

# Melbourne Welsh Male Choir

Newsletter No 67 April 2023

## Lights, Camera, Action...

The choirs' spacious rooms at Maroondah Federation Estate took on a different appearance over the past few rehearsals. The choir has always been open to new initiatives and with a gap in the choir's performing schedule, an opportunity arose, through the agency of a choir member, to create a promotional video which we hope will be completed within the month.



*The camera crew working in the background while the choir rehearses*

This will depict the life of the choir, showing what goes on in rehearsals in bringing new songs up to concert readiness.

Also included, is the real-life audition for a new chorister and the post rehearsal activities, such as the president's announcements. The crew also filmed interviews with some members of the choir separately.

These sessions will be followed by the filming of the choir in a studio environment, in full concert attire, performing several of our favourite songs.



*Our MD - David Ashton-Smith in conducting mode. (Our accompanist - Simon Walters is hidden by the piano)*

The film crew were very professional and, apart from the lighting, there was very little which distracted the choir from its normal rehearsal procedure.

When finished, the film should prove to be a valuable promotional vehicle to present to potential hirers and sponsors of the choir, as well as providing an insight into the choir, via our website and social media, for prospective new choristers.

## MEMORIES OF A MULTI-COLOUR MUSICAL MIRACLE



*While surfing the internet, the following article caught our eye and brought back memories of the choir's 1997 trip to South Africa courtesy of the invitation from Keith Fleming - the subject of this article.*

*We little knew at the time that Keith Fleming's Eisteddfod had ensured the world's access to South Africa during Apartheid, when all international sporting contact was banned.*

*The photo shows the choir performing in the Eisteddfod's "circus tent" at Roodepoort, Johannesburg, South Africa.*

*An extract from the George Herald, South Africa, 3 Aug 2017*

*Cliff Buchler | 31 July 2017*

The Welsh, with whom we made contact while visiting my young brat, came across as convivial, polite, passionate – and honest. OK, perhaps I struck it lucky, but subsequently more folk from elsewhere concur that the adjectives accurately describe the average person hailing from this neck of the woods.

This wasn't the first time I experienced the "Welsh connection".

While editing a newspaper in the 90s a stocky gentleman with a pronounced accent I couldn't identify, pitched unannounced at our offices. We were on a deadline, so no visitors without an appointment. Through the thin walls of my office, I clearly heard the words spoken to the receptionist: "Lassy, if your editor is after an exclusive story, he'll bend all the rules to see me – now". My curiosity pricked, I came out of hiding and invited the short, stocky, blue-eyed man into my parlour.



*South African journalist - Cliff Buchler*

He cut to the quick and blurted, "Do you know what an Eisteddfod is?" Noting my giveaway frown, he proceeded to describe one of the major musical events in Wales.

I was hooked, and so the South African International Eisteddfod was established and a close relationship with Keith Fleming was forged until his untimely death five years later.

What made the South African Eisteddfod unique was that it broke all political rules applying at the time. Apartheid meant no fraternising between the races, and those familiar with the Welsh Eisteddfod know the event was entirely colour blind and music the only criterion.

The opening night is indelibly imprinted on my brain. Under a huge circus tent pitched beside a lake, whites, blacks and other hues, sat side by side to witness talent that Fleming had painstakingly procured from all parts of the country over a two-year period – often knocking heads with bureaucrats totally opposed to the multi-colour concept. He also, by hook or crook, persuaded groups from other parts of the world, to participate. Airlifting these musicians, including bands and choirs, proved a miracle on its own.

Sadly, Fleming took his dream to the grave. The SA Eisteddfod is no more than a memory – a cherished one for me.

So, now you know why I'm biased towards the Welsh.

Currently we were invited to a networking function that included a helicopter ride over Cardiff. While among cloud, I imagined Keith Fleming beckoning to St Peter (given the man's persuasive power) with an exclusive and irresistible story: An Eisteddfod in Paradise.

## Can we pick 'em (2)

### Spotlight on Sally-Anne Russell

The Melbourne Bach Choir were pleased to welcome Sally-Anne again this year to sing the Alto arias in the St John Passion, on her return from singing in Beethoven's 9th Symphony with the Auckland Philharmonia Orchestra. Sally-Anne is well known and loved by Melbourne audiences for her appearances in Oratorio, Opera and Recitals.



