



A day in the life of the Palestrina Choir

Blanaid Murphy (53) is the choral director of The Palestrina Choir in the Pro-Cathedral, Dublin. She also teaches in the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM). Born in England, she lives in Phibsborough with her husband, Keith, and their son, Conor (11)

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I try to get up at 6.30am, but it’s usually nearly 7am. My 11-year-old son, Conor, is already up, fiddling around. He sings in the Palestrina Choir, and I am the choral director.



I struggle up, as the dog starts barking. I always try to get my son to do his violin practice before school at 7.45am. It’s just half an hour. Once he

gets going, he is fine, but to get him to the point of starting is always tricky. He is a great little dawdler.

I put on some Mozart or Bach when Conor is doing his practice. I don't want to hear it; I just want him to do it. My nerves immediately get all jangly, because I hear things that I want to correct. Sometimes I put on my headphones. I used to do his piano practice with him, and that was like a world war, so I decided that my relationship with him was much more important than his practice.

He was nearly five when he started the piano. I brought him to some concerts in the National Concert Hall. One day, he said, 'Mummy, it's the violin I like, and someday I will be learning it.' Now, he does both. I don't know if he is the greatest at any of it, but he likes it.

We live near the school, and we all walk there with the dog. My husband, Keith, is an architect. I met him in a choir. He was singing in Carlow Choral Society, and I was the conductor. I didn't know that he was into me, but he made a lot of attempts to set things up. In the beginning, people didn't know that we were going out. It was very exciting.

I do different things on different days. On Mondays, I volunteer in my son's school; I teach music to the classes. Then I usually have meetings. Then,

on Monday evenings, I go to Carlow, I am the musical director of Carlow Choral Society. On Tuesdays, I teach in the RIAM. I'm really a choral director, but I teach conducting as well. On Tuesday afternoons, I come in to St Mary's Pro-Cathedral and I teach the girls' choir. They range in age from eight to 16. This is their 10th year. I helped set it up. We always had a choir for the boys, and their sisters were asking, and there was nothing for the girls. As a child, I would have loved to have been in a choir like the Palestrina. The girls sometimes combine with the boys for concerts.

Girls can be harder-working in a steady way, but then boys zoom in and catch up. They probably end up getting the same results. With boys, you have to be very firm and demanding, whereas girls can be subtly lazy. I'm probably a bit of a sergeant-major. If you give out to girls, they can be pouty, whereas with boys, two minutes later, it's all over. I'm very proud of both choirs.

The boys come in here to the Pro-Cathedral on Tuesdays from 3.15pm until 6.30pm, and on Fridays, it's from 3.15pm until 7.30pm, because they have vespers. They have tea here. The parents come in and they make delicious food, such as spaghetti bolognese and curries. The boys sing at Mass every Sunday. It's a big commitment, about 12 hours a week, and the parents are unbelievably committed, despite working and having other children.

It's only having had my own boy in the choir that I realise the sacrifices people make. Conor had to audition to get in, just like everyone else. It's quite nice that my son is at my work, and he enjoys it, too. The boys start at seven years of age and they finish around 14, because their voices change. Sometimes that can be quite traumatic, because some people's voices start changing in sixth class.

When the boys come in, they have to leave their phones in a box, and they collect them on the way out. I brought in this rule because there are a lot of younger children, and you couldn't oversee what they were seeing at the break.

We have all different nationalities in the choir — Chinese, Filipino and Dutch. They come from all different areas — some from the inner city and some from Clontarf. I wouldn't penalise anyone in the choir if they weren't Catholic, but they probably have to be Christian. They learn a lot about Christian traditions; they sing mainly in Latin, and they find it easy. I try to teach them some Latin, so they know the words.

There is something about singing — that feeling of people coming together. You are breathing, it's emotional, and you have something to attain. I always think that it doesn't matter what they end up doing in their lives, but with the choir, they have got used to mastering very difficult things on a

very regular basis. It's a good training for life. Boys really respond to flattery. If you tell them that they sound great, they almost sit up and puff themselves up. There is something very beautiful about the sounds of children singing, but of boys in particular.

I've been with Palestrina for 16 years. I adore my job. I love working with children; I love all the little intrigues and their energy. It's hard work, but it is very rewarding, especially around Christmas time. There is something very special about carols. It's a busy time of year for us. We have a CD out, and we also have our annual concert in the National Concert Hall on December 11, with Dublin Brass.

On Christmas Day, the girls sing at 9.30am Mass, and the boys at 11am. I've made the pudding beforehand. I'm here in the church until 12.30pm, while Keith is at home doing the turkey. Luckily, he likes cooking.

In conversation with Ciara Dwyer

Christmas Joy: The Palestrina Choir at the NCH, December 11, 8pm. Tickets priced from €15, tel: (01) 417-0000, or see nch.ie. Their latest CD, 'Joy to the World', featuring the best-loved Christmas carols, is on sale now