

Return Journey to America by Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe

By S. Robert Powell, Carbondale Historical Society, Pennsylvania, USA

The 2018 American tour of the Swansea Valley Celebration Male Choir and Friends was an artistic and cultural achievement of the highest order.

On five consecutive evenings, October 28-November 1, audiences in northeastern Pennsylvania were given the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to attend five concerts in five days by the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe and friends from the Swansea Valley. Those of us who did so will remember always this amazing gift of song to American audiences by these world-class musicians from Wales, whose performances were given standing ovations throughout this American tour.

The concerts were all under the direction of Maestro Conway Morgan, with Dr. David Lyn Rees as accompanist. The musical collaboration between Conway Morgan and Dr. Rees, and between Conway Morgan and the singers, during these concerts is not only a joy to behold, but also the structure upon which are built the beautifully articulated performances by the choir and soloists.

Singing with the choir on this American tour were Helen Gibbon, soprano, and Kees Huysmans, bass/baritone, both of whom have to their credit numerous major wins at national eisteddfodau in Wales. Throughout the tour, solos and duets by these two remarkable singers were warmly received by the American audiences.

At three of these five concerts, student musical groups from local elementary and high schools performed during the evening: Sunday, October 28, Old Forge Elementary Choralaires, under the direction of Marty Ort; Monday, October 29, Western Wayne High School Marching Band, under the direction of Elaine Shedd Ort; and Tuesday, October 30, Valley View High School Chorus, under the direction of Gina Pascolini.

These guest appearances by these young American musicians were a win/win situation for all concerned. For the American students, it was the opportunity of a lifetime to showcase their musical talents and to perform on the same program as the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe and soloists. For the Welsh choir and friends, it was tantamount to opening a window on the fine musical talent and achievements of the students in these three remarkable schools, among others, in northeastern Pennsylvania. For the audiences at these concerts, it goes without saying, these performances were not only enjoyable as musical statements but also as expressions of civic pride in the achievements of students in the musical programs of these three area public schools.

The performances by the students at Valley View High School on October 30 were a special treat for the Swansea Valley Celebration Male Choir, in that the Voices of the Valley choir (all members of the Valley View High School Chorus), under the direction of Gina Pascolini, at the invitation of the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe, traveled to Wales in the summer of 2017, and performed there a highly successful concert tour. To the great pleasure of the members of the Welsh choir, and of the audience as a whole, at the Valley View High School concert, the Valley View High School Choir sang, in Welsh, *Men of Harlech* and *Rachie*. For their performances in Welsh of those two works, the Valley View student choir was given a standing ovation by the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe.

The repertory of the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe for this American tour was broad and diverse, with 23 works prepared and ready for performance. The musical program, remarkably, at each of the five concerts in this American tour by the choir, was unique.

The solos and duets performed by Helen Gibbon and Kees Huysmans at these five concerts were drawn from the broad repertory of both singers and included operatic arias, Broadway show tunes, hymns, and popular songs, all of which were beautifully and flawlessly executed with effortless grace and style by Helen Gibbon and Kees Huysmans, both of whom won the hearts of the audiences at all five venues.

Two members of the Swansea Celebration Choir, Gareth J. Davies and Barry Evans, performed solos at these concerts. The choir's performance of *Mi glwyaf dyner lais* began with a poignant and beautifully focused solo performance by Gareth J. Davies, tenor, of the first verse of that extraordinary song (text of 'Gwahoddiad' with music composed by Doug Roberts, a member of the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe). An equally wonderful solo performance was presented by Barry Evans, bass, as a prelude to the choir's performance of the Reverend Eli Jenkins' prayer from *Under Milk Wood*, a radio drama written by Dylan Thomas that was later adapted for the stage. With great resolve and compassion--and beautifully rendered in his opulent bass voice--Barry Evans, reading from *Under Milk Wood*, became the omniscient narrator created by Dylan Thomas who invites the audience to close their eyes and listen to the dreams and innermost thoughts of the inhabitants of the fictional small Welsh fishing village of Llareggub. As the reading by Barry Evans drew to a conclusion, the reading by Barry Evans became, seamlessly and gently, a performance by the choir of the Reverend Eli Jenkins' prayer from *Under Milk Wood*. The impact of this performance by Barry Evans and the choir at each venue was profound and unforgettable.

The venues for these five concerts were diverse. The concerts at Western Wayne High School and Valley View High School took place in very large, modern, state-of-the-art high school auditoriums. The concert in Carbondale took place in a very large and beautiful Methodist Church with breath taking stained glass windows from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and with a splendid pipe organ, on which Mark Myers, church organist, played several selections before the concert by the choir began.

