

# Melbourne Welsh Male Choir

## February 2022 Newsletter No 53



### COVID's impact on our concert in celebration of St David's Day

Our hopes that most of 2022 would be free of any new COVID dramas were not to be, with the highly infectious Omicron strain now the major pandemic threat. The restrictions which go with it have impacted the choir's ability to rehearse, perform and, of course, to fill concert venues.



*David Ashton-Smith and the Choir at an earlier concert in the auditorium at MLC*

As a result we have elected to delay the concert we had scheduled for March in celebration of St David's Day until Saturday April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, hopefully well after the peak of this current infection wave.

As indicated in our previous newsletter, we plan to entertain our audience with a wide array of songs that the choir sings best, particularly the Welsh standards, so important in this celebration of the March 1<sup>st</sup> birthday of Saint David in particular.

The acoustically wonderful, James Tatoulis Auditorium at MLC's Kew campus will once again resound to the sounds and harmonies of the famed Melbourne Welsh Male Choir as we pay our tribute in song to the Patron Saint of Wales *Dewi Sant* or Saint David.

Our guest artist will be - **Samantha Hargreaves**, the winner of the Choir's Singer of the Year (SOTY) competition in 2021. Based on that performance (which can be seen by accessing the Choir's website) and her subsequent success with recent operatic roles, our audience at the St. David's Day concert are in for a treat.

Tickets for the afternoon concert commencing at 2:00 p.m. are available via TryBooking or via the choir's website:

[www.melbournewelshchoir.com.au/tickets](http://www.melbournewelshchoir.com.au/tickets)

or from any member of the choir.

The auditorium is very comfortable and quite intimate, with a maximum of 350 seats, so be sure to book early to avoid disappointment.

The choir is in good voice and we are looking forward to presenting some of the new material we have developed since we last performed at this venue, together with some of our traditional Welsh anthems which with 50+ voices on stage is likely to raise the roof!



*Samantha Hargreaves*

## Future Concerts

Despite the level of uncertainty surrounding future concerts the choir is continuing to refine and extend its repertoire. Be sure to watch for notification of our upcoming concerts in our newsletters, website and Facebook page.

## The background to another song from the Choir's repertoire – *Eli Jenkins Prayer*

*Under Milk Wood* is Dylan Thomas's "play for voices" (i.e., intended for radio rather than the stage), a quite wild and sometimes soaring portrait of the inhabitants of a fishing village in Wales, the fictional Llareggub, depicting both their dreams and a day in their lives. One of the quieter moments comes at sunset, when the town vicar, the Reverend Eli Jenkins, goes out and says a prayer.

*Every morning when I wake,  
Dear Lord, a little prayer I make,  
O please to keep Thy lovely eye  
On all poor creatures born to die*

*And every evening at sun-down  
I ask a blessing on the town,  
For whether we last the night or no  
I'm sure is always touch-and-go.*

*We are not wholly bad or good  
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,  
And Thou, I know, wilt be the first  
To see our best side, not our worst.*

*O let us see another day!  
Bless us all this night, I pray,  
And to the sun we all will bow  
And say, good-bye—but just for now!*

The simplicity of these verses comes as something of a surprise. It is native neither to the play nor to the work of Dylan Thomas generally to be so very simple; Thomas would pile on the words and the images to stunning effect - this was a marked feature of his style and his talent.

Born in Swansea, Wales, Dylan Thomas is famous for his acutely lyrical and emotional poetry, as well as his turbulent personal life. The originality of his work makes categorization difficult. In his life he



*Dylan Thomas*

avoided becoming involved with literary groups or movements, and unlike other prominent writers of the 1930s - such as W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender, for example - he had little use for socialistic ideas in his art. Thomas can be seen as an extension into the 20th century of the general movement called Romanticism, particularly in its emphasis on imagination, emotion, intuition, spontaneity, and organic form.

Considered to be one of the greatest Welsh poets of all time, Thomas is

largely known for his imaginative use of language and vivid imagery in his poems.

Thomas began writing poetry as a child and was publishing by his teens. His notebooks from 1930 and 1934, when he was 16 to 20 years old, reveal the young poet's struggle with a number of personal crises. In his 1965 *Dylan Thomas*, Jacob Korg described them as "related to love affairs, to industrial civilization, and to the youthful problems of finding one's identity." Revised versions of some of the notebooks' poems became in 1934 his first published volume of poetry, *Eighteen Poems*. Published in December 1934, it received little notice at first, but by the following spring some influential newspapers and journals had reviewed it favourably.

Like James Joyce before him, Dylan Thomas was obsessed with words - with their sound and rhythm and especially with their possibilities for multiple meanings.

