

A huge thank you to John Checkley and the Angel Community Canal Boat Trust for their generous supply of the Angel Canal Boat for these sensational trips, and to the charming and incredibly gifted Vivien Conacher for leading each session with wit, wisdom and wondrous singing!

ANGEL COMMUNITY CANAL BOAT TRUST



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OPERA ABOARD THE ANGEL COMMUNITY CANAL BOAT

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If you ever find yourself on Islington High Street, you needn't fear: a quiet idyll, safe from the hustle and bustle of the city, is only a few minutes from your grasp. Take a right turn past the York pub, grab a quick coffee from the Daily Grind café, and make your way down to Graham Street Park. If you can make it past the dogs and children running amok and causing mayhem, you will find yourself face to face with the beautiful and vibrant Angel Community Canal Boat, the 'Angel II of Islington'. It's red, green and yellow colouring welcomes you on board, as does its skipper, that old seadog John Checkley!

Settle down on the comfy green cushions inside the boat, or if you're feeling brave and want to risk the elements, seat yourself outside, where you'll find views of the Regent Canal, its birds and beasts and the strange riverfolk who dwell on the waters of Camden and Islington. As John fires up the boat and eases it gently from its mooring, soprano extraordinaire Vivien Conacher warms up her vocal chords, and yours, with lip trills and deep breathing practised by the finest opera singers from here to the gondolas of Venice.

As the boat sets off down the canal, sailing past a small floating nest or family of swans, Vivien opens the glorious singing with a group rendition of the classic 'Oh what a Beautiful



Morning!' from the musical *Oklahoma*. If you are lucky, the sun might just peep out from behind the clouds, before scurrying back: he's not ready for summer yet.

A Capella singing of Scottish folk song 'The Water is Wide' serenades passers-by as the Angel arrives at the first and only lock of the journey, and begins its slow descent into the murky waters at the base of the canal. 'Moon River', in the style of the sublime Audrey Hepburn, soon follows, and Vivien

encourages you to look out for particularly striking sounds, such as the fricative 'F's in 'two drifters, off to see the world' and the sibilant 'S's of 'I'm crossin' you in style, some day'.

This enchanting rendition leads the group into the mouth of the Islington Canal tunnel, 960 yards long: darkness descends on the group, but for a small light far away at the close of what seems to be a never-ending passage. The drip and splash of the water falling from the roof of the tunnel onto the group below echoes, as Vivien's voice lifts above and around the boat. Through the darkness, the group listen to the sway and ebb of Gabriel Faure's 'Au bord de l'eau', followed by Poulenc's 'Les Chemins de L'Amour', in waltz time. The group clicks, taps their feet, sways their shoulders or claps along as they please, while Vivien directs her lilting tones outwards from the cubby hole of the boat's interior into

the tunnel ahead, the sound reverberating and rebounding off the cold stone.

Transporting us to other times and other places, Vivien concludes our journey through the tunnel with an A Capella performance of Bernstein's 'Somewhere' from the heart-breaking, classic musical *West Side Story*, her voice gently fading on the final notes.



At the end of every tunnel, of course, there has to be a light, and the Angel emerges into a glorious rush of sunshine. The group throws off their blankets as they are plunged into a tentative summer warmth, and Vivien challenges them to further warm up their vocal chords with a rendition of 'Toreador', from Bizet's spectacular and legendary opera *Carmen*. Everybody's favourite, the Toreador holds his note

for as long as humanly possible to show off his incredible talent: waiting their turn patiently, the group launches into the chorus with gusto, slapping their knees in time with the heavy beat.

Still thinking of 'two flashing eyes', the group is whisked onto less familiar ground, enjoying the powerful melody of Giuseppe Verdi's 'Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves' from the opera *Nabucco* or humming along to Giacomo Puccini's peaceful and soothing 'Coro a bocca chiusa (The Humming Song)' from *Madame Butterfly*. As the canal boat passes a small row boat, faithfully paddled



along by a kindly gentleman whose wife looks on despairingly, the group waves and sends messages of support: 'Keep going!'. The Angel is the envy of all the riverfolk along the Regent's Canal each Thursday morning, as its inhabitants sail along, floating carefree and uplifted by their singing. As the boat arrives at King's Cross and makes its way past the imposing King's Place, lunchers look out across the water at the warbling vessel and smile.

Vivien kicks off the return journey, as John guides the boat around and makes it homeward bound, with the vintage classic 'Que Sera Sera (Whatever will be, will be)', echoing the tranquil and carefree mood of the group. She then challenges the group to split into parts, assigning men and women's roles to the group as they begin a rendition of 'Some Enchanted Evening' from the musical *South Pacific*. Vivien adds subtle dynamics to the singing, prompting the group's voices to rise in crescendo leading into the second chorus, and encouraging quiet singing for the final beautiful lines of the duet: 'Once you have found her, never let her go'. As the Angel makes its way back through the endless Islington Canal tunnel, Vivien serenades the group with heavenly arias such as Schubert's 'Ave Maria' and Cesar Franck's 'Panis Angelicus', transforming the darkness into quiet and pensive reverie.

After emerging from the tunnel, John works hard as the boat rises in the lock, and Vivien works the group's vocal chords just as hard, this time donning her nun's habit and leading them in a rousing performance of 'Climb Every Mountain' from the Rogers & Hammerstein classic *The Sound of Music*. Any resting birds on the



canal's waters, or lunchtime strollers taking a short nap on the riverside, are soon roused by the high-pitched crescendo of the group as they urge Maria to find her dream and marry Captain Von Trapp, memorably played by Julie Andrews and the dishy Christopher Plummer.



Nonetheless, all good things must come to an end, and at the end of this sensational cruise Vivien forbids dim spirits and reassures the group with a rendition of Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again', forecasting good times still to come and wishing for a sunny day. If you are able to, why don't you stay on the boat for a short time

to enjoy delicious chocolate biscuits and a hot cup of tea and chat with your fellow passengers, that is, if they have any voice left after all that singing!

