

Happy 100th Philharmonia: science gives choral singing a big tick

By Claire Duffy

January 10, 2020 — 4:00pm



TODAY'S TOP STORIES

EMISSIONS

Albanese flags dumping 45 per cent emissions target

1 hour ago

TRUMP IMPEACHMENT

'Brazen and unlawful': Trump's impeachment defence revealed

50 minutes ago

ROYAL FAMILY

Prince Harry and Meghan to give up royal titles, access to public money

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

04 mobile numbers were expected to expire years ago. It didn't happen

The sky is still dark. There's a moon. Someone is pressure-hosing the front steps of the Opera House. A cruise liner is docking at the Overseas Passenger Terminal. It's 5am, the moment when the city is in the hands of its cleaners, and you can get a parking spot in Macquarie Street. I'm at the Opera House for a photo shoot, to publicise The Dawn Chorus, a free a cappella concert by Sydney Philharmonia Choirs to be held next Sunday, January 19.

2020 is the Philharmonia's centenary. When the choir began, an Opera House in

Sydney would have seemed absurd. There was no symphony orchestra, no ABC. Fewer than a million people lived here. Where I am was a tram depot. The Harbour Bridge was in the planning stages. It was only two years since The Great War and the flu pandemic. Swimsuits were wool. Everyone wore hats. The pubs closed at 6pm. But at home there were pianos, and people got together to play and sing. There were plenty of churches, and they all had choirs.



Sydney Philharmonia Choirs rehearse for the Dawn Chorus, with Claire Duffy fourth from right.
KEITH SAUNDERS

Out near Ashfield, still fringed with cow paddocks, 19 church choristers started The Hurlstone Park Choral Society. Members paid threepence a week to hire a hall and a piano, and were soon in a whirl of church, charity and tennis club fundraisers, convalescent home concerts, social events and picnics with party games and dancing. In a world where you made your own entertainment, it went brilliantly.

Fast forward 55 years. It's 1975. I am 20. That choir was so good, it's been the chorus of choice for the Sydney Symphony for 40 years, and it's now called Sydney Philharmonia. I'm going to try to join it.

In 1975, I was about as far from Philharmonia's beginnings as I am now from that girl in her flares and platform shoes. It was another era. I prepared for my audition with the help of a record player, and my acceptance letter – written on a typewriter – came by post.

You might think that in 45 years I'd find something else to do, but I haven't, and I won't. I still love every over-committed minute of it. Science gives choral singing a big tick. It works



you out, cheers you up and keeps you sane. I'm one of many who've discovered this for themselves.



The Hurlstone Park Choral Society, conducted by Vivian Peterson, perform at the Sydney Town Hall in the 1940s.

Science gives choral singing a big tick. It works you out, cheers you up and keeps you sane.

It's the "whole-is-bigger-than-the-sum-of-its-parts" thing. Merge together a few dozen singers and a wonderful all-around-sound wraps you up and carries you off. Build up some really big numbers – as Philharmonia can – and it's a volcano. It can blow the roof off, or simmer at a subterranean hush. And there's the applause addiction. From a few hundred it's gratifying. From 2000 it's an adrenaline shot. From 5000 (at the Albert Hall in London) it hits you like a wave.

When I joined Philharmonia there were two choirs, and about 180 singers. Ladies wore a ghastly home-sewn electric-blue nylon maxi dress. I lowered the average age. These days I'm driving it up; we all wear black (thank heavens).

For a choir to live to be 100, it must be doing something right. Philharmonia rehearses a whopping 1500 singers for about 20 productions each year. There are three auditioned choirs, three community choirs, plus "PopUp and Sing" events. Late last year I was in a restaurant post-performance and overheard the people at the next table bubbling like their own champagne, celebrating their Christmas Choir debut. It reminded me how special all this is.

Those links to the Sydney Symphony and the Opera House are important. We are always working with top artists such as Simone Young, David Robertson, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Zubin



In 1973 women choristers were expected to sew their own new electric blue maxi dresses. From left, Lesley Stephenson, Shirley Williams, Ruth Jurd, David Freeman, Leonard Pitchard and John Willis.

GOLDING/FAIRFAX MEDIA

Mehta, Edo de Waart, Sir Charles Mackerras, Sir David Willcocks, Ward Swingle ... The idea that *I* am somewhere in *their* orbit still does my head in.

The Stage Door at the Opera House is like a portal to another world. I love seeing The Greats behind the scenes. Take the stairs to the Green Room, and – magic! Nutcracker soldiers at the vending machine, ballerinas with unlaced tutus and shoes off, actors in costume glued to the rugby, performers (long ago, admittedly) who'd throw in their cards and stub out their cigarettes when "Ladies and gentlemen ... on stage please" came over the PA. I've hugged a Dalek, seen Dame Joan Sutherland in the lift, shared a sofa with skating superstars Torvill and Dean, and gawped like a starstruck teen while my friend asked (Sir) Bryn Terfel to please get off her coat because he was sitting on it.

