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## CHORUS LINES

I am sitting in Box F, tucked away at the side of the orchestra platform, with 90 other women choristers from the alto section of the Messiah Choir. I'm looking out at the rows of empty seats in the concert hall of the Sydney Opera House. Slowly the auditorium fills up and my grip tightens on my copy of Handel's *Messiah*. It's opening night, 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2013. From my back row perch I mutter. 'I'm nervous' to the woman next to me. 'Be glad you're not a soloist,' she whispers back.

Most of the singers in the Messiah Choir are amateurs. This bi-annual event which takes place in Sydney in December, gives choristers the opportunity to join the prestigious Sydney Philharmonia Choir for three performances of *Messiah* at the Sydney Opera House. Our combined voices number nearly four hundred.

As I wait in my seat I reflect on the amount of time and effort it has taken me to get to this point. I've learned fifteen choruses of *Messiah* almost by heart, attended ten rehearsals and am committed to all three performances. When the rehearsals started in November, choristers were expected to be familiar with the choruses; the rehearsal is for fine tuning and getting the feel of singing together. It's not the place to start learning the part from scratch, but it is where people start to drop out. When I enrolled for in the Messiah Choir in June, I was one of the last altos to get a place because it's a popular voice part for older women. It cost nearly \$200 for the privilege even though I already had a copy of the score and a practice CD of my part, having sung *Messiah* before. Choral singing doesn't come cheap! Every choir I researched for this article, with the exception of school and church choirs, has an annual subscription.

The Sydney Philharmonia Choir is one of many choirs and choral groups throughout the country. The Australian National Choral Association lists a total of 634 choirs Australia wide, the largest number, 182, is in Queensland, New South

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Wales is second with 164. There are probably many more that are not registered with ANCA.

Singing groups and choirs often favour funky names like Choirbolical of Toowoomba, Queensland and Shiny Bum Singers in Canberra ACT. In Sydney, Stuart Davis conducts several A Capella groups with names like The Sea Naturals and Unaccompanied Baggage. In Western Australia, The Bunbury Men of Song sound very confident and in South Australia you can find Women with Latitude. Most States have a gay and lesbian choir.

Some choirs reflect Australia's ethnic diversity. In Balwyn Victoria, The Greek Choir of the Cultural and Educational Club of Florinios meets weekly as does Melbourne's La Voce Della Luna. In Sydney, there's a Chinese choir called The Yellow River Chorus two Arabic choirs and Fortissimo!--formerly The Sydney Italian Women's Choir. Wales, that 'Land of Song', is represented by Welsh choirs in every State.

Both St. James's church and St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney claim to have the oldest choirs in Australia and the Sydney Male Choir, founded in 1913, has led the singing at the Cenotaph in Martin Place on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day since 1930. Much newer is the Gondwana National Indigenous Children's Choir, created in 2008 by Lyn Williams OAM under the umbrella of the Gondwana National Choirs whose ages range from ten to twenty five.

One definition of a choir or choral society is a group which can perform works from the choral repertoire, including those by composers such as Bach, Handel, Mozart, Brahms, and Verdi or modern works such as *Carmina Burana*, by Carl Orf. In order to sing any of these works, choristers need a basic knowledge of musical terminology; sharps, flats, naturals, note values and time signatures, that SATB means Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass and which line to follow in the score. Being able to sing in tune is a given.

As we got closer to the the first performance of *Messiah* our rehearsals took place in the concert hall of the Sydney Opera House. It was an odd experience to be in the foyer with everyone in casual clothes instead of being surrounded by crowds of well dressed concert goers. We signed in and collected our performer's ticket and seat number. I settled into my seat between Fran, a retired physiotherapist and Susan, a

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lecturer in criminal law. It was an annual event for them, they told me, this was their tenth time. Each of them, like me, also belonged to a community choir.

Many community choirs, unlike more professional choirs such as the Sydney Philharmonia, don't insist on auditions. However, anyone who joins a choir which performs large choral works will know immediately if they're out of their depth even though most choristers are happy to share their knowledge of musical notation or foreign words. Choir members who sing out of tune, (and sometimes there are often a couple in a community choir), can always be put behind a convenient pillar for the actual performance.

