



OUR CHOIR – 80 YEARS IN THE MAKING

The Eighth Decade (2016-2026)



The eighth decade has been an unusual one in the choir's history. 70th Birthday celebrations, which had begun in June 2016 with 'The Music Lives On' concert, concluded in December with 'Rejoice', a programme of Vivaldi's 'Gloria', excerpts from Handel's 'Messiah', and Christmas carols. This concert opened with the audience and choir singing three carols accompanied by Christopher Cook on the organ. The fourteen-piece chamber orchestra La Fraternità di Solisti accompanied the choir in the Vivaldi and Handel. Artistic Director (and a violinist) of La Fraternità, Gyula Cseszkó, had assumed, incorrectly, that he would be conducting the entire performance. Jane, however, was firmly in control of all proceedings and the orchestra had to adjust to a choral style of conducting.

Fundraising efforts continued throughout the year. A High Afternoon Tea in May raised \$800 and in July, for \$20 admission plus supper, choristers and friends enjoyed the silent movie 'A Sentimental Bloke' to musical accompaniment at Holy Trinity Church, Balaclava. Choir members were asked to contribute slices and cakes for the supper. The very handy sum of \$610 was made from this venture.

The committee had wanted to bestow Life Membership on Joan Shewan, in recognition of her long and excellent service to the choir from the piano stool, but the Constitution did not allow a non-financial member to be awarded this honour. A Certificate of Honorary Membership was proposed in its stead.

2017 saw a change in the usual order of the concerts. A 'Variety Concert' was the first cab off the rank in May, with guest tenor, Roy Best, singing two sets of three songs, and Sue Goessling, now the choir's regular rehearsal pianist, accompanying. John Dunham sang 'Beautiful Dreamer' and the choir performed motets, opera choruses and excerpts from Orff's 'Carmina Burana' and Gilbert & Sullivan's 'HMS Pinafore'. In the latter, the audience joined in singing 'Sweet Little Buttercup'. They also lent their voices to Brahms's 'Lullaby' and helped belt out Parry's 'Jerusalem' to finish the concert.

The major work for the year, 'The Creation' by Haydn, was performed in October at Auburn Uniting Church. Lisa Anne Robinson, soprano, Peter Mander, tenor, and Paul Hughes, bass, were joined by sixty-three choristers, Glen Eira's numbers boosted by choristers from Monash Chorale and Star Chorale who had had to commit to attending all rehearsals before the concert. Christopher Cook provided the organ accompaniment. Heather Cameron, a Glen Eira chorister, in a letter following this concert, praised Jane's conducting, noting that she focussed on the whole, giving her attention equally to all performers whether soloist,

chorister or organist. Heather finished by saying that she had sung in many such works, with conductors from around the world 'and can honestly say that Jane was as good as any I have come across'.

The choir had borrowed copies of 'The Creation' from the Sunshine Coast Choral Society and choristers were urged to be vigilant in not marking their copies in any way. Only one failed to comply, marking the copy with highlighter thereby forcing GECC to fork out for a replacement copy!

St James' Anglican Church in Glen Iris was the venue for the end-of-year concert, 'A Christmas World'. Christopher Cook manned the organ and Shu-Cheen Yu provided soprano solos – 'Panis Angelicus', 'Rejoice Greatly' (from 'Messiah'), Laudate Dominum, and Stephen Adam's 'The Holy City'. For an encore she delighted the audience with a Chinese love song, 'The Swallow'. Christmas songs from around the world filled out the remainder of the programme, with audience participation in selected carols.

The choir had a relationship with the Music Lovers' Society through the then President, Hazel Wilson. For a time, GECC would offer complimentary tickets to the Music Lovers' Society for our concerts, and they would reciprocate with tickets for theirs. When the MLS finally disbanded in 2017, they donated their 1926 Steinway grand piano to the GECC. The piano was kept at the back of the stage in the Glen Eira Town Hall auditorium and wheeled out for concerts held there. It later had to be sold when the Town Hall requested that it be removed from the premises.