Other engagements in her busy 2023 schedule will once again see her playing the role of Rossweisse in Melbourne Opera's complete Ring Cycle presentation in Bendigo.

Her other roles this year will take her to Adelaide, Hobart and Opera by the Lakes in Gippsland.

Sally-Anne was the winner of one of the Choir's early *Singer of the Year* competitions and, as a principal guest artist at the **Kathaumixw** festival, was instrumental in the Melbourne Welsh being invited to compete at this festival of 1200 voices in Powell

River, British Columbia, Canada in 2002.

## The background to one of the songs in the choir's repertoire – *Va pensiero*

*"Va, pensiero"*, also known as the *"Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves"*, is a chorus from the opera *Nabucco* by Giuseppe Verdi. It recollects the period of Babylonian captivity after the loss of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The libretto is by Temistocle Solera, inspired by Psalm 137.

Verdi composed *Nabucco* at a difficult moment in his life. His wife and children had all just died of various illnesses.

Despite a purported vow to abstain from opera-writing, he had contracted with La Scala to write another opera and the director, Bartolomeo Merelli, forced the libretto into his hands. Returning home, Verdi happened to open the libretto at *"Va, pensiero"* and seeing the phrase, he heard the words singing.

At the first rehearsal "the stagehands shouted their approval, then beat on the floor and the sets with their tools to create an even noisier demonstration".

As he was subsequently to note, Verdi felt that "this is the opera with which my artistic career really begins. And though I had many difficulties to fight against, it is certain that *Nabucco* was born under a lucky star".

When Verdi died, onlookers in Milan's streets spontaneously began singing *"Va, pensiero"* choruses as his funeral procession passed by.

A month later, when he was reinterred alongside his wife at the Casa di Riposo, a young Arturo Toscanini conducted a choir of eight hundred in the famous hymn.

The choir sings this beautiful chorus in its native Italian

The words to the song and its English translation are given below:

Va, pensiero, sull'ali dorate;  
va, ti posa sui clivi, sui colli,  
ove olezzano tepide e molli  
l'aure dolci del suolo natal!

*Fly, my thoughts, on wings of gold;  
go settle upon the slopes and the hills,  
where, soft and mild, the sweet airs  
of my native land smell fragrant!*

Del Giordano le rive saluta,  
di Sionne le torri atterrate.  
O, mia patria, sì bella e perduta!  
O, membranza, sì cara e fatal!

*Greet the banks of the Jordan  
and Zion's toppled towers.  
Oh, my homeland, so lovely and so lost!  
Oh memory, so dear and so dead!*

Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati,  
perché muta dal salice pendi?  
Le memorie nel petto raccendi,  
ci favella del tempo che fu!

*Golden harp of the prophets of old,  
why do you now hang silent upon the willow?  
Rekindle the memories in our hearts,  
and speak of times gone by!*

O simile di Sòlima ai fati  
traggi un suono di crudo lamento,  
o t'ispiri il Signore un concerto  
che ne infonda al patire virtù!

*Mindful of the fate of Solomon's temple,  
let me cry out with sad lamentation,  
or else may the Lord strengthen me  
to bear these suffering*

## **Life membership - Trevor Hemmings**

At the choir's Annual General Meeting, in March, baritone Trevor Hemmings was awarded life membership.

While other members have been awarded life membership for long and active roles within the choir, this award was the first to recognise the contribution of both the chorister and his wife.

The award reads:

***This award recognises Trevor's dedication and loyalty to the choir over a period of thirty years.***

***During this time, he and his wife Val have been instrumental in providing front of house services and sale of the choir's CDs for all the choir's concerts, thereby ensuring audience satisfaction and the provision of additional revenue for the choir.***

Congratulations Trevor and Val may your contribution to the choir continue for many years to come.



*Trevor receiving his award from choir president Kevin*

## **New Chorister - Joe Sullivan - baritone**

Joe's ancestry is Irish and Swedish. He grew up in North-East Victoria, before the family spent three years in London and Rome from 1957 to 1960. They then returned to Melbourne where Joe went to school at De La Salle College in Malvern.



