

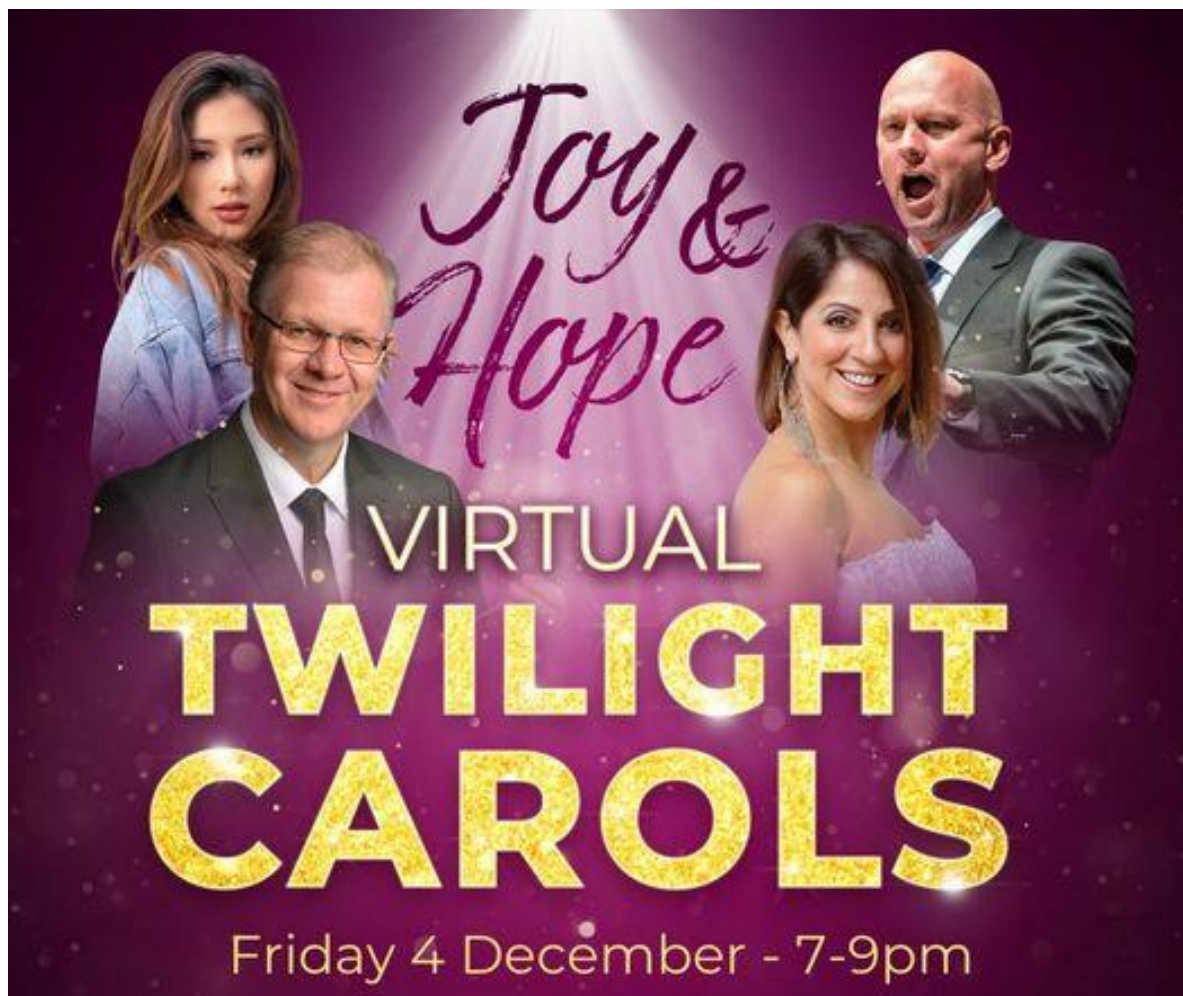
## Melbourne Welsh Male Choir

### December Newsletter No 42



Season's greetings to all our supporters.