Sue Goessling, the rehearsal pianist at this time, possessed an impressive resume. She had an extensive career as a pianist and accompanist for a wide variety of concert-work, as a rehearsal repetiteur both for opera productions and choral works and as an audition accompanist. She was also a piano and classroom music teacher. She had worked with the Victorian Boys' Choir and the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society, and was the official accompanist for Opera Australia's Victorian Schools Touring Company, as well as playing for shows, corporate functions, weddings and the like - a talented and versatile pianist indeed.

She was due to play in the choir's April 2018 concert 'By George', but as Denise Grocke (our current concert manager) describes, 'Sue Goessling fell on broken glass the night before the concert and severed a tendon in her left hand. We were able to find a replacement, Jodie Lockyer. Jodie sightread the accompaniments because we didn't have time to get the music to her. In addition, Sue was to play the Etude #1 of Scriabin, a fiendishly difficult work. Jodie accessed the music on her iPad and thrilled the audience by playing it note-perfect at the normal (fast) speed! It was truly an incredible performance by Jodie.' When Sue was unable

to play at rehearsals, Linda O'Brien or Yvonne Carr took her place at the piano. The 'Georges' in the 'By George' concert were Bizet, Gershwin, Handel and Dreyfus, and Judith Dodsworth sang soprano solos from each composer. The performance took place in the auditorium of the Glen Eira Town Hall and was attended by George Dreyfus himself, celebrating his ninetieth birthday.

In September that year, at Auburn Uniting Church, fifty-four choristers performed Fauré's 'Requiem' and excerpts from Haydn's 'Nelson Mass', with Christopher Cook on the organ and soloists Lisa Anne Robinson, Kerrie Bolton, Peter Mander and Paul Hughes. 'The Spirit of Christmas', the end-of-year concert at St James' Anglican Church, Glen Iris, featured Christopher Cook on the organ and Judith Dodsworth as guest soloist. John Dunham and Nolene Prince from the choir also sang solos. During these years, Helen Funston often performed as a tenor in the choir due to the perennial shortage of males.

2019 was Jane Elton Brown's last year with the choir after nineteen years of masterful conducting. It was also the year that our current rehearsal pianist, Berta Brozgul began her working relationship with the GECC. Born in South Africa, Berta migrated to Australia at the age of twelve. She received a Masters degree with highest honours from the Mozarteum in Salzburg and has won numerous prizes throughout her career, including a major prize in the 2015 Lev Vlassenko Piano Competition. She has performed as a concerto soloist with the Queensland, Tasmanian and Melbourne symphony orchestras and was accepted into the Australian National Academy of Music in 2016, with which she is currently a member of the Associate Faculty. She regularly accompanies solo instrumentalists and performs with chamber groups as well as performing solo herself. In the October 2019 concert, 'Favourites from Opera and Oratorio', Berta played Rachmaninov and Chopin solos as well as accompanying the choir in excerpts from a wide range of operas and oratorios. Judith Dodsworth was the guest soprano. A new sponsorship program had resulted in financial support for both Judith and Berta for this concert.

In the June concert, there had also been sponsors for the four soloists (the same four who had sung in the previous year's September concert). The choir added Fauré's 'Cantique de Jean Racine' and Brahms' 'How Lovely is Thy Dwelling' into the mix and each soloist also sang an excerpt from Handel's 'Messiah', Pergolesi's 'Stabat Mater', or Haydn's 'The Creation', before choir, soloists and Christopher Cook on the organ embarked on Mozart's 'Requiem', one of Jane's favourite works.

Jane's final concert as conductor with the Glen Eira City Choir was held in December at St James' Anglican Church in Glen Iris, with sixty-four choristers to sing her farewell.

Christopher Cook accompanied again on the organ and Lisa Anne Robinson was the guest soloist in a concert of Christmas fare. At the end of the concert the choir sang Rutter's 'The Lord Bless You and Keep You' before Jane was presented with a sculpture which represented, in three dimensions, her belief in 'Reaching for Perfection'. She was also granted Life Membership of the choir. Then, everyone launched into 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas' before enjoying a celebratory afternoon tea, browsing the Christmas stall and hoping to win something in the raffle.

