
Austinato



Performing Squad singers prior to *Requiem for an Empress* at Sacred Heart Carlton, May 2021. (Photo: Jane Kupsch)

From the Chair



Professor Stephen Duffy
Chair, Australian Boys Choral Institute Board

It was truly wonderful to attend a live performance of The Vocal Consort and the Australian Boys Choir in late March after a fifteen-month hiatus. We were treated to a great concert of operatic pieces in *A Night at the Opera* at the Hawthorn Arts Centre. Guest artists included the baritone Stephen Marsh and pianist Andrea Katz. There were several beautiful solos from both TVC and the Choir. They were all led by our Artistic Director, Mr. Nicholas Dinopoulos, who conducted with great aplomb.

It is an enormous credit to Nick, our music staff, and our General Manager, Ms Katie Whitecross, that we kept the various choirs of the Australian Boys Choral Institute together through the long days of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Their online musical programme kept all the boys engaged and enthusiastic. Now that we are all working together again, we can be assured of ongoing success.

During the COVID-19 crisis of 2020, the ABCI Board was committed to keeping all of our staff. We were fortunate to receive government grants and obtained significant funding via 'Job Keeper', which meant that, despite halving the tuition fees for the last three terms of 2020, we had a surplus for the financial year. We have set aside most of this surplus as contingency against uncertainties in 2021. The generosity of our longstanding donors has also been a windfall in these challenging times. The ABCI Board will present these positive results in our annual report at the AGM in May 2021. Unlike many arts' organisations, the ABCI remains in a strong position, with all our staff and boys still with us. This is due to our wonderful musical and administrative staff, and the loyalty of the Choir families. Working together during this time of adversity has ensured success.

"Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success."
Henry Ford

Summer of Song



Performing Squad and Artistic Director don masks to rehearse at Summer School, January 2021. (Photo: Kristen Westcott)

Excitement was in the air as the ABCI Performing Squad arrived for the 2021 January Summer Music School. The YMCA's Lake Dewar Lodge, in the rolling hills west of Melbourne, was the perfect location for this much anticipated reunion.

Following the cancellation of both May and October Weekend Workshops in 2020, this was the first residential exercise the ABCI had held since Summer School last year. Senior Singers and Choristers spent the customary week away, and were joined part-way by the Kelly Gang and Cambiata.

The boys worked hard on new repertoire and skills, and even took on the challenge of singing each and every entry in the Institute's collection of *Favourite Rounds and Canons*. Older participants renewed friendships that had been forged when they were much smaller. Newcomers to the Performing Squad joined in with the enthusiasm and confidence that comes from attending several sequential programs.

Time-honoured Summer School traditions were upheld, with an 11-year-old comedian stealing the show to claim the coveted Skit Night trophy. The tidy and creative room competitions resumed, as did our trivia and movie nights. A high flying-fox was an enjoyable and challenging addition to the roster of outdoor activities, and Mr Christie's 21st birthday was certainly not forgotten amid the busy schedule.

Music Staff and Caring Team members keenly anticipate working with our younger singers (including several first-time attendees) at the next ABCI Weekend Workshops in Term 4. On the distant horizon is a re-boot of the full Summer School experience: singers of mixed-age groups working together, an opportunity to make new friends, and the mentoring that goes on as they learn from one another. And then there's the magic that happens when the entire Australian Boys Choral Institute sings as one...



The Australian Boys Choir and The Vocal Consort in performance for *A Night at the Opera*, March 2021. (Photo: Gareth Parton)

A Night at the Opera in Review

Thursday 25th March 2021
Hawthorn Town Hall

It had been 466 long days since the Australian Boys Choral Institute's last concert. While arts' venues have remained silent, days have been filled singing online, singing about the house, and even singing in the shower.