This has been a year like none other in the history of the choir with only one live concert earlier in the year. Nevertheless, the choir has been extremely busy with virtual events and will emerge from this COVID-19 crisis with an enhanced professional capability and a reputation for responding in an innovative way to all of the challenges which we have faced.



The Choir's recent contribution to the *Virtual Twilight Carols* concert, which we hope all our supporters enjoyed, was the ninth project we have been involved with this year.

Our friends in the UK, the Weybridge Male Voice Choir invited us to contribute to their recording of "Anthem" together with a number of brother choirs from the UK. This has now been released and you can find it using the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YitS8wei1D8&feature=youtu.be>

The saying – "It's an ill wind that blows that blows nobody any good" certainly applies to the last 10 months for the choir. While the Zoom sessions for learning new material have been challenging, the ability of the Zoom software to link the choristers in with so many of the fascinating guests we have had this year, is something we will miss when we get back to rehearsing at Federation Estate, in the new year. We will continue to report on these interviews in our subsequent newsletters. These highly engaging and entertaining sessions seem to have

been unique to our choir and it is a tribute to the good relations we have with our guest artists, and friends in the music industry, predominantly through the efforts of our Music Director.

It was therefore appropriate that David himself should have been interviewed by our president about aspects of his illustrious career in two of our recent Zoom sessions. What follows is a summary of those two interviews.

### **David Ashton-Smith OAM - singer, music director, arranger, compere, teacher.**

I was born in Glen Iris and my parents loved music and both sang as amateurs, although we didn't have a record player in the house until my brother built one. My mother was part of the Glenburn singers and I still recall hearing the strains of "*All in an April evening*" when the choir rehearsed in our home. We attended the Glen Iris Methodist Church where we sang all



the popular Welsh hymns. I was a boy soprano and sang solos and also enjoyed doing bible readings. I had piano lessons from the church organist but preferred playing by ear. We had a lovely old Beale pianola, which I still have, and which Mike Russell, a member of the choir, has restored for us.

At school I learned the cornet and was captain of the drum band in grade 5.

From there, I went to Gardiner Central where a very good music teacher had me singing solos. I continued my education at Melbourne High School and left after year eleven to start work with a prominent Australian company. I grew up in that job.

While working, I had singing lessons and sang part time, entering numerous competitions, which led to me being a finalist in the Sun Aria competitions in 1966 and 1967. There was no professional Victorian Opera Company at that time but there was an amateur company and I sang with them in Beethoven's opera *Fidelio* and later played the Toreador in *Carmen* at the Palais Theatre.

There was also a television talent show on Channel 0 called "*Showcase*" produced by Hector Crawford, which had a full orchestra and was initially compered by Gordon Boyd and subsequently by Rod McClennan. I won a series and got exposed to lots of contacts and networks in the industry and music gradually took over my life.

I got married to my first wife and moved to London, to join the English National Opera Company, on the understanding that we would be there for six months. It was to be 9 years before we returned to Australia. We returned partly because we wanted to educate our two children in Australia and also because we wanted some real sunshine.

The English National Opera had Sir Charles McKerras as music director and I learned a great deal about musicianship from him and his successor Sir Charles Groves.

On my return, Bettine McCaughan suggested I start teaching and supplied me with a number of students. I performed in two operas with the Victorian Opera Company and started to teach 10 of the students in the opera chorus.

I was offered a job, teaching singing at Ivanhoe Girls Grammar, which I accepted despite having no qualification or training in teaching. The school kindly gave me a day off every week to study for a teaching certificate at the Hawthorn Institute of Technology.

Later, I was recruited by Baxter Holly (the father of Tim - who put together our first virtual recording earlier this year) to teach at Knoxfield College, which is now the Knox School (and one of the venues where the choir has performed). Subsequently, I taught at Wesley College at their Prahran Campus and at Ivanhoe in their Plenty Campus, before moving on to manage the Australian Pops Orchestra.



