

# Melbourne Welsh Male Choir

## March 2021 Newsletter No 44



### Onward and...

After a bit of a false start, where we had to go back to wearing masks for two rehearsals, the choir is now hard at work rehearsing for our first concert of the year, on April 20<sup>th</sup>, at the function rooms at the Karralyka Centre, Mines Road, Ringwood, where the patrons will be treated to a veritable feast of music and food.

This concert is part of Maroondah Council's *Morning Music* and to reflect that theme the program will feature some of the choir's best loved musical theatre items, ranging from 'A Gershwin showcase' to 'Rhythm of life'. The lovely *Kate Amos* will be our guest artist and we will join with her in singing some of the songs from 'The Sound of Music'.



*Kate with the choir at an earlier concert*

For further details and tickets, please phone the Karralyka Centre on 9870 2888.

### A different celebration of St David's Day

As mentioned in last month's newsletter, COVID19 caused the 2021 Gymanfa Ganu organised by the Welsh Church and normally held at St Michaels in Collins Street to be cancelled.

The minister of the Welsh Church - Siôn Gough Hughes and his team put together a wonderful virtual concert in place of the usual celebrations. They called on previous guests to provide a 'virtual service' in its place and the resulting video features singers and conductors such as Rhys Meirion, Erfyl Tomos Jones, Aled and Eleri Edwards, Andrew Jenkins, Illid Ann Jones and others who have previously performed in the St David's Day celebrations in Melbourne, as well as the Australian Welsh Male Choir and the Melbourne Welsh Male Choir. This video is still available on the Church's website or navigate to: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCmGRaErbLYaTH4hjmumq4Q/videos](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmGRaErbLYaTH4hjmumq4Q/videos)

We were happy to supply one of our choir's virtual recordings for this innovative project and the one chosen by Siôn was 'He ain't heavy'.

### Another Zoom Guest interviewed during lockdown - John Atwell – accompanist

This Zoom interview between our music Director David Ashton-Smith and John Atwell, who is the accompanist for the Maroondah Singers, took place in November 2020. John's story provides an interesting comparison with the history of our own accompanist Simon Walters whose profile appears later in this newsletter.

The interview was facilitated by our deputy conductor - Ray Kitto, who also sings (and comperes) with the Maroondah Singers in addition to his roles with the MWMC.

John is a very interesting character, a distinguished CSIRO BioMedical Research scientist with a PhD in Immunology, who worked with Gustav Nossal at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research before joining CSIRO to work on classes of antibodies in earlier mammals, such as the Echidna and the Platypus and has a number of patents to his name.

In parallel with this he is a talented keyboard musician with a lifelong interest in pipe organs and Wurlitzers in particular.

John recalled meeting up with David when playing the organ with the Australian Pops Orchestra at the Hamer Hall (when the Hall had an organ) together with the Ashton-Smith Singers in the Barry Humphries “Song of Australia” concert, which finished with the wonderful anthem “Why do I love Australia” performed by Dame Edna.



*John Atwell at his organ*

His other memories Hamer Hall from that era include playing at a concert in honour of “Weary” Dunlop meeting up with Patsy Adam-Smith and representatives of a women’s choir from one of the concentration camps. Another was providing an improvised accompaniment to comedian Maurie Fields and his ukulele.

David reminded John of a gig they did for a Collingwood footballer’s wedding where John’s improvisations on the pipe organ during the service included “Good old Collingwood forever” and nobody picked it up!

Another of David’s recollections was attending, with their respective wives, a wonderful concert at Rod Laver arena featuring Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis and Liza Minnelli.

John was born in South Australia and was taught piano as a boy in the country by the Sisters of St Joseph. He used to have one lesson a week with scales, the other lesson was pieces and Saturday mornings were theory. However, he always wanted to

play the pipe organ, switched to it and as a result he lost his piano touch. It was coming back to accompanying choirs which gave him the ability to pick up that piano touch again.

Somewhere along the way John got waylaid from the classical pipe organ studies because in Adelaide they still had a theatre that had a theatre organ and at that stage he got enamoured of this wonderful thing called the Wurlitzer, which over the years has become his mainstay. He is very grateful to have the technique to enable him to play organs all around the world. He indicated it’s been a great experience for him, because he’s met a lot of different people in the musical world and has been to some amazing places that he would never have thought of visiting.

One of them was right up in mid Wales at a place called Towyn. It’s on the coast and it’s where a little narrow gauge steam railway called the Tallyllyn Railway runs. This is where John met Chris Awdry, the son of the Reverend Wilbert Awdry who together have written all the *Thomas the Tank Engine* books (and it was for his son that Wilbert originally wrote them). The town has a Wurlitzer which has been transplanted from London.