When COVID-19 reared its ugly head in early 2020, lockdowns and contact restrictions created ongoing uncertainties and made life very difficult for the choir committee. In November 2019, Elena Varshavskaya had auditioned for the role of choir conductor and in December was welcomed into the fold. But only four rehearsals had been held in 2020 before the first of many lockdowns halted concert preparations. There would not be another official GECC concert until June 2022.

Three of our choristers were to have sung Mozart's 'Requiem' at the 2020 Distinguished Concerts International New York, and four to have performed Handel's 'Messiah'. COVID put an end to that, and it wasn't until 2023 that Michael Skillington and Irene Havryluk-Davies finally went to New York in April to sing the Requiem, and John Dunham and Kathy Hope were at Carnegie Hall in November to participate in an abridged version of the Messiah.

Elena Varshavskaya had graduated from Moscow State P I Tchaikovsky Conservatory with Honours, majoring in Choral Conducting. She had experience both as a chorister and a conductor having sung in international choral music competitions and festivals and conducted the chamber choir 'Lad' in successful tours of Greece, Germany and Finland. Lad also received gold and silver awards at the 5th International Johannes Brahms Choir Competition in Germany in 2005. Elena joined the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra Chorus as a chorister in 2010 and became the Musical Director of Bendigo Chorale a year later. She was also conducting a community choir 'Nostalgia' and the Choral Studio *Harmony* Children's Choir. She brought with her an extensive musical knowledge as well as a delightful sense of humour and an ability to beguile the best out of her choristers.

In March 2020, due to the COVID lockdowns, the committee sent a letter to the Caulfield Indonesian Church, where rehearsals had taken place for fifty years, advising that the choir had decided to suspend operations. The choir continued to pay a nominal fee for hall hire for the rest of 2020, despite not being able to use the space. A small retainer was also paid to Berta and Elena during 2020. A letter was sent to choir members, asking for donations to

help pay for the retainers for Elena and Berta and the hall hire as there was no other source of income until rehearsals and concerts resumed.

The choir, like a lot of the world, discovered the joys of Zoom during COVID. The 2019 AGM was held in June, 2020, via Zoom, as were all committee meetings at the time. From August that year, fortnightly choir gatherings were held using Zoom to encourage choristers to stay connected during this strange and difficult period. Choir members spoke about their lives and came to learn more about each other, the committee, Elena and Berta through this medium. Online quizzes added to the fun. Choir numbers at these Zoom sessions varied between fifteen and thirty. A dinner was held in December, with appropriate social distancing, of course.

As Melbourne continued to drift in and out of lockdown, it was impossible for the committee to plan for concerts. Instead, they had to turn their talents to creating COVID-Safe policies for when lockdown restrictions eased. Angela Alomes joined the committee and used her considerable IT skills to run the choir website, something she is still responsible for today. Denise Grocke, who'd worked with John Dunham previously on concert management, took on the role by herself and has continued ever since with precision and expertise, drawing on her comprehensive knowledge of the music world to the great benefit of the choir.

There were discussions on a change of rehearsal venue, given the need to take into account the recommended social distancing between choristers. When the Caulfield Indonesian Church raised its hall hire charge markedly in 2021, Holy Trinity Church in Balaclava and St Andrew's Church in Brighton were considered as alternative venues. A rehearsal was held at each venue and a survey of members decided the matter in St Andrew's' favour.

When rehearsals eventually resumed in 2021, choristers paid a weekly rehearsal fee of \$10 instead of an annual subscription. Masks were worn, chairs had to be positioned to allow two metres of spacing between choristers, everyone needed to use the QR Code on entry and a designated COVID Marshall had to check that everyone had the required green tick on their phones or verify that those not using QR codes had the requisite double vaccination certificate. Average attendance numbers at that time were between twenty and twenty-five. Prior to COVID there had been an average attendance of sixty. With no formal

INFORMATION YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT COVID SAFE REHEARSALS.

