

Brisbane Chorale – Our Journey

Our beginning

The Brisbane Chorale was formed in February 1983 under the auspices of the Queensland Conservatorium by its founding director, Dr Roy Wales, then director of the conservatorium. The Brisbane Chorale grew out of an amalgamation and expansion of choral forces that had operated previously at the "Con": a student/community Conservatorium Chorale that had been formed in the early 1970s by Edward Talbot, and a student choir known as the Conservatorium Choir. Operating within the structure of the Conservatorium, the Brisbane Chorale became a major choral force in the city.

In 1997 Brisbane Chorale, while continuing to maintain a close and mutually beneficial affiliation with the conservatorium, registered as an independent incorporated association with its own constitution. Today, Brisbane Chorale Inc. is self-funded and employs its own staff (music director, assistant music director, and accompanist), and is no longer formally associated with the conservatorium.

Our music directors

Brisbane Chorale Inc. has had musical teams of exceptional quality over the years - wonderful accompanists and assistant chorus masters whose musicianship and support have contributed so much to our music-making.

Our founder, Roy Wales, instilled the essence of what choral singing is all about - the joy, the teamwork, the absolute thrill of being inspired to give our all. The music directors who followed him have helped us to keep alive that aspiration for choral excellence and enjoyment - all of them musicians of quality, and we pay tribute to them:

- the late Roy Wales (1983 - 1987)
- James Christiansen (January - December 1988)
- Peter Roennfeldt (January 1989 - August 1991)
- the late John Nickson (August 1991 - April 1996)
- Emily Cox (April 1996 - December 1996)
- Russell Larkin (January 1997 - July 1998)
- Christopher Kiver (January 1999 - June 2002)
- Emily Cox AM (since 2003).

Our present music director, Emily Cox, was a chorister with us at the beginning. It's a pleasure to work with her now as music director.

Our members

We are a community of singers drawn from all walks of life, with an extensive choral experience. In fact, a survey of choir members undertaken in 2008 found that total years of choir/choral experience in Brisbane Chorale Inc. add up to at least 1,877 years! The survey also found that:

- members of Brisbane Chorale Inc. were born in 21 different countries
- 24 languages are spoken in varying degrees by our members, ranging from Icelandic to Tongan
- occupations range across sales assistant, postal workers, students, ICT personnel, office and business managers, teachers, nurses, artists, architects, engineers, lawyers, scientists, doctors and clergy.

Performances

Brisbane Chorale's repertoire is broad and extensive. Performances include great choral works of the past but also major 20th century works. Highlights of Brisbane Chorale's history have included Australian premières – Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* (1986), Eliot Goldenthal's *Fire Water Paper: a Vietnam Oratorio* (1997), Bob Chilcott's *Jubilate* (2001) and Joseph Jongen's *Mass Op 130* (2003). There have also been some world premières, the most recent being the 2011 performance of Elena Kats-Chernin's *Symphonia Eluvium*, a reflection on the Queensland floods of that year. Brisbane Chorale Inc. has also commissioned two choral works – *Child Sightings* by Sydney composer Matthew Orlovich (2002), and Philip Bracanin's *Symphony No 2*, premiered with the Queensland Philharmonic Orchestra in 1995.

“... last night's world première in Brisbane's Concert Hall of Philip Bracanin's *Symphony No.2* by the Queensland Philharmonic Orchestra, Brisbane Chorale, and soprano soloist, Marilyn Richardson was a landmark performance”
– B Hebden, *The Sunday Mail*, 17.9.95)

Brisbane Chorale later recorded this work for ABC Classics with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra (QSO) conducted by Werner Andreas Albert. Brisbane Chorale has also recorded Mahler's *Symphony No 3* with The Queensland Orchestra, and at the end of 2012 was involved in a recording “Joy to the World”, for Move Records, featuring Christmas choral music by Sydney organist and composer Robert Ampt.

A landmark in Brisbane Chorale's history was its presentation on 11 November 2000, with the QSO and Werner Andreas Albert, of Beethoven's magnificent *Missa solennis* to celebrate the new millennium. There have been some very moving performances, such as Mozart's *Requiem* in the Concert Hall in 1995 given as a tribute to the victims of the Kobe earthquake.

“In Mozart's *Requiem* ... the Brisbane Chorale and Queensland Conservatorium Chamber Orchestra found eloquent expression for the shared sense of loss.”
– P Kelly, *The Courier-Mail*, 10.04.1995

In August 2012, Brisbane Chorale was privileged to be the core choir in the Brisbane Mahler Chorus, which performed Mahler's “Resurrection” *Symphony* with the visiting Hamburg Philharmonic Orchestra under Australian conductor, Simone Young.

In November 2018, Chorale also formed the core choir in a performance of Mahler's Symphony No 8, "Symphony of a Thousand", joining Conservatorium Symphony Orchestra and combined massed choirs under conductor Johannes Fritzsich.

Brisbane Chorale has sung in staged productions (the Queensland Ballet's 1989 season of *Carmina Burana*), film screenings (Sergei Prokofiev's sound-track to the screening of the classic Russian film *Alexander Nevsky* in 1991 and, in 2012, *Lord of the Rings – Fellowship of the Ring*, original score performed live with film) and also concert versions of Bernstein's *Candide* (1995), Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1996), the Australian première of the rock musical *Chess* (1993). For many years Brisbane Chorale performed regularly in the Queensland Performing Arts Trust's Spirit of Christmas concerts. It also participated in the Queensland Pops Orchestra's Best of British concerts where it has been known to really let its hair down: "high kicks, stamping and hip swaying...all part of the Brisbane Chorale's contribution"! (Gillian Wills, The Courier-Mail, 2003).

