

GLEN EIRA CITY CHOIR INC. 1946-2026

EIGHTY YEARS OF HARMONIC HISTORY

Glen Eira City Choir, a non-auditioning community choir, began life in 1946 as the City of Caulfield Philharmonic Society under the baton of David Plummer. He was a very energetic man who was ambitious for his new choir, and while his aim of accruing one hundred singers was never quite realised, in his twenty-nine years at the helm he moulded his choristers into a well-respected and very active part of the Melbourne musical landscape.

Sixty-nine choristers performed in the first concert on 21 October 1946 and numbers increased during David Plummer's era to just over eighty. They regularly performed in the Four Choirs Festival in the Melbourne Town Hall with other major choirs and, as grateful recipients of annual grants from the Caulfield City Council, played an active role in civic ceremonies and community events such as the yearly Carols by Candlelight in Caulfield Park. In its early decades, the choir took part in many historical celebrations, such as the Queen's Coronation festivities and the Opening Ceremony of the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. The choristers also regularly competed in Eisteddfods and were asked by local churches and community groups to perform at fundraising concerts.

In 1954, the name was changed to Caulfield City Choir. The feeling was that the original title was not only quite a mouthful (described as 'cumbersome for oral and printed use' and 'a waste of time and space') but also created an impression of 'highbrow-ness' which put off many a potential audience member. As with all community choirs, remaining solvent was a constant concern and finding the balance in repertoire that would both satisfy choristers and attract audiences was a priority. The choir's concerts took on a regular pattern – the early concert, around May, was a serious classical choral work often performed in conjunction with another choir; the August/September concert had a lighter, more popular vibe; and the Christmas concert speaks for itself. This pattern has survived, for the most part, to this day. And the name of the choir changed again in 1996 to Glen Eira City Choir, reflecting the change in the local council's title and acknowledging the continued support of that council.

After David Plummer resigned in 1975, the choir churned through seven conductors in the next twenty years, the most stable time being Douglas Heywood's nine-year tenure between 1983 and 1991. Jane Elton Brown's nineteen years at the helm from 2001-2019 was another significantly settled period in the choir's history. Jane's motto was 'Striving for Perfection.' She was a disciplined task-master, and her phenomenal experience in conducting choirs, at Methodist Ladies' College and with community choirs such as Star Chorale, was of huge benefit to the Glen Eira City Choir.

Each conductor has brought with them their own musical contacts, and this is reflected in the supporting artists featured in choir concert programmes. In David Plummer's day (1946-75) there were regular collaborations with the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society and RAAF Band; Douglas Heywood (1983-91) teamed the choir up with the Camberwell Chorale and the Camberwell Camerata Orchestra, both of which he was conductor, and his son Thomas performed piano and violin solos in choir concerts from the age of ten, then later often accompanied from the organ loft; John Ferguson (1994-5), as Director of music at Scotch College, introduced the Scotch Connection Wind Quintet (of which he was a member, playing French Horn), a Jazz ensemble from Scotch, and the Glen Pro-Musica Chamber Orchestra, which he also conducted; Elena Varshavskaya (2020-) has enabled us to collaborate with the Bendigo Chorale and Choral Studio *Harmony* Children's Choir, as well as her talented son, Erik, playing violin and singing solos.

The choir has also been blessed with a succession of wonderful accompanists throughout its eighty years. Joan Shewan accompanied concerts for nearly thirty years, from the 1980's through to the 2010's and acted as assistant conductor when required. Sue Goessling followed Joan for the next five years and we are now enjoying Berta Brozgul's exquisite playing at our practice sessions. Berta has accompanied us since 2019.

COVID-19 took its toll on the choir, as it did with everything else. Unable to physically meet during lockdown periods, many choristers joined a monthly Zoom meeting where they had the chance to keep up contacts and get to know their new conductor, Elena Varshavskaya, who had the misfortune of being appointed to the role only a few weeks before life as we knew it took a serious battering. At the end of 2021, a much-depleted choir of around a dozen singers gave a small Christmas concert to a handful of audience members. In June 2022, twenty-three choristers from Glen Eira City Choir joined with thirty from the Bendigo Chorale for a performance of Vivaldi's *Gloria in D Major* and some works by Rutter, Faure, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Gjeilo, with snippets from Handel's *Messiah*.

Currently, once a year, we join with the Bendigo Chorale to sing a large serious work, giving one concert in Bendigo and one in Melbourne. Since COVID, we have performed the abovementioned Vivaldi, Haydn's *Missa Brevis*, Rheinberger's *Stabat Mater*, Karl Jenkins' *Requiem*, and this year's offering, Mozart's *Requiem*. Lighter repertoire over the decades has included songs from musicals, folk songs, jazz and blues, music from the British Isles and America, Gilbert and Sullivan, and popular songs from various eras.

We are now a healthy and happy choir of over fifty voices, very much enjoying Elena Varshavskaya's incredible talent, patience and her delightful sense of humour, and looking forward to more decades of happy music-making.

Rosemary Harmer, Honorary Secretary, Glen Eira City Choir
May 2026