

The choral phenomenon

by MARYANNE JAUQUES

Organised singing groups, whether for performance or just for fun, are a boom art form in regional NSW. In the last few years a number of major choir programs have reenergized the country choir across the state. In small towns they are once again gathering about the piano (or the CD player) and discovering the joys of singing together as one.

Sing Australia attracts the adult crowd, those who sing for pleasure not so much for performance. Established in 1985 by opera singer and singing teacher Colin Slater, it is now a national phenomenon, with 92 choirs across the country, many of the newest in regional NSW in towns like Trundle and Condobolin.

Trundle didn't have a town choir until Sing Australia arrived three years ago. Choir leader and local shop owner, Marie Lyons says the choir "lightens the load" of the drought on her and the other 30-odd choir members. Singing in the choir is 'her space, her time.' Indeed Sing Australia's Colin Slater told me, "A growing body of research show singing brings specific health benefits, such as improved lung function, improved posture, increased alertness and focus, enhanced immune systems and reduced stress levels." The Trundle choir meets fortnightly for their fix, in either Trundle or nearby Bogan Gate and belts out numbers from a specially produced book of mostly Australian songs.

Sue Thomas, leader of the Condobolin group, explains the Sing Australia ethos: "It doesn't matter if you think can't sing because everyone can sing in a group. It's safety in numbers. When I started I thought 'I'm not a singer', I can't possibly sing in front of people", but the choir has recently been performing publicly at local events and nursing homes. In September Sue joined 700 others at a Sing Australia gathering in Canberra, organised as part



Gala concert at the Moorambilla Festival, Coonamble, September 2007

of the organisation's focus on providing hope and opportunities to drought affected communities. "Singing with people from all over the country in such a big group was amazing. It was really emotional", she says.

The Moorambilla Festival in Coonamble has been a similar a catalyst for community members to meet and sing with others from regional areas. It's also provided the opportunity for the development of vocal workshops and camps and a growing range of well rehearsed children's and adult choirs. In 2006 the festival focused artistically on men and boys, with the establishment of a regional boys choir and a 'Songs in the Key of Bloke' choir for men. This year a women's choir was added and plans are even bigger for 2008. Artistic Director Michelle Leonard says the real focus is building social capacity through the choirs — regional opportunities, promoting and creating Australian works, giving hope and sense of community, promoting the value of music and creating performance opportunities.

In 2007 the Regional Arts NSW Country Arts Support Program supported a number of choir programs and workshops, including the "Murrumbidgee Magic Chorus" workshop for female singers in Griffith; seven weekend choral workshops in the lead up to Moorambilla across the far west; a Community Choir Workshop in Warren and workshops leading to five performances of orchestral and choral works by the Heartsong Community Choir, Bega Valley String Orchestra and other local musicians of the Bega area.

Cheryl Pringle, member of the successful Scone Singers in the Hunter, says choirs are "really just about the shared enjoyment of being able to sing in a group and perform in the community." Everyone, it seems, is singing their heart out. ■

Sing Australia Tel 1300 552 296
Website www.singaustralia.com.au
Moorambilla Festival & Choirs 02 6822 4420
Website www.moorambilla.com

March

8 March — 12 April

👁 *Festival Art Awards* This annual competition attracts artists from across Australia, with entered works embracing a wide range of mediums, including painting, ceramics, glass, textiles and photography.

COWRA Tel 02 6340 2190

10 — 15 March

🏆 *The Club* Ego, power, jealousy, greed and football! David Williamson's timeless classic returns to the stage with Gold Logie winner John Wood headlining an exceptional cast. Merrigong Theatre Co, IPAC

WOLLONGONG Tel 02 4226 3366

14 — 16 March

🎵 *'Blue Mountains Music Festival* Critically acclaimed annual 3 day music festival in **KATOOMBA** features around 80 concerts with over 100 international and local performers on 6 stages

Website www.bmff.org.au

14 — 16 March

🎵 *Kowmung Music Festival* Three days of exquisite chamber music and jazz in captivating locations (last year featured a shearing shed & Abercrombie caves).

OBERON Tel 02 6335 6307

Website www.kowmung.com.au