



OUR CHOIR – 80 YEARS IN THE MAKING

The Fifth Decade (1986-96)



The choir's fifth decade did not start well. The 1986 performance of Verdi's 'Nabucco' on the 11th of May, at the Camberwell Civic Centre, with the Camberwell Chorale and Camerata Orchestra, made a loss of \$1200 (\$4000 in today's money), with each choir expected to take their share of the loss. This caused some mutterings about the viability of continuing with these combined concerts.

However, a joyous celebration of Caulfield City Choir's 40th anniversary, took place on the 7th of September, at St Stephen's Uniting Church Hall, in Balaclava Road. Titled 'Caulfield's Forty Years of Song', the concert promised 'a programme of nostalgia – favourite melodies and appealing choral items specially chosen from the Choir's comprehensive repertoire to compliment these 40th Anniversary celebrations'. Forty-one choristers took part in the concert and two previous conductors played cameo roles; Ian Lee, singing tenor solos, and Conductor Emeritus, the one and only David Plummer, conducting Handel's 'Silent Worship' and Parry's 'Jerusalem'. Thomas Heywood, now twelve years of age, performed both violin and piano solos. The music was followed by a celebratory afternoon tea. And, the much-anticipated choir photo was finally taken, the ladies in their glamorous full-length teal-blue dresses and the gentleman in black trousers, white shirts and teal-blue cravats.

The committee was busy updating the constitution in order for the choir to become an incorporated association, and in late 1986 at an extraordinary general meeting, this was approved by the members. So, 1987 began with the choir proudly sporting an 'Inc' after its name. Margaret Glasson, who was later granted Life Membership, took on the role of Secretary in November, and Lucy Versteegen retired from her position as pianist for the Day Choir due to ill health. A new uniform for the ladies was mooted – a skirt and blouse – and investigations commenced. Dorothy Stanley-Low, who joined the choir in 1973 and played a long and active roll on the committee was granted Life Membership in June 1987.

The concerts for that year began with Verdi's 'Requiem' in May, at the Camberwell Civic Centre, with the Camberwell Chorale and Camerata Orchestra. The concert-programme had a cardboard cover and six double-sided pages, the luxuriousness of this item explained by the large number of advertisers who had been persuaded to chip in and have their businesses featured. These included a furs and leather boutique in Swanston Street, a Collins Street store selling the same type of merchandise, The Chocolate Box, The Organ Centre, Westpac Bank and Brash Holdings, owner of numerous music stores. For the first time, there was enough room in a concert programme to list the names of the choir members, and we

find there Sue and Colin Polites. Sue is a current member of the choir in 2026 and originally joined in 1981.

'Victorian Lollipops' was the title of the September 1987 concert, and promised 'favourite melodies and ballads from the Victorian era'. Among these were 'Rose of Tralee', 'Show me the Way to go Home', 'The Old Grey Mare', and 'By the Light of the Silvery Moon', many of which invited audience participation. Afternoon tea was served after the performance. The Camerata Orchestra accompanied the choir in the December concert of Handel's 'Messiah' at St Stephen's Uniting Church, a 'spontaneous' performance with the audience singing along.

1988 saw the Day Choir disbanded, and a recruitment drive for school-leavers and 'other young singers' to join the choir. Douglas Heywood decided to reduce his workload by attending alternate choir practices, his wife and choir pianist, Joan Shewan, to conduct the others. The major work that year was Haydn's 'Creation' at the Camberwell Civic Centre with the usual suspects. In September, the 'Celebrate'88' concert at St Stephen's featured British folk songs, such as 'John Peel' and 'Bobby Shaftoe', popular songs, such as the theme song from the movie 'Exodus', 'The Impossible Dream', 'The Happy Wanderer' and 'For All We Know' (the latter made popular by the Carpenters), and the now teenaged Thomas Heywood on violin and piano. In the December concert, 'The Glory of Christmas', the choir performed Vivaldi's 'Gloria' as well as an assortment of Christmas carols.

