

Melbourne Welsh Male Choir

October Newsletter No 41



The winners of the Choir's Singer of the Year competition announced

We hope all of our supporters have seen the wonderful video announcing the winner of the Choir's 2020 Singer of the Year Competition – **Gabrielle Penney** .



The runners up were :

Emilia Bertolini,



and **Lyla Levy-Jordan.**



Congratulations girls, your performances were great and we look forward to monitoring your professional careers and possibly singing with you in future.

The **Singer of the Year** video, which can be seen using the link <https://youtu.be/8Y37POuWMxc> features interviews with David Ashton-Smith and the three finalists, as well as showing their performance videos, comments by adjudicator Jeanette Russell, together with some recent video performances by the choir.

We believe you will be pleasantly surprised by the quality of the production and the wonderful performances of the finalists. It's 35 minutes long and full of entertaining content, so find a comfortable seat and enjoy.

This COVID-19 crisis forced the choir to “think outside the square” and this Singer of the Year exercise, together with the production of our “*I believe*” and “*He ain't heavy*” videos, has been a triumph for the musical staff, the technical specialists within the choir and the whole external choir ‘family’ including adjudicators like Jeanette Russell and guest artists like Roy Best, Mike Brady and others who generously contributed to the success of this unique project.

Recent Choir activity

One of the advantages of having a Music Director who has worked in Opera overseas is that he has a number of friends from around the world who can be called upon to provide interesting guest segments during our breaks in the choir's Zoom rehearsals.

John Pickering

One such friend was Australian tenor John Pickering who spoke to us from his home in Hannover Germany and what a fascinating guest he was.



John has known David Ashton-Smith for a long time, since they met as fellow singers and competitors on the Eisteddfod circuit in 1974.

Born in East Kew, he had singing lessons and competed on the Eisteddfod circuit i.e. Hartwell, Dandenong, Ballarat etc., until his voice broke at age 13. He continued with music lessons for piano, trumpet and voice, while studying for a degree in Architecture!

From the age of 7 he played cornet with the Kew Citizens band which became Kew City Band and he performed with the prestigious Fire Brigade Brass Band as one of their soloists. At that stage, singing was just a hobby.

While completing 7th grade singing at “the Con” he sang the bass aria “In diesen heil’gen Hallen” from the Magic Flute, but from that time his voice range went up and up and he ended up as a lyric tenor! He won a number of

Sun Aria competitions, including the Melbourne Sun Aria in 1971 and the ABC's instrument and vocal competition.

While working as an architect with Peter McIntyre, he and Eilene Hannan won the New York Metropolitan Opera's competition in Australia, which required them to go to Honolulu for the next round of the Pan Pacific competition. John won the Pan Pacific competition the following year which resulted in him travelling to New York. While there he met with Kurt Adler, the long-time chorus master and lead conductor of the Metropolitan Opera, who urged him to go to Europe where “there was a shortage of tenors”.

John auditioned in Vienna with a famous agent Dr Rudolf Raab (whose clients included people like Placido Domingo), who arranged for John to get employment with an opera house in Pforzheim. John liked the environment in Germany and shortly afterward he sold his Melbourne home and brought his wife Caroline and their new daughter to Germany intending to stay for 5 years. They are still there after 45 years.

John explained that, unlike Australia, the opera houses in Germany (and there are 85 of them) are publicly owned either by the city, the state or the federal government. With his background as an architect John occasionally acted as a guide at the Opera house in Karlsruhe where they employ 650 people including principals, chorus, orchestra and all technical and administrative staff. As an example of the subsidies which support the opera in Germany, the Bielefeld Opera House has a subsidy of €65 million per annum.

With such a wealth of opera to choose from, a large proportion of the German public are seasoned opera lovers and they are aided by the low prices for admission - typically €40, (\$65) while students might pay as little as €12. At the Sydney Opera House he paid more than \$250 a seat for his family!

David recalled seeing John perform in Hector Crawford's "Music for the People" concert at the Myer Music Bowl in Melbourne with John Farnham and Harry Secombe.

John shared a bottle cream sherry with Harry on that occasion and retained his friendship with him over the years. John visited him whenever he was in London. This included being invited to Lord's Cricket ground to see Sir Harry Secombe's XI vs England.

He has been a freelance tenor for most of his career in Germany which has meant him driving around 80,000 kms a year between engagements along the autobahns (in his beloved Saabs) at speeds up to 180 km/hr!

As he has grown older, he has moved from being a lyric tenor to a character tenor, which has given him roles like the witch in Hansel and Gretel (pictured right) - which in Germany is often played by a tenor rather than a mezzo-soprano (the Germans believe it makes the role more scary).

The German opera community are in lockdown during this COVID crisis with all staff on half wages. They are hoping to restart with social distancing and limited audiences as soon as practical but not being able to have large choruses is a concern.



John himself was delayed from returning to Germany from Australia in March, due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

After answering a number of questions from the choir members, John gave us a sample of his wonderful tenor voice with an acapella rendition of "Danny Boy".

