The Millennium Choir in New York

Matt Farrelly

Formed barely two years ago as the brainchild of Fr PJ Hughes, Joe Moore and Fr Turlough Baxter from Carrick-on-Shannon, The Millennium Choir is already one of the country's leading choirs. Conducted by Carrick's Monica O'Gorman, it was formed originally to perform a series of concerts to mark the Jubilee Year.

This led to a limited edition CD that sold out in weeks. Indeed so successful were those early concerts that the choir was approached to repeat them later in the year, and these repeat performances became the fundraising foundation of the trip to the States.

Joe Moore and his musical team of Conductor Monica O'Gorman, Elizabeth O'Halloran, Sr Nora Keenan and Fintan Farrelly set about planning and organising.

To get some idea of what was required, consider the work of rehearsing three choirs at three locations for months before, bringing them together to blend them into a single unit. The hard work was done with humour and good cheer–well, most of the time!–so when the Mohill Choir under Sr Nora would join with Monica's and Elizabeth's troops from Carrick and the forces from St. Mel's Cathedral, all that would remain would be to polish and refine the music. Only it's never as simple as that!

The organ accompaniment at St Patrick's and the piano accompaniment at Morristown and Fordham was provided by Fintan Farrelly, organist at St Mel's Cathedral.

The choir brought along some excellent artists to set off its programme. The soprano soloist was Sandra Oman, currently Ireland's leading home-based soprano. Renowned for her opera and oratorio singing, she has a wonderful stage appearance to complement a lovely voice.

One would have heard a pin drop in St Patrick's Cathedral while, accompanied by Fintan on the organ, she sang extracts from Mozart's Solemn Vespers and Handel's Messiah, the sound of her voice soaring through the lovely Cathedral.

Our dancers Claire Crossan and Caroline Conway are Connacht Champions and provided audiences with what some had only ever seen on a Riverdance video. Yes, they are that good.

How do you make a violin dance or sound like a singer or a banjo? The

Enda Steuson & Joe Flynn relax at the Hudson river.

The talented Rynn singers, Mohill. One would have heard a pin drop in St Patrick's Cathedral.

answer is give it to Niamh Crowley to play! Her solo violin playing simply brought gasps from hushed audiences. In a programme that ranged from traditional Irish airs to music by Massenet and Mascagni, she had audiences spellbound. One minute she was charming them with a beautiful slow air, the next she had them on the edges of their seats when she squared off in a duet with Fintan on piano in the famous showcase piece 'Banjo and Fiddle'. It did seem that she could make the violin sing, dance, hum... one wouldn't be surprised if she could get it to whistle Dixie as Gaeilge!

A man who probably can whistle Dixie in fluent Swahili is Deasun Lyons. Deasun is a most versatile performer who can sing, dance, and play several instruments. He joined the orchestra to play accordion while Claire and Caroline danced to a medley of Irish airs arranged for the orchestra by Fintan, and then while tenor Noel Holmes sang the airs, he accompanied Noel on bodhran before he himself gave a demonstration of sean nos dancing.

The choir boasted a second soloist Maurice Murphy, the tenor with the beautiful voice and high notes from Longford who sang "The Holy City" in the concerts.

We took the school bus to Morristown in New Jersey for opening night. The lovely two-tiered Community Theatre is a very prestigious venue and is popular with international artists who play to classical and jazz audiences. It was flattering to see the Irish Millennium Choir billed alongside the world famous Beaux Arts Trio, Musical America's Ensemble of the Year in 1997, Willy Nelson, and trumpeter Maynard Ferguson.

It is a rare honour and privilege to be invited to perform at St. Patrick's Cathedral, the most famous and important cathedral in the USA, and few choirs are lucky enough to receive such an opportunity. The call to St. Patrick's came through Leitrim man Brendan Murray, who was a guest of honour along with another Carrick exile, Shane Grahame-Flynn. Brendan is a Carrick-on-Shannon man who has grown a hugely successful construction company in New York. He has an ongoing connection with St. Patrick's, and has recently completed some specialist reconstruction work on the Cathedral. Shane heads up the MBNA Credit Card Corporation that sponsored the choir.

An extensive advertising campaign had obviously spread the word, as the Cathedral was buzzing.

The sound of choir and organ swelling gloriously together and rising to the magnificent spires is a memory that will stay fresh with every member of the group forever. It was as if people were being moved to sing and play above themselves - it was like being in an All-Ireland Final with all the pride and emotion. St Patrick's was in every way the summit, the high point to which only a year earlier everyone had begun to aspire.

The last item on the programme was 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic', and the choir gave a stirring rendition of this old war-horse. As the final Amen soared throughout the

Joe Moore, District Justice Oliver McGuinnes, Brendan Murray & Enda Stenson MCC

magnificent Cathedral it seemed as if the spirit had roused the entire company of choir and musicians to lift the ceiling.

The audience immediately rose to their feet with a standing ovation and rolled out into the aisles. There were wonderful scenes as scores of people came forward to congratulate the choir. Longford man Noel Egan from the EU Commission at New York was there with his wife Aisling, and renewed acquaintance with classmates from St Mel's and others he hadn't seen in more years than he cared to remember.

Afterwards the Cathedral authorities revealed that the audience of 1500 was the largest ever to attend an afternoon concert in St Patrick's, and the choir has been presented with a souvenir video of the performance.

Joe Moore, who doubled as compere, made presentations on behalf of the choir to Brendan and Shane without whose support the day would not have happened.

That evening the celebration at the Manhattan Club in Rosie O'Grady's began at 6pm and finished at ... well that depends on who you're talking to! A splendid buffet dinner was followed by a night of singing and dancing. Here Brendan Murray took the opportunity to welcome one and all and say how proud he was to have been involved with the occasion in St Patrick's. In a tribute to Brendan, the Rynn Singers from Mohill accompanied Dick Carr in a beautiful and poignant dedication to the memory of his mother of 'The Shores of Lough Bran'.

The choir is a very friendly and relaxed group that might be said to enjoy not only singing but socialising too! And it is a particularly talented group that likes to perform offstage. This was a night for everyone to unwind after the excitement of St Patrick's, and several of the choir sang and performed party pieces. From Councillor Stenson to Fr PJ, with tenor Joe Lowe's terrific impersonation of Elvis, to the lovely close harmony renditions from Dessie Brennan, John Donlon and Brendan Bartley accompanied by Frank Melia on keyboard, another dazzling demonstration of Irish dancing from the gorgeous Caroline and Claire - and countless other contributions - this was an evening to provide cratefuls of reminiscences.

Friday meant the Flanagan Theatre at Fordham University for a fund raising concert in aid of The Special Needs Children's Trust. The organiser was our host, Leitrim man Gerry Flood, who had just arrived off a plane from Lourdes where he had been accompanying a pilgrimage of his charity. Fundraising events such as this concert, Gerry said, were what made their trips to Lourdes possible.

Monica O'Gorman, Shane G Flynn & B Murray.

At the end there were speeches, and Joe Moore accepted a presentation from the Leitrim Association on behalf of the choir. At the supper afterwards, we met Tommy Corrigan from Shroid whose sons have all graduated from Fordham as business scholars and American footballers!

Fordham was the last concert on the eve of returning home. This was now the end of the tour, and there was great elation at how successful the concerts had been, how much fun we had had, and even talk of the future.

Three buses were lined up at the Flanagan Theatre for the journey back to the Hotel Pennsylvania. Only two of them made it. The third found itself diverted once more to Rory Dolan's.