

# Austinato



The Australian Boys Choir and The Vocal Consort present *Requiem for an Empress*, May 2021 (Photo by Jane Kupsch)

## From the Chair



**Professor Stephen Duffy**  
Chair, Australian Boys Choral  
Institute Board

*'I am an optimist. It does not seem too much use being anything else.'* – Winston Churchill

While it feels like we have spent most of this year in lockdowns and rehearsing online, we were lucky enough to have two great concerts in the first half of the year, which is more than we achieved for the whole of the COVID-19 affected 2020! It is with considerable relief that we have been able to resume face-to-face rehearsals for our boys and young men, and with any luck we can hear our wonderful choirs perform again soon. It is a great credit to our Artistic Director Mr. Nicholas Dinopoulos, our Institute staff, and our General Manager Ms. Katie Whitecross that we kept the various arms of the Australian Boys Choir engaged throughout this time.

The ABCI Board has remained busy during this challenging year. Budgeting in these uncertain times is difficult, and we have been very lucky to have had Ms. Yuen Fong as our Honorary Treasurer for the last two years. She has done an outstanding job of steering the Institute through challenging financial times with repeated remodelling of the budget and various scenarios. Unfortunately, owing to increasing commitments she has decided to step down from her position as ABCI Honorary Treasurer. Happily, Ms. Deb Damman, who you may remember wrote the letter for our 2020 Christmas Giving Appeal, has agreed to return to the ABCI Board as Honorary Treasurer. Deb has performed many volunteer roles for the Choir community over the years. On behalf of the whole ABCI community I welcome Deb back to the Board and thank Yuen for her outstanding service.

In other ABCI Board news, we have also had the pleasure of welcoming Ms. Fiona Trumble as our Honorary Secretary. She replaced Mr. Dan Heerding who has taken on a variety of leadership and volunteer roles in the ABCI over many years. Fiona is well qualified for this role as a Fellow of the Governance Institute of Australia, Chartered Secretary and CPA. Fiona works in policy, risk and compliance in the independent school sector and is currently the Compliance Manager at Methodist Ladies College. The ABCI Board welcomes Fiona and looks forward to working with her in the future, and thanks Dan for his long-standing service to the Institute.

While there are many uncertainties in the short- to medium-term, we all remain optimistic that the worst of the pandemic is behind us and that the ABCI can return to its role of providing beautiful music to our loyal audiences and supporters. On behalf of the Australian Boys Choral Institute Board, I wish you a hopeful end to this year and a great 2022.

## Collaborative Encounters

As the Australian Boys Choir advances towards 2022, it prepares to travel back in time to the eighteenth century. Embarking upon a new collaboration with the Australian Romantic & Classical Orchestra (ARCO), the Institute will present a program titled *Austrian Encounters* which will see vocal and orchestral colours swirling and mingling to make spirits soar for both performer and listener alike.

ARCO was founded in 2013 under the direction of renowned musician and educator, the late Richard Gill AO. Current co-Artistic Directors, violinist Rachael Beesley and clarinettist Nicole van Bruggen, continue Gill's legacy which also shares a common vision with the ABCI.

'Under Richard's artistic direction, the pillars of music education and historical insights into Classical and Romantic repertoire struck a powerful chord within the Australian music and music education worlds,' says Rachael. 'The musicians of our orchestra and our youth orchestra, Young Mannheim Symphonists, share Richard's energy and passion for music, and we are proud and humbled that he entrusted us with carrying on his incredible legacy.'

The Choir has also felt the depths of Gill's contribution to the community, and ABCI Artistic Director Nick Dinopoulos recounts how the partnership was born: 'ARCO co-Artistic Director Rachael Beesley and I have worked together on various projects in and around Melbourne for years now, and she was terrifically enthusiastic about putting the pieces together when we last had a friendly Zoom catch-up and I mentioned the idea for this concert,' he says. 'I am absolutely committed to these sorts of wide-ranging collaborative projects for the ABCI into the future.'

Rachael also notes a strong synergy between the two organisations: 'We are thrilled to collaborate with ABCI as their core ideas of offering exceptional music education and training to support talented young singers to grow, learn and shine, empower boys to find their voices and encourage them to have a go aligns with our philosophy towards music education.'

