

OUR STORY

The beginning

In June 1984, when Derek Nichols persuaded a group of people (many with no musical experience) that singing together was not only fun but could make a contribution to the community, it is unlikely that anyone anticipated how Cygnet Singers would develop, nor what would be achieved.

The first production was a Music Hall evening on 9 November 1984, staged as part of Cygnet's sesquicentenary celebration, and was followed in the next two years by three confidence building performances, including a memorable Viennese Café Night.

Establishing the pattern – a wide-ranging repertoire

By the time Alan Cato became Musical Director in 1987, Cygnet Singers had established a reputation not only for its concerts but also for entertaining far and wide, at Nursing Homes or with community groups such as the Senior Citizens. During the next five years the choir was introduced to a range of musical experiences that raised the singers' awareness of what they could achieve. The first challenge came in the Bicentenary year which the Singers celebrated with a fully-staged production of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, a lively performance of this 18th century musical romp, remembered by its singers and audience as great fun but also very successful. The willingness of the choir to be extended musically was then shown by the totally different demands of singing oratorio and operatic excerpts with the Tasmanian Youth Orchestra, and staging an Old Tyme Music Hall with the Elizabeth College Wind Ensemble providing the accompaniment. In the same year they sang excerpts from Handel's *The Messiah* and Mozart's *Requiem* with guest conductor, accompanist and experienced soloists from the Tasmanian Conservatorium of Music. On two occasions the choir was invited to appear in the City of Glenorchy's Concert Series and also took part in Memorial Church, Hobart's Sunday Afternoon Concerts.

In 1991 the Singers performed a joint concert with the Spring Bay Singers whose conductor, Rod Grosvenor, was also the Musical Director of the Friends' Singers. This marked the beginning of the close association of the Cygnet Singers with these two choirs which led to an ambitious series of Three Choirs festivals from 1994 to 2001.

Three choirs festivals

Rod Grosvenor became Musical Director of Cygnet Singers in 1993 after the death of the Rev. Don Lawson who had been conducting the choir from mid-1992. The Singers were able to fulfil a long-held ambition for the Rev. Lawson when he was able to conduct them in the cantata *Olivet to Calvary* with Alan Cato as one of the soloists. From 1987 there had been within the choir a small part-singing group (Cygnet Chorale) which worked with Mary Coatman to develop a repertoire of items for concerts, or as the core of programs for community events and Nursing Homes. For this group there was now an opportunity to join Friends Singers and members of Spring Bay Singers, under Rod Grosvenor's direction, in recitals of great church music by composers such as Fauré, Vivaldi and Byrd. So rewarding was this musical experience that it encouraged more Cygnet Singers to participate and by 1999 over half the choir was involved.

The Three Choirs Festivals introduced the entire choir to the enjoyment of combining in larger choral works with the range of composers and styles providing an exciting challenge. Programs included such diversity as Bach's *Peasant Cantata* coupled with *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, *Carmina Burana* with a concert version of *The Mikado* and Bernstein's *West Side Story* with Borodin's *Polovtsian Dances*. Choirs practised separately and grew musically when they came together for final rehearsals and performances. In addition to these combined concerts, there were the Singers' own concerts in Cygnet and appearances at local events. In all this music-making the choir felt extremely fortunate to have so able and willing an accompanist as Dianne van Tienen who has played for them for 24 of their 25 years. During the late 1990's however, she did, to her great pleasure, get the chance to sing with the altos when her son, Ben, was available to take her place at the piano. This

remarkably talented young musician, (pianist, singer, conductor and composer) had grown up in the choir and now helped introduce a new element into the choir's programs through contact with members of the Tasmanian Chapter of ANTAS and its President, Helen Todd. Always ready to provide opportunity and encouragement for young singers, Rod Grosvenor worked with the choir to provide programs in 1997, 1999 and 2001 in which the choral music was complemented by that of these young soloists.

Huon Valley Musicians

The Cygnet Singers have also had the experience of working with the Huon Valley Concert Band for many years not only at the Huon Valley Council's annual Australia Day Awards Ceremony but in holding joint concerts. Their first was in 1996 at a time when Dianne O'Toole was the band's conductor and another in June 2000 when she was also conducting the Singers during Rod Grosvenor's absence. At this concert the soloists were three local young instrumentalists, Robert Schultz (trumpet), Rachel Forster (violin) and Ben van Tienen (piano). In May 2009, a concert with the band, now directed by Malcolm Martin, had as its title A Celebration of Music in the Valley which neatly sums up the purpose and pleasure of both groups.

