



BWW Review: The Washington Chorus Gives a Joyous St. Patrick's Day Concert

by Sam Abney

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The Washington Chorus.

Photo by Shannon Finney.

Third on the list of identifying traits for St. Patrick's Day (behind binge drinking and the color green) is the amount of fun the holiday elicits from devoted celebrants. This sheer joy was on full display at The Washington Chorus's St. Patrick's Day Celebration presented at the Kennedy Center on the holiday in question. In addition to being a

The Washington Chorus

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beautiful showcase for the talented group, the day was a fun-filled one thanks to programming that united multiple arts groups from across the District (and the globe) and especially because of their show-stealing conductor and Artistic Director, Christopher Bell.



Zoë Conway and John McIntyre.

Photo by Shannon Finney.

To build proper suspense for the Chorus, the additional performers can be evaluated first. Flown in from Ireland, Zoë Conway and John McIntyre brought some simple, yet powerful, tunes to the afternoon. The married couple played a selection of duets with John on guitar and Zoë showcasing her world-renowned fiddle-playing prowess. Their duets were lovely but Ms. Conway's solos were the true highlight. For their second set of the evening, Ms. Conway brought two fiddles onstage with her, using them for separate numbers because one of her songs was historically played on a slightly out-of-tune fiddle. In her hands, however, nothing could possibly sound off-pitch. Instead, every note she played was as enthralling as the last.

The Culkin School of Traditional Irish Dance brought the energy even higher during their rousing sets. No matter which ensemble, whether it be their youngest beginners or their eldest teen experts, each danced with such vigor and excitement that the audience couldn't help but clap along. With the D.C. Irish band, the Irish Inn Mates, providing solid

Broadway World: "TWC Gives a Joyous St. Patrick's Day Concert"

backing for their numbers (along with musical support for the Chorus), the energy only continued to build whenever more dancers graced the stage. At multiple times during the night, the Inn Mates had the chance to lead the performance and they never disappointed with some of the tightest quartet numbers possible.



Dancers from The Culkin School of Traditional Irish Dance.

Photo by Shannon Finney.

Even with so much to be delightfully distracted by during the afternoon, The Washington Chorus remained firmly in the spotlight. Each of the ensemble's numbers were filled with tight harmonies and fully filled the spacious Concert Hall. It was a smart decision to provide the lyrics to some tunes in the program, however, because the pacing of some numbers made it difficult to discern the exact words. The most notable example was "Paddy McGinty's Goat," a humorous number about a mischievous goat who does everything from ruining a wedding to eating a stick of dynamite. It was still an uproarious number, but the speedy tune lacked the same diction which drew in the audience with songs like "Wild Mountain Thyme."

Broadway World: "TWC Gives a Joyous St. Patrick's Day Concert"



Artistic Director Christopher Bell.

Photo by Shannon Finney.

With so much going on, it would have been easy for the afternoon to go awry or feel awkward. This is where Mr. Bell's personality really saved the day. Though he did forget in which order the program would go (he began speaking at a time when The Irish Inn Mates were scheduled to do a solo number), his effortless charm lifted the performances and made any of these small gaffes easily forgivable. Part of the magic of a choral performance is seeing the passion of a conductor come through with each action. This is certainly the case with Mr. Bell.

Audience participation is always a little tricky and, with multiple sing-alongs, it was a hit-or-miss affair throughout the program. Lesser known tunes like "The Wild Rover" and "Irish Eyes Are Smiling" garnered some tepid vocalizations from the crowd. When "Danny Boy" wrapped up the afternoon, however, the crowd was more than happy to belt their hearts out. All in all, these short asides of interaction created a solid connection between the Chorus and their enraptured audience.

Broadway World: "TWC Gives a Joyous St. Patrick's Day Concert"



*The Washington Chorus.
Photo by Shannon Finney.*

Following the performance, the Chorus continued their celebrations at the Watergate hotel for an intimate gala and auction to benefit their programs. It was a wonderful way to promote the educational and community outreach programs that the Chorus takes on throughout the District, particularly their Side by Side initiative. As part of the program, the Chorus selects up to two outstanding high school choruses to rehearse and perform with The Washington Chorus for a winter concert. With video testimonials from participants past and present, it was a great reminder of the good being done in the community and a festive opportunity to provide additional support for these initiatives.

At the end of the day, The Washington Chorus knows how to throw a party. And that sentiment is not solely referring to their swinging shindig at the Watergate. With Christopher Bell at the helm, it is clear that concerts with the Chorus are sure to be anything but ordinary or boring. It doesn't hurt that their musicians are also quite impressive as well.

The Washington Chorus's St. Patrick's Day Celebration played a one-night-only engagement at the Kennedy Center last Sunday.