ARCO specialises in the historically informed performance (HIP) of late 18th- to early 20th-century orchestral and chamber music repertoire on period instruments. Sometimes referred to as period performance, HIP seeks to elucidate the musical culture and aesthetics of the period in which the music was conceived. Both Nicole and Rachael studied historically informed performance at the Royal Conservatoire in the Hague, playing with many leading HIP ensembles throughout Europe and Australia.

'To the listener, there is an immediately noticeable contrast between the HIP approach and that of the mainstream symphony or chamber orchestra,' says Nicole. 'This is due to different timbral relationships between wind, brass, string sections... Understanding changes in performance styles encourages us to investigate how things might have sounded in the 18th- and 19th-centuries.'

The planned repertoire includes pieces written specifically for boys' voices, featuring some of the most outstanding choral repertoire written by Mozart, as well as works by Joseph and Michael Haydn. The performance will recall the ABCI 2018 European tour when the boys sang in Salzburg Cathedral, site of Mozart's baptism. 'Perhaps the most intriguing work on the program is Mozart's first setting of the Litany of Loreto which will open the concert and was written when the composer was 15 – around the same age as many of the performers that we'll have on stage' says Nick.

The ABCI Artistic Director looks forward to a program that is 'absolutely crystalline and effervescent. We'll pair Mozart with the well-known *Missa Brevis* in B-flat by Joseph Haydn, before returning to perform another Litany by Joseph's younger brother Michael,' says Nick, detailing some of the program highlights. 'The *Sparrow Mass* (so called for the chirps found in the violin part of the *Osanna* section) is easily one of the most ebullient works in Mozart's output and will round up this historically informed presentation, including the unique sound of gut strings in the violin and cello sections of the orchestra, and replicas of eighteenth-century Viennese trombones.'

The Choir's 2022 season will be a magical mystery tour of global proportions. 'International travel has been fairly tricky

for a while now, so we thought we'd bring the world directly to our audiences instead,' says Nick of the diverse offerings for the coming year. 'I'm also looking forward to our September program of sublime choral music from Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia presented alongside the wonderful singers of The Vocal Consort and it will be great to be back on stage at Melbourne Recital Centre at Christmas, too.'

### **Austrian Encounters Concert Details**

Saturday 22nd May at Sacred Heart Carlton, with a live-stream on the Melbourne Digital Concert Hall Platform.  
Also Sunday 21st May at St. Mary of the Angel's Basilica Geelong.

See [www.australianboyschoir.com.au/concerts](http://www.australianboyschoir.com.au/concerts) for further information and to secure your seats.

**The Australian Romantic and Classical Orchestra  
perform at the City Recital Hall – Angel Place, Sydney  
(Photo by Oscar Smith)**





Elwynne Stafford checks that the boys' robes are performance-ready in 1983

## For the Love of Volunteering Deb Damman: 2021 Elwynne Stafford Award recipient

*'Time is not measured by the years that we live, but by the deeds that we do and the joys that we give.'* – Helen Steiner Rice

Deb Damman's outstanding contribution to the Choir over many years sees her named as the inaugural recipient of the Elwynne Stafford Award for volunteers in 2021. The accolade is named for Honorary Life Member and ABCI volunteer, Elwynne Stafford, who passed away in October 2020 having had a profound influence on a generation of ABCI singers.

Deb Damman admits her life became much richer when her son Ian joined the Australian Boys Choir in February 2011.

Deb soon became aware that, like every not-for-profit organisation, the Australian Boys Choir relied not only on its highly-trained and dedicated staff, but on the endeavour and goodwill of volunteers. Since her first, somewhat hesitant involvement as a volunteer, Deb has put her hand up for everything from front-of-house wardrobe and stage managing at concerts, to roles as a carer at camps and on tours.

There have been countless highlights for Deb, including 'the wonderful adult contingent with whom I have met, shared, laughed,



Deborah Damman backstage at *Byrd to Britten*, September 2016 (Photo by Megan Heerding)

and even cried'. One of Deb's most memorable volunteering experiences was her involvement in events to celebrate the Choir's 75th Anniversary Exhibition in 2014. 'The team worked on this for 18 months and it was amazing to be part of,' she recalls.

