our first concert was later that same day in the intimate setting of St George in the Pines Anglican Church. Awaiting us at the church door were David and Mona Matthews – our dear friends from the Calgary Welsh Society.

The Calgary Welsh Society had invited us to Alberta and worked so hard to help make the tour a reality. David Matthews greeted our audience and got the evening concert underway.

Janice Price, Banff Centre president and warden of St George’s Church, was invited to acknowledge and recognize the lands of the First Nation peoples, and the community of Banff. Ms. Price’s eloquent opening remarks set a lovely tone for our concert. We celebrated in the beautiful harmonies of our first in-person concert since 2019. What a treat that was for us all.

“A unique, professional, enriching, warm, and thoroughly enjoyable experience making music, beginning in the glorious beauty of Banff”, wrote Steve Glynn from Columbia, IL.

Wednesday morning we left Banff to make our way to Calgary. Reluctantly leaving the mountains, we were ready, though, for our performances in the big city. On the way we made a special detour to



Lake Louise, Alberta

gorgeous Lake Louise where we enjoyed a picnic lunch treat together, thanks to Sabrina and William Clark.

Celebrating Wales in Calgary was the theme of our visit to Canada’s third largest city.

The Calgary Welsh Society was our host and partner in this grand venture, and we shared so many memorable experiences together.

The magnificent atrium of the Calgary Central Public Library was the location of the first event where Côr Cymry received its official *croeso* to Calgary and sang a lunchtime concert on the steps of the striking Shaikh Family Welcome Gallery. Alongside, the Calgary Welsh Society’s specially curated photographic exhibition shone a bright spotlight on the contribution of the Welsh pioneers to Alberta, telling the story in full for the first time.

David Matthews, on behalf of the Calgary Welsh Society and Côr Cymry, received the Presentation of Tobacco, Exchange of Knowledge, and Land Acknowledgement by Elder Shirley Hill. Elder Hill then greeted us with the Fancy Shawl Dance.

The ladies of the Calgary Welsh Society, elegantly dressed in finely made Welsh costumes, graced our gathering. Later they would kindly host a reception and provide a space for conversation and relaxation. Being able to share in sustenance and easy conversation together after so many years of covid isolation, was a special gift for us all.

Cameras sent by the Welsh Government in Canada filmed our proceedings at Calgary’s jewel of a Central Library.

The Grand Finale Concert was at Grace Presbyterian Church on the evening of Saturday, June 25th. The church hosted its largest audience since before the pandemic. Côr Cymry sang magnificently with every chorister giving their all. We had waited a long time to sing, and we did! The church’s technology allowed us to share the concert via livestream with choristers, friends, and family at home. Members of the Calgary Welsh Society saw each other in person for the first time in a long while. And at the end, the mighty sanctuary rang with our combined singing of our Welsh National Anthem – Hen Wlad fy Nhadau.

Who could have known when we began planning the tour for 2020 that we would need to deal with the challenges of a worldwide pandemic – but with great teamwork and mutual understanding, and a love of all things Welsh, we did it!

And as a personal treat, I was



Dinner at the Railway Orientation Centre, Calgary Heritage Park



Calgary Public Library



Grace Presbyterian Church, Calgary

able to meet with cousins and close family who I had never met before. They were the descendants of my grandmother’s brother and his family who had emigrated from the Gwendraeth Valley to Alberta in 1929. You know I’ll be back for another visit!

A huge and heartfelt thanks to

the Board and members of the Calgary Welsh Society. Diolch o galon i Gymdeithas Gymreig Calgary. Thank you for helping us find our voices again. Long may the proud beacon of *Welshness* shine strong in western Canada.

Hwyl am y tro | Until the next time!