

The leader of cacophonists... is Arnold Schoenberg.
- Henry T. Finck, *Musical Progress*, New York, 1923.

Coming to you live...



*Peter McCloy, John Mills, Thea den Hollander,
Carolyn Syme, Wendy White, Amanda Ryan,
Judy Buchhorn.*

These choir members joined with the Sydney University Graduates Choir to sing Verdi's *Requiem* in the Sydney Town Hall a few weeks ago. The week before that we sang Handel's *Messiah* in the University Great Hall, and some of us sang Brahms' *Requiem* in the Sydney Opera House a few weeks after that.

Singing in a massed choir is a thrilling experience. Not just the performance itself, but the rehearsals that precede it, the excitement as you see the audience building, and hear the orchestra tune. Then being part of the creation of a wonderful piece of music, wishing you could be in the audience to hear yourself sing. I once sang in a choir of 1200 voices in the Opera House. The choir outnumbered and totally surrounded the audience. What an experience!

Authors can revisit their work constantly, an artist's work is reasonably permanent. But for a musician, when the performance finishes, that's it – it's gone forever. Sure – it may be recorded, but a recording is to the live performance as a postcard is to the reality of, say, the Grand Canyon. You have to be there! The only way to know what 1200 voices and a 60 piece orchestra sound like is to be there!

Being in the audience is great, performing the work adds another dimension. Maybe it even

beats being the composer : Brahms told a choir that they sang his work better than he composed it!

Rehearsing is a process of education, as you get to know the music, experience the nuances, polish your diction, feel the work come together. You develop an intimacy with the music, and your future encounters with a piece you know, whether live or as a recording, become more meaningful.

I recently watched *Performance*, a movie about a string quartet. A student's teacher criticises her performance of Beethoven's *String Quartet in C Sharp Minor Opus 131*. When she asks him what she has to do to reach a satisfactory standard, her teacher hands her a three volume autobiography of the composer, and tells her to read it. He's telling her that understanding the composer adds to an appreciation of the music. In my experience, that's certainly true! How can you appreciate Beethoven's anguish in *Missa Solemnis* if you don't know of his deafness and awful tinnitus?

The movie is about the quartet's experiences leading to a performance of *Opus 131*. I won't go into the details – things become very complicated – go see the movie! But I learned a lot about chamber music, the workings of a string quartet and how the players work together, something that I'd not realised. I have a complete set of Beethoven's String Quartets, but they didn't feature in my regular listening, nor can I say that I appreciated them. With my newfound knowledge, I play my CD of *Opus 131*, and find myself enjoying it in an entirely new way. Listening becomes more active rather than passive.

Did you see Chinese pianist Lang Lang on TV, playing Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No.2*? It proved to me that there is a visual element to the appreciation of music. Having seen the miracle of Lang Lang's fingers, I now listen to one of my favourite pieces with a new appreciation of the music. Did you know, by the way, that Rachmaninoff was 1.98m tall? (That's 6'6" if you're as old as me.) He had big hands, which

certainly influenced his compositions – he wrote what he could play.

My remarks, by the way, probably apply to all forms of music – seeing a live performance adds a new dimension, learning about the music and the composer makes it even better, and there's no greater experience than actually performing.

Action plan : Join a choir. Yes you can!

Even highly qualified musicians now find it quite difficult to earn a living from their art. Perhaps the supply exceeds the demand.

Some say that the problem is caused by placing the education of talented young musicians in the hands of bureaucrats rather than musicians.

In a recent article* Wendy Earle speaks of a downgrading of the content of courses in the arts with the substitution of literacy and numeracy targets. Such targets can, of course, be quantified and imposed in a prescribed curriculum, which is politically convenient. There is a view that arts must earn their place in our children's education by demonstrating an economic and social value.

Why should this be so? Earle continues : "[We could] free the arts from the... get-the-grades emphasis of an exam-driven curriculum, and create a space where children can learn about some of the greatest artistic achievements of the past and enjoy their own artistic experiments... The discussion is narrow and short-sighted, exaggerating art's ability to solve social ills and promote economic development...

"The problem facing advocates of the arts and arts education is that arts can have many outcomes (positive and negative). But to demonstrate, or even claim, a causal relationship between being educated in the arts and being a good person, appears absurd and snobbish."

In other words, our personal enjoyment of the arts is purely individual, even selfish. Art for art's sake! Does that imply that we cannot justify schools offering education in the arts? Imagine a society in which the value of our activities must be quantified and evaluated by its contribution to making us "better people".

Could it be that the problem isn't only on the supply side? We don't need fewer artists, we just need to do something to attract bigger audiences! We can, of course, take things into our own hands, and accept individual responsibility for the survival and expansion of the arts.

