

Our man joins a choir to see if he has a... Voice of an A



Tuned in: Ed Power wearing Palestrina choir cassock and surplice in the gallery at the Pro Cathedral, Dublin. Photo: Frank Mc Grath

December 04 2016 02:30 AM

I am wearing bright blue robes and standing on the steps of St Mary's Pro-Cathedral in Dublin. Passersby have stopped to gawp/giggle/await the arrival of the police. One lady pushing a buggy is pointing me out to her toddler. Can very tiny children laugh contemptuously? It turns out they can.

Let them chuckle. The heavy material is surprisingly snug on a freezing evening. If I take nothing else away from today, I have at least learned choral vestments are fantastic for keeping awkward draughts at bay.

I've spent the past several hours sitting in on rehearsals by the Palestrina Choir, one of Ireland's most venerable boys' vocal ensembles (yes, even older than Boyzone). It has been suggested I might like to don the Palestrina's famous royal blue. Hence I find myself toggled out, holding a choral booklet and grinning for a photographer.

What you hopefully can't tell from the snaps is that I'm the world's worst candidate for honorary choir membership. I can't sing - or even hum respectably. When I tell this to the lovely people from the Palestrina they assume I am being falsely modest. Not in the least, I'm afraid. Were I to open my mouth in worshipful song, the Pro-Cathedral altar would split down the middle and the bats flee the belfry. Not what you want visiting Dublin's most important Catholic Church.



Tune up: Music teacher Shane Barriscale leads the choir's rehearsal. Photo: Frank Mc Grath

Actually, says Palestrina director Blánaid Murphy, vocal prowess isn't the most sought-after quality among potential members of the choir, whose singers

range in age from seven to early teens (once the voice breaks it's time to move on, to the Palestrina men's choir).

A minimum of musical ability is of course required. But enthusiasm, hard work and wherewithal go a long way, too. With 1,000 kids assessed for just eight or so places each year, competition is fierce. However, successful candidates aren't necessarily those with a shining talent bestowed from on high.

Personality counts, too. "If you are keen, it carries a lot of weight. Very few kids at the age of seven would be incredibly accomplished. If someone tells me they are a really great singer alarm bells would go off. We want normal kids, not po-faced people. If you think they are quick and they are interested, they have a chance. What you really need is intelligence. You want people with strong personalities, who can work together with a group. You can have 30 boys in a room but if they are working together it sounds like a lot more than that."

The Palestrina was established in 1902 by Edward Martyn, a prominent landowner whose runaway philanthropy would eventually lead to bankruptcy (he subsequently helped set up the Abbey Theatre with WB Yeats and Lady Gregory). In the 1890s, he had embarked on a grand tour of Europe's cathedrals and was entranced by the wonderful choral music he heard.

"He went to places such as Ravensburg and was eager to bring the same thing for the Pro-Cathedral," recounts Murphy. "Back in Dublin he discovered a boys' choir singing Palestrina's Missa Papae Marcelli at St Teresa's Carmelite Church in Clarendon Street and knew that was what he wanted. That is why it is called the Palestrina Choir. He donated the equivalent of €1m to set it up. The money was only for male singers - I don't think it ever occurred to him that the choir director could be a woman, which is why he didn't stipulate against it." Across the next century, the Palestrina would become one of Dublin's great music institutions. Past members include historian Diarmaid Ferriter and respected tenor soloist Emmanuel Lawler.

The choir has twice been asked to the Vatican in the past three years. The boys sang for the outgoing Benedict XVI in 2013 and, last month, for Pope Francis. In the latter case, they had been requested to sing at a Papal Mass in St Peter's Basilica marking the 800th anniversary of the Dominican Order. On the same trip they performed Irish traditional compositions for a concert, Remembering 1916 in Song, at St Isidore's College in Rome (the invitations in both instances extended in recognition of the choir's status as among leading boy ensembles in Europe).

In the rehearsal space adjacent to St Mary's, the choir is a snapshot of modern Ireland. Kids from the inner city and leafy suburbs sit side by side; within the ranks are children of African, Asian and Central European descent. The choir is elite in the sense it's difficult to get into - yet the singers could not be more reflective of the melting pot city in which they are growing up.