Siôn Gough Hughes

Our guest at the following week's rehearsal was the enigmatic minister of the Melbourne Welsh Church in LaTrobe Street - ***Siôn Gough Hughes***.



Born in Llandudno, Siôn has been minister of the Welsh Church for 20 years and prior to that was a soldier in the Parachute Regiment and later a chaplain in the same regiment.

While in the army, he recalled being in Northern Ireland as the duty chaplain when news came in that a soldier in one of the regiment's troop carriers, had been shot and, despite only having a wound in the leg, was insisting on being given the last rites. Siôn pointed out to the wounded man that he was not a catholic priest, but the soldier insisted on having communion, so they performed the ceremony with biscuits and whiskey, which were the only things available in the troop carrier!

Later on, when Siôn visited him in hospital, the soldier thanked him and said "Father you saved my life".

Asked about the history of the Welsh Church bringing the Blue Riband winner at the National Eisteddfod to Australia for the Church's Gymanfa Ganu, Siôn explained that it was really Christine Boomsma, the Church's secretary, who was responsible. She happened to be at the Welsh National Eisteddfod when the question of

sponsorship of the Blue Riband prize came up and on behalf of the Melbourne Welsh Church she offered to be the sponsor.

It was a question of being in the right place at the time and it is probably one of the best decisions they've made, since only once in 9 years has the Blue Riband winner been unable to come to Australia.

On being asked whether he could sing, Siôn said that while he loved singing, especially light opera like Gilbert and Sullivan (his favourite song is "*Tit Willow*" which comes from Gilbert & Sullivan's *Mikado*), he had never been in a choir before coming to Australia and does not read music.

When he arrived in Melbourne, he was warned that it would be politically incorrect to join any of the three existing Welsh choirs and so he sings with the Excelsis choir, whenever he can, which he enjoys.

Siôn has compered a Singer of the Year concert for the Melbourne Welsh, when the competition was held at Blackwood Hall, Monash University. He enjoyed the experience and will be happy to do so again if requested.

Asked about how the Church was doing in this COVID-19 environment, Siôn indicated that their approach was very similar to the Choir's i.e. using Zoom, Facebook and YouTube to broadcast Church services, scripture lessons, book club and cooking classes etc.. They have installed a new camera in the church to record the services. All the links are published in the Church's *Dawn* newsletter (from which the photographs of Siôn were copied).



Asked what he missed about Wales, Siôn admitted he didn't miss the summer weather although he quite liked the Welsh winters, but he missed the history in Wales (possibly understandable since his mother was a history teacher).

In terms of activity outside the church, Siôn enjoys boxing and the training which goes with it. In his initiation to the regiment new recruits had to box each other and Siôn ended up as "the last man standing" – not bad for a chaplain!

In response to questions from the choir, Siôn confirmed that he had played rugby with Box Hill before moving to Powerhouse as both scrum half and hooker.

Chorister David Simm (another former Powerhouse player) pointed out that the club had a fairly unique record in having had two Welsh army chaplains play for them, both from the Parachute Regiment (the other player being Dewi Jones Evans).

Asked about the Welsh Church's role as part of the first women's hospital in Melbourne, Siôn explained that in 1880, a lady doctor - Dr. Constance Stone set up a hospital for women, run by women, with the outpatients being based in St David's Hall. The hospital later became the Queen Victoria Hospital for Women and is now part of Monash Medical .

The old hospital dispensary still exists within the Church building in La Trobe Street

The choir's next video production

The choir has been invited by our friends the Weybridge Male Voice Choir to contribute to their video presentation of one of the choir's favourite songs *Anthem* - from the musical "Chess". This

involves each chorister recording himself on a phone and the completed videos will be synchronised with those of the Weybridge choir and possibly those from other choirs before going to air on some of the social media channels. When it is completed we will give you the link.. watch this space.

Member Profile – Will Morton - Baritone

I joined the Choir two years ago, which was about four years after I first heard David Phillips (a work colleague and second tenor), talking about how much he enjoyed it. I have loved rehearsing and performing with such a talented and friendly bunch since then, both before and after lockdown!

I have chosen to live my life with two basic principles in mind.

- Do things you enjoy and do them with people you like.



- Just because you haven't, doesn't mean you shouldn't.

Both of these are very relevant to the Melbourne Welsh! I had never sung in Welsh before I joined the choir a couple of years ago, but I enjoy it and the lads in the choir are terrific.

I grew up in Reading which is not far from London and was best known for Courage Beer, Suttons Seeds and Huntley and Palmer biscuits! Some of you may even have been to the Reading Rock Festival?? I enjoyed growing up there and by the end of my first 18 years it had added the accolades of containing the largest housing estate in Europe and for being 'the average UK town'.

Half my family was musical and the other half was tone deaf. I think I sit somewhere in the middle... Dad was a chaplain and teacher at my school, a violin-maker, a keen double bass player and an enthusiastic tenor. One of my brothers was a very good violinist and studied at the Royal College of Music on the weekends. My sister played the cello. So, the house was

always filled with the sound of someone practising.

