

INTERVIEW

The MUSIC man

Nancy Previs talks to the conductor David Brophy ahead of his concert in the National Concert Hall in Dublin, about his energy, work with choirs and, em, socks

As we sit down to chat, I spy the navy socks – with pink, blue and yellow dots – peeking out from under David Brophy's jeans. He tells me that in his haste to catch a flight from Dublin for a performance in Finland, he forgot to pack hosiery, so he picked these up in Helsinki. He says though, that they'll fit right in with all the other cheerful pairs in his sock drawer at home in Monkstown.

"Yeah, I'd be a sock person. I certainly go for coloured socks at concerts – generally red ones," he announces with a smile.

David's musical career is notable for his energy, as he recalls some recent activity. "I was with the NSO for two concerts on New Year's Day; this weekend, I'm with the Ulster Orchestra for a BBC Invitation concert. Then I'm back with the NSO recording with Jimmy Galway. The end of this month I'm conducting Chorus Ireland, then I'm with the RTE Concert Orchestra on February 4. I'm with the Concert Orchestra again for Valentine's Day. My mother refers to me as the Duracell Bunny. I think I've got good batteries alright", he jokes.

He immerses himself completely in projects. "Yeah, that's me, it's all-consuming when it's on, then I'll move along to the next thing and it will be the same intensity again. Conducting is one of those things where you can't half do your job."

He's become well-known for working with amateur choirs. "It seems to be my role in life to be busy with choirs. There never was any great plan to become involved with choral work – it just happened."

David may be familiar to the TV audience for the 2014 documentary about the High Hopes Choir, the group he created with more than 60 homeless people to express and enjoy themselves through singing. "Musical creativity is something we all have. I love seeing the surprise on people's faces when they realise they can sing." He tells me that the High

Hopes Choir will be singing in the European Parliament in March.

"We want to bring a message to a European platform – how performance arts and groups singing together can do so much for people who happen to fall on hard times. It will be something very special for the choir," says the dedicated conductor.

The MEPs are covering the choir's costs. "It was Marian Harkin [MEP for Midlands-Northwest] who got members to club together their flight budgets and pool enough air miles for 75 flights – and rooms for us for two nights."

Meanwhile, David is busy with other choral and orchestral engagements. Talking about his next concert date with the RTE Concert Orchestra on February 4, he says fondly, "I'll be back with my old band again. I always love returning to them." This time, he's conducting them along with the Ballina Chamber Choir, Cór Mhaigh Eo and the Dún Laoghaire Choral Society (where he's musical director). The evening's highlight will be the performance of Welsh composer Karl Jenkins' powerful *The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace*. "It's rooted in traditional music from across the world with a Middle Eastern flavour and is something that will be relevant for a long time to come."

David is also busy with his Chorus Ireland project, a 'scratch choir', which launched in Kilkenny on January 29, with a performance of Haydn's *The Creation*. "The scratch choir is something that developed in the UK in the 1970s, where people would come together for a day or a weekend to rehearse like lunatics and then perform. It's sort of a pop-up choir; speed dating for choral singers!"

"With Chorus Ireland, we'll meet and rehearse for three hours on the Friday evening, rehearse all day Saturday and Sunday, do a concert Sunday night, and afterwards everyone goes home, and that's the



end of the choir. Now, some of the same people might come to the next weekend scratch choir either in Sligo in April or Limerick the end of June, but each time the group will be a little different."

An attractive proposition, then, for people who don't have the time to commit to weekly practice with a regular choir? "Yes, for people who have busy lives the notion of a choir that you can pop into for 48 hours and then leave is appealing." For David, there's also the enjoyment of nurturing a collaboration of amateur choral groups with professional musicians. "I like the space where the amateur groups or singers can meet the musicians and together create something magical."

There are no auditions: "You just sign up, turn up and sing. I don't have any idea who I'm going to get. And I've got 48 hours to create a really good choir," he says, seemingly without fear. "I actually do have fear of the unknown, but I want to

embrace it. The unknown is where great things often can happen," he says enthusiastically.

With his evident energy and focus, I get the feeling David isn't the kind of conductor who wastes time arriving early and **pacing** around before showtime. "No, coming up to a concert I'll get changed as late as possible so I can just walk on stage and start. I like the least amount of ceremony possible. When I conducted *The Rite of Spring* with the National Symphony Orchestra maybe 12 or 13 years ago I remember we rehearsed in the morning, I taught in the afternoon and then I went and did the concert that night."

David teaches at the **DDT Conservatory of Music and Drama**. He says teaching is fundamental to his creative process. "It's good, it makes you question everything." David Brophy conducts *The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace* on Saturday, February 4, in the National Concert Hall.

