

Combined voices bring dream alive

HEXHAM'S Orpheus Choir is about to embark on its most ambitious choral journey to date.

Tomorrow, they are set to thrill a sell-out audience when they perform Edward Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* amid the glorious acoustics of the ancient Abbey.

It's an ambitious project for a community choir. Indeed, Elgar's piece is so challenging that the amateur choir hired for its premiere in 1900 couldn't cope with it.

So Orpheus's director, Mark Edwards, has taken a brave punt by deciding to go for it.

"It's a piece I really like," Mark says. "I have played it as a timpanist – which was my job in the orchestra before I took up the conductor's baton – and it's a great piece of music. It's just really well written."

Gerontius derives from the Greek name for an old man and the work follows this 'everyman' character as he faces death, meets his guardian angel and goes before God before being taken to purgatory with the promise of everlasting glory.

It's certainly an epic work and requires many voices, so alongside the 80 or so people in the Orpheus, there will be additional volume provided by Voices of Hope – the Newcastle choir to which Mark belongs and which won BBC4's Adult Choir of the Year competition last year.

The Orpheus has been going for more than 60 years and was formed

Music

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in 1955 by a group of Hexham Abbey Festival chorus singers who wished to perform all year round, rather than solely at the annual Abbey event.

It's a friendly, un-auditioned choir consisting of a wide range of ages and abilities. Mark, who has been director for the last two years, explains: "It means anyone can turn up and do it. You don't have to be able to sight read."

Having said that, there are loads of people who are really good sight readers. There's a whole mix of people in it from retired people to younger people.

"Usually people will come along and say, 'I'm a soprano' or 'I'm an alto' and so we try them in one section and find where it's comfortable for them to sing. It's very much an open door policy and I'd encourage anyone to come along and get involved."

The choir meets every Wednesday night in Trinity Methodist Church in Beaumont Street. Mark adds: "We have started doing these slightly bigger productions and last year was the first one we have done of such size – Vaughan Williams's *The Sea Symphony*.

"That was a real big thing for us as



Seven of the members of Hexham's Orpheus Choir get ready for their big performance at the Abbey tomorrow. From the left, Chris Welch, Faye Robinson, Owen McArdle, Pat Rose, Jean Wilks, Denis McCaldin and Tanja Pless-Mulloli.

it demands a full-size symphony orchestra which has a lot of players. This year we will have probably around 150 performers playing in a joint collaboration."

Mark has also been able to seek friendly advice from one of the choir's latest members – a former conductor of the Halle Orchestra no less!

Denis McCaldin is a conductor and musicologist and retired professor emeritus of performance studies in music at Lancaster University.

A Haydn specialist, he has led some of Britain's most illustrious orchestras, including the RPO, the RLPO, the Halle and London Mozart Players.

After moving to Stocksfield, to be nearer son Mark and his family, Denis was keen to see what life was like on the other side of the lectern.

"I have conducted this piece but I have never sung it and it's always a revelation to discover that things you thought were easy – once you are amongst the workers – you find they are anything but," says Denis, whose daughter, Clare McCaldin, is a mezzo soprano opera singer and performed at the Hexham Abbey Festival three years ago.

"I am in the tenor section and I am enjoying seeing how the other half live, if you like. What I've discovered is that the hard pieces remain hard!"

"It's an interesting experience because I know how I would do it, but I like to see how Mark does it. It's a pleasure to work with him."

Obviously not all of the Orpheus members can boast such a CV, though most have always been interested and engaged in music in some shape or form down the years.

Tanja Pless-Mulloli joined the Orpheus when Mark's predecessor, Glenn Davis, took over.

"I was singing with Glenn in a Gilbert and Sullivan society in North Tyneside and when he moved here, I moved with him about a decade ago," she says.

Although the kind of music performed by the Orpheus is very different to G&S, Tanja grew up in a very classical environment. Brought up in Lüneburg, Germany, she started singing when she was 10 in a church linked to Johann Sebastian Bach.