In 1989, discussions were still ongoing with regard to the ladies' uniform. The membership was increasing but there was still the perennial shortage of men. The 'Caulfield Contact', a local newsletter, was in the bad books for altering wording and thereby changing the meaning of articles submitted by the choir for publication. It was also failing to include some of the notices of upcoming concerts and there was much to-ing and fro-ing of correspondence between the choir secretary and the editor on these matters.

The collaborative venture with the Camberwell contingents this year was titled 'Music for the Family', probably in an attempt to bring in a larger audience and avoid the losses of past concerts. Faure's 'Requiem' sat alongside negro spirituals and plantation songs, Mendelssohn's 'Hebrides Overture, Mozart's Flute Concerto, and Grieg's Piano Concerto (featuring Thomas Heywood as soloist). At Christmas, Vivaldi's 'Magnificat' and selections from Handel's 'Messiah' joined the traditional carols. The choir also sang carols at the Chadstone Shopping Centre, and was paid \$100 for its trouble.

By 1990, the choir had sixty members and thoughts were turning to a signature tune for the group, 'something familiar and well-known' or possibly a verse written by a local school child put to music. Over the next few months, suggestions included Schubert's 'To Music', 'It's a Grand Night for Singing', and 'Sing, Sing a Song'. Appealing though this idea might have been, it seems it never got off the ground. On the thorny issue of ladies' uniforms, a waistcoat was suggested, and this seemed to garner support, as a teal-blue waistcoat

appears in later years in choir photographs, teamed with a white shirt over a black skirt or trousers.

1990 started out with the combined choirs and orchestra performing Armenian-American Hovhanness' 'Magnificat', and the world premiere of Symphony No.1, 'Unsung Heroes', by British-Australian composer, Michael Easton, a work in six movements, 'each inspired by some aspect of the Great War', for soprano and baritone soloists, chorus and orchestra. The two contemporary compositions were balanced by Beethoven's 'Emperor Concerto', with sixteen-year-old Thomas Heywood at the piano.

A choir member, who was unable to sing in the September (variety and afternoon tea) concert, but sat in the audience, observed that 'the choir didn't watch the conductor enough; the finishing of words, especially 's', was bad; some items sounded insecure in places; in all parts there were individual voices noticeable at times' - perennial problems plaguing community choirs.

At the beginning of 1991, the committee wrote to Douglas Heywood, concerned about the viability of the combined concerts, given the financial losses. Whether or not prompted by irreconcilable differences, Douglas Heywood formally submitted his resignation 'at a date to be fixed after consultation with the choir'. He was farewelled at a dinner supplied by choir members held on June 19.

And so, the search began for a new conductor. There were five applicants for the position, and each applicant was to conduct the choir for thirty minutes on May 13, the works chosen being 'Drink to me only with thine eyes', a Bach Chorale, and something from Handel's 'Messiah'.

On May 15, Kevin Purcell was granted the position, and conducted his first concert with the choir in September. 'The Spring Concert' (with afternoon tea) consisted of 'great opera choruses and other favourites', the other favourites being selections from musicals and 'What a Wonderful World'. Classical guitarist, Slava Grigorian, and the quintet Hot Oz, provided the non-choral part of the programme, while the opera choruses were enhanced by the presence of soprano, Narelle Gillie and contralto Catherine Olley. The December concert was Mozart's 'Ave Verum', 'Vesperae Solennes de Confessore', Flute Concerto in D, and Bassoon Concerto, plus sing-along Christmas carols.

In his conductor's report at the Annual General Meeting, Kevin Purcell said that he thought the choir was 'not aiming high enough in its presentation and should do much to raise its public profile'. Perhaps with this in mind, he expressed a wish to perform Vaughan Williams' 'Sea Symphony' with an orchestra which would cost \$3000. He was even willing to put his annual fee towards the presentation. He requested that a blackboard be provided for his use during choir practices but upset the committee when he said he was not available to conduct at the council's Carols by Candlelight. Maybe not a propitious beginning.

