

Westport Children's Choir

Director's report 2017

The choir has progressed well this year, with a number of exciting developments, particularly the invitation we received in August to sing in Carnegie Hall in New York in June 2018, in a concert of new music written and conducted by Christian Grases. The material itself is particularly



Eriko Hopkinson, director, Westport Children's Choir

challenging, and will stretch the abilities of our young singers and likewise our teaching technique. It is instructive that the invitation came about through a video of our choir singing on Youtube; I intend to be more active in promoting the choir online in the coming year, as such exposure can lead in welcome and unexpected directions.

Our second venture overseas, to Prague in March, was wonderful, with many happy memories for choir, parents and teaching staff. We were delighted to be able to take most of the choir and parents to see a performance by a Japanese high school Taiko drumming group, whose exceptionally high standard of musicianship, as well as their infectious enthusiasm and energy, will hopefully have opened some minds to what it is possible for children to achieve with hard work and the right support. Children's energy is one of their greatest assets, and I will continue to

look for ways in which it can be more effectively channelled towards musical ends. We were also impressed in Prague by the youth choirs from Sweden and Germany, who seem to have no problem recruiting talented and committed boys, something that unfortunately cannot be said for us here in Ireland.

In our Summer Concert we finally got to dip our toes into the world of musical theatre, something I have long been looking forward to doing, with a selection of numbers from Tim Minchin's *Matilda*; a storyline close to all children's hearts as it involves a rebellion against educational authority! Of course audiences respond well to the combination of music and movement, and choir members find a new enjoyment and possibly new capabilities that they hadn't appreciated before. We are firm believers in the importance of engaging the body through movement when producing sound, but lack of rehearsal time usually constrains us from introducing more than a handful of staged and choreographed numbers to the repertoire. This is something I will be looking at ways of remedying in the future, either simply by a greater use of movement during rehearsals, or on a different scale through collaboration with for instance local theatre groups in larger scale productions.

Other potential future directions include collaboration with other children's choirs, in concerts and workshops; collaboration with dance groups for performances and movement workshops; a greater focus on rhythm through collaboration with drumming groups and teachers; and a possible children's choir festival. Music reading skills are also very important, and I hope to be able to develop the way in which we teach this, both in rehearsal and in camp.

Funding, specifically the lack of its availability, continues to be a source of frustration. Our constitutional responsibility not to overburden our members' families means that we are very dependent on outside sources of funding. We have several times come up against the barrier that established institutions are deemed less worthy of public support than new projects, which in a small town has the regrettable effect of diluting the focus of effort. I am very glad that we have this

year begun the process of registering as a charity, as this will hopefully make the time consuming and gruelling search for funding a little less onerous. We need money to make possible our travel plans next year, but we would also like to be able to purchase portable choir staging to improve our performance presentation, and P.A. equipment, as we have often found that sound engineers are neither familiar with nor possess the correct equipment to amplify a choir. We also need funds to continue our policy of employing at industry rates the best available musicians as accompanists and guests, and also to bring in choral clinicians and teachers to widen the children's pedagogical experience. We also aspire to employ at some stage an administrator and possibly another teacher. I am very grateful to our new "Westport Children's Choir to Carnegie Hall Campaign" committee for taking over the bulk of fundraising duties as we move into the new year, and we will continue to engage the parents in fundraising and possibly administration as far as possible.

Westport Children's Choir was founded in response to a perceived lack of music learning opportunities for children in Ireland, particularly rural Ireland. We felt that music was not given the consideration that it deserved in the school curriculum, especially when compared to other cultures with which we were familiar, particularly Japan where music teaching within public schools is very well supported and equally available to every child in the country, and Finland where extra curricular music study is widely available and supported by public money.

Choir is something which can be made available to all children and is well suited to group teaching, without the complication of the students having to acquire and learn an instrument. A pleasing sound can be created quickly in comparison to instrumental learning, and musical collaboration skills are inbuilt.

We are determined to cement the idea of music as something you *do*, in the face of its continual and regrettable commodification in contemporary society. It is every human's birthright to take part in music if they choose. Some young musicians will develop into professionals and give joy to other people worldwide; some will find that making music is a constant source of comfort and self-development, if only for themselves; but it is a tragedy if any of these potential musicians never discover the joy of making music, simply because no one told them when they were young that being a musician is both possible and desirable.

Eriko Hopkinson
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