

History of the Adelaide Male Voice Choir to 2024

by William (Bill) Shaw OAM

The choir was formed in September 1884 at a meeting of interested men in the rooms of Mr Niesche, photographer, at 97A Rundle Street, where the Regent Arcade now stands. The meeting was called after several letters to the newspaper had remarked on the fact that there was no male choir singing in Adelaide in the English language. The Adelaiders Liedertafel had been presenting concerts, but sang in German. The new choir was named the Adelaide English Glee Society, and the first conductor was Mr H Evans, a master at Prince Alfred College.

The first concert by the choir took place in the Norwood Town Hall on 24 March 1885, in the presence of the Premier, the Hon T Playford. It was in aid of the Norwood Young Men's Association Library. In February 1886, members travelled by bullock dray to the Coromandel Valley Institute to present a concert, and in September of the same year they sang at the Noarlunga District Hall.

By 1889 the choir had changed its name to the Adelaide Glee Club, and Mr A Walmsley had taken over as conductor, a post he held for the next 22 years. Around 100 years later, when Mr W Shaw was the conductor, the name of the choir was changed to the Adelaide Male Voice Choir, because the music term "glee" was no longer understood in the wider community, and some people were under the impression that the Glee Club told jokes and funny stories.

It is Adelaide's oldest continuously performing male choir, with a fine tradition of good singing and good fellowship, and its mission is to perform quality music at the finest possible level and to share the joy of music with the community. During Bill Shaw's time as conductor, the choir adopted the motto "Celebrating choral excellence".

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Over the next decades the choir sang across all areas of Adelaide and in a wide range of venues, mainly town halls, church halls and institutes, but also in some less usual spots, such as the Semaphore Rotunda and the end of the pier at Glenelg. They also performed at several cricket clubs, where sometimes the choir members would play an informal cricket game with their hosts, before presenting a concert in support of the club. Early choir records show a concert for the Torrenside Football Club at Thebarton, but there is no mention of any joint informal football game!

Songs such as "Excelsior", "Serenade", "Song of Hope", "Night, Lovely Night", "Sleighting Glee", "The Sea is England's Glory", "March of the Torch Bearers", and "The Sea Hath its Pearls" were in the early repertoire of the choir.

The Adelaide Town Hall, the Victoria Hall and the Exhibition Hall were popular venues for the choir's major concerts, several of which were benefit concerts, raising funds to assist promising young

performers in the community to go overseas for further study. One such concert was in support of a young pianist, Mr G Short, to undertake further study in Germany in 1914. He was the choir's accompanist and was granted leave of absence from the choir for the proposed period of study. Unfortunately, World War One intervened, and he was interned in Germany. The choir kept meticulous records of attendance at rehearsals, and any absences resulted in a "please explain" letter, but in 1915 the choir graciously made an exception to this strict rule for prisoners of war, who were allowed to stay on the books for the duration of the war, without having to send a written apology!

The songs performed at the choir's 30th anniversary celebration in 1914 included "The Little Sandman", "The Viking Song" and "Oh, Peaceful Night". A 1919 concert included the songs "To the Sons of Art", "When Shadows Flee Away" and "The Long Day Closes".

During the Depression years in the early 1930s, it became evident to the choir that some of the members were going through particularly hard times. A decision was made to waive the membership fee for anyone who had lost his job or whose business was struggling. Members whose fees had been waived were still considered full members with all the rights and privileges, including voting rights. Such members were also entitled to free tram tickets, paid for by the Club, to enable them to attend rehearsals and performances. What comes strongly through all the choir documentation over the years is the spirit of friendship and supportive fellowship among the members.

Tougher economic times in the 1930s meant that audiences were harder to find, so in 1933 the choir turned to broadcasting for the ABC on station 5CL, preparing and presenting 5 direct-to-air broadcasts in that year, each member in full concert dress in the studio. After the Second World War the choir resumed its extensive program of performances in the community and began to include at least one concert in a country area each year.

