

Armagh City Choir: Report by Chair: Wed 22nd May 2024

- The start of the new choral season in Sept. saw us welcome some new members to the Choir; namely, Clare to the sopranos; Kevin to the basses and Alan & Robert to the tenors. We are delighted to have them on board & hope they have enjoyed their first musical 'voyage' with us.
- The first four months [of the new season] saw us cover a wide range of music. Michael & Rodney introduced us to Dvorak's *Mass in D major* - a work never sung by the Choir before; also to a work by Tim Knight, a leading contemporary English composer, *The Lorica of Saint Patrick* – a piece hardly ever sung by anyone before! We also had our Christmas music including *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* by Vaughan Williams; *Bethle'm Baby*; *Gabriel's Message*; *Nativity Carol* by John Rutter & *O Holy Night* by Adam. It seemed a bit strange & almost comical to be singing Christmas music in October but Michael soon got us into the festive swing – helped of course by his white bottle of water!!
- Armagh Borough Council's pre-Christmas 'Georgian Day' soon came round. Once again we entertained the general public with Christmas carols accompanied by Armagh Old Boys' Silver band. Thankfully it wasn't as cold as in past years so we avoided becoming frozen on the spot! I was disappointed, though, not to see the snow machine in action from the roof of the Library...maybe next time!
- Our annual Christmas concert on Friday 8th December in St. Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral secured an excellent turnout. The audience very much enjoyed our festive programme. The *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* with Baritone soloist Aaron O'Hare and *O Holy Night* with our talented Soprano soloist and choir member, Clover being the highlights. We also enjoyed inspiring Christmas readings by various choir members, including one in Irish. 'The Three Kings' with soloist Aaron O'Hare, 'Christmas Cradle Song' and 'Love came down at Christmas' also proved popular – as did some enchanting organ music by Phillip Elliott. As is the

custom the audience joined the choir in singing the Christmas hymns which made it a very engaging evening all round. The concert concluded with 'Hark! The herald angels sing - a fabulous sound in the fine acoustics of the cathedral. We received many compliments from members of the audience afterwards.

- On Friday 9th Feb we had a great night of quizzing & craic at Armagh Golf Club for our annual fundraiser. Michael & Audrey as ever did a fantastic job with a mind-numbing variety of questions inc. a stamp conundrum for Norma. As always Choir Members were very generous in providing gifts for the raffle & we raised the very pleasing sum of £900, a fine effort all round.
- In the New Year while preparing for our collaboration with Ulster Touring Opera in Feb. Rebekah Coffey & Catherine Donnelly tutored us in both the music and pronunciation of the three Italian & French opera choruses: *Habanera*; *Brindisi* and the *Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves*. It was a pleasure to work with professionals and share their expertise. We also enjoyed learning *Dido's Lament*: '*With drooping wings*': a very moving melody which suited the Choir's blend of voices beautifully.
- The Ulster Touring Opera project 'Opera & Orchards' (*inc. the 'Armagh CiderZero' launch*) on Saturday 10th Feb was a real success. The choir's rendition of the choruses formed a perfect complement to the UTO soloists: Sarah Richmond (Mezzo Soprano); Catherine Donnelly (Soprano) & Aaron O'Hare (Tenor) who performed that evening. We were also accompanied by the splendid Ulster String Quartet.
 - Some Choir feedback on the event was: "*It was a thrill to sing alongside such young & talented soloists & have an opportunity to perform opera music that normally would not come our way.*"
 - I was sorry to have missed it but was too busy falling over on a ski slope. Luckily I came back in one piece!
- In mid-Feb we received good news from ABC Council that we had been awarded a £2k financial assistance grant within the Arts Project Fund

category. However it soon became apparent that costs for a 25-person orchestra & soloists had gone up substantially since we applied for funding. This now meant that we might end up with a £6k operating loss, so we had to opt for organ accompaniment only for the Dvorak concert in May.

- This change involved re-submitting revised costs to the Council and resulted in the award of a £1.3k Grant reflecting our adjusted expenditure. I would like to thank Trish sincerely for her kind assistance in speaking directly with the Head of the ABC Financial Assistance Programme, Valerie Leatham, to explain the cost challenges facing us as a charity & securing agreement on our revised offer by the end of March. *(We have since been awarded this figure, with just the vouching process to be actioned within six weeks.)*
- And now - our Spring Concert! What a marvellous night the 11th May was! - to perform *Cantate Domino & Elegia* by Jenkins again as well as our premiere of Dvorak's D major Mass. It was a privilege to sing with our superb professional soloists: Kelli-Ann, (Masterson); Margaret, (Bridge); Peter and Rory.
- Special thanks also go to Michael, our Musical Director & Philip Elliott, our Organist. They surprised us all, not least my Dad Roger, with a lovely dedication for his many years service as Assistant Conductor to the choir. It was a wonderful moment that I shall not forget, Michael's kind [& thoughtful] tribute, the beauty of the majestic organ music all while admiring the beautifully-coloured stained glass of the Cathedral lit up by the sunshine. I know that Mum will have been with us in spirit too. I was trying not to get emotional saying to myself, *"you have to sing Dvorak in a minute!...keep calm and carry on!"*
- Finally my sincere thanks to all our terrific Committee Members for their invaluable support & wise advice throughout the season.

- **Trish** for helping with our renewed Grant & for all her hard work with the Seating plan & organising the Staging.
- **Rodger/Dad** for compiling Programmes for both our Christmas & Spring concerts....
- **Kathy** and **Eleanor** without whom we simply couldn't function;
- Our ever-patient and long suffering accompanist **Rodney**, who must be able to book a holiday in the Caribbean by now with all the fivers Michael has promised him over the year!
- and of course our wonderfully-talented Director, **Michael**. We really miss him tonight and we all send him our thanks and good wishes for a speedy recovery!

For myself I thank you for choosing me as Chairperson this past season. It has been a wonderful privilege to serve this Choir, which has such a high reputation in the city and the province, especially since it will soon be nearly as old as I am! Thank you all!