

# Triumphant American Tour by Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe

By Silas R. Powell, President, Carbondale Historical Society

Three brilliantly-conceived and flawlessly-executed concerts by the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe and soloists were presented to American audiences in Pennsylvania at Scranton, Carbondale, and Bethlehem in October 2015. The choir's musical director is Conway Morgan, the accompanist is David Lyn Rees.

The hosts for those concerts were the Carbondale Historical Society and the Lackawanna County Saint David's Society. The tour manager was Ted Frutchey.

Full houses and enthusiastic standing ovations were the order of the day at each of the three concerts. The strong, clear, immaculate, and elegant musical collaboration of Conway Morgan and David Lyn Rees was not only a joy to behold but also provided the foundation for the soul-stirring performances by the choir. The virtuoso performances of Helen Gibbon, Ffion Haf Jones, Luke James, Sion Matthey, and Finley Bizzel-Browning, which were delivered with effortless grace and charm, won the hearts of the audiences in all three cities.

The base of operations for the choir during most of the tour was the city of Carbondale in the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania. On the day of the choir's arrival in town, the mayor of Carbondale, the Honorable Justin M. Taylor, issued a proclamation of welcome, and assured the choir that the City of Carbondale would do everything in its power to make the choir's visit to the Pioneer City both enjoyable and memorable.

It was in Carbondale, in June 1831, that the first deep underground anthracite shaft mine in America was established. To learn how to conduct deep underground shaft mining, the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company recruited ninety Welsh miners and their families and brought them to America. Those ninety Welsh families established the Welsh roots of the City of Carbondale where, on Christmas Day in 1850, the first eisteddfod in America took place.

On the site of that first deep underground anthracite shaft mine in America, on the day of the choir's arrival in Carbondale, the city of Carbondale hosted a commemorative historical program. To be present at that historic site, as the sun was setting on a beautiful October day, as the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe, under the direction of Conway Morgan, gave a heart-felt and beautifully articulated performance of *The Reverend Eli Jenkins' Prayer* from *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas was an experience that those of us who were there will never forget.

During their stay in Carbondale, the choir was received at a reception hosted by the Greater Carbondale Chamber of Commerce. In the course of that reception, Classic Voices, an *a cappella* group in northeastern Pennsylvania, under the direction of the Reverend Jay Best, sang *Calon Lan* in Welsh for the visiting Welsh choir and the many guests in the auditorium.

The members of Classic Voices who, in the weeks before the arrival of the Welsh choir in Carbondale, devoted many hours to learning *Calon Lan* in Welsh, were warmly applauded by the Welsh choir and friends who declared that both their performance and their Welsh pronunciation were excellent.

During their mornings and afternoons in Carbondale the members of the choir participated in a wide variety of excursions and tours, including a visit, hosted by Jerry Williams, to the Anthracite Heritage Museum in Scranton, where they viewed the extensive mining exhibits and then descended into a coal mine. In Carbondale they visited the exhibition galleries of the Carbondale Historical Society and the Delaware and Hudson Railroad Transportation Museum, and attended a lecture/presentation by Donald W. Powell on photography in Wales and in America in the nineteenth century.

The highlight of the choir's touring in Carbondale, for many, was the visit to Maplewood Cemetery, where there are three tombstones, dating to the early 1830s, with inscriptions on them in Welsh. The tombstones themselves appear to be of Welsh origin.

On the day before the visit to Maplewood Cemetery by a large group of choir members, David Alwyn Hughes and Carol went for an afternoon's walk in town and visited Maplewood Cemetery. There, in a remote corner of the cemetery, known to many as Welsh Hill, they chanced upon the three stones in the very large cemetery (over 7,000 burials therein) with inscriptions on them in Welsh.

"It seemed appropriate and important that spoken Welsh be heard in the twenty-first century at these important early nineteenth century burial sites," said David on the following day, "and so I read out loud the Welsh inscriptions on the stones there." That beautiful and heart-warming tribute will resonate forever in Maplewood Cemetery.

On the following day, during a town tour aboard a replica of a nineteenth-century trolley, forty members of the choir and friends descended from the trolley at Maplewood Cemetery and walked to Welsh Hill and visited the Welsh stones there. The inscriptions were studied and noted and the geological features of the stones themselves were discussed.

Remarkably, the inscriptions on the stones marking these Welsh graves are as crisp and legible today as they were over 185 years ago when the stones were installed. These inscriptions have not been negatively affected by the acid rain that has rendered illegible many marble and granite tombstones everywhere in America.

It then happened, in the peace and beauty and silence of this visit by members of the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe and friends to these Welsh burial sites, that the singing of the *Welsh Song for the Dead* was heard from the choir members, led by Selwyn Morris and Helen Gibbon. It was a transcendent moment that was enriched by an impassioned, elegiac, and spontaneous musical performance that many of us who were privileged to be there will remember always.

Additional highlights of these Welsh concerts were the guest appearances of the Scranton High School Knight Rhythms (Lisa McConlogie, director), the Valley View High School Choir (Gina Lupini, director; this choir learned *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau* in Welsh and sang it beautifully with the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe at the conclusion of the Carbondale concert), and the Carbondale Area High School Marching Band (Theron Roberts, director) and Chorus (Christopher Shuster,

director). A special feature of the Bethlehem concert was the guest appearance of Aram Basmadjian, the artist-in-residence of the Trinity Episcopal Church there.

As part of the program that followed the "Welcome to Carbondale Dinner", Josh Lawler, Eagle Scout, and Brandon Frutchey, Eagle Scout candidate, both from Troop 8 Carbondale, were recognized and honored for their active participation in community life. It was Josh Lawler who created the historic park environment at the First Underground Mine Monument in Carbondale. Selwyn Morris, speaking on behalf of the Scouting movement in Wales, congratulated Josh Lawler for his fine accomplishment as an Eagle Scout and presented him with two scarves that commemorate the birth of the Scouting movement in Wales at Ystradgynlais in 1908.

Pleasant memories of this concert tour to America in October 2015 by the Cor Dathlu Cwmtawe will be cherished for many years to come by a great many, both in Wales and in America.

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