

Celebrating 175 years of the RSNO Chorus

The RSNO Chorus is one of Scotland's most cherished musical treasures. But it also holds a highly unusual, almost certainly unique, position: it was the RSNO Chorus that created its Orchestra, not the other way round. 'All of us in the RSNO Chorus are aware that this choir was instrumental in the forming of the Orchestra,' says current RSNO Chorus Director Gregory Batsleer. 'It's a great honour to hold, and we know how special this choir is in that respect.'

Both Orchestra and Chorus go right back to Victorian Glasgow in 1843, and Nicol's Coffee House at 179 Argyle Street. And to Handel's *Messiah* – still a firm favourite for the RSNO Chorus and its audiences today. It was in this little-remembered Glasgow establishment that members of a glee club set out to drum up support for the first full Scottish performance of Handel's choral masterpiece. They'd soon gathered a remarkable 176 members, and the *Messiah* premiere took place on 2 April 1844, in Glasgow's City Halls, accompanied by an ad hoc orchestra of 30 players (an embryonic RSNO, although the Orchestra traces its official founding to 1891).



After its first concert, the choir called itself the Glasgow Music Association, and in 1855 it joined forces with the Glasgow Harmonic Society to form the Glasgow Choral Union – a name the choir retained for more than a century. The Choral Union quickly put down firm roots in Glasgow's musical world, expanding its repertoire hugely and also crucially playing a key role in city life. It was the Choral Union that sang in 1868 to mark the laying of foundation stones for the new University buildings in Gilmorehill, and that also gave a concert of Burns songs in 1877 to mark the unveiling of the Robert Burns statue in George Square.

Both World Wars forced the Choral Union to cut back its activities drastically. But it celebrated its centenary in 1944 with a remarkable event, singing no less than four of the repertoire's grandest choral works – Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Haydn's *Creation*, Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* and Handel's *Messiah* – across a five-day festival.

It's been since 1945, however, that what is now the RSNO Chorus has truly solidified its position as one of Scotland's key musical ensembles, expanding and broadening its repertoire, inviting eminent names for spectacular collaborations, and also spreading its exemplary music-making overseas.

‘Performing large choral works with a large symphony orchestra to large audiences – that buzz is something you can’t get anywhere else in life.’

GREGORY BATSLEER, RSNO CHORUS DIRECTOR

Benjamin Britten conducted the Choral Union in his own *Spring Symphony* in 1954. It made the first of its many commercial recordings in 1973, and in 1970, Daniel Barenboim took the choir to Israel for its first overseas tour since 1913, with performances of Brahms’ *German Requiem* in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and Bach choral music at the glorious Roman amphitheatre in Caesarea. Further tours to the USA, Israel and Italy followed throughout the 1970s and 1980s, confirming what had become the choir’s truly international standing. Christopher Bell, now Chorus Director of the RSNO Junior Chorus, was instrumental in the RSNO Chorus’ successes as its inspirational and influential Chorus Director from 1989 to 2001.

And by now, the Choral Union had been embraced entirely as a cherished part of what is now the RSNO family. Following the Orchestra’s name change in 1950 to the Scottish National Orchestra, in 1970, what



had for more than a century been the Glasgow Choral Union, became the Scottish National Orchestra Chorus. Both groups went on to add Royal to their names in 1991, following the patronage of Her Majesty The Queen (granted in 1977) – and their relationship has grown even closer ever since.

‘It’s a very positive step for any chorus to become fully part of its orchestra,’ agrees Gregory Batsleer. ‘And more recently we’ve been very keen to offer many more choral opportunities to singers throughout Scotland, which we’ve achieved

through the launch of the RSNO Chorus Academy.’ This new RSNO Chorus off-shoot is open to all singers, without audition, with the dual aims of developing singers for the main RSNO Chorus, but also offering greater opportunities to Scottish singers of all levels. ‘It shows that there are ways for everyone to be part of the RSNO through singing – and also what a significant part of the RSNO the Chorus actually is.’

What ambitions does Batsleer have for the RSNO Chorus now? ‘We want the singers to be thriving in their music-making, and performing exciting works with a full symphony orchestra – and we want the Orchestra’s Seasons to be full of great opportunities for the audience to hear them, too. There’s also a huge appetite for us to go back to touring with the Orchestra, and making important recordings.’

He’s clear, however, that the right way to celebrate the RSNO Chorus’ astonishing 175-year history is to look forward, rather than simply back. ‘The most important thing for a Chorus with such a great tradition and history is that we use both of those as inspiration for what we do next, and that we’re constantly looking at new ways to develop, and to have a relevance to the communities that we serve.’

David Kettle

