

Centre of attention

Christopher Bell is keeping his eye on every last member of the Edinburgh Festival Chorus, finds Mark Fisher

THERE'LL BE no slouching at the back with Christopher Bell in charge of the Edinburgh Festival Chorus. Only recently, he was rehearsing with the Belfast Philharmonic Choir when one of the singers made a quip about not having time to read the newspaper. The chorus master was puzzled, so the singer explained that under Bell's watchful eye there was no chance of a break. Other conductors, he claimed, would go off and work with another section for 30 minutes, leaving the singers with nothing better to do than read the paper. 'With me, they didn't have time to switch off for even two seconds,' says Bell, 'they have to be concentrating all the time.'

If there's one thing that characterises the work of this Edinburgh University graduate – whether it's in Belfast, where he was born, in Chicago with the Grant Park Chorus or in Scotland with the Royal Scottish Junior Chorus and the National Youth Choir of Scotland – it is in his refusal to regard the choir as a homogeneous mass. 'The secret of creating a formidable choir is convincing them that you are watching them as individuals,' he says. 'When I'm working with people they feel I am actually watching them. Everyone needs to be sure that they are involved. We don't want anybody coasting. When my chorus is singing, you get a huge amount of commitment.'

An accomplished conductor whose track record includes spells with the BBC Scottish Symphony and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestras, and the City of London Sinfonia, Bell is

relishing the chance to work not only with the Festival Chorus but also the prestigious conductors who are drawn to Edinburgh in August. His job, he feels, is to ensure his singers are operating like a finely tuned instrument ready to yield to the conductor's artistic vision. 'When it comes to the concerts, I am there to serve the conductor and get the best results possible,' he says. 'I tend to hand it to them at a performance standard and they can then mould it. I don't like it when conductors don't think the chorus is prepared.'

Being a founder of the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland and artistic director of the Children's Classic Concert series, Bell is celebrated for his work with young people. For six years he directed the TOTAL Aberdeen Youth Choir, he was the first artistic director of the Ulster Youth Choir and he conducted Yo Yo Ma's Children's Concert at the Barbican in 1995. It's a strand of his career of which he is justifiably proud, although he is quick to point out it is just one strand among many.

'The opportunity to develop the Festival Chorus comes from my experience right across the range,' he says. 'I've worked with many of the world's leading conductors and covered a huge amount of the repertoire that's needed in a job like this. Alongside that, I have the experience in Scotland over the last 15 years of working with young singers who are going to be the singers of the future, who will be able to come into the Festival Chorus at the level that we need.'

The Edinburgh Festival Chorus was established in 1965 for a performance of Mahler's Symphony No 8 and went on to be conducted by such luminaries as Sir Simon Rattle, Herbert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein, Claudio Abbado, Mariss Jansons and André Previn. Replacing David Jones, who has been chorus master since 1995, Bell is looking forward to building on the high standards already achieved. 'I am thrilled to be working with this exceptional chorus, in my home town, and attached to the greatest festival in the world,' he says. 'I have attended many of the Chorus's concerts over the years and it will be wonderful to be involved directly.'