

Melbourne Welsh Male Choir

September Newsletter No 40



The Choir's *Singer of the Year* competition goes totally digital



With the continuing scourge of the COVID 19 lockdown, the choir has had to adapt its procedures for the 2020 *Singer of the Year* competition. Contestants were asked to submit a video of their two preferred songs (arias) to the judging panel by 27th August who were then charged with deciding the three finalists. Applications closed, in mid-August, with high quality video performances having been submitted by 20 entrants. These were assessed by the adjudication panel, with the announcement of the three finalists made on Wed. 16th September. As it is not possible to plan on having any live performances by the finalists in front of a judging panel, the final adjudication will also be on the basis of the video recordings and will be announced on Wed. 30th September. At that time, a video production, built around the performances by the finalists, will be released and circulated to choir members, Friends of the Choir and on social media.

The panel comprised **Jeanette Russell**, Sydney based international opera soprano, teacher and adjudicator (who has previously adjudicated our SOTY competition when the heats were held at the Melbourne Conservatorium and the final at Blackwood Hall). Her written critique of every artist's performance will be welcomed by all the competitors. **David Ashton-Smith**, who, in addition to his music director role with the choir, is a well-known and respected adjudicator. His involvement with Opera Scholars Australia, Opera in the Market and Opera in the Alps serves to enhance that reputation. The other panel members were SOTY organiser **Alan Stevenson**, our deputy conductor **Ray Kitto**, current president **David Field** and former president **Phil Tomlinson**.



The three finalists chosen by the panel were Emilia Bertolini, Lyla Levy-Jordan and Gabrielle Penney. A decision on the final placings will be made on Sept 30th. In addition to the awards for the finalists a special encouragement award was made (courtesy of Ms Russell) to Michael Dimovski and Highly Commended awards were also made to Jordan Auld and Amelia Wawrzon.

A video outlining this stage of the awards is available to our readers via the following link <https://youtu.be/fKZ4ixtlKAU>

Crowdfunding campaign for SOTY:

Donations via the crowdfunding site and direct to the choir's bank account now exceed the target sum of \$4,000 - our warm thanks to all our donors and to choir member - **Will Morton** who has coordinated this campaign. Any excess funds from this campaign will be retained specifically for use within SOTY. Please note that all donations to the choir are tax-deductible.

Recent Choir activity

As our readers will know, the choir continues to meet on Wednesday evenings via Zoom with video attendance roughly comparable with a normal rehearsal at Federation Estate i.e. in excess of 50 choristers. During the last few months we have enlivened the rehearsals with interviews and a question and answer sessions with some of our guest artists and friends of the choir. In August we met up with another diverse set of guests:

Roy Best

Roy is a regular guest artist with the choir, He last sang with us in the concert at the Melbourne Recital Centre. He spoke to us from his home on 2 acres near Chum Creek, Healesville, where his major activity during the COVID crisis has been building a vegetable patch! His other great love is racing cars, having spent 17 years involved with historic cars, restoring and racing them alongside his father. He once owned MRD1 - Jack Brabham's first racing car which is now on the Historic Racing register. He once drove the Brabham in the Lou Melino Trophy at over 220 mph! The love of speed runs in the family since his dad raced an A40 historic car.



Mum was a pianist and Roy had lessons (which he wished he had continued), however he has sung since the age of five in various choirs and as a soloist. He did not consider a career as a singer and worked as a builder until Bettina, his music teacher encouraged him to enter the *Operatunity Aus* competition run by the ABC. This required a 20-page entry form and a 5-minute DVD. Out of 3000 entrants and numerous auditions it came down to a small number of finalists who performed live at Sydney Opera House before a TV audience of more than a million viewers . David Parkin won the first prize, but finalists Emily Burke and Roy impressed the judges enough to be offered places in the prized Opera House performance. This started his operatic and stage career and the rest, as they say ,is history. (Roy is pictured above dancing with Yvonne Kenny)

Tiffany Speight

Tiffany has not performed with the Melbourne Welsh but is a friend and colleague of our MD, working with him as Program and Vocal Director of Opera Scholars Australia. She spoke to us from her home for the past 15years in Old Malmsbury with her daughter - Issy occasionally interrupting!



