

*Excerpt from the program of the tenth annual concert of  
The Glasgow Orpheus Choir, 23rd March, 1915*

THE ORIGIN  
OF THE  
"GLASGOW ORPHEUS"

I

THE WOON' O'T

This is how it happened, and when and where. At the east end of Rottenrow there was a courtyard, and in the south-east corner of the courtyard a stair which led down (not up) to a small hall. Quiet and remote was that hall, a place where a dark deed might be done, or a fair. On a certain night in the autumn of 1901 a number of men and women were gathered there to welcome their new conductor. They were bright and eager. They had bone and muscle and other things in plenty, including manners, good, bad, and indifferent. They looked as if they meant business. I certainly did. I had come straight from a two-years' conductorship of a recalcitrant and (when not so) anaemic church choir. There I had scored a perfectly complete failure (from my point of view), and there I had had my failure crowned by the presentation of a nice silver-mounted baton, accompanied by some nice silver-mounted platitudes.

I was in no mood for preliminaries on that eventful opening night. There stood I, and there sat the Toynbee House Choir, some thirty strong. "What piece do you know best?" I asked. "We rock away on the billows gay,"

they replied. "Very well, then," I added, "let's rock away." And we rocked. They threw it at me in slabs. It sounded to me (having come straight from that church choir) like the elements let loose in a hurry. It tore on its way as a tempest gone mad. It was the loudest noise I had ever heard or wish ever to hear in the name of music; and, to be frank, it was not musical, but there was heart behind it. So after we had mopped our foreheads and adjusted our neckgear and our throat muscles, I spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "you have very strong voices, very strong, but I like you. Your singing falls on my ear as the music of Apollo's lyre, not because it (your singing) is sweet or beautiful (it being neither), but because it is natural. This," I continued, "is the basis of all art. And, furthermore, you have enthusiasm. This, too, is well. My proposal, therefore, is that we start now to learn how to sing."

It must have been at that point that a voice spake down the chimney (or was it the ventilator?), saying, "I proclaim the banns"! At any rate, it was precisely at that moment that we took each other for better or for worse, and that is how it happened, and when and where.

## II

### MARRIED LIFE

After the wedding we settled down to work, and at the end of the season we gave a concert. The audience was small. The program was tactfully bisected by an "interval." A comic singer assisted. At the interval the small audience became appreciably smaller. After the comic singer's last *turn* the small audience vanished. The audience was right. We deserved it. We had been doing foundation work, and we foolishly deceived ourselves, and thought to deceive the public, that the edifice was showing above the surface. We failed.

It was a fruitful failure. We set our teeth. Those were the days. My partner (the Choir) was superb. She absorbed choral technique as a young bride absorbs cookery recipes, and at the end of that second season we turned out our first choral pie. Sodden in parts, perhaps, was the paste, but there were nice brown crisp bits, and much flavour and aroma about the whole thing. The public approved and applauded.

In the third year we were engaged to sing at the East-End Exhibition. Things were becoming exciting. We duly appeared. There was a huge audience, and we sang ourselves instantly into public favour. The spirit, chained up heretofore through technical disabilities, peeped forth that night, as it has more and more ever since. We began to dream dreams. The secretary, Tom M'Dougall, even suggested the possibility of the Choir some day finding itself singing in the City Hall, and, again, of the Choir some day finding itself singing compositions by the conductor. Ye gods! The molecular disintegration of the Pyramids seemed a feasible proposition in comparison. But Tom M'Dougall was right, and I have pleasure in naming him here as the first man to divine the path along which the Choir would go, and, therefore, as one of the real founders of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir as we know it to-day. There was another pioneer. He stood listening outside the door of our practice-room one night. He was a man of fine culture and wide musical experience. He was much too good for us as we then were. But he came in, because, as he afterwards explained, he detected a new and original note in our singing. That man was John B. Retson. It was he who, later, in some controversy, reminded the members that their policy must always be based on the assumption that *the Choir was going to make history*. He was our best chorister, and became our president. The sun has

passed and repassed over his grave many times, but he is fondly remembered still as one who gave us strength and courage.

