

Bello Duo shines a light in the darkness

When the world went into lockdown, a young couple whose musical careers were literally floored by the pandemic used their amazing talent to brighten the lives of others.

The result was the birth of Bello Duo, and through their music, Antrim parishioners Victoria McClements and Conor Taggart have brought joy and hope to thousands of people worldwide.

Victoria, 20, suffers from a rare and life-threatening illness, and during the first Covid-19 lockdown last year was shielding at her grandparents' home in Kells, as her mum Audrey, parish administrator in All Saints', Antrim, is also a key worker.

Seated in her grandparents' summer house, a refreshing breeze blowing through the open doors, Victoria and Conor share their inspirational story.

Victoria is a former pupil of Antrim Grammar School. "I had planned a gap year after my A Levels. I always wanted to do music, but it is a difficult profession to get into," she says. A member of Belfast School of Performing Arts, Belfast Operatic Society and other local theatre groups, Victoria is professionally trained in musical theatre. Her talent earned her a place on the Diamond Choir which sang in St Paul's Cathedral to celebrate Her Majesty the Queen's Diamond Jubilee back in 2012.

In 2019, she got the coveted role of Kim in the Grand Opera House youth production of 'Miss Saigon.' "It is one of my favourite musicals and I always wanted to play the part of Kim," she says. "I worked really hard at it and I got the role. It was the best show I have ever done. It was great to get my name out in the musical theatre world in Northern Ireland."

Victoria met Conor when she started working with his singing waiter company, Singers Secreto, in October 2019, singing primarily at weddings. Friendship blossomed into romance. But with lockdown the following March, functions were cancelled. This was devastating for Conor and the 180 Singers Secreto staff he employs in Ireland.

The 24-year-old has a degree in Business and IT from Queen's University Belfast, and set up his company a couple of years before the pandemic hit. The concept is that the nervous waiter serving guests at a function has a catastrophic fall and then



Victoria and Conor in Victoria's grandparents' garden in Kells, where Bello Duo first came about.

surprises everyone by bursting into song. With the pandemic, their work dried up.

"We have done a few virtual events, for example with comedian Paddy Raff, but apart from that, it has been completely dead," Conor says. "Financially this past year has been very difficult."

Conor is now campaigning to have the ban on live music lifted in Northern Ireland so Singers Secreto can get back in business.

Bello Duo was formed during the lockdown of spring 2020. "I was shielding with my grandparents, and each Thursday we would go out and clap for carers," Victoria explains. "A neighbour asked us to sing, so we agreed to do a song. It was quite petrifying!"

'When you are feeling down and angry, singing really releases your emotions.'

"There is something a bit random about doing it on the doorstep," Conor adds. "You feel as if someone is going to shout 'turn that noise down!'"

In fact the opposite happened. As Conor and Victoria sang uplifting numbers like 'The Prayer,' and 'You Raise Me Up,' people shared videos on social media.

"We shared our singing on Facebook Live, and each week we found more and more people were tuning in and writing lovely

comments," Victoria recalls. "One person wrote: 'You are the highlight of my week.' We were getting around 250,000 views each week!"

"People from church were very supportive, especially those older people who couldn't get out because they were shielding. We included some upbeat music and literally had people dancing in the street!"

There were benefits all round, Conor says. "It was a lovely thing to do and was great for our mental health after going from two or three gigs a week to literally nothing. Singing is a great way to express yourself and get things out."

Their biggest supporters were Victoria's grandparents, John and Eleanor Howard, who shared photos of the neighbours dancing, organised music, and even agreed to be interviewed for 'Nolan Live.'

Last December, with an easing of restrictions, Victoria and Conor took to busking on the streets of Belfast. "We didn't earn a lot, but we decided we wanted to make the most of it, so we booked a recording studio and put some of the songs we had sung on the doorsteps onto an album. We figured our families might buy it," Conor explains.

They entitled the album 'Out of the Darkness.' "It features songs that had given people a glint of light at a time when we thought we were coming out of lockdown," Victoria says.

A promo video was the next step, and for this, the couple worked with Shane Doyle of D6 Photo/Cinema. It was filmed on the north Antrim coast last December.