There will be COVID Marshalls to ensure your safety. We are required to wipe down points of contact e.g. door handles, tables & space chairs before your entry.

1. The indoor venue must be well ventilated with windows open at all times. (Fans are not recommended.)

You will need to:

2. Use Hand sanitizer (provided) at entry.

3. We must physically distance at least 2 metres from each other. This will be marked out and chairs placed for this. We will be using a QR code to record attendance. Otherwise it would be 4 metres spacing.

4. Short rehearsals - 1 hour only from 8pm-9pm WITH NO BREAK. We have allowed ourselves 30 minutes before rehearsal for setup & cleaning. We may be able to start earlier with practice.

5. Sing gently to avoid the spread of droplets, rather than full voice.

6. Bring your own drink bottle. No food or drink can be shared.

7. The toilets will be closed. (because of the additional cost of cleaning after each rehearsal.)

8. You will be asked to wipe down your chair after rehearsal with a wipe provided.

Stacking needs to be done by 2 people only.

9. Social distancing must be maintained at all times. You will need to bring a mask.

Information for choristers during COVID

concerts to bring in income, costs needed to be reduced. It was decided to cancel the insurance on the Steinway piano.

In December, there was a Christmas breakup at St Andrew's, with friends and family invited to attend a Christmas singalong. A gold coin donation was asked for, and the money was then donated to Motor Neuron Disease, in memory of long-standing choir member, Cathy Pearce, who had succumbed to the disease in September. Cathy, who had served the choir well in many capacities, fundraising in particular, had been granted Life Membership in May.

The first concert in the post-COVID era was held in June 2022 at St Andrew's, when twenty-three Glen Eira choristers joined with thirty from the Bendigo Chorale to sing Vivaldi's 'Gloria' and a number of short works by Rutter, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Fauré.

Christopher Cook accompanied on the organ and Lisa Anne Robinson sang 'Rejoice Greatly' from Handel's 'Messiah'. Lisa was joined by contralto Kerrie Bolton for the 'Gloria'. This concert was repeated at St Paul's Cathedral in Bendigo.

The combining of Bendigo Chorale and GECC for two performances of the same concert each year, one in Melbourne and one in Bendigo, has continued ever since, and Elena Varshavskaya's other choir, Choral Studio *Harmony* Children's Choir, regularly features in our other Melbourne concerts. Indeed, in the October 2022 concert at Glen Eira Town Hall, 'A Palette of Sound', they delighted the audience with a bracket of three songs, and joined with the GECC to sing excerpts from Rodgers & Hammerstein's 'The Sound of Music'. The rest of the programme contained a wide variety of songs from Bach and Vivaldi to Bernstein and Rutter. Both these concerts made a healthy profit of \$900 each, enabling the Treasurer to heave a sigh of relief after the battering choir finances had taken during the COVID years. A Christmas concert, which was held in December at Holy Trinity Church in Balaclava, made a small loss.

In 2022 Hazel Wilson was granted Life Membership for her long-standing involvement in the life and activities of the choir. Hazel had been a member since 2006 and served as President from 2008 to 2021. Our current President, Penny Paton, took over the role in 2022. This year also saw another uniform change - to black shirts/tops and pants or skirts and red bow ties or scarves. There were disruptions when Brighton Grammar's building project saw rehearsals move to a smaller hall at St Andrew's, and a malware attack on GECC's website and email system was something everyone could well have done without. Post-COVID there were no afternoon teas at the conclusion of concerts and the choir was no longer taking part in Glen Eira Council's ceremonies or Carols By Candlelight. But choir numbers began to

increase as COVID stepped into the background, with an average attendance at rehearsals of twenty-five throughout 2022.

