

The Grand Concert

By Cynthia St. Clair and Alan Upshall

In our series of articles describing the North American Festival of Wales, this month we focus on the Grand Concert. It is indeed a very grand concert, with the best of Wales' male choirs and the best of Wales' operatic soloists. The Dunvant Male Choir are an outstanding group of choristers led by two of Wales' best young musicians, director Tim Rhys-Evans and accompanist Jeffrey Howard. There is a new vigor and excitement about the choir since these two musicians took over the reins; not only have they entered eisteddfod competitions, they have won them, to acclaim by the judges.

The choir is joined by Welsh baritone star Jason Howard from Merthyr Tydfil in Wales, who now lives in Toronto with his family. Jason has an international reputation as an outstanding operatic star and soloist, and we are delighted that he could find the time in his schedule to come and sing in Richmond.

As we described in the last article, from the beginning it has been the goal of the NAFOW planning committee to attract the best musicians to the festival. This could not have happened without financial support and we are very happy to thank our sponsors, Grenville Thomas of Vancouver for his support of the Dunvant Choir, and the Wales Tourist Board for the support of Jason Howard. Without that support, this great combination and concert would not have been possible.

Welsh National Eisteddfod Winners, the Dunvant Male Choir, featured at the North American Festival of Wales

(sponsored by Grenville Thomas)

The planning team for the 2003 North American Festival of Wales are delighted to welcome The Dunvant Male Choir, the largest and the oldest male choir in Wales to sing at the Grand Concert at Richmond in August. The choir, formed in 1895 by men from the congregation of the Ebenezer Congregational Chapel in Dunvant, near Swansea, was the winner in the male voice competition at the Welsh National Eisteddfod in 2002 and represents the very best in traditional and modern choral music.

The choir has a rich history. Through the years, the choir has won every competition that is available to male choirs in Wales. After a hiatus of more than 20 years, in 2002 the choir again entered the Welsh National Eisteddfod and won the competition. This victory followed their win at the Welsh Semi-National Eisteddfod in 2001 in Cardigan.

The Dunvant Choir has always had a very busy concert schedule, performing all over the world in festivals and to support charities, as well as making many television and radio appearances. They are proud to represent not only themselves but also Wales to the larger international community. The Dunvant Choir has toured North America many times, most recently a tour of the west coast of America and western Canada in 1995.

Since that tour, both a new musical director -- Timothy Rhys-Evans -- and new

accompanist -- Jeffrey Howard -- have been appointed. Under this new leadership, not only has the choir sustained its tradition of musical excellence, but also has expanded that tradition into a leadership role in Welsh musical circles. In 2003, the choir inaugurated a youth singing competition, The Welsh Musical Theatre Young Singer of the Year, which was a spectacular success, and is destined to become a feature on the Welsh music scene for many years.

For the concert at the 2003 North American Festival of Wales, director Timothy Evans is developing a very special program, a "musical time journey through Wales," to illustrate how Wales has changed and keeps changing, and how music has greatly influenced life within Welsh communities.

Without doubt, when you put the Duvant Male Choir on stage there is always a buzz. When you combine the Duvant Choir with Jason Howard, you are in for a spectacular evening's entertainment.

Welsh Opera star Jason Howard, Baritone

(Sponsored by The Wales Tourist Board)

Welsh baritone Jason Howard, one of Britain's leading singers at home and overseas, was born and raised in Merthyr Tydfil, South Wales. Before he embarked upon his solo career, Jason was a fireman in his local community and sang in the Dowlais Male Voice Choir for pleasure. In 1985 he left the fire service to pursue full-time studies in London at Trinity College of Music and The Royal College of Music. He was the only U.K. winner in the 1992 Pavarotti Voice Competition.

Jason has sung lead roles in major opera houses all over the world, including The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, England, the Opéra National de Paris, the English National Opera, Chicago Lyric Opera, Houston Opera, New York City Opera, Tel Aviv Opera House — and of course the Welsh National Opera in Cardiff!

His "signature" operatic role is Marcello in "La Bohème," which he has performed to acclaim. He has sung the title roles in "Don Giovanni," "Eugene Onegin," and "Billy Budd," and many other traditionally performed and modern operas.

Jason is in demand by the opera houses of the world. Future plans include "La Traviata" for Minnesota Opera, "Mourning Becomes Electra" for Seattle Opera and New York City Opera, returning to Paris Opera for "Peter Grimes," and his long-awaited return to the Welsh National Opera in 2005 for Alfio in "Cavalleria Rusticana" and Tonio in "Pagliacci."

As well as being a major international presence in the opera community, Jason has performed numerous concert performances, including Mahler's "Eighth Symphony,"

"Peter Grimes," "The Trojans," and "La Bohème" and has worked with noted conductors, including Mstislav Rostropovich, Sir Colin Davis, and Michael Tilson-Thomas.

Jason has made many CD recordings in a wide range of styles, from operatic music to Broadway songs. Among his CDs are "S'io T'amo" (Sain Records), a solo album of Italian love songs; "Make Believe" (Silva Screen Records), a collection of Hollywood songs made famous by Howard Keel and Gordon Macrae; "Song of Norway" and "A Little Night Music," (TER records); and Malatesta in "Don Pasquale" and "Faust et Hélène" (Lilli Boulanger) for Chandos.

On top of all of this, Jason has, in the last decade, played a major role in Welsh music. He has appeared in countless TV and radio productions; has sung with male voice choirs throughout Wales, including the pre-game singing at the Millennium stadium in Cardiff; and has performed in the Cardiff Bay summer open air concerts. He is currently working on developing an international music festival in his home town of Merthyr Tydfil.

Jason's appearance at the North American Festival of Wales is sponsored by the Wales Tourist Board.