



Shining bright: All Girls Bright'n Beautiful, with Griffin centre, and Lundberg at front, third from right!

Raising voices

The national choir competition uncovers amazing talent

There are a million stories in the ABC Classic FM Choir of the Year competition. This is just one of them:

The Brighton Secondary School Chamber Choir, of Adelaide, consisting of 15-year-old Year 10 girls, was formed by music teacher Michael Griffin in January 2003. By July, under Griffin's direction, they had won the Performing Arts Challenge Under-18 Choir division in Sydney, which they took again in 2004 and 2005.

They followed that up with a tour of central Europe in November and December, during which they sang in, among other venues, the Porgy and Bess Jazz Club and Rathaus in Vienna, and St Nicholas Cathedral in Prague.

Griffin heard about the Choir of the Year competition early this year, and rallied the girls, who by then had renamed themselves The All Girls Bright'n Beautiful Choir.

The girls reassembled for the

first time since the European tour outside the ABC Centre in Collinswood, Adelaide, at midday on April 8. Griffin had chosen three compositions from the choir's repertoire of 35 songs: *This Little Babe* (from Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*), *Danny Boy*, and an old pop song, *Route 66*.

They had half an hour together to get back in tune, then it was onstage to face the judges. "It was a bit unconventional, the

way we did it," says soprano Jane Lundberg over the phone from Adelaide. "We're probably not the best example of a choir preparing for a competition. But because we've been singing together for a while we were able to just come together and have a go."

There was an added poignancy to the occasion: Griffin had accepted a job teaching in Dubai, and this looked like the last time he would direct the choir.

"We thought, regardless of the outcome, we would just put our all into it. We were up against groups that had prepared for months beforehand. But we really wanted it to be a happy occasion for him [Griffin], so he could go off and remember it as being a really positive thing. I didn't expect to win anything."

All Girls Bright'n Beautiful were the third to audition that day. The auditions were fairly casual, and competitors were able to watch each other. Most of the choir stayed to hear the rest of the auditions.

"It was very exciting - I don't know how else to describe it," Lundberg says. "When you went into the hall, everyone was trying to suss each other out and work out the competition. There were a few choirs that we were very impressed with. But we've been a competitive ensemble for a few years now. We're confident we've got a good, attractive sound, and we had a good program."

The Adelaide auditions were held over two days, and 20 choirs were heard. From that,

three youth and three adult choirs were selected to compete in the state finals.

"We were pretty eager to hear the result," Lundberg says. Griffin, back in Dubai, was emailed on June 5. All Girls Bright'n Beautiful had made the South Australian finals.

"We were like 'whoa!' when we got the email," Lundberg says, adding that, circumstances permitting, Griffin will fly home for the next stage. "So maybe this [the state finals] will be the last time with Mr Griffin." Or maybe not.

The auditions, held in six towns and cities across Australia, heard 7000 singers from more than 250 adult and youth choirs. There were choirs from trade unions, universities, schools and communities. Some others consisted of gays, lesbians and masons. The names were varied: The Spangled Drongos, Note Tonight Josephine, Stairwell to Heaven, Women with Latitude and Diplomatic Notes.

The music included Andrew Lloyd Webber, Gershwin, Monteverdi, Mozart, world music, jazz, religious, gospel, Polish and Russian folk songs, German Liedertafel.

For many of the choirs, even attending auditions was a challenge. The Shark Bay Community Choir started driving at 3am to arrive in Perth on time, and some Queensland youth choirs camped out or stayed in hostels.

"We've had an overwhelming response," says ABC Classic FM program manager John Crawford. **Fred Pawle**



Joyce DiDonato

Joyce to the world

A Kansas mezzo reveals her deepest desire

Joyce DiDonato has been praised the world over for her ability to communicate directly with an audience. When I meet her in a smart London café to talk about her new disc, I find that her directness doesn't stop behind the proscenium arch. To put it less airily, she's a hoot.

"When people used to tell me I was lucky to be an opera singer, with all the travelling and glamour, I'd say, 'You think I'm lucky? This life sucks!'" she laughs at one point. (She's since changed her mind about that, by the way.) When we're talking about fame a bit later, she says, "You've got to try and stay yourself, not be somebody you're not. People tell you that you've got to get a fur coat and act like a diva, but that's bullshit."