David in Victorian Opera's Return of Ulysses 1981

My involvement with the Australian Pops orchestra came about after a meeting with Kelvin McMillan. Kel was Sales Manager with Fleet Express, who loved Ivor Novello, but his true passion was playing his alto saxophone. He started the orchestra, modelled on the Freddie Gardner's jazz and swing band of the 1930-40 era, which featured Gardner on saxophone playing songs like "*I'm in the mood for love*".

In 1980 I sang with them and when John Fulford moved to Sydney I became their resident soloist. I also took on the role of compere for all of their concerts.

Barry Bignell, conductor of the Band of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Military District in Melbourne, who was conductor of the orchestra, asked me if I could form a choir of 24 really good singers. This I duly did, sourcing many of them from Bettine McCaughan's opera students, which was how the Ashton-Smith Singers came into existence

Kelvin McMillan, was an excellent networker and was very good at getting sponsorship for the orchestra. He established a great relationship with the BBC, which gave him access to their experience and expertise. Kel also developed relationships with people like BBC producer - Barry Knight, Robert Docker - arranger and pianist with the BBC Concert Orchestra and Douglas Gamley, an accomplished concert pianist, who in addition to writing film scores for about 40 films, also wrote arrangements for Kiri Te Kanawa, Luciano Pavarotti and Barbra Streisand among others!. It was Doug who taught me that "Tacet" (a silent passage) was one of the arranger's most important tools!

These relationships resulted in the Australian Pops orchestra gaining a reputation for innovation and quality amongst the music community. We performed some memorable concerts during this time, including *Joan Sutherland's* farewell concert, a concert with *Harry Secombe* and a series of concerts with *Barry Humphries* notably *Peter and the Shark*, *Dame Edna's Song of Australia* and *Last night of the Poms*.

The Ashton-Smith Singers provided the choir for several *Michael Crawford* concerts and I was also asked to organise the backing choirs for *Andrea Bocelli's* tour of Australasia (Brisbane, Sydney Adelaide, Perth and New Zealand). At the Melbourne concert, held at the Tennis

Centre, I was pleased to be told by the leader of the orchestra that our choir “left the others for dead”.

To accommodate the Barry Humphries series of concerts, the Ashton-Smith Singers expanded from 24 to 60 members and remained at that level from then on.

I first met *Graeme and Margot Wall* in the foyer of Coliseum when I was with the English National Opera and we have been friends ever since. In 1998, I helped them put together the choir and orchestra when they started *Opera Scholars Australia*. I am currently the Music Director for OSA. The organisation accepts about 20 singers aged 18 to 28 each year. They get a scholarship, training, master classes with our principal patron, *Yvonne Kenny*, and perform in Opera in the Alps, Opera in the Market, Opera in the Caves, concerts and corporate functions.

### Responses to questions from choir members

- My favourite performing roles were as Marcello in Puccini’s - *La Bohème*, Sir Robert Cecil in Benjamin Britten’s - *Gloriana*, and Lord William Cecil in Donizetti’s - *Maria Stuarda*.
- Among my favourite popular singers are Tony Bennet and Frank Sinatra, while in the opera world I admired the American baritone Robert Merrill (whose duet with Jussi Björling in the Bizet’s opera “*The Pearl Fishers*” is, in my opinion, the best ever performance of that song) and my European idols were Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Hermann Prey
- The best advice I received for writing choral parts was to study the harmonies of the great hymns in the Methodist hymn book.



*David with some MWMC members outside the Hall of Cornwall during our 2017 UK tour.*

## Choir Chorister Profile - Gwyn Harper - Bass

Having pursued the whole of the committee and some of the longer serving members of the choir to provide choir profiles, it behoves me now, as editor, to do the same.

Born in a Welsh mining town - Mountain Ash in the Aberdare valley, I was educated at Mountain Ash Grammar School.



I did little or no singing at school, since the music program periods clashed with the rugby, cricket and athletics activities. After successfully completing GCE, I attended the University College Swansea and graduated with degree in Physics.

During my time at University, I was a member of the college's rugby team. Swansea was, at that time, the smallest college in the University of Wales with around 2,000 students (nowadays they have 19,000). Thus, in order to form a choir for the annual intervarsity eisteddfod, the choir's music director negotiated a cunning deal with the captain of the rugby. If you wanted to be in the first or second XV, then you had to be part of the college choir!

