

National Director, Annual Report 2023

A short history

It gives me enormous pleasure and of course a great deal of satisfaction to present the 25th Annual report since the formation of the first Sing Australia singing group in Canberra in 1998. It is also the 38th year since Sing Australia was established.

Sing Australia has been a long and fascinating journey and its not over yet! For the interest of those who have joined more recently the first group was called Colours and it was an all-female group. The reason for an all-female group was that I had previously started an all-male group in Canberra many years prior to that. This group evolved into an Association called The Australian Rugby Choir (ARC). Through that development it was eventually taken out of my hands. Sing Australia remained as the managers of that group for a couple of years but eventually the aspirations of the ARC and Sing Australia were at odds and Sing Australia terminated its connection with the ARC. That is another story for another time.

A new group purely for men was formed as a Sing Australia group. It was called Canberra Blokes. The latter group stayed as our only sole male group until last year when it merged with the Ladies group in Canberra which by then became known as Majura. The combined male and female group is now called Sing Australia Canberra. Canberra in all its different forms has always been our flagship even though it has gone through various pressure tests and changes. There are still two other groups remaining in Canberra – Belconnen and Tuggeranong. So that's how we started.. In a nutshell over the ensuing 10 years or so the Sing Australia network spread throughout the country maxing out at around 140 groups. It sadly and slowly declined from 2016 for all sorts of reasons. COVID didn't help but there are signs now of rejuvenation. Providing any more information than that now – well, we are talking a book!! I am hoping I can make a start on that next year. It would be nice to have it finished for our 40th in 2025. That would also mark my 53rd anniversary of my first public performance as an opera singer. We'll have to see.

Year 2023

Gigs

We had a pretty wonderful year around the network. We collectively presented 805 performances in the community. Many of those were at aged care facilities but there were also lots of gigs in the community at major events like Australia Day, Anzac Day and Christmas celebrations and all sorts of other events. Some of those were important fund raising events. We have had an amazing number of gigs through December – 180. Altogether, we have brought an enormous amount of joy to a lot of people. My estimate would be around 25,000 people but that could easily be much more than that. Even the collective joy we have had in presenting the gigs amounts to a lot of members gaining a tremendous amount of satisfaction. That is the real power of what we are about. That joy translates into an incredible impact on social and health well-being for a lot of lives. When we look at it like this our contributions are exceptionally beneficial in many ways. Among our members alone we have people recovering from serious illnesses or in the midst of therapy, we have lots of people experiencing grief, we have a number with the onset of dementia, we have had many who have experienced loneliness and depression, we have many new migrants finding their way in our society. These and more. We have those who just want to enjoy the freedom of discovering their singing voice without any pressures. Our gigs are also our way of promoting who we are. This is why it is so important to get out into the

community at every opportunity and sing – even for 30 minutes. So well done Leaders and helpers for all your wonderful initiatives. A lot of work goes into organising gigs and so to all those who make it possible we give you our sincere thanks. ‘You have done us proud’.

Weekly practices

A few groups have sadly withdrawn from Sing Australia over the year but we still have 73 groups that are pressing ever onwards and upwards. We have 2500 members meeting each week. That is pretty powerful stuff. Most groups are able to remunerate their Accompanists and Conductors. Most groups are able to contribute to sustaining community facilities where we practice. We have a large existing repertoire of songs but we are now looking to extending that further in 2024. The time seems to be right to introduce another songbook. We are so lucky to have some brilliant conductors and accompanists. It has been a most worthwhile challenge to encourage members to memorise songs as a high value mental exercise. It is also fruitful in being able to perform without lugging books around.

Tours

We have had two very successful tours. Our 9th tour to Norfolk Island and our 10th tour to Italy. Over the years we have had 42 overseas tours representing a participation of around 1200 members. On these tours we sing absolutely everywhere we can. On our recent Italy tour we took every opportunity to sing in an impromptu way in cathedrals, major tourist attractions and restaurants. We gave around 30 performances. On Norfolk Island we have the honour of singing for several services on Anzac Day and leading up to Anzac Day. We have a special opportunity to sing in their historic churches and of course in our resort where we stay.

National Gathering - October 2023

From all reports and through our survey the overall response to the National Gathering was very positive. Obviously with these events and with 530 people attending not everyone is going to give every aspect of it a tick but most of the essential elements relating to our singing were very well received.

Facebook

We continue to use our Facebook page as our main promotional tool. We post reports on gigs and we use it to promote special events and tours. It is easy to access and it means that everyone can see the information. I have posted 249 reports and 973 fabulous photos from various group performances, overseas tours and gatherings. A big thank you to all the groups who posted stories/ reports and photos to Head Office. They most certainly have provided a wonderful representation of what we do and what we are on about in Sing Australia. It's a pity more members do not see them!

Bulletins

I have sent out 22 Bulletins. Most were posted on the Leader page but some, particularly relating to the planning of the National Gathering, were sent out to Leaders by email. Important emails stay on this Leader page for an extended period. Others stay for a month or so. If you have mislaid the password please let me know.