Tiffany started off at a young age in Grade 5 training as a tap dancer and can still tap. David has always wanted to learn to tap, so he suggested Tiffany might like to teach the whole choir to tap in order to make a better stage entrance!. At primary school she was always standing and singing next to her cousin and was never picked for any school musical numbers until her teacher heard her singing on her own and discovered that she could sing but her cousin could not.

At around 16 she was not allowed to join with her friends in at the Victorian Youth Opera in a performance of *the Snow Queen* because Brian Stacey said she was too loud however told her he would find her a teacher. She went out with her friends the night before her teacher audition, sang Mimi's aria, was accepted but was told "not to drink before an audition in future". That teacher was Nance Grant who is still her voice coach. From school she went to the Victorian College of the

Arts and got an apprenticeship with the Victorian State Opera which was merged with Australian Opera. She was the only female who was kept on. Through the Australian Opera she met up with Moffat Oxenbould and repetiteur Sharolyn Kimmorley who remain her mentors. Asked about performing overseas, Tiffany outlined her experiences in 2011 after winning the Queens Trust Award through the Agatha Young Performers . She performed at the Bastille Opera Paris, Berlin and in Vienna she met up with Simone Young who was conducting the Rheingold Festival. Simone immediately organised a part in the opera, which she had to learn from a video rather than is usual from the director. As a result, for the live performance she did not know where or when to exit. One of the chorus helped her and she exited to a round of applause which was not the correct exit but was kept in the show.

David asked about her performing while pregnant having seen her in the *Coronation of Poppea*.

Tiffany said that earlier in her pregnancy when she was not really showing, she played *Musetta* in New Zealand, where her suitor lay on her belly while he sang an aria. Every time he stopped singing the baby would kick!

David asked about her absence from the stage in the last few years and she explained that while performing in *The Merry Widow* onstage in Singapore “ the whole world spun”. She continued to perform with her leading man holding her up and actually managed a dance later in the show.

She was later diagnosed with Vestibular Neuralgia which brought her career to a halt since it required a lengthy rehabilitation and meant she couldn’t drive for a year.

She is however enjoying the work with Opera Scholars Australia which is a mentoring role for young and up and coming stars of the opera world. Tiffany is back singing and has recently starred in a local production of *Mary Poppins*. David then showed us a YouTube clip of Tiffany with Jose Carbo singing *La Ci Dacem La Mano* from the *Marriage of Figaro*, which shows Tiffany at the height of her powers.

As our president David Field said in thanking Tiffany, we look forward, as a choir, to having her as our guest artist as soon as we are able.

Rhodri Clarke

Rhodri is a very talented pianist and accompanist who has performed all over the world (including accompanying Bryn Terfel at Carnegie Hall) and has played for our choir in concert and occasional rehearsals and also acted as accompanist for our Singer of the Year competitors.

Born in Porthcawl, a coastal holiday town in South Wales, Rhodri started playing piano from the age of eight when his father came from the pub and said, “I’ve bought you a piano”! Rhodri took to it like duck to water and from an early age played the organ in church. This not only taught him to play legato, but he also found that playing hymns improved his sight reading. As another organist said “when you are accompanying on an organ you have to be a leader”

Rhodri studied at the Royal College of Music in London for 6 years and decided that he was better suited to a career as an accompanist rather than a concert pianist. His hero was Gerald Moore the world-famous accompanist. As well as playing in a chamber ensemble, he played for ballet classes with the Royal Ballet and then as a result of a meeting with Mark Burrows (who organised one of our own tours to UK) and Alwyn Humphreys he was promoted into the world of male voice choir tours and travelled with an amalgam of many choirs



in tours ranging from Europe to China and Australia. It was on one of his many trips on a budget airline that he met his wife Rosemary, an Aussie from Tasmania, who was backpacking around the world.