*The Tallyllyn narrow gauge railway*

However, the other organ that John really enjoyed playing, only recently, was also in Wales in the Rhondda Valley at a place called Ynyshir, near Porth. It’s another organ that was transplanted from London and was originally sold out of the Regal theatre in Edmonton and transported down to Barry, which is on the South Wales coast. It is now located in a little chapel currently being used as a music studio in Ynyshir. It’s a very famous instrument because it was the one that the late Sidney Torch used to play.

Sidney Torch was the instigator of ‘*Friday Night is Music Night*’ on BBC and he taught composer Bob Docker how to write and orchestrate commercially. John was already a big fan of Torch’s recordings

in the 30s when he played the organ in Edmonton. To actually play that same organ and to play Torch's theme song really moved John at the concert that he gave in September 2019, it was just a brilliant thing to do. Sidney Torch's name is synonymous with early orchestral music in the BBC and he influenced so many of those arrangers that followed him. A lot of his arrangements are still well sought after and the Australian Pops Orchestra have a number of his arrangements in their library.

There is still a great following for theatre organ playing. Most Melbournians would know about the organ at the Dendy Brighton but there are others. The Regent theatre's got one which was installed in the 1990s but the original organ was taken out in about 1969. Other organs include the one in Kingston City Hall, which used to be in the State Theatre and was used when the Melbourne Welsh choir performed in concert with Tony Fenelon. There is another organ in Malvern Town Hall which is a transplant from the UK - a Compton instrument.

The organ in the Melbourne Town Hall is an interesting instrument, it's what is called a concert instrument. It is a classical pipe organ but has extra bits and pieces and was built by a firm called Hill, Norman & Beard, who are actually owned by a man called John Christie whom David would probably know through the Glyndebourne Opera (John Christie was the founder of the Glyndebourne Opera House and the Glyndebourne Festival Opera is held in the grounds of his home in Glyndebourne near Lewes in Sussex).

It was all the same firm and they had an offshoot that made theatre organs and they called them Christies. The organ in the town Hall is much larger of course but has sounds on it from orchestral instruments and percussion as well as the normal classical sounds.



John with Tony Fenelon and a Christie Organ

In response to questions from the choir, John remembered playing the Wurlitzer in Ballarat. This instrument was built by the Compton organ company and came out from England. John had the rare privilege of being one of the people to play the instrument at its inaugural concert, along with another guy called Hubert Selby, who was an organist who had come out from England and lived in WA at that time. They shared the programme together. It's an interesting little instrument and had some nice little bells and whistles.

Asked to give a little of his history with the Maroondah Singers, John recalled his first association with them was in the late 80s where they were his guests at the concert that John gave at the Town Hall. Jim Watsford was the conductor of the Maroondah Singers at the time and they did a couple of items together. After that concert Jim asked whether John would come on board as their accompanist. At that stage he thought "I'll do that for a while". He wasn't playing any piano at that stage but going back to the Maroondah Singers did great things for his hands and his playing, because you have to be a player of great empathy when you are an accompanist and he is sure that going back to his roots and going to the Maroondah Singers did that for him.

John was there for around 17 years and then decided to take a break (for 13 years). He can't remember how he was invited back but he's been there ever since, seen a lot of happenings, a lot of people come and go and it's been a great experience. John likes the role of being second fiddle, just supporting a group of people. It's different from playing a solo concert because you are part of a group and he thinks that music making in a group is the best thing to do. That's why he always enjoys doing concerts with his friend Tony Fenelon because they bounce off each other and the same happens with choir concerts.

David recalled one other highlight that he and John were associated with and that was the concert with Ashton-Smith Singers in Collins Street Baptist Church when they performed the *Mozart Requiem* but in the first half did John Rutter's *Gloria* which is written for brass, percussion and organ and John

played that organ part so well. John agreed it was a great occasion and reminded David that he had a broken foot at the time. He thought he had an infection in it until he went to the doctor and was told he had a fracture in one of the small bones in his foot. He recalled the doctor saying, “you're the second person this week to come in with one of those and I haven't seen one since I graduated 40 years ago”. John's foot was duly bound up in a cast and he had to cut the cast around the ankle so that he could put that foot on the swell pedal when he was playing Rutter's glorious *Gloria* slow movement.

## Choir Member Profile – Accompanist Simon Walters

I grew up in Cannock, a small town 30 miles away from Birmingham in the UK. My Dad was a jazz loving workshop technician who played piano, clarinet and sax a little by ear, while my Mum who preferred classical music had played organ and violin.



*Simon pictured at the choir's grand piano*

Apart from learning music at school, I wasn't pushed towards piano lessons and so very much went my own way (in fact I only ever completed one piano exam - Grade 8 while at university).

