

REVIEW REPORT & LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

The 2014 Festival took place on Saturday 15th November. A two page review questionnaire was sent to all participating choirs on 25th November, with a response requested before the end of the year. (Copy of Questionnaire at Appendix 1). The overriding purpose of the Review was to stimulate critical reflection on the 2014 concert to enable MCAA to learn and benefit from past experiences when organising future events.

The questions asked were generally 'open-ended', seeking opinions on various aspects of the organisation and conduct of the event, and suggestions for changes that might be introduced in future. In total the report reflects the views of 91 participants. Four choirs submitted the collated views of a number of their members.

[Note: this MCAA review was essentially organisational. Neither the MCAA as such, nor the respondents to this review (with a handful of exceptions) are professionally equipped to make musical or artistic judgements].

Support for the overall Festival concept

The overall concept – a regular national massed voice concert at a major concert venue - is strongly supported (Q 1). This is reinforced by the responses to Q 11, asking if the Festival was a rewarding experience, and whether your choir would wish to participate again. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, with only a handful expressing any reservation.

LESSON : The basic concept of a periodic national massed voice concert is affirmed

Matters of timing

The questionnaire noted in a short preface that the MCAA General Meeting on 15th November had found consensus that the Festival should in future be held every **three** years rather than every two. Only two or three questionnaire respondents supported retention of the two year cycle, the majority endorsing the three year cycle.

On the question of timing, the established date of mid-November had very wide support, although there was some support for having it **earlier** (cooler weather; less interference with Christmas gigs).

LESSON : Mid-November is affirmed as an optimal time of year for the event

Program structure and choir repertoire

There was also very solid endorsement of the established 'formula' for the program – band, soloist, four brackets of massed choir songs - some with band accompaniment. The general tenor of responses was 'It isn't broke, so don't try and fix it'.

However there was quite a number of suggestions for variations on the established model:

- A male soloist
- A male trio or quartet

- A 'soloist with choir' song
- A stringed orchestra rather than brass band
- A childrens choir
- A 'name' soloist

While there was general agreement with the policy of having **six** songs drawn from previous MCAA repertoire, a significant minority suggested that this be reduced to four – or the policy scrapped. It was noted by some that the three year cycle would enable earlier determination of the repertoire, and longer lead time for learning songs.

Although there was no direct question about the repertoire (always a vexed subject!), many comments were offered – many of them critical:

- Fewer spiritual / ecclesiastical items
- More contemporary / 'lighter' / 'popular' items
- Start and finish with Australian songs
- At least one song in Welsh
- Better known numbers by the band and soloist

The issue of repertoire **selection** process was also raised - mostly to urge that choristers / choirs get good opportunity to contribute to the selection process.

LESSONS:

- i. The basic program formula for the Festival is affirmed, but MCAA is encouraged to explore some variations – in types of performers and in repertoire.**
- ii. The move to a three-yearly cycle enables MCAA to reconsider the guideline that six songs should be drawn from previous concerts.**
- iii. While Musical Directors have had input into repertoire selection, this process should now be formalised in discussion with Musical Directors**

Songbooks

There was general appreciation and endorsement of the current MCAA policy and practice – to distribute songbooks at the end of the preceding year.

One respondent raised the interesting possibility that the 'songbook' might be created and distributed entirely digitally.

Another respondent urged that attention be given to negotiating agreements with copyright holders that would allow participating MCAA choirs to continue performing songs from the Festival songbook. At present the agreements are for the Festival concert performance only.

LESSONS :

- i. The move to a three-yearly cycle enables MCAA to consider earlier distribution of songbooks.**
- i. MCAA should explore the possibility of distributing the next songbook electronically.**
- ii. MCAA should explore the possibility of negotiating license agreements that would allow continuing use of the Festival program items.**

Learning aids

Of all the particular matters canvassed in the questionnaire, the provision of 'learning aids' by Lucas de Jong (MD of Melbourne Welsh) drew the widest and most unequivocally positive response. Overall the digital files were found to be of high quality and extremely helpful, and many respondents recorded their personal appreciation to Lucas for this good work.