During the last 3 years he has played two-piano concerts around the world with David Helfgott (whose life inspired the Academy Award-winning movie *Shine*), which he found to be both challenging and rewarding.

We were all surprised when Rhodri answered a question from one of our Dutch choir members in his native language. Apparently he learned Dutch while living for two years in Holland when his wife was working at the Eindhoven University of Technology!

Member Profile - Ron Thomas - Second Tenor

I entered this world at 6:20 AM on the September 11th, 1932 and have been an early riser ever since. At 18 months of age I had a near-death experienced. I had been left in my wicker basket pram in the shade of an old wattle tree in my grandparents' back yard. Unfortunately, a nearby incinerator reignited and the flames caused the wattle tree to catch fire which in turn set fire to the wicker basket pram with me inside. A neighbour heard my screams, jumped the fence and threw buckets of water over the pram, putting out the flames. Severely burned, I was rushed to the Royal Children's Hospital where I remained for 18 months aided by the attention of a young doctor who was experimenting with a new form of skin graft. I owe my life to him.



My first paying job was cleaning up the local butchers' shop. My wages? A tray of meat offcuts, spare sausages and odd chops. During the Depression, my Mum and Dad were very pleased - I was 7 years old.

Next came the paper round at 10 years of age, the wage - 10 shillings a week.

I began my apprenticeship in 1949 at the Newport Railway Workshops as a Fitter and Turner. I hoped to get a scholarship with the Victoria Railways to become a Draughtsman.

I was educated to Grade 10 at Preston Technical School but, without enough mathematics and science for the scholarship race, I returned to night school at Footscray Technical College.

It was a demanding schedule, leaving home at 6:20 a.m. to arrive at Newport by 7:20 a.m. for a full day's work and leaving Newport at 4:15 p.m. to begin night school at 5:00 p.m.

I had always been interested in physical fitness and played A Grade hockey with the Fairfield Hockey Club. In the summer months I raced in middle distance

competitions for the Coburg Athletic Club. My best time for the mile was 4 minutes and 16 seconds. Good, but not quite the 4-minute mile. However, I competed with some of the Victorian greats at the time, including John Landy. He was A grade and I was B grade.

I became interested in religious philosophy, often pondering the big questions. I met a Seventh Day Adventist at a workshop. Over a period of 3 years we became firm friends and I began to adopt his

over-all philosophy of the world. I decided to throw in my lot with the SDA church and they in turn encouraged me to train for their Youth Ministry.

I left the railways and in January 1955 I went to the SDA College of Avondale in Corranbong, NSW. I commenced a four-year study which culminated in a degree in Theology, majoring in both ancient and modern history.

Musically it was a rich experience for me. I began voice training, learned the clarinet (playing often but poorly), joined a male ensemble, sang in a 30-voice choir and conducted a male ensemble named *The Island Harmoniers*. One of the singers in this group returned to his native Tonga, became Secretary to the King and Queen of Tonga and was later appointed for a six-year term as the High Commissioner for Tonga in London!

In my final year I had the pleasure and the thrill of conducting a 30-piece orchestra and an 80-voice choir in the final rehearsal of the college's annual production of Handel's "*Messiah*".

After graduating as President of the Class of 1958, I was posted to New Zealand.

My wife Noreen and I left Australia in December 1958, ten days after our marriage and arrived in Christchurch with two suitcases, my briefcase and the top tier of our wedding cake.

During my stint in Nelson, New Zealand I joined the *Nelson Male Voice Choir* and sang with them for 2 years, occasionally singing solo. I studied voice training under the direction of Len Barnes, a distinguished voice judge in New Zealand's musical circles.

I worked in New Zealand's South Island for 3 years in Omaru, Timaru and Nelson, specialising in Youth work and, based on the success of these activities, I was transferred to Brisbane, Queensland as an Assistant Youth Director for South Queensland.

We arrived in Brisbane in March of 1962 with three suitcases, a brief case and our son, Owen aged 7 months, in a Morris two door sedan.