After completing his education, Joe worked for the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industry and for the Dairy Research and Development Corporation as a technical bureaucrat.

Joe lives with his wife, Sue, in Ashwood (in the eastern suburbs between Ashburton and Mount Waverly). He is retired and has three children – Toby, Lucy and Barnaby. His hobbies include woodworking, computers and bushwalking.

Joe has always enjoyed music. He remembers as a child listening to the Hit Parade on the radio.

He has sung in a couple of school choirs and played drums in a rock and roll band formed by a group of fellow university students. They played at weddings and parties for about two years.

He and Sue enjoy going to live concerts and even the opera from time to time.

In retirement, Joe decided to join a choir and has sung in several choirs. They all helped to improve his knowledge and appreciation of music in all its forms. He has previously sung as a second tenor, but since coming to the Melbourne Welsh he has seen the light and is comfortable singing within the baritone section.

Joe, welcome to the Melbourne Welsh, it's a pleasure to have you on board.

## **Vale - Don Thacker - second tenor**

The choir was saddened to hear of the passing of one of our second tenors Don Thacker.

Age is no barrier to joining a choir and Don was a case in point. He was probably our oldest recruit when he joined us some five years ago.

Don was born in Sheffield England in 1936, where his father was a pattern maker for a foundry.

He married his wife Coral in 1957 and they were together for 60 years until she passed away in 2017. They had 4 children, 9 grandchildren and 11 great grandchildren.

In 1965, at Coral's suggestion, they relocated with three of their children to Australia, to a warmer climate, since Don suffered with severe asthma, which he subsequently overcame. Don found a sponsor who provided him with a job and a house in Blackburn.

Don worked in sales and as a teacher for 20 years. He began working in a technical school as an engineering teacher and finished in an all-girls school in Mentone.

When he retired from teaching, he started a lawn mower shop which he ran for 14 years.



Don enjoyed tinkering with anything mechanical, particularly cars. His family took up much of his time over the years, but he always found time to follow car racing around Victoria. He also loved cycling in his younger days.

His love of classic cars resulted in him spending 10 years as a part time chauffer, driving Rolls Royces and other luxury cars for a family company in Box Hill (Always Classic Cars).

Don always enjoyed live music and sang in many choirs with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and for many years with the U3A choir in Croydon

What prompted him to join the Melbourne Welsh Choir? Don said he and his wife had attended many of our concerts and loved the music and the presentation. He spoke to a few of our members and sensed a good atmosphere in the group from his first rehearsal.

Members of the choir attended a farewell service for Don and sang some of his favourite choir songs to sing his spirit home.

Rest in peace Don, we will miss your cheerful company.

## Want to join our choir

If you are keen, whether you've been involved in music all your life, sing in another choir, or only sing in the shower, please feel free to come along to our rehearsals at Maroondah Federation Estate, 32 Greenwood Avenue, Ringwood and join in the fun and the stimulating learning process, that being a part of the Melbourne Welsh Male Choir is all about.

The choir is open to people of all ages and any nationalities and our current and past members include 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!

So, whether you are in your teens or your eighties, provided you pass the (relatively simple) audition, you will be made most welcome.

While our musical heritage is Welsh, and roughly a quarter of our concert programs are Welsh songs (not necessarily all in the Welsh language), we are fundamentally a multicultural choir with probably less than half of us having any Welsh ancestry.

We have an excellent rehearsal facility at Maroondah Federation Estate. It has a grand piano, comfortable seats, good acoustics and facilities for tea and coffee at interval.

In addition, we have the best music director and accompanist combination in Melbourne.

**David Ashton-Smith**, our Music Director, has a background as an opera singer and adjudicator, which shows in his coaching of our voice development and projection, as well as his role in teaching us new songs. He is ably assisted by our talented accompanist, **Simon Walters**, himself a music director and arranger of some note.

We have mentors for each vocal section, who look after all the new members, to ensure they are introduced to other members of their section and are properly equipped with the relevant music scores. The mentor oversees the new member for the duration of the probationary period, helps with pitch or pronunciation where appropriate, and answers any questions, they might have.

