

**THE MINISTERS' ARTS EDUCATOR'S AWARDS 2006
WRITTEN REPORT BY MICHAEL GRIFFIN – SECONDARY SCHOOL WINNER**

It is my pleasure to report on the professional development activity undertaken as part of winning the secondary teaching section of the 2006 Education and Arts Ministers' Award.

Introduction

This tour of 19 full days taken in late June-July 2006 was an outstanding success. The aims and objectives as set out in the application proposal were achieved, and only minimal alterations were required due to budgetary considerations, further suggestions from U.K organiser and mentor David Lawrence, and on one occasion, illness.

1. Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod Competitions, Wales

This can only be described as a very special event run by a very special team of organisers, most of whom are volunteers. This music festival began 60 years ago in the aftermath of World War II, as an attempt by a small village to make a contribution to world harmony and peace. Llangollen did this by inviting the nations of a fractured Europe to put the past behind them and unite in the celebration of each others music and culture. This message still shines brightly today and for 6 days thousands enjoy a universal friendship and watch a set of competitions involving instrumental and choral music, national costume, folk song and dance. Indeed, it is not difficult to see how the event managed to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, and to continue to attract important patrons (HRH Prince of Wales was in attendance, as was Terry Waite). The centrepiece of the competitions however, is the extensive choir competitions and having the reputation as being the strongest and widest set of choral competitions in the world, this was my enticement to attend.

I immersed myself in watching the competitions of varying styles: children's, female, male voice, barbershop chorus, youth and mixed choirs. I took my own notes and graded these choirs in their various divisions and compared my adjudication with that of the panel. This was possibly the most valuable thing I could have done, and I emerged with the impression that I was generally on the right track in regards to my assessments, notwithstanding many incisive illuminations from the adjudication panel. I am full of praise for the adjudicators. Each panel consisted of four experts in their field, and comments about each choir were read out to the audience as part of the presentation. This was done in expert fashion and serves to illuminate the position of the panel as well as educate the audience. To me this was indicative of the value they put on artistic excellence; that they are prepared to put it on the public record.

The general setting and organisation was also superb. The setting is an outdoor one like a big country fair, but the main stage –the World Stage – has been constructed especially for this event. This stage is huge, beautifully decorated with floral display; massive digital screens both sides and permanent seating for 41/2 thousand patrons. The various comperes' were informed, intelligent and humorous, and the sound system was excellent. The choirs were moved on and off stage seamlessly and adjudication was positioned at appropriate intervals. All in, this was a very slick logistics operation, borne from years of evaluation, reflection and fine tuning.

The majority of choirs I heard were of a very high quality and the best choirs were stunning. What I noticed about these choirs is their great concentration –they were

totally absorbed in what they were doing. These choirs know how to stay in the present and give 100% commitment of themselves to the text. This becomes physical: the whole body sings and reflects the music, and their faces were windows to choral conviction and the message of the text. The choirs were good to look at as well as to listen to. The diction was exquisite, the consonants being uniformly perfect and the vowels beautifully rounded. The ensemble showed evidence of acute listening as everyone's crescendo was together. There were no passengers in these choirs but a unanimous secure conformity. The repertoire sung was generally nationalistic using innovative movement and sound effects. The choirs showed a total trust in the artistic vision of their conductor and evidently had a special relationship with him/her. The best conductors were superb in their efficient use of gesture and control of their choirs. They managed to illicit great joy, passion, enchanting freshness and powerful dynamic contrasts from their choirs. The soloists were brilliant. As one adjudicator said "soloists have an effect on the rest of the choir, so choose the best available".