The concert in Wilkes-Barre took place in the First Presbyterian Church there, an enormous masonry building with a very high vaulted ceiling and wonderful acoustics. A special guest in the audience at this concert was Bill Hastie, a Welshman from West Pittston who is a World War II veteran and is now 99 years old and in good health. The Minister of Music at the church, Dr. John Vaida, performed several selections on the church organ as the audience assembled and before the concert by the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe began. During several selections sung by the choir, Dr. Vaida, on the church organ, together with Dr. Rees on the piano, accompanied the Welsh Choir as they sang.

The Trinity Episcopal Church in Bethlehem is an old and very beautiful building, with an austere and humanistic quality that is very appealing. The concert was co-sponsored by the Trinity Soup Kitchen there, which for generations has ministered to the needs of the Bethlehem community.

That same soup kitchen, be it known, ministered beautifully and generously to the nutritional needs of a large number of Welsh singers and friends both in the early afternoon and following the evening concert on November 1. The good fellowship and camaraderie that pervaded the church hall during that after-the-concert fellowship hour was heartwarming and thoroughly enjoyed by all. The evening in Bethlehem, following the concert by the choir there, ended on a melancholy note as the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe and friends had to say farewell, for now, to their many friends in America, the choir departing the following morning for Washington, before their return to Wales.

Generous hospitality was also the order of the day as well when the choir performed at Valley View High School. That day, in the late afternoon before the evening performance by the Welsh choir at the Valley View High School, Nick Germano and the Valley View Food Service Staff, be it known, addressed, beautifully, in the high school cafeteria, the nutritional needs of the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe and friends. The commemorative beverage cups created by the school for the occasion were well received by the choir and many of those cups now have a home in Wales.

The Chairman of the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe, Alan George, always in the moment, always a gentleman, and perpetually charming, at each concert, stepped forward from the bass section of the choir, and not only expressed the choir's sincere thanks to the hosts at each venue for their gracious hospitality but also presented all hosts with a copy of the CD that was recently released by the choir.

Given the five-concerts-in-five-days itinerary of the Welsh choir in Pennsylvania, there was not much time available for sight-seeing by the choir members and friends in northeastern Pennsylvania. Nevertheless, a number of the members of the choir and friends, during their time in Carbondale, did undertake bicycle tours (using bicycles provided by the Hotel Anthracite) on the pedestrian and bicycle trails (former railroad beds) in Carbondale and in the Lackawanna Valley. In addition, many members of the tour also found the time to visit the Carbondale Historical Society and the displays there of a broad range of anthracite mining and railroading artifacts.

In addition, on Tuesday morning, October 30, Dr. S. R. Powell, the president of the Carbondale Historical Society, at the request of several members of the choir, went to the Hotel Anthracite, home base of the Welsh tour in Carbondale, and gave a presentation there for many members of the Welsh tour on the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company's Gravity Railroad, which opened on October 9, 1829, between Carbondale and Honesdale, making it the first successful railroad system in America.

Several members of the tour, in addition, to the great pleasure of members of the Carbondale Historical Society, made it a point to visit again, during this American tour, as they did in 2015, Welsh Hill in Maplewood Cemetery, wherein are interred the earthly remains of many Welsh miners and their families who came to Carbondale in the 1830s to live and to work in the anthracite mines. The tombstones that mark those graves are from Wales and bear inscriptions in Welsh.

Throughout the American tour by the choir, copies of the latest CD by the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe were made available to American audiences. On the CD, which was recorded in St. Cynog's Church at Ystradgynlais, there are fifteen numbers, with solo performances by Helen Gibbon, Kees Huysmans, and Robyn Lyn Evans. To the great pleasure of many people in Carbondale, the fourth paragraph of the liner notes on the CD reads as follows: "The Choir toured Pennsylvania in 2015 and returned to the area around Carbondale in October 2018. This was the site of the first deep vein anthracite coal mine in the US in the early 19th century, and where the first Eisteddfod in America was held on Christmas Day 1850."

The American tour of the Côr Dathlu Cwmtawe was hosted by the Carbondale Historical Society and Museum, Dr. S. Robert Powell, president. The tour manager was Ted Frutchev; the event PR coordinator was Jerry Williams. This return journey of the Swansea Valley Celebration Male Choir to northeastern Pennsylvania was a triumphant success--for the choir and soloists, for Wales, and for America.

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