

Cygnet Singers – 40 years of joyful music!

This year, in 2024, Cygnet Singers will celebrate their 40th year of singing together! This is a noteworthy achievement for a community choir which started from small and rather humble beginnings and has gone from strength to strength to the well known, well loved and popular group it is today in the Huon Valley. It is an achievement which all members, both past and present, can be proud of.

The Choir will celebrate this milestone in the best possible way - with music and singing, sharing this special event with each other, with friends and family and with our wonderful audience. With the passing of each year and in particular on this 40th anniversary, it is pleasant to look back on the history of the Cygnet Singers, to remember the songs and the music, the many highlights we have experienced, the friendships we have made, the fun of rehearsals, the knowledge gained and, above all, the uplifting joy of singing.

It is the perfect moment to reminisce a little on the past, on the history of the Choir and how it all began, on a few of our special songs and memories and on some of the achievements of Cygnet Singers over the past forty years.

In June, 1984, Derek Nichols persuaded a group of people from Cygnet and the Huon Valley, many with no prior musical experience, that singing together was not only fun but could make a significant contribution to the community as a whole. It appeared unlikely at that stage that this small group would develop into a lasting choir of note, which would become such a significant part of music in the Huon.

The very first production was a Music Hall performance in November of that year as part of the celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of Cygnet. Even at this early stage, it was the start of a tradition of participation in community events, which continues to this day.

Alan Cato became Musical Director in 1987, by which time Cygnet Singers had begun to establish a reputation for the standard of their concerts, as well as for singing with other groups and at community events. For a period of time from 1987, there was a small group within the Choir called The Cygnet Chorale, which worked with Mary Coatman to develop a repertoire of concert items and core programs for community events.

From a rather humble, but enthusiastic beginning, and under the guidance of a variety of Music Directors, the Choir expanded rapidly during the following years and began to meet the exciting challenges of a range of musical experiences. A successful, fully staged performance of John Gay's 'The Beggar's Opera', some songs from oratorio and opera and an Old Tyme Music Hall were then followed by excerpts from Handel's 'Messiah' and Mozart's 'Requiem'.

From 1994 to 2001, Cygnet Singers combined with The Friends' Singers and Spring Bay Singers, under the direction of Rod Grosvenor, in an ambitious series of Three Choirs Festivals, which introduced the Cygnet Singers to the enjoyment of participating in larger choral works. When Dianne O'Toole became Music Director in 2001, she encouraged the effort to extend these links with both choral and instrumental groups. In 2003, the Choir experienced a particular highlight, singing with combined choirs in the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra's Concert Series performance of 'Finlandia' in the Hobart Federation Concert Hall.

The Choir has sung with a variety of other choirs over the years and has also invited many guest performers to participate in performances, all of whom have added variety and enjoyment to their concerts. As well as singers, audiences have enjoyed listening to soloists playing flute, oboe, harp, double bass, cello, piano, recorders and at one performance, a rousing timbrel group with energetic moves and perfectly coordinated tambourines. Cygnet Singers have continued to provide performance opportunities for a wide variety of younger musicians, soloists and chamber ensembles.

Over the years, the Choir has enjoyed a close with the Huon Valley Concert Band, working with them at community events and sharing joint concerts. In 2009, a concert in conjunction with the Band was entitled, A Celebration of Music in the Valley, which summed up the purpose and pleasure of both groups.

Cygnet Singers have participated in events in aid of a number of worthy causes and have supported fund raising efforts following natural disasters such as bush fires in the south of the State. They have sung for senior citizens in nursing homes, have encouraged the walkers in The Relay for Life and have been a part of welcoming new citizens with songs at The Australia Day Award Ceremonies.

For the Choir's 30th year, ten years ago, they recorded a CD called 'The Day's Turn', produced in the Huon Valley by Mike Raine. The money raised was donated to The Hush Foundation which provides music to help reduce stress and anxiety for children who are undergoing treatment in hospitals throughout Australia. At this concert, celebrating 30 years of singing, the Choir was privileged to have a special guest present, The Governor of Tasmania, the Honourable Kate Warner. Three of the Choir's original founding members, Barbara Harvey, Marj Gordon and Adrian Hunt, cut a cake celebrating the continuity of the Choir, which was shared by everyone present.

Other events have included Church services, including Lessons and Carols at Christmas as well as taking part in the popular Huon Valley Theatre Company Christmas Carol Variety Concert. In 2008, Carol Services had a delightful addition to the event with the playing of the Hobart Handbell Choir.