For an audience starved of live music – and performers equally deprived of performance opportunities – *A Night at the Opera* was easily one of the most eagerly-anticipated Vocal Consort soirées. And it didn't just break the 12-month performance drought and provide an opportunity to polish up the opera glasses; it delivered a satisfying salve to remind both audience and performers just how good live music, masterfully prepared and presented, can be.

Featuring The Vocal Consort, rising-star baritone Stephen Marsh, and international pianist Andrea Katz ably supported by the Australian Boys Choir, *A Night at the Opera* showcased sweeping scenes and rousing choruses from some of the world's most-loved operas, all masterfully prepared and presented.

Opening with Charles Gounod's *Soldier's Chorus from Faust*, The Vocal Consort made it clear their renowned wit, sparkle, and precision, and their reputation as one of Australia's most outstanding male vocal ensembles, were all still firmly intact despite the enforced hiatus.

Responding to Andrea Katz's nuanced delivery, The Vocal Consort were easily able to meld with Stephen Marsh's burnished vocals in the opening scene from Bizet's ever-popular *Carmen*.

It was then the Choir's turn to grace the stage in a second turn from *Carmen*, performing *The Street Urchins' Chorus*, with aplomb. Soloists from the Choir appeared later in the program in Engelbert Humperdinck's *Evening Prayer from Hänsel and Gretel* and a trio from *The Magic Flute*, the latter highlighting the sublime tenor voice of Consort's Anish Nair.

Marsh's stirring rendition of *The Toreadors' Song* alongside Katz's dazzlingly energetic accompaniment was, without doubt, one of the evening's highlights. Another was the return of TVC to the stage, with all among their ranks being former members of the Australian Boys Choir.

In both *Beethoven's Prisoner's Chorus* and Wagner's *Pilgrim's Chorus*, The Vocal Consort demonstrated what it is possible to achieve in ensemble singing at the very highest level – an effortless blend and a unanimous approach; a pleasure to hear and behold.



ABCI singers travelling to Geelong for *Byrd to Britten*, October 2016. (Photo: Megan Heerding)

The Singers' Perspective

What's it like to be part of the Australian Boys Choral Institute? Owen, a 10-year-old Junior Singer, smiles when asked what he most enjoys about being in the ABCI. "I like the sound of singing in a big group," he says. "I'm part of a bigger sound, and it makes me feel happy."

Further along in Junior Singers, Kieran feels the same way. The 11-year-old loves music and raising his voice in song. "Being together in the choir, when everyone is doing a round of singing, sounds really good. It gives me a feeling of unity."

The hard work required to learn new skills is no deterrent to young singers. Oliver says he enjoys the work required to advance through the ABCI training program. "I like the structure," he says. "It's organised, and I like that we get to learn new songs and improve our voices."

Along with learning new skills and raising their voices in song, all three boys delight in the extra-curricular activities offered during choir camps and tours. "Definitely one of my best memories is the water sports at summer camps," says Kieran. "You get to canoe, kayak or stand-up paddleboard on the lake."

The Weekend Workshops and extended Summer School program challenge the boys to move beyond what is comfortable and familiar, both personally and in their music training. Oliver says he enjoys overnight workshops, but finds spending extended time away over the summer program a greater challenge.

By contrast, Owen has fond memories of his first summer school; the food, playing with friends, and singing. "Choir feels like a family. I really like belonging to something special. And a lot of people have heard of the Australian Boys Choir, so I feel proud to be part of something people know is so great."

After a year of participating in choir online during 2020, the boys are already anticipating to their next live recital. "I'm looking forward to performing in an actual concert again because Christmas 2019 was the last time we sang together in public," says Kieran.

Owen recalls the same 2019 Christmas concert with fondness. "It was fun. I felt really happy that I achieved it, and my family and grandparents were all there," he says.

"I'm looking forward to performing in concerts again because I like how everyone is watching. And if they're happy, you know you have done something really good."

