# Motivating your choir

Scottish choir director Ian McCrorie talks to the Editor of *Different Voices*

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**Charismatic conductor Ian McCrorie has been a director of choirs for all of his adult life. His founding of the famous Toad Choir in the Sixties was the result of a suggestion from the Very Rev. Bill Johnston, then minister of St. George's, Greenock, and subsequently Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, who invited him to form a choir for what was then a rare occurrence – a service of nine lessons and carols.**

**Ten years on Ian was invited to use his choir as the basis of a new body to sing with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. With a similar number recruited from the east of Scotland, this choir, the Scottish Philharmonic Singers, performed with the SCO for some fifteen years. In this capacity, he prepared works for such conductors as James Conlon, Raymond Leppard, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zubin Mehta and Sir Simon Rattle and took his choir to France, Israel and Poland as well as appearing at the Edinburgh and Perth Festivals, Aldeburgh and the Proms. His choir in addition made many broadcasts for the BBC, often with the BBC SSO but also *a cappella*. He then became Chorusmaster of the Scottish Festival Singers and in 2005 conducted the last of the annual Christmas Carol Concerts in Greenock after forty five years.**

**Ian McCrorie is now established as the conductor of the annual CLIC Sargent Carol Concert in Glasgow, with soloists such as Nicola Benedetti and Julian Lloyd Webber. He has been an organist for almost fifty years, has served on various church committees (including *CH4*) and has made several CDs of hymns and psalms.**

**Ian has recently retired as Assistant Head and Chemistry teacher in Greenock Academy. As official historian of Caledonian MacBrayne, he has published extensively on the vessels, sea routes and piers of the Clyde and the Western Highlands. He was appointed MBE in 2007 'for services to Music and to the community in Inverclyde'.**

**We asked him to go behind the music to the skills involved in enabling a choir not just to sing with intelligence but with enjoyment.**

"I have to admit that I find it ten times easier to write a history of the Waverley than about the skill of the choir director. In histories, you are dealing with objective facts and their

interpretation. Leading a choir is very personal, intuitive, almost private. When a choir at the end of a practice or a performance feels flushed with success and satisfaction, you often don't know what you have done. Of course there were many other factors, the music itself, the giftedness of the singers, the occasion, but somehow this is channelled through you, the conductor, so that a number of things meet up and focus.

"When I am calling the choir to order to begin a practice, I keep in mind the remark of the late Arthur Oldham, late conductor of the Edinburgh Festival Chorus, that the amateur choir comes together after a hard day's work and they will not thank you for seeming to make this time of relaxation more of the same. Yet, as choir director you know that they will not be satisfied except as the result of hard work. The trick is to make it seem like enjoyment.

"It is important that your own enjoyment of the music is evident. If the choir do not yet know the piece or are still learning it, seeing that you have already 'got somewhere' on a road they are still travelling on will increase their expectation of the end product. You are an advocate of the piece. You believe in it. They will too. Of course, there are times when you are introducing a choir to music you have not chosen and may not like. You should come clean; then they know the kind of task they are undertaking; you have established common cause in another way.

"Humour has its place. Lightening the learning of a tricky passage relaxes the concentration and can lead to redoubled effort. However, you are not an entertainer. The enjoyment is not that of the audience and the stand up comedian. What we are talking about here is dialogue. Without turning a choir practice into a free-for-all, it can only help people's engagement by encouraging people to make suggestions, ask for clarification, offer interpretations. Monologues from the maestro shut the choir up in more ways than one. The choir director is interacting all the time with what is coming back from the singers. The music is made somewhere between you.

"Enjoyment and motivation is lodged both in the choir as a whole and in each invidual. People should be made to feel they have an identity within the choir. Auditions should be seen not as simply 'tests' but a way for the conductor to know the voices. In some choirs, auditions may take place more frequently and not only when someone first joins, their purpose not just to see if the singer still has a voice but to gauge the potential of the choir as a whole at that point. It also reminds or identifies who each one is, his or her name and personality. Know your choir not just as voices but as persons. The corollary is that you value your singers equally for what each can do. There should be no favouritism, with the same person(s) doing all the solos, say. Give others a chance to flower.

"One of the most important abilities a choir can develop is that of listening to each other. I still remember the day when I had to stand in at short notice at my school for a music teacher who was absent, and with a concert pending. I taught the boys a barber's shop quartet, part by part. That moment when it dawned on them that they were singing in harmony, having suddenly heard what each other was doing, was memorable. Achieving a good blend is most satisfying for a choir, and for this they are doing the tricky thing of concentrating on their own part and hearing each other's at the selfsame time. As the conductor, you have that 'blend in your head', but it is they who achieve it.

"It is no fun for a choir to be confronted continually with undemanding music. On the other hand, there will be music which is too difficult at that point for a particular choir. The conductor's skill is to be able to choose what they will be able to tackle, even if the choir at first acquaintance is sure they can't! A good moment for a choir is when they become able to

sing contrapuntally rather than ‘hide’ in the harmonies. Then any individual part can find it is ‘on top’, that it has the principal statement. This can be a coming of age for a choir.

"Of course, ‘note-bashing’ is necessary. But even that can be fun. Do it quickly. Even better when there is someone in the choir that could take a section away to another room and work on their part. Shirking accuracy does not only make the music suffer but it affects the confidence of the choir. Knowing that the line you are singing is correct, as opposed to suspecting that it might not be quite right but you are not sure why, provides the security from which you can go on to sing not just accurately but musically. And yes, get people to mark reminders in pencil on the score. But don’t spend ten minutes doing that before they have even had a chance to sing. Don’t lecture about what it should sound like. Show through the music as they sing.

"You have the great advantage of having at your disposal the technique known as conducting. Conducting does more than keep people in time; it communicates your intention for the music; it also communicates ‘back’ to them, reminds them, what they know about the music and how it should be sung. Approach conducting thoughtfully. Use not just the arms but the eyes, and the body too. The conductor’s physical attitude can help engage the choir in the meaning of what they are singing, be it a madrigal or paean of praise. The sound follows suit.

"Offer your own personality, your love for the music, your enthusiasm, as a resource for the choir. A choir can then develop its own personality, and, it is hoped, share your love and echo your enjoyment."