

ADVERTISING FEATURE BEARSDEN CHOIR

The highly-anticipated performance by Bearsden Choir in Glasgow later this month will be a moment of personal triumph for Motherwell singer Monica McGhee, who is marking her fifth year in remission from cancer. By Nan Spowart

WHEN acclaimed soprano Monica McGhee takes to the stage in City Halls this month for a guest appearance with Bearsden Choir it will be a “watershed” moment for both. The choir will be celebrating their first performance in front of a live audience since the pandemic, while this will be the first time Monica has performed with them since collapsing in the middle of the famous Rejoice aria from Handel’s Messiah.

Monica, who was singing not long after an operation to remove a cancerous tumour from her neck, fainted during the choir’s 50th anniversary celebration at the City Halls in 2017.

It is a moment that has haunted her ever since, so when she steps on stage on May 22 she hopes it will be a “line in the sand” as she recently celebrated five years in remission from thyroid cancer.

“Actually to say I have been haunted by it, is probably an understatement,” says Monica who is from Motherwell but is now based in London. “It was horrendous; really traumatic and the source of a lot of anxiety.”

Tests following her collapse revealed her neck was twisted internally after a major operation to remove a tumour which had appeared just as she was making real progress in her career as a soloist.

The cancer diagnosis was a “devastating” blow as she had wanted to be a singer from a young age and had progressed rapidly, following graduation from the Royal Conservatoire in Glasgow and a Master’s from the Royal College of Music. She then began singing with Scottish Opera, English National Opera and the Royal Opera House but found a lump in her neck in 2016 when she was warming up for a concert in London.

A few months later she was diagnosed with cancer.

“My first thoughts were whether I was going to die, if I was going to



Star soprano stages a notable comeback

lose my voice and if I was going to lose my hair,” Monica said. “Everyone said it was the best kind of cancer to get because the survival rate is high but there was no guarantee that my voice could be saved. I know people who have had the same operation and even their speaking voice has been irreparably damaged and that was

just my worst fear.”

The night before her operation, in fact, she sang every single role she would have wanted to sing in her career in case she would never sing again.

Fortunately, it was successful and chemotherapy was not needed because of her early

diagnosis but recovery took much longer than Monica had ever anticipated.

She tried to throw herself back into work but her voice still did not feel quite right and it was only after her collapse on stage that the cause of the problem was discovered.

To her horror, she was told she had to stop singing solos to allow her voice to rest although she was allowed to sing in the chorus while she underwent physiotherapy to strengthen her neck.

“Recovery has lasted a lot longer than I thought but other people have worse things to deal with,” said

Monica.

Rest and physiotherapy restored her



Soprano
Monica
McGhee



Conductor Andrew Nunn, left, will lead the acclaimed Bearsden Choir in their first post-pandemic return to the live stage at Glasgow’s City Halls on Sunday, May 22

voice so well that she was accepted as the Young Artist soprano at the National Opera Studio for 2020/21 although the pandemic unfortunately meant some opportunities were cancelled.

July 18 last year saw her return to the stage in a leading role when she played Donna Anna in Don Giovanni at the Dorset Opera Festival and she has recently been touring with Scottish Opera. Returning to the City Halls with Bearsden Choir will be particularly special, however.

“It will be quite a watershed moment

as I am five years in remission and once I sing in this concert and it goes wonderfully well, it will be a beautiful line drawn in the sand for me,” Monica said. “It’s not that I will ever forget what happened but I won’t be ruled by it. I can leave it behind me.

“Lots of people have some form of trauma but you can’t settle and live in that negative thought. You can acknowledge it happened but don’t let it rule your life.

“The choir are being very supportive in allowing me to come back and do this



Once I sing in this concert, it will be a beautiful line drawn in the sand

but the concert is not about me coming back – it is a celebration of a group of people who kept their choir alive during a pandemic and a conductor that kept their spirits high.

“They are here to celebrate their first time back and I think it is really lovely I can get to be part of that celebration and have a tiny personal celebration of my own.”

Conductor Andrew Nunn, who studied with Monica at the Royal Conservatoire and is a long time friend, said it was “very exciting” that she was going to perform with the choir. “She has had a real battle so for her to be able to return to the stage is fantastic,”

he said. He added that, as well as being the first time since before the pandemic that the choir had performed in public, it would also be the first time the singers would be singing without masks.

“For the first time in a long time it will feel completely normal to be on stage,” said Andrew. “It’s another reason for the choir to be excited.”

The choir, which has been in full rehearsal since January, will be performing two classical staples. The first is Haydn’s Nelson Mass, which it has performed before, but the second, Mozart’s Solemn Vespers, is new to the choir.

“They are loving getting their teeth stuck into something new,” said Andrew. “The choir was 50-years-old in 2018 so it is quite unusual to find a piece they have never performed in their history.”

There will be four Scottish soloists: soprano Monica McGhee, mezzo-soprano Penelope Cousland, tenor Jamie MacDougall, and bass Andy McTaggart.

“We’re very proud that we have four talented Scottish soloists joining us on our journey,” said Andrew.

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BEARSDEN CHOIR

HAYDN NELSON MASS

MOZART SOLEMN VESPERS

**SUNDAY 22ND MAY 2022 @ 4PM
GLASGOW CITY HALLS**

TICKETS £20, £15, £10 & £5 (STUDENTS & CHILDREN)

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