A practice CD is a very useful tool for amateur singers, and the internet abounds with them. The CD's have the singer's voice part in the foreground and in the background the other choir parts which gives the overall picture. I listen to mine on the bus, in the car and while I'm making the dinner as well as practising with the music. It's also important to get an overall feel for the piece, so my CD collection of professionally produced choral works is increasing by the year.

Community choirs are not the only avenue for the aspiring singer. A Capella and Gospel choirs are also very popular, particularly in the major cities. These require singers to hold a line of music unaccompanied by instruments. This is wonderful to listen to but not as easy as it sounds.

But what about the people who love singing but 'have been told by others *not* to sing'? They are catered for by an organization called 'Sing Australia' which was founded by trained Opera singer, Colin Slater OAM whom I've quoted above. He believes that everyone who wants to sing should be given a chance to do so. Over 25 years Sing Australia has grown into a national organization with 150 groups around the country. All members buy a Sing Australia shirt, scarf or tie and groups perform at local events. There's a National Gathering in a different capital city every year attended by over 1000 singers, giving everyone 'a chance to meet people from all over Australia who like to sing,' according to the Sing Australia website.

At our second rehearsal in the Opera House concert hall, our conductor, Brett Weymark, was having difficulty getting the choir to infuse some feeling into the chorus, 'He trusted in God', in which Christ asks God why He has forsaken Him. The

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choir's rendition sounded too bland for Brett. He asked a tenor from the Philharmonia Choir to give us a demonstration.

A small rotund man stepped forward, turned towards us and began to sing. In his voice we heard the all the sorrow of desertion and suffering. His face expressed the soulful depths of the melody as his whole body moved expressively with the music and the words: 'He trusted in God that *He* would deliver him, let Him *deliver* Him if he *delight* in Him.' In musical terms it's called 'dynamics'; sung by this tenor it was total empathy and we 'got it'.

The next day was a rehearsal with choir, orchestra and soloists. As we sat and listened to the professional singers who sang the solo parts, we were all awestruck. They not only knew their parts without the music, but stopped and restarted, came in exactly on the note and exactly on the beat, not a fraction late, or flat or sharp. Years of training means they get it right every time even if, like the bass soloist, they've just got off a flight from London.

As 21<sup>st</sup> century listeners, we're used to hearing *Messiah* performed by a large choir, but at the first performance of the work in Dublin in 1742 there were only 31 one singers: 26 boys and five men. Handel wrote the whole work in 24 days in 1741, though like many Baroque composers he recycled his own work and 'borrowed' from others. However when *Messiah* was performed in a London theatre the following year it was not well received, it was thought such exhalted subject matter had no place in a theatre. Handel became a governor of the Foundling Hospital in London in 1749 and on his death ten years later, he bequeathed a fair copy of *Messiah* to the institution. By this time *Messiah* was well established in the choral repertoire.

The libretto which we still use today was written by Charles Jennens and based on texts from the King James Bible. It outlines the life of Christ according to Christian doctrine. Handel's task was to write the music to go with the text. For the Nativity he scored 'For unto us a child is born', a joyful anthem celebrating Christ's birth and for the entry into Jerusalem, the majestic 'Hallelujah Chorus'. The final part of the Oratorio opens with the hauntingly beautiful solo soprano air, 'I know that my Redeemer liveth'. For each sentiment; joy, sorrow or his own deep religious conviction, Handel never fails to find the correct nuance or the right musical phrase.

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So on this opening night, I'm waiting in Box F between Fran and Susan. Like them, I'm dressed in choral black, with no perfume as instructed because it dries out the throat, mine and everyone else's. My score is in its black folder and my alto part highlighted in yellow for every chorus. I've walked up the steps of the Sydney Opera House in good time and flashed my choir member ticket at the attendant. I couldn't help feeling a bit special when he raised the red rope and waved me through to the foyer.