This was my first introduction to singing in a 4-part male-voice, choir and I enjoyed it, especially singing in concerts with some of the great local Welsh Male choirs such as Dunvant and Treorchy.

After graduating, I joined Elliott Automation in Borehamwood, Hertfordshire, as a physicist

but, after 4 years, changed tack completely and moved into the emerging information technology world with ICT (which later became ICL - International Computers Ltd).

After an eight-week residential, introductory course, my role, operating out of ICL's office in Euston, London, was looking after part of the university and technical college market initially in a support role and later as a computer salesman.

It was during this time that I met Betty, my wife-to-be, who was working in London as a nurse. She had to return to Australia suddenly, before we had pledged our troth, so we effectively got engaged by post. I arranged for my cousin, an executive with the Phoenix insurance company, who visited Melbourne regularly, to deliver the engagement ring to my prospective father-in-law, at the Victoria Market (where he was selling lucerne hay!). In parallel, I set out to see if I could organise a transfer within the company to ICL Australia.

As you can imagine, there were a number of expensive overseas calls from London to Australia and, with Betty's parents being on a manual telephone exchange, it meant I spoke regularly with the local Werribee exchange operator. He came to recognise my voice and would often say "Is that you Gwyn? I don't think Betty's home but I'll track her down" and he did! You don't get that service from Telstra these days!

We were married in Werribee in December 1968 and returned to UK with a job offer from ICL Australia in my pocket. However, pregnancy intervened and it took two years before we were

able to return to Australia, complete with our six-month old daughter, for me to take up my new job with ICL in North Sydney. Our other two daughters were born in Sydney. We moved to Melbourne in May 1978 and bought the house in Glen Iris, where we still live.

The computer industry was somewhat volatile at that time and, after spending 12 years with ICL in Australia and UK, I had successive roles with Computer Sciences Australia (CSA), Facom, Burroughs/Unisys, Amdahl, Sun Microsystems and Sausage Software for periods ranging from one to five years before retiring. However, it was not to be the end of my involvement in IT, since, 18 months into retirement, I was contacted by a former client, who invited me to manage a Melbourne-based, 45-man, hospital software development and service organisation, which had been acquired by a Perth-based medical software company. I finally retired four years later, after the parent company - Global Health, moved its headquarters to Melbourne

I have been a member of the Melbourne Welsh Male Choir since 1992.

I joined, almost by accident, having bumped into a Melbourne Welsh choir member - second tenor, John Roberts, in my home! John was teaching a CAE sponsored, Welsh language course, which included my daughter – Siân, who had volunteered our home to hold the class. Having identified me, from my name and accent, as a fellow Welshman, John invited me to a choir rehearsal and the rest, as they say, is history.

I don't know what I would do without my weekly dose of uplifting 4-part harmony singing and the fun and camaraderie, which goes with it.

The choir has taken me to some amazing places all over the world, from Zulu kraals in South Africa to cathedral organ lofts in Austria and, of course, the concert halls and stadiums in Canada, America and the UK, including London's Albert Hall, Truro's Hall of Cornwall, Cardiff Arms Park in Wales and the Melbourne's Tennis Centre and Cricket Ground.

I witnessed the power of song when, on our tour to South Africa to compete in the *International Eisteddfod of South Africa* in 1997, just after the end of apartheid and with Nelson Mandela newly in power, we sang the previously banned, protest song "Senzenina" and the South African indigenous people sang "Shosholosa" (a song about a freedom train) in response.



*The Choir Performing in a tent in South Africa 1997*

Then, at *Kathaumixw*, a choral festival in Powell River, Canada, on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002, a teenage choir from New York had tears in their eyes when our choir sang "An American Trilogy" as a tribute on American Independence Day and in remembrance of "9/11".