*Under Milk Wood* is a 1954 radio drama by Dylan Thomas, commissioned by the BBC and later adapted for the stage. A film version, *Under Milk Wood* directed by Andrew Sinclair, and starring Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Peter O'Toole and Sian Phillips, was released in 1972, and another adaptation of the play, directed by Pip Broughton, was staged for television for the 60th anniversary in 2014.

An omniscient narrator invites the audience to listen to the dreams and innermost thoughts of the inhabitants of the fictional small Welsh fishing village, Llareggub.

They include Mrs. Ogmores-Pritchard, relentlessly nagging her two dead husbands; Captain Cat, reliving his seafaring times; the two Mrs. Dai Breads; Organ Morgan, obsessed with his music; and Polly Garter, pining for her dead lover. Later, the town awakens and, aware now of how their feelings affect whatever they do, we watch them go about their daily business.

As night begins, Reverend Jenkins recites the above prayer (also known as the Sunset Poem).

The choir sings this version with music composed by Dylan's childhood friend Daniel Jones.

## **Chorister Profile: John Poppenbeek, First Tenor**

I was born in British occupied Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka in Sinhalese).



My father was the senior accountant at a place called Norton Bridge, a hydro-electric scheme 100 miles out of the city in the hilly tea country where it was misty and cooler.

We always had servants in our household and our big house overlooked the dam construction site down below providing ongoing entertainment for a young boy like me. However as there was no English school nearby, I was sent to an English run boarding school where I was chosen to be an altar boy. What I enjoyed most was the privilege of waving the incense carrier during the service. Perhaps I waved it too vigorously because the incense smell often became too pungent.

In my younger school days, I was selected for the College choir as a boy soprano and I recall the choir performing at a church and noticing

the excellent acoustics as we sang. However, while at college choir practice I could hear the cadets marching past our room and so gave up the choir to join the junior cadets, as I then thought singing was sissy!

Later at college, rugby football was introduced and I was selected and played as a scrum prop forward. This being the very first college rugby team, our team photo still hangs in the corridors as the College Inaugural Rugby Team.

Straight after college and because of my cadet experience in marching, I was selected as an extra - as a prisoner of war - in the filming of the picture *'Bridge on the River Kwai'* which was filmed in Ceylon in the 1950s. I met and spoke to Alec Guinness often and thought he was a great bloke. William Holden, the other lead actor, only appeared for his scenes and had no time for anyone else.

In 1957 my father decided the time had come for us to leave the country, as English was to be replaced with Sinhalese as the national language. The English and other foreigners in Ceylon began to leave, including my clan, the Dutch Burghers.

Our family came to Australia aboard the 'SS Oronsay' and our first stop was at Fremantle W.A. where an old school friend of mine took me separately to see Perth, after reassuring my father we would be back before departure time at 4:00 p.m. We walked around Perth and, as we had time to spare, we went to a billiard parlour in the basement of some building close to the bus stop. After a quick game we raced back to the bus stop only to see the tail end of the bus. We waited another half an hour for the next one and when we arrived at the dock, the ship's foghorn could be heard and the metal gangway was beginning to be pulled into the ship. Without thinking I took a running jump across the water and made the last rung of the ladder as it banged against the ship. Holding tightly on to its handrails I was able to climb back on board amid a lot of cheering.

Unknown to me, my wife Heather, a Perth girl, was on that same wharf farewelling friends. She remembered her mother remarking "silly fool" when she saw me jump across the water and people clapping my effort. Little did we know then that we were going to meet in Melbourne three years later, when Heather came over on a working holiday with a friend.

On arriving in Melbourne as a teenager, I started studying architecture at University. I did that for a year before joining the Public Service. This role gave me income and time off to study, but I had too many distractions and soon fell so far behind that I gave up the course.

I bought an Austin convertible car and I was mobile.

I worked at the State Insurance Office and chose to study an easier course in Insurance which I did complete and qualified as an A.A.I.I. (Associate of the Australian Insurance Institute) which permits me to add AAI after my name.

About 40 years ago, while employed by State Insurance Office, I was selected to be a Commissioner for Taking Declarations and Affidavits and I represented the office in certain court cases involving Common Law. Prior to retiring I was seconded to the Workers Compensation Board and later to the legal department of the Administration and Appeals Board.

After retiring, I joined our local U3A and there met Gus MacFarlane, who was a baritone in the Melbourne Welsh Male Voice Choir and he invited me to come along and listen to a choir practice, which I did.

