

Review: Wonderful Christmas time as Choir in great voice

Music

Bearsden Choir:

Countdown To Christmas

Keith Bruce

A CHOIR that has been so inventive, as well as so careful, during the coronavirus pandemic would always be worth wider appreciation. As events have panned out, Bearsden Choir may also appear to have been blessed with second sight.

Taking advantage of what has turned out to be a brief window of opportunity, the singers managed to reconvene for carefully-managed rehearsals in Maryhill Burgh Hall this autumn and then assembled in Hyndland's Kingsborough Sanctuary – one of Broomhill Hyndland Parish Church's places of worship – at the start of this month to film a version

of the Christmas concert it would previously have given in Glasgow City Halls.

Of necessity it is a much briefer programme, of four contemporary carols and one modern arrangement of a very old one, but it is probably impossible to over-estimate how much consolation the choir's singing will be to housebound people when the music is made publicly available this week.

It is a well-chosen selection of songs, with one by master of choral composition John Rutter, who has been a guest at one of the choir's online meetings, two by veteran composer Alan Bullard, and one by the rather younger Philip Stopford, who now plies his trade as a choirmaster in New York.

The traditional carol is Gaudete, its Latin text of 16th century Scandinavian origin, performed in an arrangement by Cecilia McDowall

with which the choir was already familiar. By some way the brashest proclamation of Christ's birth in the set, the choir give it full voice but without sacrificing any diction. Plaudits should go to the sopranos for the ringing descant in the final verse.

The women of the choir also launch Stopford's A Christmas Blessing, a prayer that is quite formal in structure and features a beautifully graded crescendo, every eye on chorusmaster Andrew Nunn.

Rutter's Christmas Lullaby hints subtly at other tunes and employs Ave Maria as its chorus. It features precise unison singing before accompanist Chris Nickol drops out for the a capella harmonies of the third verse.

Listeners to Radio 3 will have heard a number of new settings of Christina Rossetti's Love Came Down At Christmas this week as the network broadcast the finalists in its annual

carol composition. Alan Bullard's is a more established part of the canon and a far from easy sing, with some tricky timing. Having negotiated those hurdles, the choir adds a very poised coda to their performance.

A Londoner who studied with Herbert Howells and has worked in the south of England all his life, Bullard also supplies the Scots coda to Bearsden Choir's sequence of carols. Scots Nativity shows his familiarity with traditional music, and especially Gaelic song, in its cadences, as well as echoing church canon.

Filmed in elegantly simple style by Demus Productions, and with crystal clear sound recording by Matthew Swan, Bearsden's Countdown To Christmas starts tomorrow and is accessible via its own website, bearsdenchoir.com, its YouTube Channel and Facebook page or on heraldscotland.com.