



# *Friends' Newsletter*

St Francis' Choir Inc. 326 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne. 3000 Ph.

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## **Director's Report**

Dear Friends,

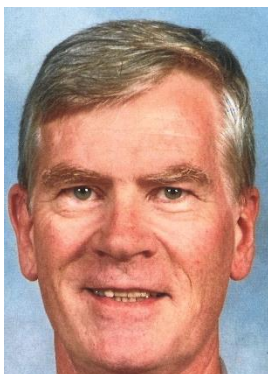
It has been a long while between newsletters, but I'm pleased to report that St Francis' Choir is enjoying its return to singing after two years of limited activity due to the pandemic. Apart from the very well attended ceremonies of Holy Week and Easter, we have also had a joyous celebration of Pentecost with a Mozart Mass with soloists and accompanied by the Symphonia of Melbourne.

Such a return to 'normal' activities is very gratifying indeed and reminds us we have much to look forward to.

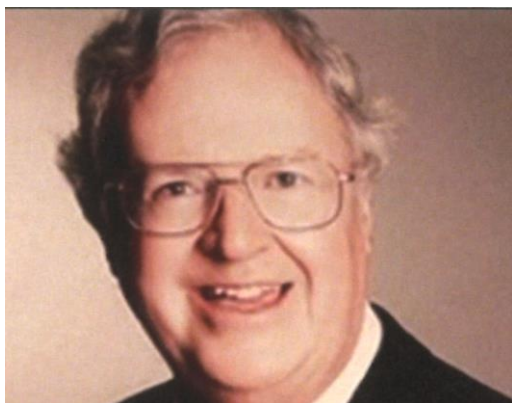
While the future looks bright, it is also important to remember that over the last two years the choir has lost some significant personalities who have greatly contributed to the choir's development.



In April 2021 John Byrne died after a long struggle with ill health. Many present and former choristers honoured John at his funeral Mass in St John's, East Melbourne. John's extraordinary contribution to the choir really needs a dedicated publication, but we remember with gratitude his extraordinary vision in helping to re-establish the orchestral Mass tradition at St Francis', his voluminous knowledge of the choir's history, his skill as a composer, his dedication as a singer, his wicked sense of humour and his generous capacity for friendship. The moving eulogy for John delivered at his funeral by Roger Heagney is included in this newsletter.



Just before Christmas last year John's friend and fellow tenor, Paul Clements died. Paul was a gentle man who excelled in his chosen profession of teaching and was always eager to offer support and affirmation to those around him. His boyhood experience as a chorister gave him a lifelong love of choral music and he was a faithful member of the choir for some 30 years. Another large group of choristers travelled to his home parish of Diamond Creek to sing at his funeral.



Another stalwart supporter of the choir was Patrick Street. Patrick generously agreed to become one of the inaugural trustees of the St Francis' Choir Foundation in 2005 and was always enthusiastic in his support of the choir in so many ways. As Patrick's funeral fell in Holy Week, we were able to honour him musically through the splendid singing of Larissa Cairns and Merlyn Quaife with inimitable organ accompaniment from Anthony Halliday in Sacred Heart, Carlton.

Passing away at the grand age of 95, Irene Taylor will be remembered as a tireless worker for the



choir. In addition to her fine voice, Irene donated countless hours of her time to choir fundraising activities. She was also an amazing seamstress, making all the gowns the choir currently wears. Singing in the choir was something of a family affair for the Taylors: Irene's husband Aelred (who died in 2020) directed the choir prior to Roger Heagney and Irene and Aelred's daughter Hilary also sang in the choir before taking up a Covent Garden scholarship.

Although there is sadness in recalling these wonderful people, we also have a profound sense of gratitude for all that has gone before. We continue to remember the family and friends of John, Paul, Patrick, Aelred and Irene, and we look forward to our annual commemoration Mass in November when we will be able to pay them tribute through liturgy and music.

Giving thanks for the past and looking forward to the future, we would also ask you at this time of the year to consider supporting the choir with a tax-deductible donation. We would be very grateful for whatever you are able to give.

We also hope that over the coming months you will be able to visit St Francis' in person and attend the 11.30am Sunday Mass to hear the choir. In the meantime, all of us at St Francis' join with me in wishing you good health and thanking you for your ongoing support.

*Tony Way, Director of Music*

### **In Brief** - Marilyn Jamieson, Co-ordinator, Friends of St Francis' Choir

Welcome back to all our Friends after such a long and challenging time dealing with COVID. It is wonderful to see and hear the choir back at the 11.30am Mass on a Sunday. This is a most encouraging sign that we are returning to 'normal'.

As we approach the end of the financial year, we ask you to consider supporting the choir by renewing your membership to the Friends or by making a tax-deductible donation. You may do this by using the enclosed form or by using the EFT details included in this newsletter. As always, my thanks to all the Friends of the Choir for your continual support.

## Eulogy for John Byrne

John joined the choir in 1969 and clocked up over 50 years of service as a member. His influence was profound and it would be fair to say that his overwhelming interest and love was for the St Francis' Church and Choir which he served so well during those years.

His early years of singing were with the Loyola Gilbert and Sullivan society and there is a photo of him dressed as Lord Lieutenant of the Tower in Yeomen of the Guard. In 1972, probably through his influence, a number of the Loyola singers joined the choir. One of them, Bernard Cronin, said: 'it was the theatrics as much as the music that was the attraction'. He also shared a memory of John's mischievous sense of humour when together they made a cassette of 'The Creation' of the choir. John supplied the music, Bernard did the very witty and wicked text referring to one member as 'Mary the Late' and another choir as 'the flat chested warblers on Eastern Hill'. They had a hilarious time putting it together and I hope it is now lost.