I met three year old Harry on a Sydney ferry. We were both on our way to the Opera House. I was on my way to a rehearsal. Harry, an accomplished air guitarist, was taking his parents to a Baby Prom. These programs have been running at the Opera House for thirty years – they are a perfect introduction to live performance for children.

Not that Harry needed an introduction. He made it perfectly clear to me that music is an important part of his life, and that he understood exactly where he was going and what he would experience, and that this was something he wanted and looked forward to.

In ten years time Harry may well have different tastes, and display a typical teenage contempt for the classics, but he'll keep growing, and I'll bet the knowledge he's absorbing now will come to the fore, possibly with the appearance of a few grey hairs, and he'll benefit accordingly. Or, perhaps, his appreciation of fine music will just keep growing – can Beiber and Beethoven coexist?

Harry will have a solid musical foundation, whatever his tastes, and this is something that our education system is increasingly denying our children. That's short-sighted and tragic.

So if you want your children – or grandchildren – to grow up acquainted with some of the better things in life, it's probably up to you.

Choirs such as the Newcastle University Choir provide valuable opportunities for young musicians to gain experience, as members of an orchestra or as soloists. The choir would love to perform more of the major classics from the choral repertoire, and when we do our audience numbers reflect an ongoing popularity and demand for these works. However, the costs are high, and these performances usually lead to a financial loss. We need the support of more people, and hopefully sponsors.

When you enjoy our concerts, you are also helping to support young musicians and in no small way are contributing to the quality of life in the Hunter. At the same time, you'll be enjoying all your music more! Everyone wins.

On the record:

Having spent some time extolling the virtue of live performances...

The choir is now rehearsing for our next project - a CD of some of our favourites. More details in our next issue, and something to look forward to.

* You can find Wendy Earle's article online at www.spiked-online.com/site/article/13634.

Marilyn Horne passes along the advice her close friend Stravinsky gave her about enduring the critics: "After one lousy review," she recalls, "Stravinsky pulled a silver flask filled with Scotch from his pocket and handed it to me. 'Drink this immediately,' he said. 'This is the only way to survive.'"

Letter to the Editor



A group of young musicians from Newcastle Boys High School circa 1952. Kevin McDonald is third from the right.

The item in issue No.27 of *Cacophony* regarding the proposed Newcastle Youth Orchestra was of considerable interest to me. I have long been saddened by the fact that the Newcastle area lacks a symphony orchestra, albeit an “amateur” one, or even a small classical music orchestra.

Over 60 years ago there was a considerable amount of classical music initiative locally in the Newcastle area, and I was one person involved in it. In my final two years at Newcastle Boys High School, a few of us formed a septette and played

light classical music. I played the clarinet. Around the time 1953-54 when I was a student at Newcastle Teachers College, we had a very small classical music group. At the same time there was a Newcastle Technical College “symphony” orchestra, conducted by a person named (I think) John Laman. I played clarinet in that orchestra, as well as being 2nd clarinet in the local Gilbert & Sullivan orchestra where *Pirates of Penzance* was performed. Also, in the years 1950-54 (approx.) the noted violinist, Errol Collins, organised and conducted a youth “symphony” orchestra - we rehearsed in a hall at Tighe’s Hill. These were the very early days of Newcastle Conservatorium, headed by Harold Lobb.

I went away teaching in western NSW in 1955, and my involvement in local classical music ended (sadly for me). I did play the clarinet in the local Dance Band in the town where I was teaching (1955-57)!

Anyway, enough of my reminiscences. The sad fact remains that (as far as I know) very little happened in later years regarding local (Newcastle) musicians getting together to play classical music. When I returned to the Newcastle area later on, all I could look forward to for my love of classical music were the occasional visits to Newcastle by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and occasional visits by performers such as the pianist Claudio Arrau (if that’s how his name is spelt!).

Kevin McDonald

Musician performs in eight countries in 24 hours

A German musician who wanted to break a world record and promote his new CD gave concerts in eight countries this weekend — all in 24 hours.

Vicente Patiz, 34, first performed in the northwestern German city of Oberhausen on Saturday and then drove more than 1,000 km (600 miles) to give more concerts in Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Switzerland and Liechtenstein, performing his final concert in Austria on Sunday.

The concerts, at which Patiz played Mediterranean guitar music he had composed himself, lasted up to 1-1/2 hours and were attended by between 20 and 100 people.

“The concerts weren’t all held at sociable times,” he said. “It was a bit difficult to get the Swiss to come to a concert first thing on Sunday morning.”

“Each of us has that right, that possibility, to invent ourselves daily. If a person does not invent herself, she will be invented. So to be bodacious enough to invent ourselves is wise.”

- Maya Angelou

Cacophony is edited by Peter McCloy on behalf of the Newcastle University Choir, who do not necessarily share the views of the editor. To contribute or to communicate, email us at newsletter@newcastleuniversitychoir.com

For more about Newcastle University Choir, go to www.newcastleuniversitychoir.com