Some other wondrous events have come our way on occasions. A group of us took to the Concert Hall stage in 1987 disguised as the Great Barrier Reef Coral Society to help Gerry Connolly and the QSO under Dobbs Franks in a "Tour de Farce". We've stood, singing mid-field in the Lang Park "Cauldron" at a 1996 Rugby International as 42,000 fans roared their welcome to the teams. What an overwhelming experience that was! And in 2002 we had some fun singing along onstage with the renowned rock group George and The Queensland Orchestra in the River symphony concert in New Farm Park.

Occasional invitations to perform for corporate events have taken us to some interesting locations. Particularly memorable was the gala event to celebrate the 85th birthday of the Brisbane Arcade where we surprised the assembled guests by appearing all around the balcony above to sing and wish this beautiful arcade a musical "Happy Birthday".

Amongst these myriad choral experiences we have also continued to present the important staples of the symphonic-choral repertoire, such as Haydn's *The Creation* (in partnership with Oriana Choir), a cycle of Mendelssohn's oratorios (*Elijah*, *Christus*, and *St Paul*), Rachmaninov's *The Bells*, Verdi's *Requiem*, Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel's *Oratorio*, Handel's *Israel in Egypt*, Brahms' *A German Requiem*, *Carmina Burana*, Karl Jenkins' *The Armed Man*, Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, and the Britten *War Requiem*.

In recent years we have also performed regular "A Joyful Noise" concerts at City Hall, in collaboration with a brass ensemble and organ, giving us the opportunity to present a range of smaller pieces in a variety of musical periods and instrumentations.

Tours

Taking our performances to centres beyond Brisbane is an important community outreach and also a lot of fun for us. While there are logistical difficulties in transporting a large choir, Brisbane Chorale Inc. has, over the years, sought out performance opportunities in our immediate regional centres (Gold and Sunshine Coasts, Toowoomba, Ipswich). Brisbane Chorale's first interstate tour was to Adelaide in 2009 to perform Verdi's *Requiem* with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, with a reciprocal visit by the Adelaide Chorus to perform that work with us and the QSO. A valuable interstate cultural collaboration!

Brisbane Chorale's first international tour took place in September 2013 with a performance of Elgar's oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* in Auckland, New Zealand in collaboration with Auckland Choral. Some Brisbane Chorale Inc. members had an exciting foretaste of international touring early in 2013, when a contingent travelled to New York to participate at the invitation of Distinguished Concerts International, New York, in a performance of Karl Jenkins' *The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace* in Carnegie Hall.

COVID

The pandemic in 2020 presented challenges to Brisbane Chorale, as they did to all people, performers, and audiences globally. A planned performance of Brahms *Requiem* in 2020 had to be postponed only two weeks out. Our normal rehearsal routine changed drastically, with online streamed rehearsals following a period of no rehearsals at all. Once in-person rehearsing resumed, our new and evolving norm involved unfamiliar practices such as checking in, wearing masks, and physical distancing. The early performances post-lockdown were designed around a need for plenty of ventilation and physically distanced seating, along with detailed attendance recording, to protect the health of performers and audience alike.

This period of rapidly changing medical advice and social disturbance, including complete lockdowns and lifestyle adjustments, affected our members like everyone else. As a way of expressing and exploring how being suddenly unable to meet, rehearse, or perform affected our members personally, we produced a short YouTube documentary film 'A Prayer for the Living', which focussed particularly around this sudden disruption to preparations for the Brahms *Requiem* through to its eventual performance in November 2020.

Associations with other organisations

We are indebted to the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University for its support through the early years of the Chorale, by the provision of rehearsal space, student singer involvement, and storage facilities. From time to time we have been able to support Conservatorium events by active participation. For example, in 2007 we helped the "Con" celebrate its 50th anniversary in two events, the first being a performance of Vaughan Williams' stirring and moving *A Sea Symphony*. And in 2013 we joined the Conservatorium in special Anzac Eve and Anzac Day commemorations, celebrating the 100th anniversary of Benjamin Britten's birth with his *War Requiem*. We provided the off-stage chorus in the final scene of Vaughan Williams' *Pilgrim's Progress* for Queensland Conservatorium Opera in 2002. In 2024 we collaborated with the University of Queensland Singers, who provided their whole membership as co-choristers, as well as two student soloists in a performance of Mozart's *Requiem*.

Over the years we've been privileged to work with Brisbane's major orchestras, choirs and performance organisations and have enjoyed some memorable concert experiences. Some of these have been broadcast on ABC radio and television. Brisbane Chorale Inc. values its association with 4MBS Classic FM, Brisbane's fine music FM radio station, which has made a major contribution to the music community through its annual Festival of Classics, its recording and broadcast of concerts, and its support of local artists. Several of the Chorale's performances have been given as the opening or closing concerts of the Festival of Classics, singing major works or the varied fare of the Spectaculars and Galas: 'Opera Gala', 'Choral Spectacular', 'Gilbert & Sullivan Spectacular', 'Christmas Spectacular'.

It is important for us to give back to the community where we can, in support of charitable causes. Brisbane Chorale lent our voices in 2000 for the Palliative Care Christmas celebration and our 2001 Sing-a-thon "Voices for Voices" raised money to help children who can't speak or can't hear. Our very successful Christmas concert in 2010 raised funds for Cancer Council Queensland, as did our 2013 raffle for flood relief.

Each year the Chorale awards the Brisbane Chorale perpetual trophy to the winner of the Secondary Choir (Advanced) section of the Queensland Youth Music Awards.

The years ahead

Choral music is a vital artistic medium that has inspired composers over centuries to write some of their greatest music. Brisbane Chorale Inc. is dedicated to bringing to audiences the joy, the wonder and the beauty of great choral works of composers past and present. We invite music lovers to share that music-making with us as we continue our musical journey.