Deb's experiences are not unique among volunteers. In March 2020, the Journal of Happiness Studies published data from a survey of nearly 70 000 volunteers in the UK. It found that those who had volunteered in the last year were more satisfied with their lives and reported better mental and physical health than those who had not.

Katie Whitecross, current ABCI General Manager, reflects: 'Deb's personal volunteer journey epitomises the heartbeat of the Institute. It is a testament to her character that Deb still volunteers as a Board Member today, even after her son has left the Institute. We'd truly be lost without people like her.'

Engaging with the Choir has not only been a thrill for Deb, it has also changed her son's life. She says, 'The ABCI has given him a like-minded cohort of friends and musicians. It gave him the skills to successfully audition for the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School which has led him to a place at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music.'

Deb says she feels truly honoured to receive the Elwynne Stafford Award and looks forward to congratulating future recipients. As someone who has reaped the rewards of serving over the years, she encourages everyone to put up their hand and give what they can by way of their skills and time. 'Volunteering for the Choir will only ever have an upside. You have nothing to lose and so very much to gain... for you and your son.'

## Changing Voices: The Journey Forward

Change is life's only constant and it certainly applies to the Australian Boys Choral Institute. Probationers become Tyros, Tyros graduate to become Junior Singers and Senior Singers, and Performing Squad members keen to grow their leadership might just achieve the coveted rank of Chorister. And, of course, the vocal gift that brought boys to ABCI in the first place proliferates as they transform into young men.

At the ABCI, voices don't 'break', they simply change. It might be semantics, but framing this stage as positively as possible makes a big difference. It's all part of a boy's life and an important phase in their development. It means that their involvement at Choir alters, but doesn't have to end.

The Cambiata training group and the Kelly Gang (named in honour of Choir founder Vincent J. Kelly) are groups for teenagers within the ABCI whose voices have begun to change and who have chosen to continue their vocal and choral interests. Kelly Gang membership is by invitation/audition and normally requires qualification at Chorister level. In both groups, the focus is on training rather than performance, with an emphasis on vocal technique, especially learning to cope with the "new instrument".

So how do singers react to it? 'It can feel quite daunting initially when your voice changes,' says Josh, who is currently a member of the Kelly Gang. 'You have to start training your new voice all over again.'

Luckily though, Josh's voice change took place relatively quickly. He recalls mixed emotions making the move to Sunday afternoons to sing with new – but mostly familiar – faces. Now, he is also completing VCE music while continuing to sing with Kelly Gang.

'I feel a sense of satisfaction having completed each step of the ABCI training and journey,' Josh says, adding that he hopes to study music at Melbourne or Monash University. 'The ABCI has built an amazing musical base for me. Without my Choir training, I would never have been able to achieve all I have, or even think about pursuing a career in music.'

Recently departed Chorister Ethan has just moved from the Performing Squad to the Kelly Gang. He also remembers the onset of his voice change as an interesting time.

'I had experienced so many amazing years of singing with the Performing Squad at their incredible standard...and, more importantly, I'd found so many incredible friends,' he says. 'But, on the other side, I was truly ecstatic to experience this new part of my voice, and I adapted quickly to the new range and really liked it.'

Ethan says his voice change opened up new possibilities, musically and in terms of his Choir experience. 'I started to uncover the true gems that all the different parts of the Choir bring together,' he says, adding that just before his voice change began he had been moved down a part to Second Soprano. 'I remember jumping with joy! I didn't spend long there though; after only a term I moved down to Second Alto. It was at this point I knew my voice change had truly begun.'

Voice change means needing to leave the Performing Squad, and Ethan says he felt strange knowing he would never be at another Friday or Monday rehearsal. '[But] I'm incredibly happy to be a part of the Kelly Gang. So far, I've thoroughly enjoyed exploring and singing with my new lower range, and can't wait to see where my voice is when it fully settles down.'

