

ADVERTISING FEATURE **BEARSDEN CHOIR**

There may be no live audience for this year's Christmas performances from Bearsden Choir, but those watching the seasonal shows online are certainly in for a wonderful – and safe – festive treat

MUSICIANS of every genre have been taking their first steps back to live performance. The devastating but necessary restrictions of the pandemic are becoming slightly less onerous, but for some groups those steps need to be more tentative.

Bearsden Choir is renowned for its performances of large-scale choral works. With around 120 voices, rushing back to singing together unmasked would, of course, have been inconceivable. The road back to singing together in person had to be paved with careful blocks, each building a little more confidence for members.

There will be no audience at Bearsden Choir's first live performance together. The Countdown to Christmas is five short pieces of seasonal music, which will be filmed. One will be broadcast on each of the five days running up to Christmas Day.

There has been careful preparation for the moment when 118 voices come together with musicians at Kingsborough Sanctuary to record the performances.

Keeping the choir connected during the height of the pandemic was the greatest priority. Using Zoom, it was clear that members were equally keen to maintain that connection, with around 100 logging in to weekly singing rehearsals. These became "Inspire" sessions, with not only guest appearances from the likes of composer John Rutter but well-being sessions covering everything from vocal technique to yoga.

The choir's planned performance of Mendelssohn's Elijah was thwarted by lockdown, but the next step was to encourage members to upload videos of themselves singing their parts of two movements at home, which was brought together and broadcast – no mean feat when there were more than 90 members taking part.

The choir's next step was in May – a critically acclaimed online performance of Vivaldi's Gloria. "This was the next step," says Director of Music Andrew Nunn. "It was a hybrid performance, blending virtual recordings with live recordings that I made of soloists and musicians."

As much as the choir would have loved being back with their audience this Christmas, it was clear that this next step needed to be taken slowly and safely.

"We knew that we wouldn't be back in our usual home, the City Halls in Glasgow, this year," says Bearsden Choir chairman John Wotton. "We need to look at the safety of our members, their families and our audience and we made a decision for the long-term health and success of the choir."

We will look at Bearsden Choir's Countdown to Christmas programme in detail next week. The preparation to its



A harmonious festive performance to suit all



Main image, vocalists John Stringer, Kenny Douglas, John Wotton and Iain Foulds will be among the 118 voices of Bearsden Choir taking part in a special online concert

recording has taken several months, beginning with the first in-person rehearsals at Maryhill Burgh Hall in September. John Wotton says that the members were consulted at every stage, using online tools such as Google Polls to get feedback from members on how they wanted to proceed and how they could return to in-person singing together in a way that would allow them to feel safe.

The choir members were required to be fully vaccinated and to rehearse in a mask. He adds that the choir has not lost members as a result of these precautions and these careful steps have allowed the membership to build their confidence in the return to live singing.

"We've done a lot of research," adds John. "The choir is also a member of an organisation

called Making Music, an organisation that provided advice, which was updated regularly."

Rehearsals at Maryhill Burgh Halls were taken in two shifts to allow for social distancing and when it came to a performance space, John and Andrew Nunn spent two days looking for the right space.

"We decided on Kingsborough Sanctuary," says Andrew. "It's the former Hyndland Parish Church and we could see that it was a space that would not only be acoustically excellent, but also, now that the pews are removed, there is room for the 118 members taking part in the performance. This is the first that will be done unmasked."

John adds that every member has been asked to take a Covid test on the morning of the performance. "The measures we have taken so far means that we have stayed Covid-free and we want that to remain so that we can begin the year looking forward to rehearsals for our return to the City Halls in May 2022, when we will be with our audience once again, performing a large-scale work."

■ **Bearsden Choir's Countdown to Christmas will be broadcast online from December 21 to 25. Watch at Bearsden Choir's own website bearsdenchoir.com, its YouTube channel or its Facebook page, as well as The Herald's website and Facebook page**