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

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

If you contact us on the phone numbers or email addresses shown in this newsletter, we will respond promptly and arrange for your introduction to the choir. Otherwise, just come along on a Wednesday evening at 7:00 p.m., introduce yourself and you will be made most welcome.

Once you decide to join, we will provide you with access to our web-based aids, which will enable you to learn the songs and practice the individual parts at home. This makes the process of getting up to speed with the Choir's repertoire much easier.

We also have Welsh language sessions, given by some of the Welsh speaking members of the choir, to assist new and existing choristers in the pronunciation and translation of the words of the Welsh songs in our repertoire.

Following some rehearsals and a formal audition, you could be singing in one of our concerts within weeks and possibly joining us on our next tour.

## **Want 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, or smaller venues such as our venue for St David's Day Concert (the James Tatoulis Auditorium at MLC), will be aware that the choir has the skills, 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. Please bear in mind that we're talking about a choir of 40+ voices plus a professional music director and accompanist.

We have an eclectic repertoire, a great sound and provide excellent entertainment and value for money.

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

The choir is a not-for-profit organisation and we rely on revenue from concerts, membership fees, sponsorship and donations for our continuing operation. This has obviously been a problem for the choir during the COVID pandemic, when we weren't able to perform in any concerts.

If you would simply like to donate to the choir, please contact any member of the committee. The choir is a registered charitable body and all donations are 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.

## **Communicating with the Choir**

Feel free to copy or circulate this newsletter to any of your friends and relatives. We are keen to increase our supporter base, so if you would like us to add them to our distribution list, simply let us know their email address. Alternatively, they can subscribe directly to the newsletter via our website:

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

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

Email is our preferred way of communication with our supporters, so please send us an email and we'll respond promptly to whatever queries you may have. Alternately if you want to speak with the newsletter author about any of the content, please phone him on 0419 562 353.

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

Please introduce us to your friends and be sure to let us know what you might like to see us perform in our future concerts.

## **Laughter is the best medicine.**

### **Nothing changes**

A group of tourists were on a guided tour through an ancient castle in Europe.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the guide said. “This castle is over 700 years old. Nothing has been altered or touched in all those years.”

“Sounds like they have the same cheap landlord I have!” exclaimed one of the tourists.

### **Acceptable language**

A boy is selling fish on a corner.

To get his customers' attention, he is yelling, “Dam fish for sale! Get your dam fish here!”

A pastor hears this and asks, “Why are you calling them ‘dam fish.’?”

The boy responds, “Because I caught these fish at the local dam.”

The pastor buys a couple fish, takes them home to his wife, and asks her to cook the dam fish.

The wife responds surprised, “I didn't know it was acceptable for a preacher to speak that way.”

He explains to her why they are dam fish.

Later at the dinner table, he asks his son to pass the dam fish.

The son responds, “That's the spirit, Dad! Now pass the bloody potatoes!”

### **A Detective's observation**

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine, they laid down for the night, and went to sleep.

Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend. “Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.” Watson replied, “I see millions and millions of stars.”

“What does that tell you?”

Watson pondered for a minute. “Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies, and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?”

Holmes was silent for a minute, then spoke. “It tells me that someone has stolen our tent.”

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### **CHOIR DIRECTORY (please note the new positions as of March 2023)**

President: Kevin Seerup [president@melbournwelshchoir.com.au](mailto:president@melbournwelshchoir.com.au)  
Vice-president: Bill Spawton [vicepresident@melbournwelshchoir.com.au](mailto:vicepresident@melbournwelshchoir.com.au)  
Secretary: Michael Kenny [secretary@melbournwelshchoir.com.au](mailto:secretary@melbournwelshchoir.com.au)  
Treasurer: Phil Tomlinson [treasurer@melbournwelshchoir.com.au](mailto:treasurer@melbournwelshchoir.com.au)

Music Director: David Ashton-Smith OAM

Committee: Richard Bolt, Michael Brandon, Geoff Cooke, David Field, Robert Mits, Ieuan Thomas.