"It was a long and freezing day," Victoria recalls laughing. "I was up at 4am and we started filming at 6am. I was wearing a sleeveless dress, shivering, my heels sinking into the ground. We filmed 'The Prayer' on the beach with candles set on the rocks, but the tide came in and almost washed them away."

At times the temperature dropped to -2 degrees. In the video, you can literally see their breath as Victoria and Conor sing.

But the stunning location inspired the couple to record and film their own version of 'Danny Boy,' a move that was to catapult them onto the international stage. "Once the video came out, the album really took off," recalls Conor. Before they knew it, their version of the famous song was number one in the vocal download chart in South Africa (pushing Josh Grogan into second slot and Frank Sinatra into number three). At the same time, it was number four in the UK vocal chart, despite



Victoria and Conor pictured while recording the video for their album 'Out of the Darkness' on a freezing December day on the north Antrim coast. Picture by Shane Doyle.

competition from the likes of Ed Sheeran.

"Lots of magazines picked up the story and we have been featured around the world - some articles we can't even read because they are in languages like Danish," Victoria laughs. As a result, album sales in countries like the USA and Australia have rocketed. As well as local media, they have had their own four-week show on London FM, and starred in a St Patrick's Day broadcast with the New York-based Catholic Faith Network.

The couple are now working on writing their own songs, and while they have big dreams for their future, they are also realistic. "When I sing at weddings, I sing what people want to hear," says Conor. "Sometimes I try and sound like Bublé or Sinatra, but singing as Bello Duo helps me find Conor's voice.

"I would love to do a live theatre tour. I hope that when the world reopens there will be opportunities for Bello Duo. But you have to be the person who is willing to be the waiter who falls on the floor and the next night sings to a theatre full of 500 people."

Victoria agrees: "It doesn't matter if we are singing to 10 people or 1,000 people, we give it our all."

Like Victoria, Conor has a solid background in musical theatre, having

secured a last-minute seat at the London production of 'Les Misérables' when he was just 10. He has since performed in 'Les Misérables' five times, playing the lead role of Jean Valjean three times.

While Victoria dreams of singing as Bello Duo on big stages, her achievements to date are amazing as she has Addison's disease, a rare disorder of the adrenal glands which affects just one in 100,000 people. She is now dependent on steroids.

"It is something I don't let get in the way as such. I'm very motivated," she says. "If I set my mind on something I will achieve it. I have bad days, but I just try and get on with it. If I am really sick and vomiting or have broken a bone, I need to have an emergency injection within half an hour to ensure I don't have adrenal crisis. It has just happened once, but my mum took me straight to hospital."

Victoria was diagnosed with Addison's the day after her 12th birthday. "It is very rare, I was the only female in Northern Ireland to have it at the time." Conor interjects to point out that Victoria is already famous in the world of medical text books!

"I live with it. I have learned to read my own body and don't try to push myself too far," Victoria says. "I stopped playing hockey because of the risk of injury. That is what turned me to music. When you are feeling down and angry, singing really releases

your emotions."

Victoria remembers clearly those early days before her illness was diagnosed. She had no energy, was frequently vomiting, lost weight and her skin became darker. "I lost a crazy amount of weight, you could count every bone in my spine. The only thing I craved was salt and vinegar crisps - with Addison's you crave salt.

"When I couldn't eat or drink or even keep water down and was crawling to the bathroom to be sick, then falling asleep on the bathroom floor, my mum took me to A&E." In hospital, Victoria was diagnosed with Addison's disease. "They started me on medication and a few days later I had perked up. Visitors were allowed to bring me anything I wanted to eat, which was great!" she recalls.

Victoria's courage at the time made an impact on those she met. "The nurses were really good," she says with a smile. "One of them found us on social media, performing on the doorstep as Bello Duo, and sent a lovely message. I am very lucky."

Lucky, talented, dedicated and brave. Victoria and Conor wave goodbye from the doorstep that launched their blossoming career, and Conor heads inside to take a call as part of his ongoing campaign to allow live music to return for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.