



OUR CHOIR – 80 YEARS IN THE MAKING

The First Decade (1946-56)



The Glen Eira City Choir came into being in 1946 under the name of the City of Caulfield Philharmonic Society. David Plummer, its first conductor, was an energetic man, a talented and well-connected musician, and a leader full of enthusiasm and ambition for his new choir. The original advertisement for members stated that the aim of the choir was ‘to foster the love of choral singing and provide opportunities both for our own enjoyment and to help worthy causes.’ The repertoire was to include ‘part songs, glees, madrigals, folk songs, shanties, choruses, etc., for general purpose programmes. Then, some larger compositions and competition work.’ The City of Caulfield Philharmonic Society was a founding member of the Choral Association of Victoria, and David Plummer served as its Vice-President for many years.

The City of Caulfield Council was closely involved with the choir, providing annual grants, rehearsal spaces and concert venues, and the incumbent mayor was the choir President for much of its history. The annual subscription for choristers was £1/1- (payable quarterly), or 6d per week, and rehearsals were held on Monday nights in the Court Room of the Caulfield Town Hall. Members of the public who wished to support the choir but didn’t want to sing, could subscribe to the society for £1/1- per annum, which guaranteed them reserved seats at Subscribers’ concerts.

Sixty-nine choristers performed at the first concert on October 25, 1946, the men decked out in dinner suits and black bow-ties and the women in white blouses and black skirts. The concert opened with the National Anthem, at that time, ‘God Save the King’, and concluded with Parry’s ‘Jerusalem’. The programme included a diverse range of songs, many of them popular, such as ‘Rolling Down to Rio’ and ‘All Through the Night’, as well as piano, baritone and flute solos by invited artists. According to one newspaper article at the time ‘the society, diligent in study, wisely guided and progressive in outlook, gave a good account of itself.’ A conductor’s memo to the choir instructed choristers to sing the National Anthem ‘not as a mere formality, but with meaning’, and ‘Waltzing Matilda’ should be ‘first gay, then dramatic, then melodramatic – always full of “go”’.

In this first decade, the choir gave two or three Subscribers’ concerts each year, as well as numerous concerts in local churches and halls in support of worthy causes such as ‘Food for Britain’ and ‘Food for Europe’, and local charities. The choir sometimes charged a fee for such appearances which brought in much needed income and regularly performed at the City of Caulfield ANZAC services, and would bring Christmas cheer to patients in local

hospitals in December, as well as participating in the Caulfield Council's Carols by Candlelight. David Plummer was keen for his choir to succeed and regularly tested their mettle in the Heidelberg and the Welsh Eisteddfods, as well as other competitions throughout Victoria, frequently winning prizes. Prize money for the Heidelberg Eisteddfod in 1947 was £50 for first place, £15 for second and £10 for third, with an entry fee of just £1. The City of Caulfield Philharmonic Society often joined with other Melbourne choirs for massed choirs festivals, such as the Four Choirs Festival held annually in the Melbourne Town Hall. Also raising the choir's profile were the occasional half-hour ABC radio broadcasts featuring our choristers (which would boost the coffers at £10/10- per appearance), and when the first Moomba Festival took place in 1955, the choir joined in the massed chorus of celebration.

In post-war Australia, music was hard to come by, having to be ordered from Britain with long delays between placing the order and receiving the goods. Forward planning was paramount! Music was often borrowed from other choirs, and Mr Plummer pounced on the opportunity to purchase music when the Malvern Choral Society was disbanded in 1954.

Between 1947 and 1950, tram and bus strikes were a regular occurrence in Melbourne, which played havoc with choir attendance numbers since most choristers relied on public transport at that time. The first Subscribers' concert in 1950 had to be cancelled when the sixty-day transport strike resulted in such low attendance at rehearsals that the choir was unprepared to perform on concert day.

The choir also had to deal with the perennial difficulty of retaining accompanists, who would leave to pursue stellar solo careers as performance pianists. The other old chestnut was the perpetual need for more male voices. Some things never change, it seems. In the early years, a grand piano had to be hired for each concert, which was a considerable drain on finances.

Queen Elizabeth II's succession to the throne brought other opportunities for the choir to perform. Some members took part in the Pageant of Royalty held in the Exhibition Building in 1953, and when the newly-minted Queen toured Australia in 1954, twenty-two choirs performed at the state reception, our choir being one of them.

1954 also saw the name of the choir changed to the Caulfield City Choir, the original name being considered 'cumbersome for oral and printed use' and 'a waste of time and space'. There was evidence suggesting that the previous name suggested 'highbrow music' to the public and put them off attending concerts.

In 1956, Betty Emms, a foundation member, became the first Life Member in recognition of her 'ten years of wonderful service to the choir in many capacities' including Honorary Secretary and Treasurer. She also represented the choir at the councils of the Choral Association of Victoria and the Four Choirs Festival Committee, and was a 'willing and delightful soloist whenever called upon'.

This first decade of the choir's existence saw it established as a well-known and well-respected presence in the Melbourne musical scene. Its repertoire continued to include popular songs but also expanded into lengthier works such as Purcell's 'Dido and Aeneas' and Handel's 'Messiah'.

Let us conclude with some sage advice from David Plummer in a memo to his choristers –

*If you lose the place, or haven't a copy, or are otherwise befogged --- do the "fish" act.
Conceal your plight --- open and shut your mouth with the others.*