About two months later, I performed my audition singing 'Myfanwy' as my evaluation piece, in Welsh. I was privileged to be accepted into this choir which has enabled me to claim that I have actually sung at the Royal Albert Hall in London with MWMC and other Welsh choirs from around the world, in a massed choir with over 850 male voices. It was an experience never to be forgotten.

My wife Heather and I then rewarded ourselves by flying to Barcelona and going on a wonderful Mediterranean cruise aboard the *'Queen Victoria'* on the last leg of her maiden voyage from Barcelona to Rome - all thanks to MWMC!

I can proudly add that I have been very lucky to have met my wife Heather and raised two wonderful sons and now have nine beautiful grandchildren.

## **Come and join the choir**

The choir is always keen to attract new members.

Singing is good for the mind and body and rehearsing the choir's songs during lockdown has been therapeutic. Ask any of our choristers!

In addition, we have performed with some wonderful established singers such as Teddy Tahu Rhodes, Sylvie Paladino, Judith Durham, Marina Prior etc., as well as some brilliant new and upcoming artists we have discovered via our *Singer of the Year* competition.

The choir's online tools for learning the repertoire are excellent and our secretary and other Welsh speaking members provide special lessons at our rehearsal venue (and continued them via Zoom during lockdown), to assist choristers with the knowledge and pronunciation of our Welsh songs

While our heritage is Welsh and around 25% of our concert programs are Welsh songs (not necessarily all in the Welsh language), we are fundamentally a multicultural choir with probably only half of us having Welsh heritage. The choir is open to people of any nationality and our current and past members have included people with Scots, English, Irish, New Zealand, Dutch, French, German, Egyptian, South African, Tongan, Samoan and Australian backgrounds. We even have a Kiwi as the current president!

Some of our members enjoy the choir so much that they travel significant distances (such as from Traralgon in the east or Bacchus Marsh in the north) to attend rehearsals, such is their enjoyment of the choir and its camaraderie.

Whether you've been involved in music all your life, or only sing in the shower, you are welcome to come along to any of our rehearsals at Maroondah Federation Estate, 32 Greenwood Avenue, Ringwood to see how the choir operates.

You will be made most welcome, whether you wish to sit within the body of the choir and sing with us, or simply listen and observe, alongside our other guests, until you are happy with the music and the environment.

During the times when our rehearsal rooms were closed because of COVID constraints, we had Zoom rehearsals, which allowed us to practice our repertoire (albeit without hearing our fellow choristers) and enabled us to keep up to date with the choir's concert program and interact with each other.

In addition, we were able to hear from some of our previous guest artists and other local and international singers (friends of our MD), about how they were coping in this pandemic impacted world. It made all of us feel less isolated and part of the global community of singers.

Our rehearsal facility at Federation Estate is excellent, with comfortable seats, good acoustics and we have the best music director and accompanist combination in Melbourne.

The choir benefits from our Music Director, David Ashton-Smith's background as an opera singer and adjudicator, in coaching our voice development and projection, as well as his role in teaching us new songs. He is ably assisted by our accompanist, Simon Walters, himself a music director and arranger of some note, whose keen ear picks up any problems with pitch or timing.

Established section mentors 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 act as mentors for the duration of the probationary period and will answer any questions you might have.

There is a break for tea or coffee during rehearsals, which gives everyone the opportunity to chat to other choir members. On the first Wednesday in the month, one of the sections provides the choir and visitors with (a sometimes sumptuous) supper.

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

If you contact us on the phone numbers or email addresses shown in this newsletter, we will respond and arrange to meet you personally. 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 access to our web-based aids which assist in learning and practising the individual parts at home. This makes the process of getting up to speed with the Choir's repertoire so much easier.

We also have Welsh language sessions, as mentioned above given by some of the Welsh speaking members of the choir, to assist choristers with the pronunciation and understanding of the Welsh songs in our repertoire.

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.

It has been a while since the Choir's last tour (which was to Cornwall and Wales) and we are currently planning our next tour, which, bearing in mind the continuing impact of COVID, is likely to be within Australia.

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

Anyone who has attended our concerts at major venues such as the Melbourne Recital Centre, Ulumbarra Theatre Bendigo, Hamer Hall 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 is available for community, corporate and sporting events, dinners, anniversaries, weddings etc., at most times in the year. So, if you are, or know of, an organization which might require anything from a short rousing opening to a conference (say) to a full two-hour concert, together with quality guest artists and an orchestra or band (if required), please contact **Gwyn Harper (0419 562 353)** or any committee member and we will be pleased to work with you to produce an outstanding event.

Please bear in mind that we're talking about a choir of up to 50 voices plus a professional music director and accompanist. We have an eclectic repertoire, a great sound and provide excellent entertainment and value for the money.