I had the privilege of conducting the first Stop Smoking campaign in Australia promoted by the Seventh Day Adventist church called The Five-Day Plan. It was an immediate success and continued throughout Australia until the birth of the Anti-Cancer Council of Australia.

In 1965 I was sent to Tasmania, arriving mid-year, with our son Owen and daughter Corinne. I worked with the church youth of Tasmania and administered a new portfolio, Health, Education, Radio & Television Ministry for the Public Relations Dept of the SDA church. This resulted in me joining the Tasmanian Institute of Public Relations (we had 7 members) and becoming its first secretary, a position I held for 6 years.

Whilst working in Tasmania I sang with the all-male *Hobart Orpheus Choir*.

In 1970, I was sent to Melbourne, Victoria to administer the all-age Sabbath School and the Radio & Television Public Relations Department. I joined the Victoria Public Relations Institute and became its secretary holding the position for 6 years before being transferred to WA.

The appointment in Perth, WA was to administer the Radio & Television, Health Education and Public Relations Departments. We arrived in Perth in 1976 with Owen, Corinne and Ron (our second son, aged 7 months).

Our daughter Corinne was in a local girls' choir, but it was scheduled to close because its conductor was being transferred to NSW. The accompanist, an old friend from my college days, approached me and asked me to take on the conducting role. I agreed and thus began a six-year association with the girls' choir. We toured most of the southern areas of WA presenting sacred and classical choral music arranged for female voices.

Having become increasingly agnostic, I left the employment of the SDA church at the age of 53 and began a new life in Melbourne.

For the next 3 years I worked in marketing for a company "Salamanda Fashion" owned by a close friend. I returned to night school at Deakin University, three nights per week for three years studying Health Education and graduated with a post graduate diploma in Health Education enabling me to gain a position at Box Hill Hospital utilizing both Health and Public Relations diplomas, a position I held for 5 years.

During this period, I joined the *Melbourne Singers*, the choir that formed the nucleus of the *Carols by Candlelight choir*.

Leaving Box Hill, I joined a newly formed funeral company - The Milne Group, as assistant manager. The role included producing public relations article for weekly newspapers in most of the suburbs,

leaflets on handling grief and the after-effects of death including suicides and traffic accidents. I also ran a weekly radio program in Mornington.

During this time, I joined a barber shop group called *The Harmonairs*, and sang with them for 4 years. In 1988 I received a call from a Salvation Army officer in Sunshine, with whom I had previously worked. He was looking for someone to help him with a new government programme to help people return to work. It was called Skill Share and ran for 14 weeks, 3 times per year.

He asked me if I was interested in a position as the night manager of the Salvation Army Men's Hostel in A'Beckett Street called The Gill. It accommodated 255 men each evening. I said yes and the rest is history. I worked for the Salvation Army for the next 14 years, managing the hostel. It began in 1948 and still operates but it's current capacity is greatly reduced from 255 beds to just 64.

I was a foundation member of the Australian Federation of Civil Celebrants. Our membership in 1993 was 34 and is now over 2500 across Australia. I am honoured to be their Number 1 patron and a Life Member.

In 2002, the week I retired, I rang, what I thought was the choir which sang at the interval during the yearly screening of "How Green was my Valley" at the Astor Theatre in St Kilda. I did not know there were three Welsh male choirs! It was a mistake I have never once regretted.

Communication

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Email is the preferred way of communication with our supporters, so send us an email and we'll make sure you are in our database and ensure you are included in all future communications.

We treat all information provided as confidential and our subscribers can opt out at any time.

We value your feedback so please write and let us know what you think of the choir, our newsletters or our video performances, introduce us to your friends and tell us where and what you would like to see us perform in future live concerts.

Would you like to hire the choir?

While, like all choirs worldwide, we are unable to perform at present, we anticipate things will be back to normal in the new year.