Thankfully there is a path forward for boys at the ABCI, which doesn't exist in all choirs. Josh also says that voices eventually do settle, but it happens at a different pace for each singer. His advice for boys is not to let it cause stress. 'Give it time and enjoy your next journey in the Kelly Gang or Cambiata.'

Ethan believes boys should embrace their voice change because, after all, it is inevitable. 'If you're feeling hesitant and even a little scared about such a big change, I highly encourage you to reflect upon all those times you've listened to the changed voices and remember those incredible performances,' he says, adding that it all means a fresh start.

'You have all your experience. You get to enjoy this rich new sound, while feeling confident, thanks to your years of training.'

**Changing Voices of the ABCI in performance at Melbourne Recital Centre, December 2019 (Photo by Jane Kupsch)**



## Solfège and Sorcery

On any given weeknight during the school term, outsiders peering through the windows of Choir House might well wonder if the ABCI had ceded its place and purpose to a class in mime.

Solfège, also called solfa or solfeggio, is a system whereby each note of the musical scale is assigned an individual functional syllable; for example: any note on the piano known as 'C' might be designated as the syllable 'doh'. The origins of solfège can be found in eleventh-century Italy, when music theorist Guido of Arezzo invented a system of notation that linked notes to the syllables of a Latin hymn.

The ABCI uses 'moveable doh' solfège, combined with the corresponding hand-signs, both of which are key to learning in a Kodály-inspired environment. 'We specifically use this method,' says Tim Mallis, Choir alumnus, current member of The Vocal Consort, and long-time ABCI Music Staff member, 'because it reflects the way children learn naturally by exploring musical elements in singing games, folk song, and creative development through the senses.'

Tim notes that this specific use of solfa provides a consistent framework for internalising musical processes and functions. 'While Julie Andrews employs a whimsical manner to describe her do-re-mi to the Von Trapp children, she managed to explain it surprisingly well,' he says. 'In essence, solfa establishes a relationship between pitch intervals and syllables. This allows one to sing a million different tunes by mixing them up (with jam and bread).'

The benefits of solfège, as a foundational skill, extend beyond the realm of Choir. Tim says that solfa helps children develop their auditory imagination and processing. 'When children

learn audiation through solfa it opens their minds to a whole new way of learning. They can then transfer the skill to sight-reading. It's fundamental in the same way that multiplication remains essential to learning mathematics, despite the advent of digital calculators.'

Of course, Tim Mallis was brought up in the Choir community and has used solfège as a musical tool from an early age. He does find, however, as with any approach, that its many uses sit alongside several shortcomings. 'When you reach an almost professional level of aptitude, you encounter more complex musical ideas. An example of this might be some of the more esoteric, atonal music of the last century that would struggle to fit the mould. However, by this stage in their music education, students will develop different strategies to reconcile any initial pedagogical shortcomings.'

Nevertheless, the use of solfège and the Kodály Method remains consistent across all ABCI levels, from Early Learners right through to the Kelly Gang. 'The combination of solfa syllables with hand-signs allows children to absorb musical material visually, aurally, and kinetically,' says Tim.

'It is amazing to watch gatherings of the various Choir groups that are able, magically, to learn a song together using the exact same techniques. It seems extraordinary for a single teacher to stand in front of a group of some 200 children, wave a few hand signs in front of them, and impart a song without singing a single note. If parents have ever witnessed this sorcery on an ABCI Weekend Workshop or Summer School, they will know exactly what kind of wonder this can inspire.'



ABCI Music Staff member Timothy Mallis plays for *Australian Sounds*, August 2019 (Photo by Jane Kupsch)

## Concert Review: *Requiem for an Empress*

*'The success of this performance was built on the vocal texture achieved. The uniqueness of boys' voices in creating an almost celestial aesthetic has long been the desired goal in sacred music.'*

– Bronislaw Sozanski, *'The Ballarat Courier'*, 18 May 2021

Amongst the uncertainty and turmoil of 2021, the ABCI managed to deliver a stunning paean to hope and beauty in the mesmerising performance, *Requiem for an Empress*. Presented on Saturday 15th May at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Ballarat, and Sunday 16th May at Sacred Heart Church, Carlton, the performance comprised a single, 65-minute work, the *Officium Defunctorum* of 1605 by celebrated Spanish Renaissance composer, Tomás Luís de Victoria.