I sang in the local church choir with my mate Steve Townsend, starting as a treble and ending up a bass. I must have been OK at singing before my voice broke, because I remember turning down an invitation to join the Kings College choir in Cambridge. It was an honour to be asked, but it also meant moving to boarding school and learning French, so it was not a hard decision! So, my early singing career is probably better defined by:

- finishing a bottle of whisky with Steve in the choir stalls on Christmas Eve, which we had started earlier in the evening while singing carols at the local hospital, or

- persuading a stage manager at the Cork Jazz Festival that my university swimming team was actually an acapella singing group. We started a poor rendition of Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody in front of several hundred people, before we were thrown off stage.

I left home at 18 and travelled to Australia (Perth) for a year, before heading to university in Northern Ireland where I studied economics. It was an interesting time to be in Ireland. It was the tail end of 'the troubles' and the Anglo-Irish agreement was signed while I was there. Ian Paisley was my local MP and I have a story to tell about that after a few beers if anyone is interested.

While my Mum was not as musical as the rest of my family, she had (and still has) tremendous drive and a willingness to take on challenges. She was awarded a PhD at the age of 80, has had two books published and kept her four kids stimulated while also managing her own career. I have written no books and am academically average, but her willingness to give things a go and explore the unexplored has clearly influenced me.

My working life has been spent in the UK, France, USA and Australia. I have always been drawn to innovation and despite having limited technical ability, I have been involved in a few technology 'firsts' over the years.

- The first (we think) fully 'digital-to-press' colour magazine in North America. (Rugby Union Magazine).
- The first inter-campus digital lecture-on-demand service in Australia (at Monash Uni).
- (One of) the first video-on-demand services in Australia (with Monash, NFSA and Cinemedia)
- The first in-vehicle telematics service, to track and control high-end passenger vehicles (with Holden)
- Australia's first real-time road traffic information system (now used by Google and others to show congestion on their maps)

I have worked in technology start-ups, software firms, large consulting firms, my own consulting business and some interesting government agencies. But work has not been my primary driver and I am pleased to say that I have maintained a good life-balance, working part-time for quite a bit of my working life.

My home is filled with women, which is maybe why I enjoy the all-male choir?? My wife Kate has built an amazing physiotherapy business specialising in dizziness related problems, called Dizzy Day Clinics. Kate started the business after completing her PhD while we were raising our two girls who are both now at university. Jessica is following her mother's footsteps into physio and Charlotte is completing her Masters degree in International Relations at Monash (researching Russian private military companies)!

I am currently renovating my 1979 VW Kombi which is great fun and very time consuming. I am learning a lot about cars, metal, welding, fibreglass and painting! It is very satisfying taking on such a large and challenging project and fingers crossed I will be able to drive it around by Christmas, assuming we are allowed to by then...

2020 has been a strange year for everyone but will be particularly memorable for me as I was diagnosed with cancer in March. As many of you will doubtless know, this is a tough experience, but I am one of the lucky ones and have recently been given the all clear.

As I reflect on my pathway to the Melbourne Welsh Male Choir I am reminded that those simple principles have given me a good life full of wonderful people and interesting challenges. I fully intend to continue this way for many years to come yet.

Communication

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

Your feedback is important to us so please write and let us know what you think of the choir, our newsletters or our recent video performances. Please introduce us to your friends and let us know us know what you would like to see us perform in our 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 and orchestra or band (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 is featured in this edition. 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, as was the case this year, from other states.

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 given the opportunity to be involved in the presentation ceremony on the night and (during normal times) and in the elimination heats. As stated earlier, one of our videos released during this COVID era was viewed by over 30,000 viewers and for this year's SOTY event the videos of the final competitors on YouTube will have both 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

How I learned to mind my own business

I was walking past the mental hospital the other day and all the patients were shouting “13...13...13...”. The fence was too high to see over, but I saw a little gap in the planks, so I looked through to see what was going on.

Some idiot poked me in the eye with a stick, then they all started shouting “14...14...14...”

Loving memories

An elderly gent was invited to his old friend's home for dinner one evening. He was impressed by the way his buddy preceded every request to his wife with endearing terms -- Honey, My Love, Darling, Sweetheart, Pumpkin, etc... The couple had been married almost 70 years, and clearly they were still very much in love.

While the wife was in the kitchen, the man leaned over and said to his host, “I think it's wonderful that, after all these years, you still call your wife those loving pet names.”

The old man hung his head. “I have to tell you the truth,” he said, “I forgot her name about 10 years ago”.

Vasectomy Joke

The bride said she wanted three children, while the young husband said two would be enough for him. They discussed this discrepancy for a few minutes until the husband thought he'd put an end to things by saying boldly, “After our second child, I'll just have a vasectomy.”

Without a moment's hesitation, the bride retorted, “Well, I hope you'll love the third one just as if it's your own.”

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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