Anyone who has attended our concerts at major venues such as the Melbourne Recital Centre, Ulumbarra Theatre Bendigo and the Melbourne Town Hall, will be aware that the choir has the skills, capability and contacts to produce and run high quality major events.

The choir will be available for community, corporate and sporting events, dinners, anniversaries, weddings etc., So, in the new year, if you require anything from a short rousing opening for a conference (say) to a full two-hour concert, with guest artists (if required), please contact **Colin Brown (0409 188 109)** or any committee member to discuss your needs. Please bear in mind that we're talking about a choir of up to 60 voices plus a professional accompanist and music director, so we provide great sound and excellent value for money.

Would you like to sponsor the choir?

If you have a product or service which you believe might appeal to our audiences, then contact us and we will be delighted to feature your product in our marketing material and promotions.

The choir is always seeking sponsors, in particular for the annual funding of our prestigious *Singer of the Year (SOTY)* concert, which we mentioned earlier. This event, which has been running for 27 years and is open to singers under the age of 35, draws competitors from all parts of the state (and indeed

sometimes interstate).

The number of winners and runners-up of this competition who have gone on to make careers on concert and opera stages worldwide is testament to the quality and significance of the event. In addition to awarding monetary prizes to the finalists, the choir provides them with opportunities to perform as guest artists in our concerts during the year.

All sponsors are acknowledged in our programs and publicity material and will be the opportunity to be involved in the presentation ceremony on the night and (during normal times) in the elimination heats. As stated earlier for this year's event we plan to put the videos of the final competitors on YouTube so any sponsors will have local and international exposure.

If you would like to be associated with this wonderful event or indeed any of our other prestigious concerts, please contact any member of the choir's committee and we will be delighted to work with you to get the best value out of your sponsorship.

In times like these, laughter is still the best medicine

Lawyer's Tombstone

A lawyer named Strange died, and his friend asked the tombstone maker to inscribe on his tombstone, "Here lies Strange, an honest man, and a lawyer."

The inscriber insisted that such an inscription would be confusing, for passers-by who would tend to think that three men were buried under the stone. However, he suggested an alternative: He would inscribe, "Here lies a man who was both honest and a lawyer."

That way, whenever anyone walked by the tombstone and read it, they would be certain to remark: "That's Strange!"

What to charge?

A Welsh farmer drove to a neighbour's farmhouse and knocked at the door. A boy, about 9, opened the door.

"Is your dad or your mum home?" said the farmer.

"No, they went to town."

"How about your brother, Howard? Is he here?"

"No, he went with Mum and Dad."

The farmer stood there for a few minutes, shifting from one foot to the other, and mumbling to himself.

"I know where all the tools are, if you want to borrow one, or I can give dad a message." said the boy.

"Well," said the farmer uncomfortably, "I really wanted to talk to your dad. It's about your brother, Howard, getting my daughter Susie pregnant".

The boy thought for a moment...

"You would have to talk to dad about that. I know he charges £500 for the bull and £50 for the pig, but I don't know how much he charges for Howard."

My Favourite Animal

Our teacher asked what my favourite animal was, and I said "Fried Chicken"

She said it wasn't funny, but she couldn't have been right because everyone else laughed.

My parents told me to always tell the truth. I did. Fried chicken is my favourite animal.

I told my dad what happened and he said my teacher was probably a member of PETA. He said they love animals very much.

I do, too. Especially chicken, pork and beef.

Anyway, my teacher sent me to the principal's office.

I told him what happened and he laughed too. Then he told me not to do it again.

The next day in class my teacher asked me what my favourite live animal was?

I told her it was a chicken.

She asked me why, so I told her it was because you could make them into fried chicken.

She sent me to the principal's office.

He laughed and told me not to do it again.

I don't understand. My parents taught me to be honest, but my teacher doesn't like it when I am.

Today my teacher asked me to tell her what famous military person I admired most.

I told her "Colonel Sanders"

Guess where I am now...

We wish all our friends a safe and healthy time during this COVID-19 lock-down period and look forward to seeing you at our concerts in the not too distant future.

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