As a child, I thought everybody had perfect pitch like myself, but I was soon corrected! I always dreamed of being a professional musician but as is often the case, with no initial contacts in the industry it took a twisty route to get there. This route included a

year as a full time teacher, a stint as a “Bluecoat” entertainer at Pontins holiday camp in Blackpool and a year studying for an academically questionable “Diploma in Variety Entertainment”.

In 1994, having moved to London a year earlier and with some savings from my teaching, I became a full time musician. My earnings initially were meagre, especially since most of my wages from my first professional pantomime (at a fringe theatre) went to replace the Atari computer I'd stupidly left on a train platform! However, I did relish expanding my range - improvising for kids' ballet classes, playing for 'open microphone' sessions, accompanying a local operatic society and memorably, playing on a very ordinary fringe show called “Shame” - the reviewers didn't have to work too hard for that one.

Gradually I gained returning clients who paid good rates. One notable was Barrie Stacey, a gloriously over the top producer who toured round kids' shows with very little rehearsal and less than state of the art props and costumes. I was often the sole musician (without backing tracks) dragging my keyboard around the UK by train (as I couldn't drive). In performance, I often had to think fast when sets failed to materialize or actors lost their lines! Barrie recently wrote an erotic novel at the age of 80 - as you do...

Another great contact was a husband and wife producing team called Calibre Productions, who initially put on cabarets at village halls but moved into touring 'songs from the shows' compilations. I got to see the length and breadth of the UK with these shows over ten years including an appearance at the Albert Hall and many visits to the Shetlands.

By 2010 I had also musically directed 20 pantomimes, my favourite being Dick Whittington at the magnificent Theatre Royal in Nottingham (2004). My last pantomimes were in Reading - very handy as I lived a short walk away with my wife Melindee and daughter Violet (born in 2006).

As often happens, I'd met Melindee in 1997 at a place I certainly wouldn't have expected to meet a life partner; a dingy but fun Australian/South African dive called 'The Redback' in West London... I guess I got bitten! (sorry). I will say she had to tear me away from the very comfortable flat share I'd been in for 5 years, but I guess sometimes the writing is on the wall for the bachelor lifestyle! Her work as a scientist was certainly very different from mine, but I guess the chemistry was right! (sorry again).

By 2009, between playing and arranging, I was enjoying a stable income for a musician. Buying some score printing software called 'Sibelius' had made my awful handwriting much more appealing to clients! However, Melindee's job had run its course and she was feeling homesick. I'd visited Australia a few times and liked it, so I was open to giving it a go. There was also the strong possibility of a job for Melindee at Cadbury in Ringwood.

Initially however, we arrived in Queensland in early 2010 and stayed with her parents while the job details were finalized... and thankfully they were! I was actually more familiar with Brisbane, so my abiding memory of the first week in Melbourne is Melindee's mum frantically driving us around looking for somewhere to rent - a much harder process than we'd anticipated. Thankfully, a friendly estate agent took pity on us and we ended up renting just a few roads away from where the MWMC rehearse in Ringwood.

I will say it took a couple of years for me to fully 'realize' my business here (made easier by passing my driving test!). My first recurring gig was with the Frankston Ladies Choir, who had just lost their accompanist and musical director - I volunteered to do both jobs and seem to have gotten away with it ever since! I also provide a lot of their arrangements.

A little later, the MWMC invited me to be a cover pianist for Linda O'Brien and when, on her departure, I was offered the accompanist job full time, I was more than happy to accept.

Both choirs have been a joy to work with and have taken me to exciting venues both here and abroad. Also, naturally I have been grateful for their continued support during the pandemic.

As far as other recurring engagements go, I was hired as a member of a function band called 'Vinyl Tonic' in 2013. The lead singer, Pete, did this weird gig at the 'Cuckoo', a German restaurant in Olinda (and had been employed there for almost 30 years!). I came in as a second keyboardist for a couple of nights with no sheet music and only knowing about 10% of the music: another baptism by fire!. Pete later asked me to join the relief band at a new restaurant called 'Munich Brauhaus' in South Wharf and from 2016 onwards our team of 20 have played 9 shows a week there. We have recently come back to the Brauhaus, in a reduced capacity - as with many artistic endeavours currently, but the music will endure and so it should - Prost!



*The Munich Brauhaus at Southbank*

## Communication

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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 join the choir**

The choir is always keen to attract new members. Whether you are 18 or 88 years of age, whether you've been involved in music all your life or only if you only sung in the shower, come along and see how the choir works at any of our rehearsals at Federation Estate, 32 Greenwood Avenue, Ringwood and you will be made most welcome. Whether you wish to listen and observe, with our occasional guests, or sit within the body of the choir and sing along with us, the choice is yours.