The choir is an independent self-supporting body and does not receive any government or corporate funding. On the contrary, the choir has a long history of supporting charities in the local community and further afield – for example, raising money for groups such as the widows and orphans from the Broken Hill mine disaster (1895), the Bushmen's Corps in the Boer War, the Tubercular Soldiers' Aid Society, the Red Cross and other charities in World War One, and for "any patriotic organization" in World War Two. During World War Two, the choir performed many concerts at the Wayville Army Camp and the Bedford Park Sanatorium, to raise the spirits of the troops and patients. The repertoire included the songs "Peace and War", "The Soldiers' Farewell" and "A Roman War Song". In 1948 the choir took part in a Choral Concert in the Adelaide Town Hall to raise money for the Lord Mayor's "Food for Britain" Fund. In later years, the choir performed fund-raising concerts for a wide range of community causes and charity groups such as the St John Ambulance, Minda Homes, the Royal Institute for the Blind, and numerous others.

In the 1950s Mr R Mellish was the conductor of the choir, which presented about 8 concerts per year and supported a range of charities in metropolitan Adelaide and in country towns, as well as participating in community events, for example the Royal Music Festival and River Pageant in Elder Park in 1958, when the choir sang from a barge moored in the river.

During the second half of the twentieth century there was a rapid rise in the availability of commercial entertainments and a related decline in the popularity of choir performances in the community. Several choirs folded, due to declining membership numbers and difficulty in attracting audiences. By the time Bill Shaw was invited by the Adelaide Glee Club in late 1984 to become the conductor of the choir, it was struggling to keep going, with a membership of around 16 active singers, although there were other names listed on the roll. However, he was not daunted. He could see that the Club was keen to rebuild, and he agreed to “give it a go”. He was the conductor of the choir for the next 39 years and was successful not only in rejuvenating it but taking it to new heights of musicianship and community service.

Bill was a professional music educator and trained choral conductor, singer and pianist, with a strong academic background and extensive practical involvement in music-making for all ages, from presenting programs for young children to conducting various choirs, bands, ensembles and orchestras for participants of all ages at professional and amateur levels. He was a man of vision, energy and ideas and he set to work on several fronts, including the formation of a supportive choir committee. He introduced new music, new performance standards, new performance format and new performance venues and opportunities, drawing on his wide network of musical and community contacts in South Australia and interstate.

One of the popular measures which Bill developed was to present themed concerts : for example, songs from operettas and musicals; sacred music; jazz-era melodies; sea-shanties; highlights of opera (which later included an annual sold-out opera dinner event); songs of love and travel; Gilbert and Sullivan songs, and many others. Accomplished guest vocalists and instrumentalists contributed to the quality of the programs, which were soon attracting large and enthusiastic audiences. The morale of the singers rose accordingly, membership numbers increased, and the reputation of the choir rose in the community. Ten years later, the membership had doubled, and the choir had a full house at its 110th anniversary concert at the Adelaide Town Hall, in the presence of the choir’s Patron Her Excellency, The Honourable Dame Roma Mitchell AC DBE Governor of South Australia.

Bill recognized the importance of strengthening the choir’s place in the Adelaide community, so that it would become known and respected for its role in supporting significant commemorative occasions. For example, he consolidated the choir’s role in leading the singing at the Anzac Day service at the Cross of Sacrifice, arranged for the choir to participate for several years in the program of lunch-time concerts in the foyer of the Royal Adelaide Hospital, and liaised with the Mary Potter Foundation for the choir to participate in the Loving Tree Christmas Carols evening.

The performance year always included several concerts which were fund-raisers for charitable causes or institutions, for example, the Anti-Cancer Foundation, the Lions Child and Youth Health Project, the Parkinson’s Syndrome Society of SA, the Prostate Cancer Association, the Women’s and Children’s Hospital Foundation. Commitments such as these, plus other regular concerts at retirement villages and for church groups were an important bonding influence for the choir. The members took quiet pride in belonging to a group which played such a positive role in the life of the community, and it strengthened the feeling of camaraderie and loyalty within the choir.

