

The Choral: Ralph Fiennes, Alan Bennett, and a Wartime Hymn to Community

By Leslie Anne Lee

When *The Choral* bowed at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2025, it arrived with a quietly irresistible pedigree: an original screenplay by Alan Bennett (his first in decades) directed by longtime collaborator Nicholas Hytner, and led by Ralph Fiennes as an exacting choirmaster in a Yorkshire mill town during World War I. The setup sounds cozy—a community chorus stitched together against the backdrop of loss—but the film’s best moments work like a well-timed crescendo: modest parts combining to make something fuller, thornier, and movingly human

A choir of the living in a town of the grieving

Set in 1916 Ramsden, the story finds the local choral society depleted by enlistment. Into the vacuum steps Dr. Henry/“Harry” Guthrie (Fiennes), a driven, secretive musician newly returned from Germany. Charged with rebuilding the chorus—now reliant on teenagers, veterans, and anyone with breath enough to sing—Guthrie sets the town on an improbable course toward Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius*, a choice that doubles as both devotional act and communal therapy. It’s classic Bennett: dry wit, humane observation, and prickly class-and-culture frictions rendered with warmth rather than cudgel.

Fiennes, in the pocket

Fiennes plays Guthrie like a conductor of souls—precise beat, guarded heart, flashes of iron. Critics at the premiere noted the film’s “low-key” register and “genteel” surfaces, but even in its softest passages, Fiennes keeps a tensile line humming underneath, especially in scenes that allude to Guthrie’s compromised past and complicated private life. That undercurrent gives *The Choral* a modern pulse without breaking period plausibility.

Bennett & Hytner’s unshowy craft

Hytner’s staging favors natural light, unfussy blocking, and ensemble rhythms, more playhouse than prestige gloss. It’s a conscious choice: the camera often settles into the choir’s grid, letting faces, breath, and blend carry the drama. Early responses split on whether that restraint feels “cozy” or cumulatively powerful, but the approach dovetails with Bennett’s humanist instincts—craft over clamor, character over contrivance

The music argument

The film’s core argument isn’t that art saves everyone; it’s that art organizes grief. Rehearsals map onto wartime absence: missing tenors, empty chairs, letters from the front. When Guthrie pushes for *Gerontius*, he’s not chasing grandeur so much as a shared language that can bear what

words can't. The choice aligns with the production's own emphasis—community first, catharsis second—a through-line echoed in TIFF's program notes and Sony Classics' synopsis.