Australian choirs in a position to tour would do well to aim for Llangollen, but I say this with caution. This is an international competition of the highest order and applicants are selected on artistic merit (from CD submissions). Over the years, Australia has had some excellent representation, but this year no Australian choir nominees were selected. My cautionary note applies to the ambassadorial role expected of such choirs. Those at Llangollen will judge the Australian choral scene by what they see and hear: therefore international touring has a significant responsibility. Also, national repertoire is expected and a uniform reflecting the country is preferred. I would be more than happy to discuss these issues further for any groups considering such a tour, but what a marvellous opportunity for those who undertake the trip! To mix with so many cultures in this friendly and festive environment is an unforgettable experience, and so musically illuminating. The town itself is particularly beautiful and the locals could not be friendlier.

I have placed some photos of the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod 2006 at the following web address for public viewing:

<http://au.pg.photos.yahoo.com/ph/mdgriffin2002/album?.dir=/7932scd&.src=ph&.tok=phr6xOFBujFxpNWF>

Whilst at Llangollen I met with several key figures such as International Liaison Officer Keith Hall and Music Director Mervyn Cousins and gained a good understanding on many organisational aspects of the festival.

2. Eton Choral Course

It was a privilege and a highlight to spend 2 nights at Eton College observing Bob Chilcott tutor the 60 school leavers from around the UK (also one from Australia, one from Canada). What an opportunity for these young people to immerse themselves with quality: quality trainers, quality music and quality surroundings. Details about this course can be found at <http://www.etonchoralcourses.co.uk/thecourse/about.htm>, but in summary, the course was set up by Eton musical director Ralph Allwood 26 years ago as a preparation for those students hoping to gain a choral scholarship at one of Britain's reputable universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. I found this experience beneficial, not only in speaking with guest conductor Bob Chilcott and the other British tutors for the course, but with the students themselves who come from a range of social backgrounds to learn about and make choral music together. I was really impressed by the importance and magnificence of the English Cathedral music tradition which provides such a steady foundation for the continuation of traditional and newly composed sacred music. The end point of this course was an Evensong performance at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle following rehearsals in the

Eton College Chapel. Evensong was conducted by Timothy Byram-Wigfield, who gave me an insight into the pressures of his position as musical director of St George's Chapel, and having many extra services (on top of the 8-weekly) to perform due to royal demand. If I didn't have it before, this has given me the utmost respect for the cathedral music director.

3. BBC Singers rehearsal at the Amadeus Centre, London

I was invited to London to observe 2 days of rehearsing by the BBC Singers. Alas I was stricken for flu for a few days and the BBC Manager begged me to stay away on day one!! Nevertheless I was ok by the 2nd day, and attended the rehearsal conducted by Bob Chilcott in preparation for a recording of his own compositions to be made the following day. This choir, Britain's only full-time professional chamber choir is regarded as "the jewel in the crown" in British choral music. Numbering about 25, the choir includes an Australian alto and New Zealand tenor. The choir is employed by the BBC for live radio shows, recordings and major performances. As one would expect from a professional choir, there was little or no need for correction on the rudiments of music, nor were there any warm-ups. The significant costs of maintaining a professional choir demand that singers of this calibre do their homework thoroughly and are warm, ready to rehearse on time. Hence I found the rehearsal totally efficient and productive. The majority of Bob's direction was in regard to tone colour, phrasing shape and ensemble balance

Activities organised through David Lawrence

4. Birmingham Workshops and Singposium

Immediately following Llangollen, I jointly presented a workshop in Birmingham with David Lawrence to about 200 primary school children and 2 visiting South African Choirs. Interestingly, one of the visiting choirs was Stellenberg Girls Choir, which had only the day before won the "Choir of the World" competition at Llangollen. Watching their director –Andre Van der Moewe in action along with David was inspiring, particularly how David managed to workshop children of such diverse choral skill. For my part I took some warm-ups with the choirs and taught the younger children some Australian children's songs. The following day I attended 'Singposium', an annual conference for the Association of British Choral Directors (ABCD), in Birmingham. As well as sitting in on some sessions, I contributed by accompanying for Julian Wilkins in his presentation on youth choral music. Later that week on return from Eton College, I was special guest conductor with the City of Birmingham Young Voices, one of four choirs associated with the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. In my 90-minute session, I exposed the choir to Australian choral music including the Aboriginal work 'Ngana' composed by Stephen Leek. The choir is going to continue with this piece. I have been invited to do another workshop with this choir (and possibly other Birmingham choirs) on return.