Not everyone made use of them, and some suggested a learning aid 'package' might also incorporate a CD and / or compilation of YouTube files. Three or four respondents noted the occasional lack of correspondence between the songbook and learning aid versions of song words.

LESSON : MCAA should recognise that Learning Aids and Songbooks are a 'package' and should be developed and distributed as such.

Ticketing

A majority of respondents chose not to comment on ticketing arrangements. Of those who did, there was general agreement that arrangements had worked well. There were however some critical comments about the seating provided to partners – being too far back, and lacking a view of the performers – and a few negative comments about Ticketek's service and costs.

Festival planning and organisation

Communication to choristers through a series of four Festival **Bulletins** sent to choirs was judged by almost all respondents to be helpful and effective.

Several respondents pointed out that they were not advised of the order of songs in the program before the concert began, and that is perhaps something that should have been a key inclusion in the final Bulletin.

Regarding the weekend of the concert, there was a high level of recognition and appreciation of the work done by 'host' and principal organiser, the Australian Rugby Choir. There was praise for the 'Welcomers' and the team of Marshals for the impressive competence and effectiveness with which the logistic challenges were addressed, with favourable comparisons to the experience at other comparable events.

There was some criticism of the weekend, however, relating mainly to the demands made on choristers, exacerbated by the hot weather. While there was broad acceptance that ample time was required for staging, sound checks and rehearsing, a number thought that the rehearsal element was over done – some, to the point that it became counter-productive. Many commented that the Saturday rehearsal in particular, on a hot day, was too long and tiring ahead of the concert at 2.30 pm. Some respondents apparently thought that bottled water would be provided and were unprepared for taking care of their own requirements. Overall, the facilities available to choristers at the AIS Arena were deemed adequate and appreciated – with the notable exception of the Afterglow party.

LESSON : Key members of the Canberra Planning Group should be consulted by those responsible for organising the next MCAA Festival in 2017.
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Afterglow party

If provision of learning aids drew near universal and unequivocal approbation, the Afterglow occupies the other end of this scale, with no one having a good word to say about it. A number gave recognition to the fact that rain severely constrained the size of the intended location. Many had already decided not to participate – based on previous experiences – and enjoyed smaller gatherings back at their hotels.

The most basic criticism concerned the over-crowding, which made it difficult to access the bar or the food. This was exacerbated by failure of the caterer to provide multiple, distributed outlets. Many were very critical of the 'value for money' equation. The overcrowding made it a very unsuitable environment for making presentations and announcements – including the important presentation of a gift to the Guest Conductor.

Many respondents recommended that the concept of an Afterglow party be abandoned, or perhaps replaced by notification of a series of nearby venues where gatherings could take place amongst those interested.

LESSON : Organisers of future Festivals should consider abandoning the concept of an Afterglow party, and explore other ways in which participating choristers may be able – if they so wish – to socialize.

Guest Conductor

There was no specific question relating to the Guest Conductor, but in the concluding 'any other comments' section inviting comments on 'any other aspect of the 2014 Festival' this was the dominant issue.

Many noted the critical importance of the role of the conductor. The guest conductor's qualifications and experience were acknowledged, and overall his September program of rehearsals with participating choirs was judged to be worthwhile and effective. There were critical comments on his Festival performance however.

In many cases critical observations were tied to criticism of the choir seating plan, which, in the judgement of many, exacerbated difficulties in 'reading' the conductor when one part group was located behind another – as on the two 'wings'. There were of course significant constraints on choir seating options.

Comments on the Band and the Soloist were uniformly very favourable, and there were also some positive comments about the MC.

LESSON : Amongst many important decisions, the appointment of the Guest Conductor is critical. Selection and appointment should be the responsibility of the MCAA Musical Directors, in consultation with the MCAA committee.