

## MUSIC FOR A WHILE

My father was an operatic tenor trained in the Bel Canto manner. Prior to marrying my mother, he was a lead tenor in the South Australian State Opera Company. My mother was a pianist and accompanied my father in home recitals. I was introduced to '*La Donna e Mobile*' and '*Una Furtiva Lagrima*' at a very early age.

Home recitals were Potter family affairs, consisting of our family together with uncles, aunts and cousins on my father's side. Dad always sang a few songs; "*Come into the Garden Maud*" was a favourite. My Uncle Norman had a bass voice and could hit a low C. He and Dad used to sing '*Watchman, What of the Night*' regularly, and occasionally the duet from the Pearl Fishers. This was all good stuff for a growing boy to be involved in.

My Dad's sister Florence could sing a fair soprano, but she always had to be encouraged to do so at family gatherings. Getting her up to sing became a family ritual. She used to sit in one of our lounge chairs and counterfeit reluctance, like the Speaker of the House being led to take his seat. While this was going on Auntie Florence used to keep saying the phrase "Oh Goy" for some reason I never understood. Finally, she would give in, stand up and sing like an angel.

Another family that attended these gatherings regularly was that of my father's second oldest brother Harold and his wife Anne. Auntie Annie was as wide as she was tall and used to sit in a precarious manner on the very front edge of her seat, from which position she would talk continually. I remember one time when she slipped violently off the edge of her chair on to the floor without the semblance of a pause in her conversation. Uncle Harold was a quiet man who always had an enigmatic smile on his face. It seemed that he enjoyed listening to his wife's vociferous conversation, but of that we were always uncertain.

Now, there was nothing snobbish about the Potter family's musical taste. My cousin Douglas could play the popular song repertoire by ear, so our recitals were also sing-songs. '*On Top of Old Smokey*' was popular, I seem to recall, along with such gems as "*Row, Row, Row Your Boat*" and "*Irene Goodnight*"

The memory of these occasions still brings to me a sense of foundations in my life, at both a community and music level. I recall that in Grade Five at school, my teacher Miss Mildy used to invite students to bring solo songs to the class. On three occasions I sang Italian Opera Arias that I had heard Dad sing. I had the music right, because I had developed a good memory for music, and the words of the first line were right; but thereafter I sang with great gusto using words that were entirely gibberish. All of this caused great interest on the part of the teaching staff. I remember Miss Mildy bringing the Grade Six teacher, Miss Hollingsworth, in to listen. I am not sure to this day whether they recognised that the words were nonsense. I was a bit of a show-off in those days, so I did not care much what they thought!

I should slip in here that I learned to play the fife during my stay in Miss Mildy's class. The fife is a steel flute, played horizontally. We had a drum and fife band at East Adelaide Primary School; by Grade six I had graduated to the front row of the band and was enjoying playing "*Colonel Bogey*" and "*Men of Harlech*" each day as the school marched into class. The band had a uniform which we used for special occasions. I recall playing in a mass band on the Adelaide Oval on the occasion of the visit of the Duke of Gloucester.

## **Piano**

When I was nine years old my mother enrolled me to learn piano. My first teacher was a man. He had an outstanding reputation but, when teaching theory, he would sit and stand you alongside of him and rub

his hand up and down the back of your leg. When I reported this to my mother I was quickly shifted to study with another teacher, Miss Alice Moncrieff.

The Moncrieff sisters, two of them, lived in a magnificent home on Payneham Road, St Peters. I am unsure what their father did before he died but he obviously had money, because the sisters not only had a gracious residence to live in but sufficient private funds to live well without having to participate in regular secular work. The sisters were ladies of manners, both in conversation and action. Music teaching for Alice was more like a hobby than an employment. She had about nine students, so her income from teaching was minimal.

Every year, the Misses Moncrieff held a student recital. The house would be magnificently prepared. I remember, in particular, numerous boxes of small Carnations called Pinks tastefully displayed around the recital room. And the baby grand piano was always polished to perfection. I can only remember two such recital occasions, the last two I attended. On the penultimate occasion my contribution was the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata No. 14, Opus 27, No.2, "*The Moonlight*". If I say so myself, I have a good touch, on the piano, so this sonata was made for me. The problem was that I was playing from



Not the Moncrieff's home but a similar Bluestone villa in Adelaide

memory and there was a place where there was a recapitulation; you were supposed to play just twice but somehow I got lost and played it three times before moving on to the concluding passage! Thankfully nobody noticed, or they were polite and did not mention it. Alice looked pleased at my effort and the other students were considerate in their congratulations at supper, as the Moncrieff manners demanded, so no harm was done.

My last performance at the Moncrieff's home was the Rondo from Beethoven's Sonata No. 8, opus 13, "*The Pathétique*". I found this great fun at the time. Recently I heard it played by Krystian Zimerman and marvelled that I had played such a piece at age fifteen, because my fingers can no longer do it and I lost touch with the piano later in life. My problem as a young pianist was that I lost the use of an eye at age thirteen and this greatly reduced my ability to read a musical score. I had to memorise everything if I wished to play in public. I would play Beethoven but when asked to play the National Anthem I could not do so because I had not memorised it! So much for piano playing; it never led anywhere but at least I had some training in music theory and the repertoire that stood me in good stead in other musical activities in later times.

