

Palestrina Choir: ‘Singing makes me feel like I’m in a different world’

Choir may be more diverse than ever, but it’s still notoriously difficult to gain a coveted spot

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Conor McGloughlin, Chanchan Yubozhou and Cameron Drumm, of The Palestrina Choir of St Mary's Pro Cathedral, Dublin. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill

O’Connell Street is abuzz with early-bird shoppers and rain-soaked commuters, but down a side street, past the odd lurking menacing figure or two, lies St Mary’s Pro Cathedral. On its third-floor rehearsal room, the air is sweet with music as the renowned Palestrina Choir undertake part of their 12-hour-a-week rehearsal schedule (including several hours on weekends).

Yet even amid the intensity of rehearsal, there's room for downtime. A dozen boys clamber round to explain the coloured medals around their necks. Much like belts in karate, they move through a series of different-coloured medals as they build their repertoire, with head chorister – in this case, 14-year-old [Cameron Drumm](#), from Drumcondra – being the most senior position.

Cameron, quietly confident and likeable, exudes the air of an elder statesman as the younger members boast about how they moved up to blue, or red, or white medals (tasks, general knowledge, music theory and general participation, apparently). Whatever happened to the boyhood staples we're all familiar with? The *Fortnite*, the flossing, the screen time?

“Oh, they would [sit in front of *Fortnite*], totally,” reasons Blánaid Murphy, who has been choir director since 2002, and its first ever female one. “Here, parents know that they are doing something very directed. No matter what you end up doing, being [in the choir] has benefits, from learning repertoire to standing up and singing. The discipline is very character building.”

Boisterous

Later, the boys change into their official robes while singing *The Twelve Days Of Christmas*, although this time they've gone a bit rogue. Their unsupervised version is less honeyed than in rehearsal, more boisterous. Blánaid gives me a knowing smile. “This is them playing up,” she smiles, moving to the door to administer a sharp “SHHHHH”.



The Palestrina Choir during rehearsals. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill

“Boys are like volcanoes,” she observes. “You have to be very firm with them. You can’t just be a schoolmarm – it’s not school, and they’re giving up a huge amount of time – but if they find the slightest chink in anyone’s armour . . .

“You do want kids with a bit of personality,” she adds. “You want kids that can lead the group and have a bit of a laugh. If they can’t rein it in, it’s a problem, but we have some right personalities in there.”

Chan Chan Yubo Zhou (11) from [Glen Hall](#) has been in the choir for four years. His parents are from [China](#) and, I’m told, speak no English. Chan Chan is much quieter than some of the other youngsters, but Blánaid later notes that vocally, the Soprano 1 is something of a secret weapon.

“My mom suggested [joining the choir],” he admits. “I didn’t really want to join in the first place. I kind of like staying at home. But you make loads of new friends and you have lots of fun.”

He’s packed plenty of action into those four years, as they’ve all done. Cameron lists the choir’s recent trips abroad for concerts (“Carnegie Hall, London, Pennsylvania, Washington, Wales, [Belgium](#), Rome, Gloucester”). There have also been, notably, concerts for popes Benedict and Francis, including appearances at the Phoenix Park and Croke Park for the pope’s Irish visit earlier this year.

“We did meet Daniel O’Donnell, not long before we went on stage,” recalls Cameron.

“We only got near the pope, though. It’s easier to sing in front of a crowd like that than your own family.”



Choir director Blanaid Murphy with members of the Palestrina Choir at St Mary’s Pro Cathedral, Dublin. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill

Previously, the Palestrina – established in 1890 by Dr Vincent O’Brien, a [Christian Brothers](#) teacher – had been overwhelmingly male, middle-class and white, but that has changed of late. A number of Romanian, Polish, Italian, African and Chinese boys have been brought into the fold, as Blánaid had taken steps to reach out to youngsters in different schools across Dublin. For all its inclusivity, the choir is notoriously hard to join: the boys must undertake listening tests in school, to see whether they have a good ear and aptitude, before being invited to audition.

“The country has changed so much in terms of population, and different traditions and perspectives have added a great richness to the choir,” she observes.

In another heartening development, Blánaid’s determination to introduce a girls’ choir to the Pro came to fruition in 2009. Both choirs occasionally come together for events and concerts, but there are no plans to integrate the two groups.

Voices break

“In England, they tried bringing girls into some cathedral choirs, but they discovered that all the boys dropped off,” explains Blánaid. “Girls are also much more mature at 11 or 12, and I think they’d very quickly take over.”

Of the differences between the two factions, she adds: “Boys are more bombastic, and can focus on things more intensely, while girls are more subtle. The girls work consistently harder, but the boys can do a better acceleration if they have to.”



Members of the Palestrina Choir. Photograph: Dara Mac Donail

And of course, boys’ voices break, signalling the end to a young man’s days as a junior chorister and a potential move into the Palestrina men’s choir.

“Some kids are ready to go and have had enough, but for some, it’s really a bereavement,” notes Blánaid.

“You just really don’t want it to stop,” says Cameron. “It’s like a break from school, where you can come in and talk to your friends.”

Howth native Conor McGloughlin (14) has been in the choir for eight years and, like Cameron, is also heading into his final year in the choir. “Even over the summer when you’re not doing anything, you deeply miss choir,” he admits.

Why do they love it so much? “Everyone’s like you,” reasons Cameron. “You can’t really be weird in front of people doing the same thing as you.”

Conor adds: “At school people are like, ‘oh, why are you singing? Like, that’s weird’. But here, everyone joins in. I think some people are impressed, mainly at the capability of giving up so much of your time.”

The religious or spiritual element of being in the Palestrina hasn’t gone unnoticed: “I guess as you get older you see the connection between the two. You appreciate it a bit more during Mass, but it’s not really cool to be religious at 14,” observes Cameron.

“You’re not really religious though, people aren’t here for the religion. They’re here to sing and go on trips and stuff.”

The two older boys already have their post-Palestrina plans in a row: Cameron wants to get more involved in his school’s drama department, something that time constraints have disallowed up to now, while Conor has a new direction in mind: “I really like to cook at home, as well as going on trips with friends, stuff like that.”

They will miss the high of singing in front of an audience, though: “It’s like winning a game in Gaelic,” says Conor.

Chan Chan, meanwhile, has many years left in the choir to enjoy. “Singing in the choir just makes me smile, it’s like you’re going into a different world,” he notes. “It’s kind of like, wow.”

*The Palestrina Choir play the National Concert Hall on December 11th. Tickets are €20-€32, see nch.ie for details. Their new album *Joy To The World* is out now.*