A Musical Head Start: The Early Learners' Program

A new initiative for the Australian Boys Choral Institute launched proudly in the Choir's 80th anniversary year, 2019. Welcoming pre-school aged girls and boys to its ranks as part of an Early Learners' Program had never been done before but now, nearly two years on, the benefits have been obvious.

Highlighting the key impact of music in early childhood, ABCI Director of Training Chords, Naomi Heyden reflects, "Learning music has wonderful benefits for many aspects including language development, motor skills, and social interaction. A singing-based focus establishes a solid foundation and can begin as young as infancy."

Having provided quality music education to young Australians for over eight decades, the ABCI felt well-placed to offer these benefits to younger children. An adjunct to the Choir's main activities, the Early Learners' classes are open to both boys and girls. "The prospect of one day having a student in the Australian Boys Choir who started with the organisation as a pre-schooler, or even younger, is a lovely possibility," muses Naomi.

Commencing weekly, daytime classes, students aged three to five along with their parents, were welcomed as the inaugural program participants. Strong interest saw an after-school class for students aged five to seven added to the timetable for 2020, bringing in a second group of enthusiastic young music makers.

With the advent of COVID-19, the Early Learners' Program took a brief hiatus before offering online classes to smiling young singers via Zoom. In 2021, these classes again returned in the interactive online format, with the convenience of this mode of delivery remaining popular.

Now that face-to-face classes are once again possible, the Institute is pleased to finally welcome its youngest students back to Choir House from Term Two. Recalling the eagerness of the participants' responses to the program, Naomi reflects, "It has been a delight to see the enthusiasm of the children, to hear requests for particular songs, and to see participation from the most outgoing students to those still building their confidence."

"The Early Learners program incorporates similar principles, processes, and benefits to the Kodály-based education that all ABCI students experience," says Naomi. Working at an age-appropriate level, the classes instil a love of song and ground students in fundamental musical concepts within a nurturing environment as the program continues to expand.

For more information, please see www.australianboyschoir.com.au/our-programs.





A Life in Music

As a small boy, Raphael Wong would attend church with his parents, observing his father in the band and his mother singing in the choir. This early exposure ensured that, when the ABCI visited Raphael's school in 1997, he was one of the first to offer up his fledgling vocal stylings. "They asked all of the boys to stand and sing the national anthem, or maybe it was *Happy Birthday*...I'll be forever grateful to my school for allowing them to come and visit."

He retains fond memories of the Choir's *AmericaFest* tour in the year 2000. It was his first overseas journey without his parents and it proved significant. "It showed me that a lot of other boys and men from all over the world sang just like me! The big concerts in St. John's Abbey at the University in Minnesota were unreal. There were choirs that wore traditional robes, to choirs that wore cowboy hats and had lassoes. I felt like a special cog, doing our bit to represent Australia in this awesome choral machine."

Raphael's involvement with music and performance has continued to grow, and a career highlight has been performing as a finalist in the *Herald Sun Aria* competition. "It's a thrill to sing in front of 2000 people, with Orchestra Victoria behind you and it's nothing but them and your voice to fill the vast space of Hamer Hall."

He now works in opera and music theatre, but also as an educator. "I still teach singing and choir, and nothing beats teaching your students something new and seeing them burst with excitement." During his time at the ABCI,

ABCI Old Boy, former Music Staff member and leading Melbourne-based Baritone, Raphael Wong (Photo: Meagan Harding)

Raphael worked as a tutor and recalls the honour of passing on what he had learned to new Choir members. "Being able to come full circle and teach these boys is so satisfying," he says. "Some of the first group of boys I taught are now fully-fledged musicians which is so good to see. I recently had a former student direct a show I was in. I definitely felt old then!"

The friendships Raphael made through his time with the ABCI endure, and a group of former members get together at least once a year. "It's crazy to think some of us have known each other for over 20 years already."

He recently made the most significant role debut of his life, that of father to his son Theodore. "I can't wait to share my passions with him," says Raphael, chief among them his love for music.