1992 was a chaotic year. Kevin Purcell prepared the choir for a combined concert in Camberwell (conducted by Douglas Heywood, and featuring works by Horowitz, Mussorgsky and Vaughan Williams), but his sudden verbal resignation in August, in order to take an overseas study tour, saw Peter Leech step in to fill the breach. The new recruit conducted the 'Spring Concert' in October, a programme of popular musical ballads, madrigals and spring songs, and sang two Robert Schumann songs as a baritone.

The 'Celebration of Christmas' concert at the Caulfield Arts Complex included choruses from Handel's 'Messiah' and incidental music from his 'Alceste', as well as popular carols arranged by Rutter and Willcocks. The Handel Bande were the supporting artists.

Despite the upheaval, this year saw choir membership increase to over sixty-five, and John Dunham, who had only recently joined the choir, began what would become a long and illustrious career as choir treasurer. To finish the year off in style, some choristers participated in the GTV9's broadcast of Carols by Candlelight on Christmas Eve at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl.

Peter Leech continued to guide and nurture the choir in 1993. He was described as 'a very fine musician with the necessary temperament and dedication', and was praised for his 'methods of teaching, attention to detail and never-ending patience.' He conducted the choir in May in an evening concert titled 'Hear My Prayer', which included romantic German lieder and oratorios by Schubert, Mendelssohn and Haydn. The September concert, 'An Alpine Spring' (with afternoon tea), featured Elgar's 'Songs from the Bavarian Highlands' and Vaughan Williams' 'Folk Songs of the Four Seasons'. Sixty-nine choristers took part in the Christmas concert, 'Unto us a Child is Born', singing popular Australian and English Christmas carols, and Bach's cantata 'For unto us a child is born' as well as excerpts from his Christmas Oratorio.

Sadly, this was to be Peter Leech's final concert with the choir as he resigned to take up a position in Adelaide as Director of Music at St Peter's Anglican Cathedral. As he farewelled the choir, he said that he had 'many beautiful memories of our music making together' and expressed the hope that 'this enthusiastic group of choristers would long continue to enjoy and provide entertainment at this high level'. It seems that although his time at the helm was short, it was also sweet. The husband of a chorister videorecorded the Christmas concert and the proceeds from the sale of the videos were donated to the choir.

And so, 1994 began with yet another search for a conductor. Four candidates applied for the position which was offered to John Ferguson, an expat Brit with a strong background in instrumental and choral music. He was proficient in French horn, harpsichord, voice and conducting and was Director of Music at Scotch College as well as an AMEB examiner for brass instruments. The Scotch Connection Wind Quintet, comprising teachers from Scotch College, including John himself, often contributed to choir concerts in the next couple of

years, as did the Glen Pro-Musica Chamber Orchestra and a jazz ensemble from Scotch, both of which John Ferguson conducted.

At the end of his first year with the choir, in his conductor's report, he was critical of the venues used for concerts, the restriction of funds available for engaging supporting soloists and orchestras, and of the practice piano, but was delighted with the emergence of some young singers (in 1995, three choristers turned twenty-one within twenty-one days of each other) and pleased with the improvements in sound, sight-reading and the way the choir coped with a variety of music styles presented throughout the year.

During his time wielding the baton, John Ferguson introduced African folk songs, selections from the King's Singers 25th Anniversary Jubilee, Swinging Bach, and Gilbert and Sullivan into the choir's repertoire. Works by Pergolesi, Wagner and Lennon & McCartney put in appearances alongside classics such as Haydn's 'Creation', and the choir continued to participate in Council (its name now changed from Caulfield to Glen Eira) ceremonies and celebrations. Unfortunately, by the end of 1995, John Ferguson felt he didn't have the necessary time to commit to the choir, and so resigned as conductor and the hunt was on again.

The choir's fifth decade ends with the appointment of Jenny Mathers as conductor, and its sixth decade begins with a new name, Glen Eira City Choir Inc., and a new logo.