She certainly tells it like it is. And this no-holds-barred quality is also one of the most impressive things about the performance on her new CD, *The Deepest Desire*, a recital of American music with

pianist David Zobel. It contains five songs by Bernstein, Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* and the premiere recording of Jake Heggie's *The Deepest Desire - Four Dramatic Songs of Praise*, settings of texts by Sister Helen Prejean. There's also a bonus track of such surprising but perfect appositeness that you have to listen to the whole disc again in a new light. It's... but no, perhaps I'll let you discover it for yourself.

DiDonato's luxurious voice is captured beautifully, and her expressive and dramatic delivery fairly leaps off the disc. In short, it's a triumph for the mezzo from Kansas City. How did the recording come about? "It was all through Laurence Heym, who had worked as sound engineer on my *Radamisto* and *Amor e gelosia* discs," she says. "She said she wanted to set up her own label and I thought, 'Oh yeah, like you're really gonna set up your own label!' But she did, and she asked me to make a recording. Since I knew it was going to be promoted heavily, I decided to do a

recital of American music. I was what we have to be out there."

DiDonato had sung in Hegg's opera *Dead Man Walking* (also based on a work by Sister Helen Prejean), and knew that his beautiful *Deepest Desire* setting had to be included. "They're about arrival. The message is, when you know what you want for it with all your soul. The Dickinson settings are about searching for a place in the world so we put those earlier. The Bernstein songs are much more visceral, much darker, so they go at the beginning. It seemed a good idea to go on a journey from dark to light."

Since the disc is all about searching and journeys, it's good to report that DiDonato's own professional journey is going well. There was a take-no-prisoners Parisian performance of Dejean in Handel's *Hercules* recently, and she was Rosina in the Royal Opera's new production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in December.

She met Sister Helen Prejean when performing *Dead Man Walking* at New York City Opera. Did that help her performance of the songs, I wonder? "I think knowing her sort of taught me how to deliver these songs. Straightforward, but passionate. Is that what she's like? "Yes - she's like a beer-dinking buddy, but she's also larger than life. She's incredibly peaceful to be around but then she can be raucous and scream with laughter. I hope that comes across in the songs."

Does she listen to her own recordings? "This is probably politically incorrect - but yes, do. Sometimes it's hard to enjoy them, because I'm working with I listen to them, but I'm very happy with *The Deepest Desire*. She pauses. "You need to have humility. But if you don't think that what you do is beautiful and important, how can you expect other people to come along for the ride? But it's not on my mind all the time. I'm not that obsessive about it!"

Warwick Thompson
See review, page 52.

- The Choir of the Year state and national finals performances are open to the public, and will be broadcast on ABC Classic FM.
- Each state winner will receive a trophy and a share of \$25,000 prize money. The two national winners (one adult, one youth) will share a further \$13,000 in prize money, and one overall winner will be awarded a recording contract with ABC

Classics, which will include a new commission for broadcast by ABC Classic FM.

- The national final will be on 20 September.

- Tickets are on sale now for all finals, which will also be broadcast live on ABC Classic FM. To find out who is in your state final see program listings on page 70, or go to: abc.net.au/classic

Victorian final: Monday, 31 July,

8pm, Melbourne Town Hall, introduced by Mairi Nicolson. Bookings 136 100 or www.ticketmaster.com.au

Western Australian final: Tuesday, 1 August, 6pm, His Majesty's Theatre, Perth, introduced by Julia Lester. Bookings 1800 193 300 or www.bocsticketing.com.au

South Australian final: Wednesday, 2 August, 7.30pm,

Adelaide Town Hall, introduced by Julia Lester. Bookings 131 246 or www.bass.net.au

Queensland final: Thursday, 3 August, 8pm, Queensland Conservatorium of Music Brisbane, introduced by Mairi Nicolson. Bookings 136 246 or www.qtx.com.au

New South Wales final: Friday, 4 August, 8.00pm, City Recital Hall Angel Place, Sydney,

introduced by Damien Beaumont. Bookings 8256 2222 or www.cityrecitalhall.com

ACT final: Saturday, 5 August, 8pm, Llewellyn Hall, Canberra, introduced by Damien Beaumont. Bookings 6275 2700 or www.canberraticket.com.au

Ticket prices: \$25 adults; \$20 concessions; \$15 youth (booking fees apply).