The cathartic and transformative qualities of song have kept him engaged over the journey: "Singing can be an escape. You can have a great day, or a terrible one. But the moment you sing, something changes. It makes me feel whole again."

For Raph, an involvement with choral music has offered a unique experience. "Singing with a choir taught me the importance of the ensemble. Listening to each other, breathing together, and understanding that you are part of something bigger. If you work as one, you will create something special and unique in that moment."

A Chorister's Life - Leadership and Learning

Alexander Rakogiannis is the first to admit being part of the Australian Boys Choir has changed his life. Auditioning in 2016, after seeing a video of the Performing Squad at his school, he says that he was mesmerised by the sound. "Although there were about 30 boys singing, if I closed my eyes it sounded like there was only one singer," recalls Alexander.

Since joining the Choir, Alexander has never looked back. He says, "The first thing I loved when I started with the Choir was the friendships." Presented with the P.R. McCafferty Award at the May Installations Ceremony in 2019, Alexander attributes his musical prowess to his ABCI training. The award, named after a former Choir parent and Board Chair, is conferred annually on a boy who has shown exceptional promise while in training.

"I am excelling in my music classes and I have been able to take on several instruments too. The Choir has also helped me a lot with my leadership skills...and speaking in front of crowds."

Alexander became a Chorister in 2020. Achieving this rank not only signaled that he had completed the Institute's training program but that he was willing to take on leadership and mentoring responsibilities to help the Performing Squad and its singers continue to grow. He knows too well the hard work involved in attaining this honour.

When told he had qualified for the rank of Chorister, Alexander says he felt a sense of pride and joy. "I sat down on the sofa and thought about everything I had done... all the work I'd put into Tyros, Junior Singers, and Senior Singers." With a firm routine in place, and practising for twenty minutes a day, Alexander reflects wisely, "You cannot expect to become a Chorister if you turn up to a tutorial on terms and signs not having studied and revised."

He is quick to acknowledge the 82-year history of the Choir and the many professional musicians who began their careers with the ABCI. "I'm honestly not sure where I see myself in ten years, but I know the Choir will always be such an important part of my life."

And in the meantime, Alexander has his sights set on the year ahead. "I am so excited to perform with the Choir this year... to get back on stage and go on tour."

Alexander Rakogiannis in performance for *Australian Sounds*, August 2019. (Photo: Jane Kupsch)

EOFY Giving Appeal



Ken Connor, past parent, past Board Member and Honorary Life Member.

I have certainly experienced in my 20 years' involvement with the Choir (including 15 years as a Board Member) several challenging times. It is in these times that the Choir Community rallies and strengthens.

I am writing to you regarding future donations. I would hope all loyal donors continue their generosity and urge all that can to consider donating to the ABCI. As Denzel Washington said "At the end it's not about what you have or even what you've accomplished. It's about who you have lifted up, who you have made better. It's about what you have given back." I hope you will give this some serious consideration.

The fact this not-for-profit organisation has endured and prospered since 1939 is clear testament to its merit. Most importantly, talented young singers are given an opportunity and a place where they can master their singing skill, where they belong and where excellence is rewarded. Your support would be appreciated.



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www.givenow.com.au/australianboyschoir

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The Australian Boys Choir

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australianboyschoir.com.au/join

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Tyro singer Herbie, aged 8. Recital Centre 2019. Photo by Jane Kupsch.

Upcoming Performances

- *Zoo Doings*: The Kelly Gang plus the Training Choirs of the ABCI / June 19, Auburn Uniting Church.
- *A Winter Serenade*: The Vocal Consort with special guests / September 9, Hawthorn Arts Centre.
- *On The Road Again*: Australian Boys Choir & The Kelly Gang / September 19-23, Regional Victoria.
- *Christmas Stars*: featuring the Melbourne Baroque Orchestra / December 11, Melbourne Recital Centre.

Full concert details and booking information at www.australianboyschoir.com.au/concerts.

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