

Ireland Tour – June 23 – July 1, 2017

For the second time in ten years, the FCCC Chamber Singers visited Ireland on our annual summer tour! We performed five concerts and two Masses over nine days, in addition to numerous impromptu events. We departed Fairfield Woods Middle School on Friday, June 23 at 1:30 PM, arriving in Ireland at 6:00 AM (1:00 AM Eastern US time) on Saturday. At 1:00 PM we performed our first concert in Limerick at St. Augustine's Church as part of the Limerick Sings International Choral Festival, even though some choristers had fallen asleep (due to jet lag) while listening to some of the other choirs. We then toured St. John's Castle, built between 1200 and 1210, and attended a festival concert in the evening.

On Sunday we traveled to Adare for another well-received concert at the Holy Trinity Church. Later that evening we enjoyed a singing dinner with another of the Limerick Festival choirs. On Monday we traveled to the Boyne Valley for an early rehearsal with the prominent Irish harpist Anne-Marie O'Farrell, followed by two concerts for the An Chúirt Chruitreachta International Harp Festival (A Court of Harping) in Drogheda and Termonfeckin. We experienced a case of true serendipity upon our arrival in Drogheda. We had prepared four of Anne-Marie's arrangements, including *The Salley Gardens*, set to a text by William Butler Yeats, one of Ireland's greatest poets. One of the harpists at the festival was assigned to guide our group from the rehearsal to the first performance. In an unassuming manner, she introduced herself as Caitríona Yeats, the granddaughter of the poet, who has been a member of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Cincinnati Orchestra, among others!

Tuesday was scheduled to be a day off from performing as we toured the capital city of Dublin. The highlights included a visit to Trinity College Dublin and the Old Library (right out of Harry Potter!) and a visit to the downtown shopping district. The evening plan was dinner and a show at the Abbey Tavern in Howth. However, when the performers found out they had a choir in the audience, we ended up singing five or six songs with and for them.

Wednesday took us to Belfast, Northern Ireland, where we began with a tour of the city, including the Falls Roads area where murals tell the story of its violent past and its belief in the future. The gable ends of houses were painted with vivid murals to proclaim a neighborhood's political affiliations, and remain a much-photographed part of Belfast's past. A major highlight of the tour was our visit to the Titanic Museum, located in the heart of Belfast, right beside the historic site of this world-famous ship's construction and launch. Another highlight was our performance at a Mass followed by a concert at the historic Clonard Monastery which has the most incredible acoustics. Our host, Cathal Murphy (cousin of chorister Maddie McDermott!), informed our boys that the room in which they were changing was the very room in which the Good Friday peace accords were drafted in April 1998 by the opposing parties. Interestingly, one of the famous peace walls stands just behind the church, separating Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods.

On Thursday we traveled westwards to County Mayo to visit Knock Shrine, a major international Catholic pilgrimage and prayer site, where we performed for a Mass of the Sick. We then continued on to our final hotel in Galway. Friday was the major touring day of the entire trip. We drove through the Burren to the absolutely incredible Cliffs of Moher, Ireland's most visited natural attraction with a magical vista that captures the hearts of up to 1 million visitors each year. The Cliffs rise up to 700 feet at the highest point and range for 5 miles over the Atlantic Ocean on the western seaboard of County Clare. Later on Friday we returned to Galway for a tour, passing the Salt Proms and having a great time in the Latin Quarter, full of shops and street musicians. On Saturday we took a flight from Shannon to New York, finally arriving at FWMS at about 6:00 PM with memories that will last a lifetime!

Here is a link to a few of the songs we performed on our trip.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDnoqj9NeMa-9tXVKX0ZrRzifgEbmQgB7>

Here is a link to a video montage put together by chorister Aleksandra Suvorova.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= EUUhouLP9o>

Letters

Below are letters from parents or grandparents who attended their first FCCC Chamber Singers trip.

Hi Jon,

First off, I will apologize that I am still basking in the glow of an incredible trip to Ireland with the FCCC Chamber group. I am still struggling to eloquently summarize how this trip affected not only my daughter, but from what I could see, all the choristers and lastly myself.

When Anna made the Chamber group this past year, you outlined the commitment upfront that was required, from not only the youth, but also from the parent(s). This commitment spoke to time, enthusiasm, and effort, responsibility to the Chamber group, money and simply our investment to the Chamber group.

After this past year's experiences of watching them perform and grow, culminating in even more incredible performances in Ireland, I can say with full conviction, this investment will shape my daughter's life.

From the moment we set off on the tour to Ireland, you impressed upon them the importance of accountability, not only for themselves but also to the entire group. Watch out for one another, make sure we are together and be a team. For the entire week, I witnessed this group work as one, not only when they were singing, but all week and to take genuine care of each other. This reflects on your leadership as you treated them with respect and they returned that respect. The tour allowed this team to experience life well beyond the scope of where we live and let them understand how large the world is and how diverse it is. That is a true investment in the growth of these individuals. Singing in 800+ year old churches with their voices gently echoing will be a memory that lasts a lifetime. I still get chills watching the videos. The tour was so well planned that we were able to see the big and small of Ireland and learn so much about their culture and history. Again showing how young America is in the grand scheme of things. As a parent, it was wonderful to watch the group experience so much but at a pace to appreciate it as well.