By the end of 2023, this attendance had risen to thirty-five and that year it was business as usual, with Rheinberger's 'Stabat Mater' and Haydn's 'Missa Brevis Sancti de Johannis de Deo' performed in Bendigo and Brighton in May/June. Hugh Fullarton provided the organ accompaniment. Elena's son, Erik Poliak, sang boy treble in Leonard Bernstein's 'Chichester Psalms' and Kate Amos sang Franz Schubert's 'Ave Maria'. John Rutter's 'Gaelic Blessing' was also performed.

The spring concert, 'Birth of the Blues', at the Glen Eira Town Hall, featured many choristers performing solos in pieces ranging from traditional gospel to Gershwin. Berta Brozgul left the audience spell-bound with her rendition of Schumann's 'Scenes from Childhood', nos 1-7, and Elena's children's choir delighted not only with their singing but also their acting in three songs. Umbrellas were raised in Lawrence's 'Listen to the Rain'! In the Christmas concert at St Andrew's, choristers processed on stage with battery-powered candles, using these lights in a choreographed display during 'Silent Night' and many donned beanies, gloves and scarves to join in a mock snowball fight and catch snowflakes while the children's choir sang about snow. Rutter's 'Gaelic Blessing' and 'Candlelight Carol', Langlais' 'C'était à l'Heure de Minuit', Mary Val Marsh's 'Baby's Born in Bethlehem' and J S Bach's 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' were performed along with traditional and Australian Christmas carols with some audience participation. John Dunham and Cathy Hope both missed this concert as they were in New York taking part in the Distinguished Concerts International.

Thirty-seven GECC choristers and twenty-seven from the Bendigo Chorale joined forces in June 2024 for a huge production of Karl Jenkins' 'Requiem'. Soprano Lisa Robinson, mezzo-soprano Phoebe Paine, alto Chloe James, pianist Berta Brozgul, harpist Katia Mestrovic, percussionist Grace James, shakuhachi master Anne Norman, Geordie Walker on French horn, and violinist and treble Erik Poliak all joined with the choirs to create a stunning performance of this haunting and beautiful work. The concert opened with Lisa Robinson singing Mozart's 'Laudate Dominum' and 'Alleluia' from 'Exsultate Jubilate'. In preparation for the Jenkins concert, Denise Grocke had held extra part practice sessions prior to regular rehearsals which went a long way towards boosting choristers' confidence. The concert was a 'box office success' with \$10,500 received in ticket sales. But it was an expensive concert to produce, with costs amounting to \$7,400, but a \$3100 profit was not a bad outcome!

In the break between the Jenkins concert and rehearsals starting for the Christmas one, our regular soprano soloist and choral educator, Lisa Robinson, held a choral workshop for choir

members and friends. Lisa is a very knowledgeable and engaging teacher and inspired those who attended the workshop to hone their vocal technique. Two more workshops were held in 2025 and one is scheduled for October 2026.

During 2024, Treasurer John Dunham, worked very hard on updating the choir's Constitution. The changes were approved by members at a Special General Meeting in October, and meant that the choir could then apply for charitable status, which has since been granted and the choir is now a deductible gift recipient, thanks to John's considerable efforts.

Christmas 2024 was celebrated with Britten's 'A Ceremony of Carols', Bach's 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' and assorted carols. Lisa Robinson stirred emotions with her beautiful rendition of 'O Holy Night', and Choral Studio *Harmony* Children's Choir delighted and entertained the audience with their bracket of Christmas songs.

In 2025, the Bendigo and Glen Eira choirs joined together to sing 'Music from the British Isles' in June, opening with the 'Hallelujah Chorus' from Handel's 'Messiah' and finishing with Parry's 'Jerusalem'. A reprise of some of the Jenkins 'Requiem' and works from Rutter, Britten, Stanford, Morley and Elgar, along with traditional British songs, provided the filling. Lisa Robinson performed 'Ombra mai fu' from Handel's 'Xerxes' and Rosanne Hunt played the lilting cello part in Jenkins' 'Benedictus' from 'The Armed Man – a Mass for Peace'. Other guest artists were Donna Chung (oboe), Melina van Leeuwen (harp), Robert McMillan (French horn), Grace James (percussion) and Ian Smith (recorder).