When Dianne O'Toole became Musical Director of Cygnet Singers in 2001 there was a conscious effort to foster links with more musical groups, especially those in the Huon Valley. Choral groups learn and develop in singing together, and a quick look at the list of concerts will show what a feature this cooperation has been in recent years. A highlight for the Singers came in 2003 when members joined a combined choir to sing in the TSO's Concert Series' performance of Finlandia at the Federation Concert Hall, and when they sang there again in ANCA's Sing-In concert program.

An indication of the Singers enjoyment of what they are doing has been the desire to share their celebrations with others. There was the special concert for the 20th birthday, with a cake cut by two of the founding members – Marj Gordon and Adrian Hunt. The 21st was celebrated with another concert and the 25th was celebrated with other choirs, as was their 20th. The enthusiasm and expertise of the Musical Director encourages and expects a high standard of performance but it is combined with a great sense of humour which is contagious so, in 2005 Polly Owens, one of the alto singers, devised The Great Elizabethan Rompe for the Singers to perform, complete with 'playlet' interspersed with songs of the period, dances by the 'Society of Creative Anachronism' and the 'minstrelsy' of Whistler's Mumm. It was a joyfully exuberant afternoon.

Community Connections

The Singers' awareness of community needs and responding to them was a factor which earned them a Certificate of Appreciation for Community Service from the Huon Valley Council in 2004. This has continued with such events as singing for the Eldercare Variety Concert and the annual service of Carols and Lessons at Cygnet and, more recently, at Huonville as well. They have made their concerts more accessible for the senior members of the community by having them on Sunday afternoons (including afternoon tea) and providing programs of music with something to please everyone by their variety and interpretation. In them the Singers have again given young musicians opportunities, with audiences enjoying performances by soprano Petronella van Tienen; trumpeter Michael Gautschi, and the Adelante String Quartet. The programs for these concerts have been as full of surprises as their intriguing titles, demonstrating the Singers' versatility and willingness to work with music from many periods, styles and countries which means singing in many unfamiliar languages. Audiences will have heard love-songs both medieval and modern; magnificent sacred music or the clamour of London street-cries; Zulu work-songs or perhaps a 'chanted' Weather Forecast. There have been other 'surprises' too: the recipe for the 'Shoo Fly Pie' song in one program and, in another some very professional tap-dancing from a top-hatted soprano. (Even the 2008 Carol Services had an unexpected, and delightful, addition in the playing of the Hobart Handbell Choir)

Recent Years

Since its 25th birthday, the choir has continued to explore a wide range of music, presented in 2 or 3 major performances each year. Recent concerts have featured the inclusion of poetry and prose readings connected to the concert theme, with soloists and readers from within the choir. Several choir members are skilled instrumentalists and their contribution to performances has provided another point of interest for audiences. Cygnet Singers have grown in assurance that musically they can respond to the demands and the 'feel' of each piece and in so doing still show that singing together is not only fun but certainly makes a positive contribution to the community.

2014 was the Thirtieth birthday of the choir, and as a yearlong project it was agreed to record a CD. Members selected the works to be performed, and the result is a wonderful celebration of the choir, produced in the Huon Valley by Mike Raine.

The title for the CD, *The Days Turn*, comes from a very special work commissioned by the Cygnet Singers for their 25th Anniversary, from young composer Ben van Tienen. Ben's family has been involved with the choir since its inception, and he has also been a singer himself. His mother Dianne van Tienen is the accompanist on the disc. The CD was launched at the 30th Anniversary Concert and money raised from sales will go to the Hush Project, providing music for children and adults in Australian hospitals. In October 2015 the choir was able to present a substantial cheque to the Hush Project.

Further partners in concerts have included Emily Wynhoven singer, harpist and arranger, CHUM, the Channel Ukelele group, Tasmanian Youth Chorale, the jazz ensemble Belle Epoque and the Swan Quintet Wind Ensemble.

Members of the choir participate with other vocal ensembles and choirs through ANCA, enjoying workshops and larger group singing, and the Festival of Voices involves numbers of Cygnet Singers in major choral works with visiting conductors and soloists.

In 2019 the 35th birthday of the choir will be marked by special celebrations, including a concert of Souvenirs - works chosen by the choir members as favourites, and finishing the year with a major concert in the Cygnet Town Hall including excerpts from *The Messiah* with instrumental accompaniment.