Written to honour the Dowager Empress Maria of Austria, for whom Victoria was personal chaplain, at her funeral in 1603, those on stage were proud to dedicate the 2021 performances to former ABCI General Manager Louise Phillips, who had sadly passed away shortly before.

The glorious music for six vocal parts perfectly suited the voices of the Choir's Performing Squad and The Vocal Consort. Both groups sang with a power and accuracy that defied the challenges of interrupted rehearsals and restrictions experienced since early 2020.

Opening with a one-voice-per-part reading of the *Ad Matinatum* from the venue balcony and punctuated by solo voices throughout the performance, including Nick Dinopoulos's resonant baritone as the celebrant, the performance was accompanied, in historically appropriate fashion, by the unique sound of the dulcian, or Renaissance bassoon. Played by the talented Simon Rickard, the dulcian supported and blended without ever overwhelming the balance of voices.

Works of this style and calibre are rare gems. Every person fortunate enough to have attended either concert left knowing they had experienced something truly special – a feeling made even more poignant by the dearth of live music endured both before and since.

Listen to live excerpts from this performance at [www.soundcloud.com/australian-boys-choir](https://www.soundcloud.com/australian-boys-choir).



The Australian Boys Choir and The Vocal Consort in rehearsal for *Requiem for an Empress*, May 2021 (Photo by Jane Kupsch)

## ABCI Concert Season 2022

- *Journeyings*: The Vocal Consort and The Kelly Gang / Thursday 7th April, Our Lady of Victories Camberwell
- *Austrian Encounters*: The Australian Boys Choir and The Vocal Consort / Saturday 21st May, St Mary's Geelong / Sunday 22nd May, Sacred Heart Carlton
- *Australian Destinations*: The Kelly Gang and the Training Choirs of the ABCI / Sunday 19th June, Auburn Uniting Church Hawthorn
- *Trans-Tasman Exchange*: The Australian Boys Choir and The Vocal Consort / Saturday 6th August, Ballarat – Venue TBC / Sunday 7th August, Melbourne – Venue TBC
- *Baltic Sounds*: The Vocal Consort and The Australian Boys Choir / Thursday 15th September, Our Lady of Victories Camberwell
- *Home for the Holidays*: Saturday 10th December, Melbourne Recital Centre

Full concert details and booking information at [www.australianboyschoir.com.au/concerts](https://www.australianboyschoir.com.au/concerts).

## ABCI End-of-Year Giving Appeal



The Australian Boys Choir, May 2021 (Photo by Jane Kupsch)

'After another challenging year for us all, it's great to feel a genuine sense of optimism about the future of the ABCI as we look forward to 2022.

I encourage you to give what you can to our End-of-Year Appeal. Your contribution, be it large or small, comes at an important time and would be a much-appreciated Christmas gift to the ABCI as we continue to support our singers on their choral journey and towards excellence.'

ABCI Board Member, Fiona Trumble



**Donate online today**

[www.givenow.com.au/australianboyschoir](http://www.givenow.com.au/australianboyschoir)

*The Australian Boys Choral Institute/The Australian Boys Choir Fund is an endorsed Deductible Gift Recipient. Donations over \$2 are tax deductible.*

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**excellence is a musical head start**

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



This edition of *Austinato* is dedicated to long-standing volunteer and former ABCI General Manager Louise Phillips who passed away earlier this year.

**Former ABCI General Manager Louise Phillips – 1966–2021 (Photo by James Lauritz)**

Contributors: Sarah Bird, Nick Dinopoulos, Stephen Duffy, Julia Gilchrist, Liz Lindner, Paul Mitchell, Belinda Scerri, Fiona Trumble, Coral Vass.

**If you would like to receive *Austinato* by email, please contact the Choir Office.**

### The Australian Boys Choir

3C Hepburn St Hawthorn VIC 3122  
PO Box 3117 Auburn VIC 3123  
03 9818 4818  
[admin@australianboyschoir.com.au](mailto:admin@australianboyschoir.com.au)