The rehearsal facility is excellent with comfortable seats, good acoustics and probably the best music director and accompanist combination in Melbourne.

We have the benefit of our Music Director, David Ashton-Smith's background, as an opera singer and adjudicator, in coaching our voice development and projection as well as teaching us new songs. He is ably assisted by our accompanist Simon Walters, whose keen ear picks up any problems with pitch or timing.

We have established choristers nominated to look after all new and prospective members, to ensure they are properly introduced to other members of their section and are equipped with the relevant music scores. They will also act as mentors for any questions you might have.

There is a break for tea or coffee at most rehearsals (except when COVID closes the tea-room), which gives one the opportunity to chat to other choir members over a cuppa and normally, on the first Wednesday in the month, one of the sections will provide the choir and visitors with a (sometimes) sumptuous supper.

Car parking is plentiful and free, while Ringwood station is a 5-minute walk away.

If you call us on the numbers shown in this newsletter, we will arrange to meet you, otherwise just come along on a Wednesday evening, introduce yourself and you will be made very welcome.

Once you decide to join the choir, we will provide you with web-based aids to assist you in learning and practising the individual parts at home, which makes the process of learning the repertoire (and the Welsh songs) that much easier.

Following a number of rehearsal sessions and a formal audition you could be singing in one of our concerts within weeks and possibly joining us on our next tour.

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

While, like all choirs worldwide, we have been unable to perform for the past 12 months, we expect that things will be back to normal shortly and as mentioned above, we are rehearsing on the basis that we will be performing in concerts later this 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 coming year, so if you know of any organization which might require anything from a short rousing opening for a conference (say) to a full two-hour concert, together with guest artists and orchestra or band (if required), please contact **Gwyn Harper (0419 562 353)** or any committee member and we will follow up all contacts.

Please bear in mind that we're talking about a choir of up to 60 voices plus a professional accompanist and music director. We have an eclectic repertoire, a great sound and provide excellent value for money.

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

As is the case with almost all other not-for-profit performing arts organisations, the choir's financial position has been seriously impacted by the COVID19 pandemic. As a result, we need sponsors more than ever before.

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 COVID19 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

### Life of Brian

A man walked out to the street and caught a taxi just going by.

He got into the taxi and the cabbie said,

"Perfect timing. You're just like Brian"

*Passenger:* "Who?"

*Cabbie:* "Brian Sullivan. He's a guy who did everything right all the time. Like my coming along when you needed a cab, things happen like that to Brian every single time."

*Passenger:* "There are always a few clouds over everybody."

*Cabbie:* "Not Brian Sullivan. He was a terrific athlete, he could have won the Grand Slam at tennis, he could golf with the pros.

He sang like an opera baritone and danced like a Broadway star and you should have heard him play the piano.

He was an amazing guy."

*Passenger:* "Sounds like he was something really special."

*Cabbie:* "There's more. He had a memory like a computer, he remembered everybody's birthday.

He knew all about wine, which foods to order and which fork to eat them with.

He could fix anything. Not like me. I change a fuse and the whole street blacks out.

But Brian Sullivan, he could do everything right."

*Passenger:* "Wow. Some guy then."

*Cabbie:* "He always knew the quickest way to go in traffic and avoid traffic jams. Not like me, I always seem to get stuck in them.

But Brian, he never made a mistake and he really knew how to treat a woman and make her feel good. He would never answer her back even if she was in the wrong; and his clothing was always immaculate, shoes polished too.

He was the perfect man!

He never made a mistake.

No one could ever measure up to Brian Sullivan."

*Passenger:* “An amazing fellow. How did you meet him?”

*Cabbie:* “Well, I never actually met Brian. He died....I'm married to his bloody widow.”

### **Confession**

A man goes to Confession to talk to his priest. “Father, something terrible is happening and I have to talk to you about it.”

The priest asks: “What’s wrong?”

The man replies: “My wife is poisoning me.”

The priest, very surprised by this, asks: “How can that be?”

The man then pleads: “I’m telling you, I’m certain she’s poisoning me. What should I do?”

“Tell you what,” the priest offers. “Give me her name and let me talk to her. I’ll see what I can find out and I’ll let you know.”

A week later the priest calls the man and says: “I spoke to your wife. I spoke to her on the phone for three hours. You want my advice?”

The man says yes, and the priest replies: “Take the poison!”

### **Uncertainty**

Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger.

When he came to Einstein, the physicist reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his trouser pockets. It wasn't there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. He still couldn't find it.

The conductor said, “Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it.” Einstein nodded appreciatively.

The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket.

The conductor rushed back and said, “Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one.”

Einstein looked at him and said, “Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going!”

**Keep safe and healthy. We look forward to seeing you at our concerts in the not-too-distant future.**

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