



something old, something new

The Ernabella Choir

by Michael Winkler

The Ernabella Choir shared the billing with Watoto, a visiting choir from Uganda, before an audience of 800 at the Yulara amphitheatre

Western choral singing began at the school in Ernabella in 1940. It

was overseen by schoolmaster Rod Trudinger. Throughout the Presbyterian mission era the choir was not regarded as an autonomous entity. Everybody sang Pitjantjatjara hymns in four parts for church, something that became embedded in the school and community experience.

When the Queen visited Australia in 1954, selected singers from Ernabella – a remote community on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands in the far north of South Australia – were chosen to go to Adelaide and perform together. They piled onto the tray of an open-backed truck and travelled 1500km to Adelaide. At that time, 1200km of the journey was over rough dirt roads. By the time they reached the state capital, the Ernabella Choir was born.

Fast-forward more than half a century to 2005. Gordon Inkatji, who was seven years old when Mr Trudinger started the choral work in 1940, visited Ernabella School and made an impassioned speech. It resonated with Principal Sam Osborne.

“Gordon spoke about the value he got out of learning to sing in the choir really well over the years,” Osborne says. “He talked about the strength of the mind, body and spirit to do this, and that this was part of how he learned to read in English and in Pitjantjatjara.

“He wanted the children to learn the same things, to gain strength from this and to learn from the older members. He spoke about the old choir members and said it won’t be long and they’ll be gone. It was time to pass on the skills and the knowledge because it will soon be time for the children to pick up the baton and run on their own. He began to teach the kids singing but they weren’t ready to learn from him. They didn’t know how to rehearse with any sense of the discipline needed to sing in a choir.”

Instead Osborne chose some children’s songs and organised a ‘kid’s choir’ for six months. After the children had grasped the fundamentals – not just of singing in parts, but also of rehearsing in a disciplined way –

the older people were brought back in.

While singing in a choir is an attractive idea, and there is obvious worth in having children and senior community members collaborating on a shared project, this was not just an artistic exercise for its own sake.

“I came to a firm conviction that kids have to learn the discipline of learning to become expert at what they do,” Osborne says. “It doesn’t necessarily matter what it is they do – it is more the process.

“The other part of that equation is that it is important to choose pursuits of excellence in something that is deeply valued by the wider community, and something that is embedded within the identity of the local community also. The choir was something where the old people desperately wanted their children to benefit from what they had learned, to hand something over, but needed the school to be the conduit for that to happen. The choir was such an Ernabella thing.”

In 2006 the children’s choir performed on its own at local events and funerals, and with the adult singers at Christmas and Easter. In 2007 things took a huge step forward with a joint concert at the amphitheatre at Yulara before an audience of 800. Sharing the billing

DIGENOUS EDUCATION

was Watoto, a visiting Ugandan children's choir comprised mainly of orphans.

In September that year, a party of 60 people left Ernabella for a week-long tour to Adelaide. This group featured 20 adult members of the Ernabella Choir, including three who began in 1940, plus students and staff. They performed at Festival Theatre, Maryatville High School, and at Bill Edwards' church in Goodwood. (Bill Edwards was the choir's conductor in the 1960s and 1970s.)

In 2008, they opened the Assitej Conference in Adelaide and sang at the opening of the Anangu Backyard exhibition at Artspace in the Festival Theatre.

The 2009 joint performances with Watoto, was made more enticing by the fact that Ernabella's Children's Choir now performs a Watoto song translated from Lugandan into Pitjantjatjara (surely one of the most esoteric translation efforts imaginable!).

"I have really enjoyed watching the progression of learning among the students," Osborne says. "When we first began the kids had no idea how to focus, how to tune their ear in, how to listen when other people were trying a part. Even sitting still for a rehearsal is a hard thing to do. Now when you go to a rehearsal at Ernabella School, it looks like a choir rehearsal because the kids in their mind are disciplined performers rehearsing to sing well."