"So I've come back to the old music," she laughs. A psychotherapist in Newcastle, she believes music really can soothe the

soul. "It's about having voice," she says. "There are many people out in the world who don't feel they have a voice and singing is a way of having a voice. Performing pieces that express emotion – and that's definitely true of *Dream of Gerontius* – can really lift you. It is full of intense emotions."

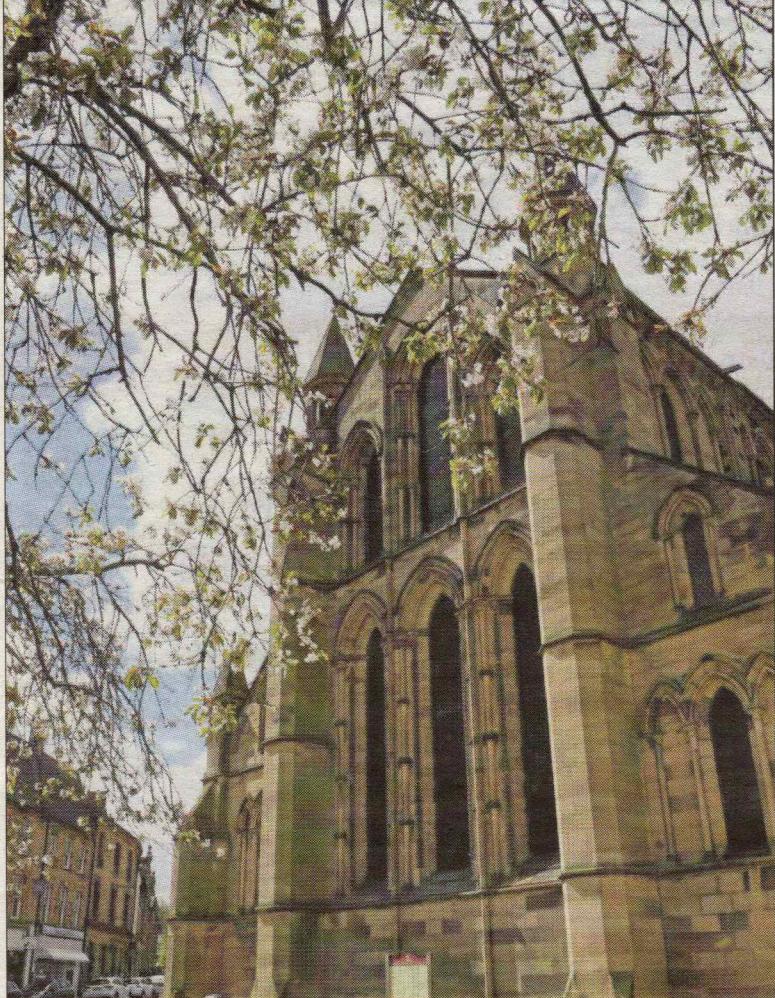
Indeed, the power of people singing together in a choir was highlighted in a recent Scandinavian study where the singers' heart rates became synchronised. Heart rates fell into a shared rhythm guided by the song's tempo.

Long-time member Owen McArdle, of Fourstones, who came to the Orpheus on the recommendation of a squash friend, concurs. "I find it extremely uplifting and really joyous. It's a very social choir and I've made a lot of friends here over the years."

Jean Wilks, a retired occupational therapist from Corbridge, who sings alto with the choir, agrees: "I have made so many friends through this choir – it's fantastically social."

Dream of Gerontius is at Hexham Abbey tomorrow at 7.30pm.

For more information about joining the Orpheus Choir, visit www.hexham-orpheus-choir.org.uk



Hexham Abbey will host a musical spectacular performed by the town's Orpheus choir and Newcastle Voices of Hope.



Voices of Hope, which won BBC4's Adult Choir of the Year competition last year, will be joining Hexham's Orpheus Choir for their performance of Edward Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* at Hexham Abbey tomorrow night.