The sad news of Elena's mother's death in May meant that Elena was away in Russia for a couple of weeks, returning just in time to conduct the first concert. In her absence, Denise Grocke took up the conductor's baton to keep concert preparation moving forward, proving, yet again, what an asset she is to the choir. Not only does she prepare all the music for the choristers' folders, but she contacts soloists, coordinates rehearsals, and ensures that every aspect of concert management is covered – and can conduct the choir when needed.

Music was sourced from the other side of the Atlantic for the end-of-year performance, 'Celebrating Christmas with Music from America'. Among the spirituals and Gershwin, were the hauntingly beautiful 'Seal Lullaby' by Whitacre and Ola Gjeilo's 'The Rose'. The children's choir sang four Christmas-themed songs and the audience raised the roof of St Andrew's with two traditional carols. Rosanne Hunt wowed the crowd with a dynamic and zesty cello solo 'Julie O' by Mark Summer. The concert finished with the combined choirs singing 'Santa Claus is Coming to Town' and Gilpin's 'Why We Sing'.

In this year, the committee was grappling with storage issues as the choir had been asked to remove music and other choir materials from St Andrew's. The committee also had to develop a Child Safety Policy and a Code of Conduct for choristers and have all members sign their acceptance of the policies. Lisa Robinson's two choral workshops in 2025, delivered with the assistance of her pianist husband, Jeremy Martin, were open to the public and were fully subscribed. Committee member, Geoff Peters, had done sterling work in procuring a grant for the workshops from the Bayside City Council. Chorister numbers had increased to around forty-five by the end of the year, and two extra rehearsals were held in December as preparations began for Mozart's 'Requiem' to be performed in 2026, the choir's eightieth year.

And so, we reach 2026. Choir membership has now reached fifty-five a good post-COVID recovery. At the 79th AGM held at the end of March, John Dunham was granted a very well-deserved Life Membership. John had joined the choir in 1991 and had been Treasurer for most of the years since then as well as taking on roles of Vice President and President at various times. He had been responsible for more than one update of the Constitution, had worked as Stage Manager and Concert Manager, succeeded in getting the choir charity status and had sung solos in a large number of choir concerts - not only a Treasurer but also a treasure!

Eightieth Birthday celebrations got underway at the end of May with the performances of Mozart's 'Requiem', first at St Paul's Cathedral in Bendigo, then a week later, at St Andrew's Church in Brighton with the combined choirs numbering around sixty-five voices. There had been three combined rehearsals prior to the concert, the first in Gisborne, midway between Bendigo and Brighton, in March, then one in Bendigo in April and the other in Brighton in May. Hugh Fullarton was the organist for both concerts and the soloists were soprano Lisa Robinson, mezzo-soprano Chloe James, tenor Nicholas Sheppard and bass Christian Smith. The concerts opened with two shorter Mozart pieces, 'Sancta Maria' from 'Litaniae Lauretanae', and 'Laudate Dominum' from 'Vesperae solennes de Confessore' in which Lisa sang the soprano solo. Audiences were at capacity for both venues.

At the time of writing, Glen Eira City Choir is looking forward to a September 'Soiree', where we will gather with fellow choristers, former choir members, past and present conductors, and supporters of the choir over the years. There will be a short concert by current members followed by speeches, refreshments and cake-cutting, and a chance to view memorabilia from the choir's eight decades of existence and catch up with old friends.

Happy Eightieth Birthday, Glen Eira City Choir Inc, and a big 'Well Done' to everyone who has contributed to its success over the years, whether as a committee member, conductor, accompanist, part rep, or running a market stall, arranging advertising, serving refreshments, organising or contributing to the Trading Tables or movie nights, overseeing the website and email account, taking material to the printers, helping set-up and pack up rehearsal and concert spaces, managing the finances, helping at front-of-house, applying for council grants, chairing meetings, coordinating concerts - and above all, lending your voice to the wonder that is a community choir.