

Arts | SPONSORED FEATURE

Chorus still getting their act together

A Bearsden singing group show how it's possible to remain in harmony throughout an emergency

KEITH BRUCE

WHEN the story of the ingenuity of humans during this coronavirus emergency comes to be written, there will be a special chapter for choirs and chorus-masters.

Faced with a complete prohibition on singing together at a time when that activity was going through a resurgence in popularity, the dangers of aerosol transmission of the disease required some radical thinking and comprehensive re-skilling.

Bearsden Choir, based in the affluent suburb of north Glasgow but recruiting much more widely, is two years past its 50th birthday. Under the directorship of Andrew Nunn, who is also the Junior Conservatoire's director of choirs at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and artistic director of the National Youth Choir of Northern Ireland, it was one of those amateur choruses going through a boom era, with healthy membership numbers and regular, well received concerts before Christmas and in the early summer.

When the shutters came down on all that a year ago, both Nunn and choir chairman John Wotton admit that they had failed to see disaster ahead.

Wotton, a baritone celebrating his 30th year in the choir, says: "This past year being chairman has become not

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



quite a full-time job, but very demanding. The things we've had to do require a huge amount of preparation, so much more than we had to do in the past with traditional live concerts. The logistics have been quite challenging."

We are talking, appropriately, via Zoom, which has been a lifeline for the choir, and Nunn joins us fresh from a Zoom rehearsal with the girls of the Northern Ireland youth choir.

He remembers the abrupt way everything in his working life changed.

"The last time we met together was on Wednesday, 11 March, 2020. We had a really good rehearsal and I'm very glad it was. We rehearse in quite a small hall in Bearsden and at the end of it there was no feeling in the room that we wouldn't be singing the next week.

"But over the next two days it was clear that things were starting to change, and at the Junior Conservatoire on Saturday there was such a weird atmosphere. Loads of the kids were off, and it was supposed to be the last week before the Easter break.

"It took us a couple of weeks to get sorted, but then we started meeting on this thing everyone had discovered called Zoom. At the start of April we

had our first Zoom rehearsal and that kept us going. At first I found it very difficult, because I was a bit shellshocked by the whole situation, but in time it has become very uplifting."

The choir had been rehearsing a performance of Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*, but that process was put on hold.

"Our sessions were more about singing for fun, with basic warm-ups and exercises, and that's what really kept us going. We'd normally do a big concert in May and finish until the start of September, but we kept going through the summer because the feeling in the choir was that these sessions were supporting their mental health.

"Some people were on their own and some were shielding. We were regularly having 70 people turning up

“The challenge is that you don't have the support of other voices around you



on a Wednesday night to do these songs and exercises. For lots of people it was the only thing they had in their week."

Later in the year, part of the success of the Wednesday meetings was to have a weekly guest, in what Nunn called their "inspire sessions". They included an opportunity to hear from composer John Rutter, recitals from young soloists and sessions on physical and mental wellbeing.

"Two hours can be a long time to focus on Zoom, and they kept the choir engaged and with something to look forward to."

From September, the focus changed to making work together as a "virtual choir", using available technology to bring the members together although they were singing alone at home. It is not something a platform like Zoom can do, but other choirs had shown the way forward.

"I didn't know a lot about that," Nunn admits, "so we took the time to talk to people and find out. We did a test recording with a smaller group and I'm really glad we did because it made the result better in the end."

The choir began by working on two choruses from *Elijah*, picking up where they had left off. Both Nunn