I was dismayed to find that my seat number had been changed, together with Fran and Susan's and we're now on the back row of the furthest box, with poor lighting and no one behind us. This is the deadliest position for a chorister, because the sound is projected outwards and it's hard to hear anyone else. One of our rehearsal conductors warned us that in the concert hall of the Opera House, we might feel as if we were singing alone and more so on the back row. It's a very strange experience--you know the others are singing but when you sing you can barely hear the choristers on either side. However, if you can only hear yourself and no one else, you're singing too loudly. I know I'll get used to it like all the 'back rowers' and I do.

So, after all those intensive rehearsals and practice at home, this is it. The audience applauds, the conductor leads the soloists onto the platform then leaps nimbly up onto the rostrum. The tenor soloist has sung the air, 'Every valley shall be exalted' and as he sits down, the conductor looks directly at us and gives us the signal. We take a deep collective breath and stand as one.

In that moment I think of Handel who trusted us, the alto voices, with the opening bars of the first chorus of his great work and we won't let him down. The orchestra begins the jaunty introduction and a strange thing happens: the audience of nearly 2,000 people leans forward in anticipation. This is what they've come for--Handel's spectacular choruses. They want to hear *us*! I take a deep breath and BLAST it! 'And the glory, the GLORY of the Lord....' the notes come out, my voice works, I *can* do it!

As Part Two neared the end, we all felt the crackle of anticipation from the audience as we rose to our feet in the silence before the Hallelujah chorus. The house lights went up and the audience shuffled to its feet according to the tradition (even though there's no evidence that George II stood up at the first London performance, or

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was even there!) Handel doesn't make his audience wait too long; there are only three bars of introduction and the music is marked *forte* and double *forte* throughout. It is taxing to sing, to keep in time and not rush ahead and requires skilful breathing from the women choristers as they hold 'KING OF KINGS....' and 'LORD OF LORDS...' for ten beats. It's an exhilarating, exhausting, wonderful experience to sing it.

The response at each performance to our 400 voices as the final 'Hallelujah' echoed round the concert hall was astounding. There was a frisson, a pause, then whoops and shouts of 'Yeah!' followed by deafening applause. The reverberating drumbeat of thousands of feet on the wooden floor of the concert hall washed over us as we stood motionless and emotional, our music open at the last page of the Hallelujah chorus.

Recently I saw a comment under a Youtube video of the Mormon Tabernacle's performance of the Hallelujah chorus which said simply: 'this is the entrance song to heaven.'

During the interval I queued for the toilets with the audience, drank a bottle of water and got some feedback. As I was washing my hands in the ladies' room, a Canadian visitor asked me if I was in the choir. When I nodded she said, 'I'm on holiday here and this is a highlight for me. Thank you so much.' Other audience members smiled at us as we went past in little groups—oh the heady feeling of fame!

If you're thinking of joining a choir—go ahead! In a performance your feet will hurt from standing, the chorister behind you might accidentally poke you in the neck with her score or get it tangled in your hair. You might get told off for humming along with the soloists and you won't be able to see the conductor because someone has swapped places and is blocking your view. And don't panic when you turn over two pages by mistake in the Hallelujah chorus and get horribly lost in a maze of notes and bars--you'll pick it up.

And now it's the final night, we've sung the seven minute finale, 'Worthy is the Lamb' and the 'Amen' and it's all over. I get the biggest endorphin rush of my life when the conductor acknowledges the choir and the audience erupts in thunderous applause. I think I'll be smiling for a week!

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There's champagne afterwards, but together with a few friends I decide to skip it. It's the week before Christmas, the evening is warm and the restaurants round Circular Quay are buzzing with loud music and chattering people. We walk along as the ferries glide past; four ladies in black, singing quietly together. We're people of a time and place separated from Handel's London by nearly 300 years but musically it's yesterday.

A taxi passes us with a redundant advertisement for *Messiah* on its boot; it depicts a modern young woman dressed in black. She's sitting on rocks and looking down pensively. Her face is in profile with the sea in the background and on her back she has large white angel wings.

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