## **Choirs**

My family attended the Methodist Church in East Adelaide. I recall singing in Sunday School Anniversaries on a specially built platform that held the two hundred students. Our conductors were found in the congregation. They were always enthusiastic people, and the rehearsals which went on for some twelve weeks during Sunday school time I remember as being pleasant enough.

At age seventeen, I was invited to join the Church Choir. The church boasted a Pipe Organ, a resident organist and a choir of perhaps



Spicer Memorial Methodist Church, Fourth Avenue, St Peters

twenty voices, some of whom, like my father, were no slouches at the art of singing. Mr Bailey was an old State Opera contributor, and Mavis Everett, the lead soprano had a professional career in classical singing. Then there was Vera Penhall, well trained but with a pronounced vibrato as was popular in her time of training. Later Gwenneth Annear joined the choir along with her brother David and their alto mother, who had a voice like Kathleen Ferrier. Gwenneth went on to England to perform at Glynborne and numerous other places in a long and successful singing career. My father-in-law, Les Solomon was the assistant organist and sang in the tenors. He could sight read any piece of music and earned my great admiration for that ability. There were lots of others I could mention, but I think the reader by now will have the impression that the Spicer Memorial Methodist Choir was not at all a bad place to learn the art of choir singing.

One practice night I was surprised when Jim Duff our organist asked me to sing a solo. It was a one liner: "The days of man are but as grass, as a flower in the field, so he perishes". Not exactly exciting stuff and the music was pretty ordinary too. I suppose the challenge was to make the pronouncement mysterious and profound, a challenge which I probably did not measure up to. My next solo part was to sing the bass part of the trio in Haydn's chorus, "*The Heavens are telling*". This

was definitely more like it and it opened up for me a life-long appreciation of Haydn's great work "*The Creation*", which I had the pleasure of introducing to music audiences when I conducted it several times in several country towns in South Australia and recorded portions for an ABC broadcast in later years.

The Spicer choir sang on Sundays in both the morning and evening services. We used to gather in the choir vestry at the side of the church building, collect our music and march in at the appropriate time to sit in pews located at the front of the church on each side of the pulpit, looking towards the congregation. We would stay there until after the third hymn when we would march down to sit in the congregation to hear the sermon. We had a good repertoire of anthems, through Handel, Mozart and Cesar Franck to Caleb Simper. The latter composer was regarded by some as beneath their dignity, but I enjoyed his "*King of Kings*" and "*Break Forth into Joy*" tremendously. One of the great disappointments of my life was that on a work trip to the UK I spent a night in Barnstaple in Devon not realising that down the street was the Church where Simpler played the organ and composed anthems for 52 years!

## **The Repertoire**

From age eighteen to around about age twenty-eight, I spent a great deal of my time listening to recorded classical music. In those days it was all vinyl records and the search was always on to find equipment that would give you the best results. The elimination of back-ground noise was particularly important, and we were fortunate in those days that record players reached a very high level of performance.

Having a good speaker was especially important. My research led me to build a speaker box; it was about a metre high and about 600mm wide with an internal sound filter. It was designed for a very high-

performance speaker but my budget only ran to a cheaper version, Nevertheless, the low E in the opening bars of Wagner's *Das Rheingold* ran along the floor with a very satisfactory rumble!

In conjunction with the speaker box I built another cabinet to hold the record player, a mono tape recorder and a cupboard underneath for records. My wife Judy could never understand why it was necessary to have two boxes, just to play records but many pleasant hours were spent with fellow 'musos' listening to everything from Mozart's Jupiter Symphony and Schubert's *Winterreise* to a range of operas and oratorios. My taste in music changed over time. In the end my favourite composers became Henry Purcell, William Byrd and Claudio Montiverdi. All of this was good preparation for things to come.

## **Conducting**

When I was 23 years old I married Judy and we moved to Jamestown. The Methodist Church had a choir, but it had fallen on sad days by the time we got there. There were just not enough singers. Herb Medlin had been holding the fort as conductor for a long time and now wished to pass the baton to someone younger. I was persuaded to have a go at it. We had an electrified American Organ, a passable organist, and an ensemble of two sopranos with reasonable voices, a tenor who had a voice like a rasp on a fruit tin and the respectable bass voice of Herb Medlin. Somehow we managed to contribute an anthem to the morning services. In the evening Herb and I would usually contribute a solo. Being choir master, I had the freedom to schedule myself to sing bass solos from the Messiah like "*Behold I tell you a Mystery*" on such occasions. The audience was unsophisticated, and my efforts were appreciated.