We were now a successful Choir, and about to experience one of the concomitants of success—trouble.

### III

#### TAKING UP HOUSE

It—the trouble—arose in this way. We were only lodgers. The Choir was an adjunct of an older body, the Toynbee Men's Social Club. Put in another way—the Club was the father, the Choir the daughter. And the father, lacking vision (as fathers sometimes do), failed to notice the growth of the daughter. He wanted the last word in the direction of her affairs always, and she, being by that time the principal breadwinner and respectably married forbye, naturally rebelled (as daughters sometimes do). And so it happened that, one wet night in January, 1906, rather than break the furniture, we left. That parting was surely on the loom of fate when the earth first shook the waters from her mane.

We were seventy strong as we stood, homeless, on the cold pavement in Rottenrow. But we had the proverbial good angel in our midst; her name, Elsie Hall. She said, "Follow me!" And we followed. And she led us to a new abode where all was snug and warm. No tear of sorrow did we shed. Let this be said to our shame if ye will. We were in our own house, and we were happy. We filled our lungs with the free air, and our first breath shaped itself thus: "Henceforth shall we be known as the Glasgow Orpheus Choir." And it was so.

*List of Office-bearers and of members who came over from  
Toynbee House on 6th January, 1906, to form the  
Glasgow Orpheus Choir.*

<i>President</i>	-	-	-	-	-	J. B. Retson.
<i>Vice-President</i>	-	-	-	-	-	Donald M'Donald.
<i>Secretary</i>	-	-	-	-	-	David Smith.
<i>Assistant Secretary</i>	-	-	-	-	-	John M'Kenzie.
<i>Treasurer</i>	-	-	-	-	-	Thos. M'Dougall.
<i>Librarian</i>	-	-	-	-	-	Robert M'Kean.

*Stewards—*

Elsie Hall. Elizabeth Lees. David M'Intyre.  
Wm. Sutherland.

*Auditors—*

J. Sutherland. Robert Gray.

*Accompanist—*

Gilbert Esplin.

*Conductor—*

Hugh S. Robertson.

*Members—*

SOPRANOS.

M. Appleby.	Helen Jenkins.
Beatrice Christie.	Bessie Laing.
Lizzie Corstorphine.	Margt. M'Beth.
Agnes Cowan.	W. M'Kee.
Lizzie Cowan.	M. Marwick.
Alice Devlin.	E. Murray.
L. Drummond.	C. Samuels.
Elsie Hall.	Agnes P. Wilkie.
L. Hartin.	Agnes T. Wilkie.
	Bessie Whitelaw.

CONTRALTOS.

M. Corstorphine.	Jessie M'Gowan.
M. Cowan.	Chrissie M'Kean.
Helen Duthie.	M. Miller.
Carrie Emerson.	M. Nelson.
Helen Frame.	Margt. Perston.
Elizabeth Lees.	Nellie Russell.
Jenny M'Coll.	H. Scrimgeour.
	Margt. Toner.



TENORS.

A. Begg.	Don. M'Donald.
M. Cameron.	Thos. M'Dougall.
Robt. Gray.	David M'Intyre.
Wm. Gray.	Jas. G. M'William.
H. Houston.	Geo. Muir.
Jas. Kelly.	C. Peevor.
J. Lindsay.	Robt. Saunders.
	Thos. Smellie.

BASSES.

Arch. Burnett.	John M'Kenzie.
Andw. Christie.	J. M'Quattie.
Geo. Devlin.	J. Patience.
Robt. Gray.	John B. Retson.
Hugh Graham.	R. Ross.
Andw. Guthrie.	David Smith.
J. M'Donnell.	James Smith.
Robt. M'Kean.	Geo. Sutherland.
	Wm. Sutherland.