I am very excited for what the future holds for my daughter as she continues with FCCC Chamber! See you very soon.

Tom Wilder

Dear Jon,

It has been three weeks since our return from Ireland and we just can't get that trip out of our heads. It was truly a trip of a lifetime for Ella, Christina and myself. We were just looking at our photos and wishing we were still there.

The week we returned everyone asked us "what was your favorite part of the trip?" and "what impressed you the most?" For me it was a simple answer: THE CHOIR! While we loved every second of beautiful Ireland, the thing that will stick with us forever is THE CHOIR!

What you have done with that group of children defies explanation. The sound that is generated when those 38 kids open their mouths can only be described as heavenly, angelic. This is not just praise from a very proud parent. We were approached by local Irish folk at every church and festival and told the same. The people of Ireland who witnessed these kids singing were blown away.

We were approached by an elderly woman at Clonard Monastery after the show. She said the choirs singing was other worldly but what impressed her the most was the focus and the discipline these children had the second you raised your hand before the first note. She said that the focus and discipline these children have will translate into everything they do for the rest of their lives. Wise words from a wise woman.

From the trip launch at JFK to the return flight from Shannon, the focus and discipline reached way beyond their singing. When you asked the kids to line up for a head count they did it within seconds (like the Von Trapp children without the whistle). Never having to be asked a second time. Never goofing around. That made us as parents feel like our daughter was very safe and in good hands at all times throughout our Irish Adventure.

One final memory sticks with me as I reflect on the trip. Our last night in Galway, the kid's very proud bus driver, Colin, asked them to perform for the hotel staff and guests. It was like HE was the proud parent of these kids. Jon, you went up to lead the kids one last time but turned to them and said, "you guys know what you're doing, take it away!" As the children launched into their favorite Gaelic tune I watched their faces. The smiles, the laughs, the tears, the pride. It was at that final moment they realized how GOOD they were! How special that moment was. How special this week was. It was a moment frozen in time. It was a moment that you created for us all through your tireless dedication to this choir. It was a moment that we will never ever forget.

To you and the CHOIR, we can NEVER thank you enough for these moments we all shared that late June in Ireland. It was Grand!

Thank you so much,
Kyle and Christina Miller

Hi Jon,

The motivation for our family in traveling to Ireland was twofold: we had never been and had always wanted to go and there was also that parental piece that felt better about accompanying our daughter on her first international trip.

Our daughter commutes a distance to be part of the choir so didn't really know many of the kids well. She also tends to be reserved. During the trip I was able to witness her begin to find her place within the group. Having this concentrated time together I believe let her feel as though she really fit in and she was able to develop relationships on a whole different level. This social aspect was one of the greatest gifts that I really didn't anticipate.

Also, as a parent who drops their kid off for two rehearsals per week and thus doesn't know any of the other kids, it was wonderful for me to view and learn more about this unique group of teens and talent. I would describe the group as collectively fun, respectful, disciplined, talented and very inclusive! It was also a treat for me to have some time talking to individual kids along the way and getting to know them on a more personal level.

I truly had minimal contact with my daughter during this trip (even though I was there!) and felt that that was exactly how it should be! It proved to me that she was having a great time!!!! It also provided me with an assurance that I would feel comfortable sending her off with FCCC again without reservation.

June Presslaff

Dear Jon,

I went to Ireland with the Chamber Choir thinking it would be good for Kyle, who's 12, to have family nearby just in case. I loved being on the trip, but he did not need me at all! Not only did he take care of himself, but I think he matured during the trip, just being surrounded by the disciplined young people who have been motivated by you.

Listening to the Choir, in so many kinds of venues, was so moving. I loved seeing them singing for the joy of singing. They got standing ovations, and really moved the audiences who heard them, but they seemed oblivious to that. They seemed to have acquired the maturity to take joy in their music, and really caring about doing it well.

It was also so much fun to experience Ireland with such a nice group of young people and their families! It is an amazing experience to have so much fun surrounded by so many kind and thoughtful people. On the way back Kyle said he wished life could always be like the trip, but we agreed that if it were we wouldn't appreciate it as much, but it is a blessing to have experiences like this one during our lifetimes!

Morrie Ross

Hi Mr. Noyes,

I just wanted to write you a quick note thanking you for the wonderful opportunity you have given to our choristers in traveling! Norah and I both had a wonderful trip to Ireland! The entire trip was truly a once in a lifetime experience. I was impressed by the hard work and dedication of the choristers; every performance was stellar! I was very impressed by both you and Mrs. Beatty, continuously checking in with all of the choristers and making sure they were not only safe but also having a great time. Norah has truly enjoyed every moment of being involved in the Chamber Singers. Traveling with the group has made her a much more confident singer and young lady. The choristers are wonderful and sweet kids. They all truly care for each other. It was heartwarming to see them together and I feel so lucky that I was able to attend the trip. Thank you again for the opportunity, it was an amazing experience!

Alison Mortimer