The annual schedule was augmented every year by special events such as tours to SA country areas (eg Meningie, Penola, Naracoorte); interstate trips (eg Melbourne, Brisbane, Orange); hosting visiting choirs (eg the Harvard Glee Club, the Buderim Male Choir); concerts for the National Trust in the State Dining Room at Ayers House; lunch-time concerts at the Flinders Street Baptist Church; evening concerts for the Adelaide Music Club; the national Australian Choralfest in Adelaide in 2004; singing at the launch of the Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health; filming a concert of Christmas carols for TV Channel 44; performing concerts at the Adelaide Fringe; presenting sea-shanty concerts at the SA Maritime Museum for the annual SA History Festival; and many more such events.

The future of choral music in Australia was at the front of Bill's mind, and one of the ways that he saw for promoting continuing interest was through a mentorship program for aspiring young conductors. He instituted a scheme whereby a selected young musician could gain practical experience in choral conducting and repertoire by joining the choir for a few years as a chorister and assistant conductor. The program started in 2004, and by the end of 2023 there had been six such "apprentices", who all continued in music-related fields.

In the Australia Day Honours list in 2011, Bill was awarded an OAM (Order of Australia Medal) for his services to music in the community, especially through the Adelaide Male Voice Choir. The award was greeted with pride and acclaim by the choir, as being very appropriate acknowledgement of the inspiring work he had done over the years. Not only had he guided the members through a richly varied repertoire and honed their technical and interpretive skills, but he had also taken on a wide range of organizational and administrative tasks. These included devising the theme and content of each concert; choosing, sourcing and arranging music especially for the choir; organizing contacts, venues and performance opportunities; mentoring young conductors; engaging and rehearsing soloists; writing funding applications; registering choir involvement in various festivals; researching the history of the choir in the archives held in the State Library; doing radio and newspaper interviews and writing publicity materials; and working with his wife Daina in preparing the choir's *In Harmony* newsletter for publication.

All the work Bill did for the choir, as with all his community commitments over the years, was undertaken on a voluntary basis. On 31 January 2024, Bill retired from his position as conductor and director of music of the Adelaide Male Voice Choir, after completing 39 years in that role – a period which covers more than a quarter of the choir's history. He was the choir's eighteenth conductor since its establishment in 1884, and the longest serving. During his term in office, he played a significant role in developing the choir's skills, repertoire and community service, so that it now has a place at the very heart of music making in the community. The choir is acknowledged and appreciated for the professional quality of its singing and for the positive contribution it makes to happy and inclusive community building.

During his time as conductor, Bill was fortunate to have the support of three talented accompanists: Clem Gracie, Margaret Lambert and Edward Kriek.

The new conductor of the choir is Jonathan Leske, and we wish him luck as he starts his journey.

During its long history, the choir has been privileged to have as its Patrons some of the most distinguished members of the Adelaide community. These have included Governors of South Australia, Chief Justices of South Australia, Lord Mayors of Adelaide, Premiers of South Australia and a Minister of the South Australian Government.

In 2022 the new Governor of South Australia, Her Excellency The Honourable Frances Adamson AC, arranged to share her patronage duties with her husband Mr Rod Bunten, and the choir was pleased to welcome Mr Bunten as its Patron. He quickly developed a rapport with the choir, and in May 2023 he sang in the bass section of the choir at its concert *Sailors, Settlers and their Songs* at the SA Maritime Museum for the SA History Festival.

The choir has also been fortunate in having prominent members of the South Australian community as its Vice Patrons. The current Vice Patrons are media personality Peter Goers OAM and concert pianist and retired music teacher Jeffrey Kong.

This year the choir is able to celebrate its 140th anniversary secure in the knowledge that it has weathered many storms in the course of its existence, including two World Wars, the Depression, and the Covid pandemic, and that it continues to provide joyful music experiences for the community.