Groups and Membership

We currently have 73 groups which is about half of what we had 10 years ago but it is still an impressive singing group network – arguably still the biggest in Australia. Obviously COVID played a big part in reducing our membership and some groups withdrew due to a lack of music leadership. HOWEVER, we currently have a total membership of 2520 and growing. We had around 600 new members this year. Not bad by any standard.

Our newest group in the network which can provide hope for the future is Sing Australia Burnside (Adelaide). It was started in February this year. It is led by Colin and Margaret Slater. It was formed following the closure of the nearby and fairly long running Magill group. Burnside started with a membership of 20 and that has now grown to approaching 50. The weekly attendance is close to 40. It has a fabulous team of helpers and the enthusiasm for taking the group to greater heights next year is very exciting as well as providing an inspiring lead to the rest of the network. The aim is to take the membership to 100 next year. We have a stunning venue in the Burnside Uniting Church with a beautiful grand piano, a wonderful accompanist in Tamra McDonald and all the mod cons in overhead screens and audio visual. The formula in a nutshell is making everyone welcome. The exciting development is the increase in the number of men. We now have 15. Just on that statistic alone we want to have at least 30 men in 2024.

Year 2024

Membership

We would love to see the national membership grow back to at least 3500. That means on average for each group to increase membership by 10 over the year. If we can do that by attracting younger people – that is people in their 50s and 60s the groups will take on new energy. From that we would hope new leadership possibilities will arise. Don't take from this that we don't value our older members - we do, very much so. But it only stands to reason that our future lies in strengthening our membership with younger people. On the same score we have wonderful leaders but lack of succession is most certainly impacting on future growth potential. New ideas – new energy – widening our networks. Once again, we are not undervaluing the great contributions of our existing leaders or not appreciating them but It just makes sense to bring freshness into Leadership. This also contributes to longevity – obviously!

Tours

Next year we plan to have our 10th tour to Norfolk in April. It will be a very special tour. We have established an important relationship with the people of Norfolk Island. It is hoped we can maintain that connection through our annual tours. Above all they are fun.

In September we plan to have our 4th tour to Spain and Portugal with an added attraction of touring to Morocco. Both these tours are available for booking now through our website. Please do not delay if you want to participate. Please know that Margaret and I will lead this tour and I will lead the Norfolk Island tour regardless of what transpires with Sing Australia.

National Gathering Adelaide - August

This is already looking incredibly exciting with around 500 expressions of interest. We will have to spin the wheels in the new year. We can come up with a brilliant gathering. The enthusiasm for this by the local groups in Adelaide is fantastic.

Future management

I am still developing ideas that, most importantly, can see Sing Australia continuing into the future with a change in ownership and management style but this is still work in progress. The more promising Sing Australia presents itself now the better the future scenarios will play out. One very distinct option for the long-term future for Sing Australia is for it to become an Incorporated Association. In brief this scenario would basically ensure that the Sing Australia concept stays exactly the same. I.e. Annual Membership, inclusive membership, weekly practices would run exactly the same, the opportunity for performances would remain the same, there could still be national gatherings and tours.

There could still be combined performances. The only difference would be the management structure. Each group would be governed by a Constitution that would outline how the group is to be managed, it would outline the appointment of a management committee with Office Bearers – President, Secretary, Treasurer and a small committee all of whom would be elected by the members of each group. Association Meetings would need to be held from time to time. The Committee would be completely accountable to the members. The Committee could still appoint and pay for accompanists and conductors. There would be a need to report annually to members. Group fees would be governed by the peak body – also an elected group. I suggest that initially I could be appointed as the Patron of the National Association. Obviously, a voluntary position.

The beauty of this concept is that for all intents and purposes Sing Australia will not look any different to how it is now but its organisation will be more strictly governed and that won't hurt.

I will have to give up my private ownership but it would please me immensely if Sing Australia could have a long-term future rather than for me to close it down. The bottom line is I must, even against my deepest desires, step back now. I reckon 75 is a reasonable retiring age! Of course, as a Patron I can contribute when or if needed in various ways.

I would like to leave this thought with you all for a month or so. In February I will ask for your collective views. As usual we will, go with the majority.

Important

I must point out that Sing Australia will still run as per normal until a new management system is in place. We will still be functioning over the Christmas break so your membership will still be contributing to that. Our insurance policies and copyright fees do not take a holiday nor do any membership renewals. There will be good notice of any changes. That is why the Direct Debit system is so good. What would be absolutely desirable would be a smooth transition to a new management system. For all intents and purposes there would be an uninterrupted transition as far as membership is concerned.

I would like to once again thank all the Leaders, all the Accompanists and Conductors, all the hardworking helpers in all the groups. I would like to thank Mardi for all her brilliant management tasks over many many years. She has been exceptional. I would like to massively thank Margaret for her long hours and her patience and perseverance in managing many important aspects of Sing Australia particularly on the event management side of things. She has been a tower of strength for me in so many ways. I have been incredibly lucky to have had the benefit of her management skills.

'The time has come, the walrus said ...' BUT the walrus will have to wait for me just a bit longer. BUT I hear the call!!! I won't be going anywhere until everything is settled.

I do have to say that Margaret and I will continue to manage the forthcoming tours.

Happy and safe Christmas one and all. May our new year be a year of rejuvenation and a new beginning!

Colin

Colin Slater OAM CF Founder and National Director