## **Would you like to donate to or sponsor the choir in 2022?**

As is the case with almost all other performing arts organisations, the choir's financial position over the past two years has been adversely impacted by the COVID pandemic. As a result, we need donors and sponsors more than ever. If you would simply like to donate to the choir, please contact any member of the committee. We are a registered charitable body and all donations will be acknowledged and are tax deductible.

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

Our audience ranges from the baby boomers to later generations in their 30's, 40's and 50's, so for those organisations which have this demographic as a target market, sponsoring the choir provides a unique and cost-effective way of getting your message across.

The choir is seeking donors and sponsors for the funding of the prizes for our prestigious *Singer of the Year (SOTY)* concert which, hopefully, we will be able to hold before a live audience, in 2022. This event, which has been running for 29 years and is open to singers under the age of 35, draws competitors from all parts of the state and indeed interstate. 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 this event.

As a result of COVID19 restrictions the last two SOTY competitions had to be adjudicated based on video performances and as mentioned above, the winners' interviews and examples of their performances are available via the choir's website or our Facebook page.

In addition to awarding monetary prizes to the finalists, the choir gives the finalists an opportunity to perform as guest artists in our concerts during the year.

All sponsors are acknowledged in our programs and publicity material and are given the opportunity to be involved in the SOTY presentation ceremonies on the night and in the elimination heats. One of our videos produced and released during the COVID19 period was viewed by over 30,000 viewers and for the 2020 SOTY event, the videos of the final three competitors on YouTube had both local and international exposure. We expect the videos of 2021 SOTY event to have a similar impact.

The choir is able to perform at a sponsor's nominated site if required, as we have done in the past (e.g., the opening of a legal conference in the city, the Eureka Stockade anniversary in Ballarat, the opening of the State Library or even at a vehicle dealer's showroom in the suburbs).

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.

## **Communicating with the Choir**

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

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

[www.melbournewelshchoir.com.au](http://www.melbournewelshchoir.com.au) or via our Facebook page.

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

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

Your feedback is important to us, so please write and let us know what you think about the choir, our newsletters, or our recent performances (whether video or live).

Introduce us to your friends and let us know what you would like to see us perform in our future live concerts.

## **In times like these, laughter is still the best medicine**

### **Kid vs Barber**

A young boy enters a barber shop and the barber whispers to his customer. "This is the dumbest kid in the world. Watch while I prove it you."

The barber puts a dollar bill in one hand and two quarters in the other, then calls the boy over and asks, "Which do you want, son?" The boy takes the quarters and leaves.

"See" said the barber. "That kid never learns!"

Later, when the customer leaves, he sees the same young boy coming out of the ice cream store.

"Hey, son! May I ask you a question? Why did you take the quarters instead of the dollar bill?"

The boy licked his cone and replied, "Because the day I take the dollar, the game is over!"

### **Kid vs Barber(2)**

I was in a barbershop when a man and his young son walked in to get a haircut. The man asked the barber to give his son a haircut while he shopped for groceries nearby. The barber finished giving the haircut but there was no sign of the father. An hour passed; two hours passed.

We finally asked the son where his father was.

The boy shocked us by saying, “That man was not my father. He just told me that if I wanted to get a free haircut at the barbershop, I should come with him.”

### **This lawyer is thorough**

The attorney tells the accused, “I have some good news and some bad news.”

“What’s the bad news?” asks the accused.

“The bad news is, your blood is all over the crime scene, and the DNA tests prove you did it.”

“What’s the good news?”

“Your cholesterol is 130.”

### **Groom Running Late**

A police officer in a small town stopped a driver speeding down the main street.

The driver said he could explain why he was speeding, but the police officer said he was going to put him in jail until the chief got back, but that luckily for the driver, the chief would be in a good mood because he was attending his daughter’s wedding.

The driver said, “Don't count on it. I'm the groom!”

### **Happy Returns**

A pensioner was driving his Ford Ute at 100 km/h on a back road when, on looking in the rear-view mirror, he saw a police car behind him.

He floored it to 140, then 150...then 155,....

Suddenly he thought “I’m too old for this nonsense!”

So, he pulled over to the side of the road and waited for the police car to catch up with him.

The Officer walked up to him, looked at his watch and said, “Sir, my shift ends in ten minutes. Today is Friday and I’m taking off for the weekend with my family. If you give me a good reason that I’ve never heard before, why you were speeding... I’ll let you go.”

The man looked very seriously at the policeman and replied, “Years ago, my wife ran off with a policeman, I thought you were bringing her back”!!

The cop left saying, “Have a good day, Sir”.

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### **CHOIR DIRECTORY**

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