"It can be much harder to get the [children from disadvantaged backgrounds] to stay," says Murphy, herself a Londoner of Irish parentage. "But the rewards can be incredible. One boy who was with us just started in [exclusive private school] Belvedere on a scholarship. The choir greatly contributed to that. He proved himself able to function in a certain social setting."

The children are preparing for a Christmas concert tomorrow at the National Concert Hall (where the 30 boys will be joined by the Palestrina men's choir and the Orchestra of St Cecilia). Christmas is when the Palestrina, as an institution, lets its hair down. The choir rarely performs secular music but once or twice a year convention is set aside and the repertoire is expanded to crowd-pleasers such as Walking In The Air from Raymond Briggs' The Snowman, God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman and Winter Wonderland. It isn't unheard of for the Palestrina to even belt out Jingle Bells.

That's quite a change from the regular repository of classical choral music, with the choir performing an entirely different suite of pieces each Sunday at the Pro-Cathedral. "Practice is long," says Murphy. "Three and a quarter hours on Wednesday. On Sunday they are in for four hours. You have to stand up and sing a different repertoire off by heart with very little turnover. And you've got to look the part. It is great training, whether you want to be a politician or work in music."

Are pushy parents an issue? "Yes, but in that case I don't think the child would stay if they didn't want to," says Murphy. "You sometimes get it the other way around. The child wants to stay but the parents are wondering, with all the practice, how do we get them there every week? There is obviously a lot of pressure on families in terms of time nowadays."

I'd expected the kids to be precocious overachievers. Actually, they're conspicuously normal - a bit awkward and inclined to giggle among themselves, as children their age tend to. But they're serious about their music. They're also completely unselfconscious about the choir. That's quite a contrast to my school days, when being good at something was a fast-track to having your head shoved down the loo at lunch break.

"We went to the Vatican to sing for the Pope recently," says Joshua Fitzpatrick (13), who has performed in the choir for the past six years. "Everyone at school thought it was really cool."



Choristers Chan Chan Yubo (9), Conor Graham (9), Jack O'Flaherty (8) and Ollie Maughan (8). Photo: Frank Mc Grath

"People come up to me and say, 'Oh are you a good singer?'" says Max Bennett. "I shy away from it. I don't want to sing for them. I'm perfectly at ease singing for the Pope. But not for people I know."

They're regular kids in many ways. Max is a keen hurler and footballer, Joshua plays rugby. They got into the choir because they had an aptitude for music (many Palestrina members also play an instrument) and were looking for an outlet for their abilities. "We listen to stuff like Drake and Kanye," says Max. "All kinds of music...from classical music to what you hear on the radio." Do they ever tire of singing, say, The Snowman? "No because we do new songs every Christmas. So it stays interesting for us."

In addition to a musical education, the choir prepares the boys for one of life's most poignant lessons: that all things must pass. Once puberty hits and their voices crack, their days as junior choristers are at an end (there is the option of joining the Palestrina's men's choir, though many leave music behind completely).

"A boy will typically grow very dramatically before his voice breaks," says Murphy. "And then their voice gets incredibly good just before it turns squeaky. It can happen quite early - some are as young as 11."

The Palestrina has benefitted from an upsurge in popularity of choral music. Once regarded as a carry-over from more religiously oppressive times, choirs are today deeply chic. The Dublin Community Gospel Choir performs at Electric Picnic; Belgium's Scala choir tours the world delivering haunting covers of Radiohead and Depeche Mode. How extraordinary to recall that, just a few years ago, it was an open question whether the Palestrina had a future.

"It had dipped a lot," says Murphy. "At one point membership was down to eight boys. When I took over in 2002 there were 12 boys who were robed, plus six in training. But the 100th anniversary was approaching and we had to very quickly get it back on its feet. Today there is a great interest in choirs. You have them on TV a lot. I don't think there has ever been as much enthusiasm among the public."

The Palestrina Choir performs tomorrow, December 4, at 8pm in the National Concert Hall. Tickets start at €15, see nch.ie

Photos by Frank McGrath