

This year's SCO Chorus Christmas Concert aims to offer an oasis of calm



David Kettle

“I have such an overwhelming love for the group,” says Gregory Batsleer. He’s talking about the SCO Chorus, where he’s been director since 2009, having previously run the Hallé Youth Choir and set up a brand new chorus at London’s National Portrait Gallery, as well as collaborating with pop musicians including Damon Albarn and Elbow.

But the SCO Chorus plays a special role for him, he says: “There’s nobody else in my life I see as regularly as these people. I’m so indebted to what some chorus members have given me, and I don’t think they’ll ever realise that – even if they do piss me off from time to time...”

That statement is typical of Batsleer’s passion for what he does, his genuine enthusiasm for creating great art with choral singing – and his disarming frankness, too.

One of the SCO Chorus’s flagship events is coming up in a few days: this is only the third year they’ve put on a Christmas Concert in Edinburgh’s Greyfriars Kirk, but it’s rapidly becoming a fixture in the capital’s musical calendar. And it was Batsleer who launched the project.

“The idea emerged about four years ago, when I was in Berlin,” he says. “The Berlin Radio Choir has an annual Christmas concert in the Berliner Dom, and it’s absolutely packed. I thought, ‘We can really stand on our own within the SCO season. Edinburgh has this beautiful church right in the middle of town – so why don’t we do our own Christmas concert where we can show our own identity?’”

But, like the Berlin event that inspired it, this is no ordinary Christmas concert. “It’s not *Jingle Bells* or pops,” continues Batsleer. “Christmas is a time of extroversion, bright lights, sweets, presents, loud music and so on. We forget that it’s also a time of reflection, and we’re hoping to provide a space in the run-up to Christmas for people to come in and reflect in the calm.”

There’s a thoughtful underlying structure to the concert, too. “We begin with music by Bruckner and Eccard – very serious, dense pieces



Gregory Batsleer: ‘It’s not Jingle Bells or pops’

creating quite a dark, thoughtful space – then grow and open up as though the sun is coming out and warming people.”

The thinking behind these Christmas concerts is typical of Batsleer’s pioneering, creative approach to music across the board – another recent example being *Songs of Farewell* back in June, in which he and director Jack Furness transformed the SCO Chorus’s performance of Parry’s poignant wartime masterpiece into a fully-

“I’m so indebted to what some chorus members have given me, and I don’t think they’ll ever realise”

staged music theatre work.

Batsleer points to the remarkable current popularity of singing in a choir, but the difficulty of encouraging audiences to go to choral concerts. Part of the problem, he feels, is the disconnect between the participatory social contact of singing together, and the traditional conventions of a classical concert, whether choral or otherwise.

“The challenge is to dispel the expected etiquette of what a concert is,” he explains. What kind of events would he like to see as a result?

“The idea of staging something is very good, and venue is a big issue – you could take music into all sorts of unusual spaces. Dance and movement are other good ways of breaking down barriers, and lighting and atmosphere are so important.”

He’s not out to subvert music organisations’ traditional offerings, he’s keen to stress: “It’s not about stopping what they do, but adding to it, creating different paths to it.”

Beyond the SCO Chorus, Batsleer also directs the RSNO Chorus, and has recently been appointed choral director at the Huddersfield Choral Society. “I’ve been careful to ensure that each of the positions I take has the potential to become something very different,” he says. “With the RSNO, for example, I’m trying to open the doors of that organisation in a much more choral-facing way – it’s about doing wider, broader things, like *Come and Sing* events and launching a Chorus Academy.”

He has big ambitions, across a wide group of choral ensembles too. How does he balance it all? “I feel unbelievably lucky to do what I do,” Batsleer says, “so that the question of balance becomes one not of difficulty, but one of excitement.” ■

Gregory Batsleer conducts the SCO Chorus’s Christmas Concert at Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh on 20 December, www.sco.org.uk