5. Meeting with the BBC National Secretary of England, Louise Hall

Although based in Birmingham I met Ms Hall in Stratford-upon-Avon where she very generously gave me an insight into the magnitude, philosophy and workings of the world's largest international broadcaster, the BBC. Of particular interest was BBC Radio Three which promotes choral music with its feature *The Choir* hosted by Aled Jones, and the *BBC Choir of the Year* competition. The BBC has extensive internet listening and learning opportunities for choral music at the following site:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/aod/mainframe.shtml?http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/aod/classical_promo.shtml

Ms Hall was very interested in Australian Choral music (I gave her a complimentary CD of Brighton Secondary School's *Hope There Is*) and we discussed possibilities of my assistance in the presentation of a 30-minute feature on contemporary Australian choral music for the BBC. Also on the agenda was a discussion of the BBC Choir of the Year competition, given that our own ABC is in its inaugural year with a similar concept, and the BBC 'Twinning Schools' concept—an educational initiative from the BBC to foster international friendship between schools. Radio Three Controller Roger Wright was unable to join us in this discussion, but this is something I shall continue to pursue with the BBC.

6. Other rehearsals/performances

David Lawrence was assistant conductor to James Wood for the New London Chamber Choir. This choir, noted for its contemporary avant-garde status worked on the opera "Hildegard" (2002) in preparation for a performance in Holland. Whilst it was difficult to approach musically, it gave me an insight into the versatility of the voice and modern compositional style. The rehearsal took place at St. Marks, Marylebone.

Some planned events did not come to fruition. For example, Luciano Pavarotti's illness forced the cancellation of all his performances including the one I was to attend in the Yorkshire Dales, and David's attempt to get me into Royal Albert Hall was not successful. However, he suggested that I get a feel for the country and see local churches and music-making. This less structured part of my tour consisted of travelling parts of England and Wales visiting cathedrals and where possible attending concerts and Evensong. Some examples include Chester Cathedral Evensong, a piano trio concert in St John the Baptist, Chester, hearing the local Welsh Male Choir in Bety's e Coed, and seeing the magnificent St David's Cathedral in southern Wales. I also managed to get to Oxford and attend an early baroque concert in the Christchurch College Cathedral (the famous Christchurch Choir I wanted to see was on summer holiday). I also managed to enjoy much beautiful scenery and see some famous 13th Century Welsh castles and for some light relief, enjoyed a tour of Lord's Cricket Ground!

Summary

In summary, in 19 days I collaborated with many highly respected choral music figures, event administrators, educators and the BBC. Through general observation and structured activity, I have significantly increased my understanding and appreciation of English Choral music, the richest choral tradition in the world. Also, I have had the opportunity to promote Australian choral music and to open doors for future contact and collaboration.

It is my hope that this wonderful experience made available to me by SAYAB can be passed on to Australian educators and classrooms. To this end, I have already written articles on my Llangollen Eisteddfod experience for the Australian National Choral Association (ANCA), and the Australian Society for Music Education (ASME). I will take whatever opportunities I get to further promote choral music, and avail myself to any practitioner who might gain from my experiences.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the Government of South Australia, through DECS and SAYAB for this generous opportunity for further development. In particular, Jessica Machin from SAYAB has been of great assistance throughout the planning and execution of my trip; nothing has been too much trouble. I can say that my British counterparts were most impressed that our state had a system in place to

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reward, rejuvenate and encourage excellence in arts education. Long may it continue! I would be more than pleased to advocate these awards whenever I can be of use.

Michael Griffin
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