

Together again in full voice

Singing sensation:

Members of the acclaimed Bearsden Choir are back to entertain us in the run-up to Christmas

THIS Christmas, perhaps more than any other in living memory, will be filled with the joy of simply being together.

For Bearsden Choir, it will be the first time that the 130-strong group will perform together in a venue for nearly two years.

For the listener, the sound of a choir, voices raised together in a celebration of affecting Christmas music, is profoundly moving.

The opportunity to sing together will certainly be an emotional moment for the choir. This year's Christmas performances will be the culmination of a time when singers have managed to stay together through online rehearsals and spectacular performances, followed by carefully planned rehearsals, organised in Covid-safe groups and performed fully masked.

As director of music Andrew Nunn and chairman John Wotton explain, this year's Christmas programme is a careful next step for the choir, allowing it to come together to perform for its audience, but also look to the long term.

This year, Bearsden Choir is counting us down to Christmas with eight performances which will be broadcast online on YouTube, Facebook and the choir's website between Saturday, December 18 and Christmas Day.

Preparations are well under way for the recording of the eight pieces, carefully selected by Andrew Nunn to take viewers through the light and shade that is found so abundantly in Christmas music.

"Bearsden Choir normally performs large choral pieces with an orchestra, but these eight choral pieces are all quite short, each no more than five minutes," says Andrew. "Each carol is quite contrasting – some emotionally rousing, some gentle, and one with real full-bodied singing."

All of the pieces except one are completely new to the choir, providing a challenge but in a manageable way. "Seven of the eight pieces are by living composers," adds Andrew. "The only one that isn't is The Snow by Elgar, which is one of my favourite pieces of all time. The other seven are all quite contemporary. To my mind you can't



■ Eight performances of Countdown to Christmas by the Bearsden Choir will be broadcast between December 18 and Christmas Day

have Christmas without John Rutter. His carols are absolutely synonymous with the season and we will be performing his wonderful, comforting Christmas Lullaby."

Andrew has also chosen a modern setting of O Come, Emmanuel by the young American composer Elaine Hagenberg. "It's dark and stormy and the choir has absolutely loved working on this piece."

There will be two pieces by Philip Stopford. "A lot of people will know the tune to In The Bleak Midwinter, but Stopford's is quite contemporary. We will also be performing his A Christmas Blessing, which is sweet and uplifting."

The choir will perform two pieces by Alan Bullard: a "beautiful, bright piece" called Love Came Down At Christmas and The Scots Nativity, which has a genuine Scottish flavour.

The only piece that the choir has performed previously is Gaudete, a rousing piece set by Cecilia McDowall.

"I have been thinking about the audience," says Andrew. "It's been almost two years since audiences have seen choirs sing carols, so we wanted to give them something that they had really missed last year. This is a varied programme, with shifting moods across the eight days, but I'm sure we have it right. Christmas really is a magical time for choirs."

Finding a venue large enough to accommodate the 130-strong choir, musicians, and the technical crew required for video and audio recording has also been difficult, but John Wotton is delighted with the location of Kingsborough Sanctuary on Hyndland Road in Glasgow.

"We would usually perform at the City Halls in Glasgow," says John, "but it's closed for roof repairs."

"However, we have found the wonderful venue of Kingsborough Sanctuary, which people might know as Hyndland Parish Church. It is no longer used for worship by the Church

of Scotland and is now a fantastic performance space, with all the pews removed."

Bearsden Choir will gather there to record these pieces on December 4 – the first time the choir has sung together unmasked.

"While we won't have an audience, the Countdown to Christmas will be broadcast worldwide," adds John. "By the time we reach the end of the season in May, we hope to be back in the City Halls in front of an audience."

The small steps that many of us have been taking out of Covid, negotiating the road back to how we can perform and consume culture, have been difficult. Andrew and John know how much it means to choir members who, for so long, only saw many fellow singers on Zoom.

"This term has been about rebuilding and rebirth following Covid," adds Andrew Nunn.

"It's been about the choir members getting back to singing and, more importantly, singing together where they can hear each other. The connection that people feel when they are together in a room singing is so special."

"The Christmas repertoire has been chosen with the choir and its audience in mind and will be so uplifting and inspiring."

www.bearsdenchoir.com



■ Andrew Nunn, Bearsden Choir's director of music, has selected eight choral pieces