Jamestown had two town choirs. A male voice choir led by Mr Merritt, the pastor of the Baptist Church. I sang second bass in those days and

greatly enjoyed such works as '*On the Bank Two Roses Fair*' and the stirring '*Comrades at Arms*'. Because of my efforts at the Methodist Church I graduated to be the Assistant Conductor of the Male Voice Choir at Jamestown. And I later held the same post for the Jamestown Choral Society conducted by a Mrs Pierce, whose husband was a farmer who made conductor's batons as a hobby. I used one of his batons for many years after leaving Jamestown. All of this was good grounding in practical choir conducting. Behind the scenes I found an outstanding singing mentor in Emlyn Gordon Hitchings, a Welsh preacher who had sung professionally for many years in the United Kingdom before coming to Australia. I sang quite a few solos at Jamestown social events in those days. I found a brilliant accompanist in Mrs Rosa Skurry, who was the wife of the Shoe Shop owner Joe Skurry, a first tenor whose main occupation seemed to be making harmless mischief. Country towns are great places to live and learn and Jamestown was certainly a place where I was blessed on the music front. My last musical performance in Jamestown was to surprise the members of the Camera Club with a piano performance of Handel's "*The Harmonious Blacksmith*" and Beethoven's "*Fur Elise*" at their annual Christmas meeting.

After four years in Jamestown our family moved to Loxton. When I arrived there, I found that a group of people had formed the Loxton Oratorio Choir to perform Handel's "*Messiah*" two years previous to our arrival. But the project had grounded to a halt because the Congregational Minister who had conducted the performance had been shifted elsewhere. I was told that the Anglican Minister had offered his services, but he beat time on the half beat and the choir found that they could only sing by ignoring him. The Choir had an excellent management group and a superb accompanist, all they needed was a conductor who knew his stuff. One member of the choir was an old school mate of mine from High School days. He decided I should be the conductor and his recommendation of me was received well by the

committee. The Anglican Minister retired gracefully to write reports on our performances for the local newspaper.

The first performance for the revitalised choir was "*Messiah*". Loxton is a strong Lutheran town; many of our choristers were Lutherans and we were blessed when the local Lutheran Church was opened to us to perform, because it was an excellent place to perform and had a pipe-organ which we used on numerous occasions in later times. The *Messiah* went well apart from the pianist introducing an accelerando into every chorus. As the choir had ignored the Anglican Minister, the pianist was really leading the foray. The second year we did Maunder's "*Olivet to Calvary*" at Easter and Haydn's "*Creation*" at Christmas. I brought in a small orchestra for the latter performance.



St Peter's Lutheran Church, Loxton

The third year we did the First Part of Mendelsohn's "*Elijah*" and Britten's "*St Nicolas*". The latter was a three-choir operation for which we brought in the Renmark Ladies Choir as the gallery choir, their conductor Don Belle as the tenor soloist and a choir from the local High School prepared by Elizabeth Angove, a graduate of the London School of Music and contemporary of Benjamin Britten in her student

days. A brilliant young organist named Norman Inglis had arrived to teach Mathematics at the high School and he presided at the pipe organ for the hymns in the Britten work. Once again, things went well.

The next year we began an annual series of Bach concerts in the St Peters Lutheran Church. Lutherans came hundreds of miles to hear the choir sing in German cantatas like "*Wachet Auf*" and the "*Easter Oratorio*". Visiting artists provided by the Australian Arts Council contributed Preludes and Fugues on the organ, instrumental works and song recitals.



The 1965 Performance of "St Nicholas", Main Choir, Children's Choir and Orchestra - Ladies Choir and Organist in Gallery



The 1966 Messiah at Loxton in St Peters Church

In 1966 I was promoted to Adelaide. I returned to Loxton in December of that year to conduct the Messiah. The choir had swelled to eighty voices; the accompaniment was provided by a string orchestra with trumpeter led by a Supreme Court Judge, together with our regular pianist and organist on piano and organ. We had excellent soloists and it was a fitting climax to five years of rich music making.

When I moved to Adelaide, I was persuaded to take over conducting the Gawler Barossa Oratorio Choir. I had worked with their founding conductor Boyd Dawkins in the formation of the South Australian Country Choirs Association while at Loxton. He was a politician needing time to participate in an upcoming election, so he was keen for me to run the choir for a season. I conducted "*Elijah*" with this choir, Haydn's "*Stabat Mater*" and finished with a workmanlike "*Messiah*" accompanied by a string group and superb trumpet player from the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra.



Conducting the Combined Country Choir at Berri, 1965

I laid down my baton in December 1968. My career in public music-making came to an end. It was a great time of learning and contributing

to people's pleasure. Just recently a friend produced vinyl recordings of a 1964 performance of Stainer's "*Crucifixion*" and the 1966 *Messiah* in Loxton. Norman Inglis, revamped them on CD, and I frequently listen to them with great pleasure. They are performances sung by relatively unsophisticated country choristers who put their heart and soul into their singing and found meaning in the words. In my view, the Loxton Oratorio Choir was the best country choir in Australia in the 1960s. When I heard the *Messiah* after fifty years I wanted to find all the choristers and kiss them. Regrettably, most of them were long since dead, but I recalled their enthusiastic faces and names with great affection and not a little gratitude for allowing me to have the experience of making 'music for a while'.

JSP