

Achill Choral Society to sing Celtic Spring at Mayfield

By Constance Scrafield

The Achill Choral Society, now in its 34th year, has travelled to Ireland and the U.K.

Now, in an all-Celtic program, they will take us back to the dreamy history of the ancient Celts, as well as those of this and the last century, to the descendants of the Celtic heritage of Eastern Canada.

There are two performances, one already sold out in Alliston and the other at Mayfield Secondary School for an evening performance April 30, for which there are still tickets.

As we sat in the back of the hall where they rehearse, the songs were full of the tales of the sea, working in the mines, the lives and losses of the Irish, Welsh and Scots. Across the ocean to the New World, the sea still dominates the ruminations of the poetry within the songs and the orchestration of these choral voices seems to pull us along amid the waves, the storms and the journeys home.

Some of the songs are complicated, with voices weaving in and around the melodies and the harmonies. The trick is to make those vocal manoeuvres sound easy, which is achieved by these rehearsals, repetition and "sing it again." Further, the songs have jokes, lots of humour, fables, stories you might never had heard. There are rolling and guttural "r's", attitude, accents, fluctuating dynamics "pianissimo" "forte!"

At the controls of this learning and practising is A. Dale Wood, who co-founded the choir all those 34 years ago, in 1982 in Hockley with Mr. Meyers from Austria who loved music and wanted to establish a choir in this rural area.

Throughout the life of this collective, there are still several original members, still attending every Wednesday to listen so attentively to Wood as he urges, presses, critiques and praises the choir while the work progresses. He instructs them in diction, in the process of pushing an "r" for emphasis in the words; helping them understand the intonation in accents which are not their own.

For the whole span of time, the choir and Wood have been singing together, they have returned his demands with every inch of effort, their loyalty and respect for him complete. He has always been the undisputed maestro.

Under that direction, the Achill Choral Society has had a successful career as a choir, filling the venues for their performances here and overseas. They have been invited to sing, both on their own and in company with local choirs, in fine halls and churches in many countries across Europe, the U.K and, as we mentioned, Ireland.

This choir, like most music making and sharing groups is a community of friends. However much they do or do not see one another between rehearsals, they care for each other. In times of trouble or joy, they commiserate and rejoice. Many of them have known each other for a long time; some have only been with the choir a couple of years or a few months.

Traditional to the Celtic song is the haunting, wishful tones "music that floats one second and bounces the next. In a conversation with Wood after rehearsal, he told us, "They'll sing in Gaelic. They'll sing in old accents."

The songs are full of history, myth and folk stories.

The music committee choses a selection for a proposed concert but Wood always has the final say.

"They put together a collection of Maritime folk songs and I said that wasn't a concert," he said. "Then they came back with this all Celtic selection and that's a concert!"

Still, there is a wide range of Celtic music and Wood was clear about the times from which the music was chosen.

"To begin with," he said, "we were looking at just the ancient music but there's so much that's modern from the East Coast that we just had to include it. I wanted that modern Celtic music."

Why do a Celtic show? There is a lot of audience appeal with the demographics of the area was one answer and the interesting challenge of singing in the dialects and language was the other.

The choir is accompanied for this concert by NUA, a Canadian Trad Trio of three musicians. James Law plays the fiddle; Graeme McGillivray is on guitar and master of the Bordhran is Jacob McCauley.

Wood has also directed the Georgetown Choral Society and Georgetown Children's Choir for 40 and 25 years respectively.

Asked what he thinks keeps such groups going for so long, he replied, "The love and joy of singing. Music is part of us. There's lots of history " these are great musical communities."

Tickets for the concert may be purchased at BookLore in Orangeville, Holmes Appliance and Music Store, Shelburne, Forester's Book Store, Bolton and Dryclean World, Caledon East, as well as from all Achill members.