



'What's The Worst That Can Happen?'

Gareth Malone has produced music from the most unlikely singers. As he launches a new project, Maria Ferreira talks to our favourite choirmaster

It's a Thursday night in the Supperclub of trendy London neighbourhood Notting Hill and an audience of Britain's music journalists has gathered for the launch of *Gareth Malone's Voices*, the latest project from the charismatic choirmaster behind the *Military Wives*.

A hush descends as Gareth takes the stage, boyishly slim in his signature natty suit and thick-rimmed glasses. 'We haven't actually performed live before,' he warns us. 'So this could be a glorious mistake...'

But, of course, the sound is just plain glorious. Sixteen of Britain's finest young voices soaring in layered harmonies over well-loved pop songs by the likes of Keane and Alicia Keys.

They perform with the kind of bright-eyed energy

that's become a trademark for Gareth, 38, who rose to fame as the indefatigable conductor on BBC2's *The Choir*, coaxing recalcitrant teenagers at a London comprehensive into singing like rambunctious angels. He's since put together choirs for non-singers from all walks of life, including the phenomenally successful *Military Wives*.

His own life in music began in the cradle. 'My mum sang nursery rhymes to me when I went to bed every night,' he remembers. 'Listening to her lovely soprano voice is probably my earliest memory. She also used to play me a record by the Choir of King's College Cambridge to get me to sleep, which I later rediscovered and loved as an adult.'

After studying at the Royal Academy of Music, Gareth started organising community

Gareth's Top Tracks
Piano Concerto No 23 in A Major (K488) by Mozart.
Tragic and simple, it feels just like slipping into a warm bath. I totally lose myself in this.

choirs – including for the east London neighbourhood around the London Symphony Orchestra music centre – projects which eventually caught the eye of the BBC.

His core beliefs remain the same, whether or not the TV cameras are running. His approach to working with new people is to keep reminding himself – and his charges – that, 'You'll be fine. What's the worst that can happen?'

'If I have that air of confidence, then they'll catch it,' he says. 'It's about creating a safe bubble. My work with the *Military Wives* was basically nine months of saying, 'You can do this,' and getting them to a point where they believed in themselves enough to sing in three-part harmony in front of the Queen.'

Gareth's Top Tracks
Graceland by Paul Simon.
One of my favourite albums and my first experience of African choirs. I love the effortless tone of the Ladysmith Black Mambazo choir on *Homeless*.

'I try to get first-time singers beyond their preconceptions about singing. My warm-ups sound like silly noises, but actually they teach people that their voice is their

instrument. Your breath comes up through your body and creates a sound that comes out of your mouth; if you think about it in these physical terms, it takes personality out of the equation. Everyone has got the same apparatus – it's not like your voice will reveal everything about you and your psyche, which I think people are frightened of. It's an instrument and you've just got to learn to play it.'

Above all, Gareth is passionate about the power of choral singing to lift people out of the humdrum of everyday life. 'Work is stressful,' he says. 'There are deadlines, problems to manage, a controlling boss... But singing in a choir means being with other people in a convivial and positive way, working toward something with a real sense of fun and excitement.'

'Life is long,' he continues. 'There's something really special about stepping out of that day-to-day drudgery to put on a special performance for others.'

Gareth's Choice Of Choirs

Gareth Malone's Voices is my latest project, and it's something quite different for me. I've worked with amateur singers for a long time, so I wanted to recruit young, professional singers and create my own group that wasn't just about classical singing. It's contemporary music married with a British choral sensibility.

It's very different working with people who are trained singers – but there's still no ego. They work hard and they just want to be part of great music. Their age means there's a kind of openness that you might not find with more mature singers. If I'd gone for the country's greatest choral stars, they'd all be in their thirties and forties, and I'm not sure they would have responded to the pop repertoire with quite the same enthusiasm and energy.



THE LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA COMMUNITY CHOIR [left] was the first choir I worked on. We started with just 15 people in the first rehearsal, ranging from aged eight to 90. Then we began handing out flyers to locals. By the time I left eight or nine years later, we had so many members we couldn't fit them all in the building!

NORTHOLT HIGH SCHOOL was my first TV choir. We went to the World Choir Games in China – I think we came second to last – but the transformation those comprehensive school kids went through was really great to see. We did an incredible 60 hours of rehearsals – they were atrocious at the beginning and became quite accomplished toward the end.

THE SEVERN TRENT WATER CHOIR won *Sing While You Work* in 2012. These men are labourers – they're out in the middle of the night digging up the road – but it's a thoughtful, skilled job, too. So they were all smart guys, but hard, and that's not the type of guy who's usually attracted to a choir. They brought a fantastic depth of passion and grit that I think helped them to win – they had that extra 'oomph'.

There are about 83 **MILITARY WIVES CHOIRS** across the world [below, Gareth with the choir which won Single Of The Year with *Wherever You Are* at the Classic Brit Awards 2012]. It went beyond me and took on its own life. We just caught the shift in attitudes after 10 years in Afghanistan: the realisation that, even if you were anti-war, it wasn't the soldiers' fault and they still needed support. It was a stunning journey for everyone.



Photos: Eyevine, Getty, Rex