Singing with the choir has given me the opportunity to meet, rehearse and perform in concert with some great entertainers, ranging from Bryn Terfel, Aled Jones, Rhys Meirian, Andrew Jenkins and Erfyl Tomos Jones from Wales to local stars such as Judith Durham, Marina Prior, Teddy Tahu Rhodes, Rhonda Burchmore, Mike Brady and of course the stars of our recent concert at the Melbourne Recital Centre, Sylvie Paladino and Roy Best.

Singing is quite addictive and, as a result, I (along with some other Melbourne Welsh colleagues) am also a member of the *Carols by Candlelight* choir for the Christmas Eve concert at the Myer Music Bowl, which is usually broadcast live by Channel Nine.

I also perform with the Athenaeum Club choir, which rehearses on Thursday evenings.

In addition to the wonderful experiences, I've had and the good friends I've made through the choir, I'm sure the rehearsals have kept me physically and mentally fit. There is no way you can worry about the problems of the day when you are concentrating on harmonising with 50 to 60 fellow choristers.

## **Communication**

Please feel free to copy or circulate this newsletter to any of your friends or relatives and if you would like us to add them to our distribution list, so they get their copy direct, then please let us know their email address.

Alternatively, they can subscribe directly to the newsletter via our website:

[www.melbourneshchoir.com.au](http://www.melbourneshchoir.com.au)

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

Email is the preferred way of communication with our supporters, so please send us an email and we'll respond to whatever query you may have.

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 what you would like to see us perform in our future live concerts.

## **Would you like to hire the choir in 2021?**

While, like all choirs worldwide, we are unable to perform at present, we anticipate things will be back to normal early 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., in the new year, so 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 **Gwyn Harper (0419 562 353)** 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. We provide an eclectic repertoire, a great sound and excellent value for money.

## **Would you like to sponsor the choir in 2021?**

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 seeking sponsors, in particular for the annual funding of our prestigious *Singer of the Year (SOTY)* concert, which hopefully we will be able to hold before a large live audience in 2021. This event, which has been running for 28 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.

Many of the winners and runners-up of this competition have gone on to make careers on concert and opera stages worldwide, which 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 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 three competitors on YouTube had 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 **Colin Brown (0409 188 109)** or 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**

### **Rugby Legends**

JPR Williams the legendary Wales and Lions fullback was interviewed about the current state of Welsh rugby.

"How do you think your triple crown winning team would have fared against the current Welsh team?" he was asked.

"I think we'd win by about 6 points" JPR said.

"Only that small a margin" said the interviewer.

"Well, we're all in our seventies now" replied JPR

### **Chess (at Christmas)**

A group of chess enthusiasts checked into a hotel and were standing in the lobby discussing their recent tournament victories.

After about an hour, the manager came out of the office and asked them to disperse.

"But why?" they asked, as they moved off.

"Because" he said, "I can't stand chess nuts boasting in an open foyer."

### **The Farmer and the Code Enforcement Officer**

A Vermont farmer was standing in his barnyard when an official-looking car pulled up. The driver got out and introduced himself as the local code enforcement officer.

"I was noticing your fence," he said. "You have three 3-inch rails. You need to have either three 4-inch rails or four 3-inch rails."

"Ya don't say," said the farmer.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to write you up," continued the code officer, but as he was doing so, he had to keep swatting away at some flies that were buzzing around his head.

"Havin' some trouble with them circle flies, are ya?" asked the farmer.

The man stopped writing for a moment. "Well, yeah," he said, "if that's what they are. I've never heard of circle flies."

"Well, circle flies are common on farms," replied the farmer. "Ya see, they're called circle flies because they're almost always found circlin' around the back end of a horse."

"Oh," said the code officer, as he continued writing.



After a minute, he stopped and said, “Hey, wait a minute! Are you trying to call me a horse’s rear end?”

“Oh, no, no,” replied the farmer. “I have too much respect for code officers and the government to even think about callin’ ya that.”

“Good,” said the man, as he went back to writing the citation.

After a long pause, the farmer added, “Hard to fool them flies, though.”

**We wish all our friends a safe, healthy and joyous time during this festive season and look forward to seeing you at our concerts in the not-too-distant future.**

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