Sometimes we are "Philharmonia incognito", and you'd never know it's us. We've backed Nick Cave, Barbra Streisand, the Rolling Stones, and Barry Humphries. Not all at once. We sang at the 1988 Bicentenary (I was *that* far from Princess Diana). We were at the 2000 Olympics opening, the funerals of both Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke; we're on the soundtrack in *Happy Feet*, *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* and *Strictly Ballroom*. That was us sprouting from the audience in the Vivienne Westwood-designed punk fashion extravaganza *Semele Walk*.

We've backed Nick Cave, Barbra Streisand, the Rolling Stones, and Barry Humphries. Not all at once.

In Philharmonia it's impossible to be bored. You learn new things all the time and the concerts roll briskly from one to the next. It takes time and effort to decipher a score, learn your part, and get it right. Brett Weymark, our artistic director, spends between 60 and 80 hours preparing, *before* a program's first rehearsal. There are more than 400 rehearsals a year. That's a lot of person-hours. As amateurs we're unpaid, but I like the original meaning of the term: we do it for love. This beautiful music could never be heard if it weren't for people like us.

Our day jobs are mixed: we work in schools, hospitals, universities, sales, hospitality, IT, the law ... at least one of our singers is doing gruelling work with the RFS in the bushfires. In Philharmonia you make friends you would never find otherwise. You soon suss out who has a spare pencil, and who gets the conductor's markings down right. In time you discover they too are an astrophysicist, live on the Illawarra line and share your love of detective fiction. People fall in love in



Philharmonia. One man proposed in front of the entire choir. Luckily she said "yes". Nowadays sometimes they bring their babies. Our board is partly made up of members (I did it, in the '80s) and individual singers are connected like Lego to generous donors, volunteers and sponsors without whom the whole thing would be impossible. Everyone is threaded together, and it works because we're there for each other.



Artistic director Brett Weymark: Singers will only come if they enjoy themselves. JAMES ALCOCK

At the top, these connections converge on one all-important individual. It's an extreme understatement to say Philharmonia's artistic director is critically important. Putting it bluntly, singers will only come if they enjoy themselves. We are blessed to have been led for 17 years by Brett Weymark, whose enthusiasm, inventive programming, high standards and commitment to getting lots more people singing, are key ingredients in our longevity. He is the mastermind who inspires us all.



A rehearsal for the Dawn Chorus: There are more than 400 a year. JAMES ALCOCK

Rehearsals start punctually and you must be ready. Back in the flared pants days, I innocently sat in the front row, till a fierce old lady with firmly lacquered hair barrelled up and barked "my seat!" These days, Brett assigns our seats. It's like boarding a plane, you have to check a plan to know where to go. We try to decode it: "Why am I here?", "Why is she there?" "He's moved me up the back – what did I do?" "I'm down the front – is he watching me? Why is he watching me?" Brett is like a winemaker, skilfully perfecting the blend.

Philharmonia has a track record of nurturing talent and commissioning new works. This is our legacy. There's more music for other choirs to sing and more people to sing it. We were there at the inception of the Song Company and Sydney Children's Choir (now Gondwana Choirs, a spectacular success in its own right). We've supported young women composers. We run a youth choir, *Vox*, and we assist emerging choral conductors. Right now Brett Weymark mentors Natalie Gooneratne and her migrant led *Phoenix Voices of Youth*, whose moving story was recently featured on ABC TV.

Next Sunday's *Dawn Chorus* will feature Yorta Yorta soprano Deborah Cheetham's *Acknowledgment to Country*, in Gadigal language. In our centenary year we've commissioned 100 minutes of new Australian music, with a whole series by Indigenous composers, and a new work by Brett Dean, the pre-eminent Australian composer of his generation. Philharmonia tours to Britain in October to present this, in collaboration with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Chorus; and then we move on to Germany for a four-city tour.

It's not hard to see why a choir unites people. Whatever the era, whatever the work, choral singing is intensely human. Real feelings go out with that sound. Handel's *Messiah* is thrilling, you tingle with joy. Verdi's *Requiem* is terrifying, you dread your own mortality. Bach will make you ache, Vivaldi trickles optimism down your neck.

Singing enriches you way beyond the music. Philharmonia provides purpose. You always have somewhere to be, something to do, and something to look forward to. And it sounds schmaltzy, but singing opens your heart. In any community there are people facing loss, loneliness, illness, trauma. Some of our members have endured terrible trials. Singing eases pain and helps us heal. When you sing you feel alive.

I wish those Hurlstone Park founders could know what they started. Their Sydney was ravaged by war and disease. Mine is facing fires and discord. Whatever stresses coloured the years between us, thanks to those 19 church singers, at least one group of people in Sydney has stayed committed to coming together, in harmony.

The Sydney Philharmonia Choirs present *Dawn Chorus* on the Sydney Opera House steps on Sunday January 19, at 5.30am.