Vatican 2 saw the introduction of the Mass in English in July 1964 and congregational participation was misunderstood to such an extent that choirs all over Melbourne were disbanded. It was difficult to find any liturgical music that was not simplistic or banal in quality. Imported music from America gradually seeped in and largely took over. John pushed for local composers to fill the vacuum and looking back, there are many: Christopher Willcock, Noel Ancell, Chappy Rayson, Graham Cox, myself to name a few including John himself. John's parents, John and Sheila were also very supportive and commissioned several works including a Te Deum. They also generously donated the Clarinet stop on the new Casavant Organ in St Francis'. A plaque on the transept wall commemorates their gift.

Today the Mass setting (as you will see from the Order of Service) is John's own setting of the new text; string parts have been added for this occasion by Christopher Willcock.

John's knowledge of music was encyclopaedic. His huge collection of CDs ranged over a vast area, particularly Classical, Romantic and 20<sup>th</sup> century Masses, Oratorios and Operas. He studied for his Bachelor of Music at the Australian Catholic University and later took out his Master's degree with a brilliant thesis. He was a meticulous researcher and historian.

The choir was reformed in 1961 by Fr Chappy Rayson and in 1962 was consolidated and stimulated by preparing for the celebrations for the canonisation of Peter Julian Eymard, the founder of the Blessed Sacrament Congregation. In 1966 Chappy went to Rome to further his musical studies. He returned in 1971 and was elected Superior at St Francis' in 1972. He and John were kindred souls and great friends. They both shared the view that "mediocre music does not meet the spiritual or musical needs of the people."

In 1973 Melbourne was host to the International Eucharistic Congress and between them they hatched up the idea of a Festival of concerts and Masses sung by visiting parish choirs and ending with a performance of Mozart's Coronation mass with orchestra and soloists. This was a triumph. From then on John pushed for the restoration of the great artistic settings of the Mass and for the commissioning of new works by local composers.

Four years later in 1977 John went overseas for a holiday to England and Vienna. On Christmas Eve at Brompton Oratory in London he heard the Beethoven *Mass in C*. Two weeks later in Vienna he heard the *Mariazell* Mass by Haydn at Sunday Mass at the Augustinerkirche. It was then in his own words he became convinced that this kind of Liturgy: "could give St Francis' Choir a new spirit and the role for which it had been searching." On his return he convinced us

to try a series of 'Great' Masses monthly from July to Christmas. Fr Tony Lawless, Superior at the time, gave his guarded support, but after watching the congregation he said this was 'bread and butter' music for those attending, not artistic self-indulgence. The following year the number of 'Great' Masses performed, doubled.

The tradition John established continues today under Tony Way, but one needs to remember the climate in those early days led to a not inconsiderable fear that we would be censored since much of the music was at that time mistakenly considered inappropriate. What that really meant was that it might overshadow the clergy.

I think most people were in fact very pleased and John's program notes were always interesting and well researched.

John was the also mainstay of the planning. Each year he would arrive with a typed year's repertoire of suggestions for masses and motets for every Sunday. Lively discussions and differing opinions followed, and he often got his own way; -but, not always. The reins had to be put on at times. Margaret reminded me of one occasion when John suggested we revive Gounod's *Messe Solenne*. The score calls for 3 harps. I asked him where the hell would we get three harps or afford their cost. He replied: "We left them hanging on the trees by the waters of Babylon." We eventually did do the Gounod but with 2 harps, one of which John paid for himself.

He especially delighted in planning the Christmas Carol Festival and I must say I was equally delighted that he did so. Christmas Carols are not my favourite music, - with some exceptions.

The Choir's two tours overseas were like the icing on the cake for John. In the 1986 tour we sang the New Year's Day concert in Notre Dame and received a standing ovation for Merlyn Quaife and the choir's performance of *O Holy Night*. We later found out that it was a resistance song during the second world war. We sang in Cologne Cathedral and The Duomo in Florence where the resounding sounds of the brass quartet led by John Schmidli lingered well after they had stopped playing. We were asked to sing at a Papal Audience after which we gave our final performance at a Mass in St Peters. At the end of the mass we sang Christopher Willcock's *Prayer of St Francis* and to quote John again: "As it reached the final words.....'in dying that we rise to eternal life', all the floodlights in that amazing basilica suddenly blazed into life. This unprecedented gesture was done a tribute to the choir."

John delighted in it and was justly proud of how far we had come. All the tour is documented in his beautifully written history of the Church and its music: *Echoes of Home* 1995.

Yet another of John's ideas that made a huge difference to the choir members' self-esteem and the choir finances in general, came from hearing about the Friends of the Oratory choir in London. He and Barbara Marron got their heads together (probably while handing out how to vote leaflets for the Labor Party) and the result was many a happy, bibulous and encouraging Sunday lunch at Papa Gino's where the idea for the Friends of St Francis' choir became a reality.

There are not many people who have suffered so much illness as John did throughout his whole life yet have influenced so many and achieved so much as he did in his 50 years of service to his Church its Choir.

Vale! good and faithful friend.

**Roger Heagney**

## Donating to the Choir

- You can donate using the form accompanying this newsletter.
- Given the current delivery speed of ordinary mail, we encourage to use the donation facility on the choir website [www.stfrancischoir.org.au](http://www.stfrancischoir.org.au) or
- You can also donate by EFT:  
St Francis' Choir  
BSB 033068  
Account 186383  
If you are making an electronic donation, please email us at [stfmusic@blessedsacrament.com.au](mailto:stfmusic@blessedsacrament.com.au) to advise us of your donation and then we can issue a receipt.