Part of the appeal of choir for Osborne was that, as principal, it helped engage children and gave them an extra reason for attending school. "The kids love choir. Up to 90 kids do choir, all at the same rehearsal, so if there are only 35 spots to go on tour you have to be attending, know the words, have your act together. It perpetuates the quest for excellence among the kids."

"Often choir is used as the reason to get back up on the bike and have another go (at school). They get confidence and encouragement from the family about choir. Everyone says, 'Hey, come on, you don't want to miss out on choir!'"

There are also clear literacy benefits. Virtually none of the children have English as a first language, and choir work has improved their oral literacy, their reading and their comprehension. "I noticed pronunciation improve. For example, when they sang the line in *Hakuna Matata*, "It's our problem free philosophy" – that includes the p, b and ph sounds, which are all the same sound in Pitjantjatjara. I noticed over time that they

were pronouncing those English sounds perfectly.



Lisa Saloman, Sam Osborne (Ernabella School Principal) and Stewart Colin

"Oral English improved, confidence improved, and in our NAPLAN testing the primary students did really well. Of our Year 3s, 87 percent made literacy benchmarks and 100 percent got numeracy benchmarks. It is all linked. The journey of the choir means kids have nailed down the discipline of learning, so there is a real change in the classroom learning environment also. Kids know how to learn and apply disciplines of learning to reading, writing and maths."

"In singing with the old people, I have enduring images in my memory of very old men and women with one arm around their grandchildren and the other arm pointing to the words on the overhead projector, singing an alto or tenor line into their ear. Children are learning to read English and Pitjantjatjara, but there is also that reinforcement of language, identity, culture across generations. One way children learn to read is by repetition and familiarity. Every time we sing a song at a rehearsal, we put the words up on a big screen, even if the kids already know all the words, so there is the visual reinforcement of the literate text."

An unexpected 'literacy outcome' was the time the choir's prowess averted a confrontation. "A very senior Anangu man came to see me at the end of a rehearsal," Osborne says. "It was in the midst of an awful fight that had split some big families. I knew he was coming because he was upset and wanted to sort things out. He waited outside while the kids were rehearsing, but by the time I got to see him he was a little teary and quite sentimental. He told me, 'What you are doing with the kids right now is how I learned to talk to you in English about the problem we are having now'."


"He said how moved he was. It was not just important in terms of singing but he believes he gained his control of English through learning to sing choir songs in English as a child. I think he is right. We have taught the kids many musical styles, many languages, many cultures. You teach them about life as you sing, choosing songs that promote optimism, that reflect passion and deeper thinking, and expose kids to a world that otherwise they don't really understand."

Approximately 40 percent of the choir's repertoire is songs in English, 40 percent in Pitjantjatjara, a lot of songs with words in both languages, plus occasional songs in other languages including Swahili and Lugandan. A few of the songs are written by students, and some are accompanied by percussion as a way of involving the students' other talents.

"I wanted to teach them how to sing in many different ways and styles," says Sam Osborne. "They naturally love to sing. It is a powerful, guttural kind of noise that they make. They have a power about their voices that they can call on and that I equate to a fifth gear above what most other people have."

"But I deliberately picked two songs by John Rutter, traditional English choral singing, to train the kids to sing with rounded sounds, focus on their breathing, get a soft and pure and smooth sound so that they could apply that style of singing to some of the songs. You have to train some of them out of what comes naturally, and it took explicit teaching to do that. On other songs you give them permission to let go, and that is very moving for the audience. They just take off."

The children dress in a similar manner to the original costume of the choir, an extra layer of connection to the Ernabella story and local identity. Principal Osborne left Ernabella at the start of 2009 and is now a *Dare to Lead* consultant in Alice Springs, as well as studying for a Doctorate. However, his connection to the choir remains strong, and his pride in the children's work ethic, ability and capacity to soften the hardest heart remains undimmed.

"The choir performs quite often at funerals and they are simply amazing," concludes Sam Osborne. "They help temper the level of emotion. If someone is feeling out of control, they listen to the kids and see them there, standing out the front, singing beautifully. They bring people together." 

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