



# **THE BLACK MOUNTAIN MALE CHORUS OF WALES**

The Black Mountain Male Chorus has made a considerable impact on the Concert Circuit in the four corners of the U.S. with nearly 200 appearances to great critical acclaim – one has to go back as far as 1893 to the Chicago World Fair to find a similar Welsh Choral achievement!

Compared to traditional Welsh Choirs, this group has the average age of just 30, with members drawn from all over Wales. Having the honour of Bryn Terfel, the world-renowned Bass- Baritone as its Patron, gives the singers a great performer to try to emulate!

The wonderful reputation of the Welsh as a 'Nation of Singers' is obviously exemplified in this group – but there is more ....much more. The Chorus' performance is often described as a 'Musical Journey through Wales'. And as a reviewer wrote of the last tour: "The Choir's performance was outstanding! The musical quality and variety were magnificent".

Wales, generally regarded as the 'Land of Song' is blessed with more than 300 Male Choruses in an area no bigger than the State of New Jersey. These choirs emanated from the heavy industries of coal & steel, the past industrial backbone of the country. The concern has been, like the industries, they will eventually disappear and this gave the reason for the formation of Black Mountain, representing a vibrant, new generation of Welsh Male Choir. While honouring the great tradition of the Welsh Male Choir, this group also aims to appeal to a new generation of chorister. In addition to the Chorus, there is a wide diversity of talent.

The overall Musical Director is John Quirk, who has ensured the musical standard of the group while encouraging many new, young, up-and-coming Conductors to take the baton. For many years, John was Head of Music at one of the leading Music Colleges in Wales and, therefore, in an ideal position to identify those students with future potential. John has also written, arranged and conducted many of his own compositions with the leading orchestras in the Principality.

With this Tour's emphasis on Christmas, there are many Carols from the U.K. & Europe which will be well-known to audiences. Apart from representing some of those countries, Wales itself has a fascinating history in the celebration of Christmas together with over 60 Carols specific to their Celtic tradition. 'Deck the Halls', as an example, was originally a Welsh carol.

The harp has always been regarded as Wales' national instrument and it has always featured extensively in our productions. As its special qualities come into its own when associated with Christmas, to further enhance the festive atmosphere of the show, it is intended to utilise more than the one traditional solo harp. The Choir's featured harpist and soloist is Llinos Daniel whose contribution can best be described as enchanting. Her singing & playing creates a major contrast in texture to the choral sound. Llinos specialises in performing beautiful traditional Welsh ballads, a style which is very suited to Carols as well as combining with the Choir on some items.

We can leave the final words to the reviewer in the last Tour:

'There is one problem with the show – it is over too quickly! We could have watched the whole programme all over again! Thank you for giving us a superb Musical Event.



## **THE WELSH MALE VOICE TRADITION**

**Wales...A Land of Song – a Nation of Singers. What is it about this scenic country, which produces so many famous choirs?**

Even in pre-Roman Britain, it was recorded that the Celtic Bards performed as poets & singers. With the loss of Welsh Independence in 1282, the Bards were forced to seek sponsorship by entertaining nobility. Accompanied by the *pigborn*, a primitive oboe, the *crwth*, similar to a lyre and later the *Celtic Harp*, Welsh music went through a period of extensive growth until the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.

The religious changes of the Reformation along with the growth of Non-conformity led to a deterioration in Welsh musical development, and when the Methodist Tide swept through Wales in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, traditional music-making was actively discouraged. In fact, much of the ancient native music of Wales was lost.

Sermons and song took Wales by storm, and the emergence of great Hymnists provided the platform upon which Wales was launched into its unassailable singing destiny. Singing by the masses was further assisted in the 1860's with John Curwen's introduction of *Solfah*, an easy-to-learn singing system. Within Wales, sight-reading was deemed elitist; *solfah* greatly appealed to the inhabitants of the heavily industrialised heartland. Classes were introduced at chapels and schools and drew upon all ages.

The chapel became the cultural centre of each community; the *Gymanfa Ganu* or Hymn-singing Festival was introduced and new hymns were composed for competitive entry. This fervour was further stirred by the passionate Revivalist Movement during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when famous preachers stamped through Wales with their 'fire-and-brimstone' Christian messages.

As a result of the male dominance in the coal, iron & slate regions of Wales combined with the newly found Christian ethic, the Male Choir took root. It was not unusual for each community to have three or four choirs, with each choir claiming memberships of up to 200 choristers. Choral rivalry was intense and competitions, or *Eisteddfodau* were over-subscribed.

For many years, hard work, choirs and chapels were the cornerstones of community and family life. However, early in this century, these communities changed. The mining pits closed and men emigrated to find work and World War 1 took a heavy toll. By 1939, chapel attendance had diminished, marking the end of the great era of Welsh choral music.

The tradition and the hymns live on through choirs who now perform more of a social function within their communities, this time without the backdrop of harsh conditions, which prevailed in industrial Wales more than a century ago.