Within the Choir, there are a number of talented people, both singers and instrumentalists who have performed individually or in groups, adding variety to different concerts. Members have also contributed in other ways as well. Ross Whiteley has been responsible for some of the most memorable scenic props, notably a Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang bright red car. Readers and writers have presented a selection of both poetry and prose and talented artist, Polly Whittington, has designed and illustrated the imaginative covers for concert programs. In 2023, Polly wrote and produced the delightful story of Hamish, the highland coo (cow) and his long journey from Scotland to Bethlehem in order to present a gift to the baby Jesus. His many adventures and encounters along the way provided an entertaining and amusing script for the audience to follow between Christmas songs, while a full size model of Hamish, also made by Polly, looked down on the audience from the height of the stage.

Each year, the Choir has participated in workshops and performances for the Festival of Voices in Hobart and also The Australian National Choral Association. Such a busy schedule includes far more than just concerts twice a year. We are very grateful to our audiences for their continued support in all these events and endeavours.

The Choir has continued to expand its repertoire to include a wide range of music of every genre with songs dating from the 16th century to the present time; sacred and religious music, Christmas carols and songs, art songs, opera choruses, folk music, songs from musical theatre, love songs, novelty songs, nursery rhymes and children's songs. They have sung in a number of languages apart from English, including Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, Hebrew, Welsh, Finnish and even Zulu! Recently they have been gifted a song in *paredarerme*, one of the Aboriginal languages of the first Tasmanians.

In June 2019, Cygnet Singers celebrated 35 years of singing with a Grand Souvenir Concert of favourite songs, voted by the Choir, and the reading of the Choir's history up to that time. In December of that year, blissfully unaware that it would be their last time together for the next eighteen months, they performed a concert in Cygnet Town Hall, entitled 'Hallelujah' which consisted of both Christmas Carols and excerpts from Handel's 'Messiah'. This was a special occasion and a wonderful concert, performed in conjunction with the Tasmanian Youth Orchestra String Quartet, various instrumentalists and a soprano soloist, Madeleine Dyer, a graduate from the Hobart Conservatorium of Music.

The Choir ended the year, 2019, and left for a Christmas break but by February of 2020 when they would normally have re-convened for the following year, the world was in lock-down and the Covid virus dictated that choirs were unable to meet. Members of the Choir certainly appreciated, perhaps as never before, the use of technology, which enabled everyone to keep in touch with each other, to ensure each other's welfare, to keep morale high and support each other through that time. The uncertainty of what was to come in the future was worrying and so when the Singers

were finally able to meet again, observing safe distancing and optional mask wearing, it was truly with relief and joy that they rehearsed their next concert in May 2021. It was aptly titled, 'Moving on with Music' and was a program of uplifting songs and amusing poems, raising the spirits of choir members and the audience after the concern of the previous months.

Five more concerts have been added to the repertoire since that time, an average of two each year, the most recent one in May 2024, entitled 'Blessings'. Members of the Choir, both past and present, would agree that it is a blessing to be able to enjoy a love of singing and to share the friendship and enthusiasm involved in a choral group. For each Choir member, Cygnet Singers is a special place where everyone feels welcome and included and every rehearsal and concert is an inspiring and enjoyable experience.

There are many people who assist and support the Choir, beginning with the Committee, all of whom work behind the scenes to ensure the smooth running of the Choir in many different ways. At present the Choir consists of approximately fifty people who are drawn together by a love of singing but whose musical knowledge varies considerably. Over the past 23 years, Cygnet Singers has been extremely fortunate to have had the leadership of a talented Music Director, Dianne O'Toole, who has many years of experience in music education and performance and who has guided, taught and encouraged the Cygnet Singers with knowledge and humour for every program and event which took place in every one of those years. Apart from her considerable musical knowledge and understanding and her choice of suitable songs, her administration and organisational skills have consistently ensured the smooth running of the Choir from one program to the next.

During all of this time, she has been ably assisted by the Choir's accompanist, Dianne van Tienen who has accompanied the Cygnet Singers for the last 39 of its 40 years, a truly amazing achievement. Together Dianne O'Toole and Dianne van Tienen are a formidable team without whom the wheels which keep the Choir happily in motion would cease to turn as smoothly as they do.

In compiling this brief outline of the story of Cygnet Singers, only some of the highlights, the concerts and the artists and choirs with whom the Choir has shared the last forty years have been mentioned. Apologies are offered to anyone who has been missed as every contribution and collaboration is of equal importance and all have added to the success of concerts and the enjoyment shared with our audience.

Cygnet Singers look forward to celebrating more significant birthdays with each other and with our audiences in the future.

- *thou shall entertain, bringing joy to the world*
- *thou shall indulge in music and sing from your soul, let your spirit be free*

Quote from quartet 'The Idea of North'