

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by Anne Williams

2004 Churchill Fellow

Exploring ideas for collaborative relationships between composers and young choristers to create new choral music



Australian composer Stephen Leek and members of the Eltham East Primary School Choir

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Signed: *Anne Williams*

Dated: 5 May, 2005

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1. INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report chronicles a quest for ideas that could result in the creation, through collaboration, of new music for children's choirs. In the final analysis the journey generated much information and many questions on a variety of related aspects of the life of a choir, all of which present challenges for both my choir and the Australian music scene as a whole.

While not necessarily producing the anticipated results, the journey provided me with many experiences and possibilities that will affect my teaching and lead to initiatives that I could not have considered had I not been offered this opportunity. These included:

- Conversations with composers Tobin Stokes (Canada) and Olli Kortekangas (Finland) and choral directors Karmina Šilec (Slovenia) and Tapani Tirilä and Kari Ala-Pöllänen (Finland) about the creative process and the conditions most conducive to successful composition.
- Discussions with composers Stokes and Kortekangas about the possibility of an international collaboration on a new piece, of three or four movements, on a specific theme, that would involve Australian children working, both in person and via the internet and conference calling, with composers in Australia, Canada and Finland.
- Exploring the elements of Kathaumixu, a highly-regarded Canadian choral music festival, and of the Powell River Academy of Music and the way in which its impressive use of music and volunteerism has bound a community together.
- Being offered the opportunity to observe some of the world's best youth choirs in rehearsal and to reflect on best practice in teaching children to sing together.

I am deeply indebted to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for its belief in my proposal and for providing the financial assistance without which this journey would not have been possible. In particular I want to acknowledge the always prompt, patient and practical assistance of Pam Oakes and Meg Martin in smoothing the way.

I also wish to thank:

- Principal Denise Howes, Assistant Principal Michelle Jeffress, the School Council and school community at Eltham East Primary School for their acknowledgement and support of the choir program.
- Dr Bronwyn Davidson (University of Queensland) for her unrelenting insistence that I should apply for a Churchill Fellowship.
- Stephen Leek, Churchill Fellow and Eltham East's Composer-in-Residence, for his musical wisdom and foresight.
- Vivien Williamson for her assistance with the original submission, as well as every other aspect of the process and for her unstinting encouragement and support.
- Don James, Terry Sabine, Carrie Lanigan, Romi Low, David Donnelly and the entire Powell River team; Tobin Stokes and Madeleine Humer in Victoria, Canada; Diane Loomer, Marisa Gaetanne and Colin Miles in Vancouver; Karmina Šilec, Nadja Stegne, Franja Kmetec and Mihela Jagodic in Maribor and Ljubljana; and Olli Kortekangas, Kari Ala-Pöllänen, Tapani Tirilä and Leila Ristiluoma-Tirilä, Reijo Kekkonen and Heli Vapaakallio in Finland; for their welcome, their hospitality and their generous gifts of time and ideas.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1. *PERSONAL DETAILS*

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2.2. *PROJECT DESCRIPTION*

To study elements of successful composer/young chorister collaborations in Canada, Slovenia and Finland as evidenced by the work of specific composers in order to ascertain those ideas which could be applied in Australia.

2.3. *HIGHLIGHTS OF THE JOURNEY*

- **Tobin Stokes** - discussions with this remarkable young Canadian composer.
- **Powell River Academy** - a community music school which produces a world-renowned music festival – lessons in the power of volunteerism.
- **Carmina Slovenica** - visits to rehearsals of a Slovenian youth choir of astonishing power and depth.
- **Olli Kortekangas** - meetings with the Finnish composer to discuss composer/chorister collaboration.
- **Tapiola Choir** – conversations with Kari Ala-Pöllänen and visit to observe rehearsal techniques.
- **Oulainen Youth Choir** - visits to rehearsals and discussions with director Tapani Tirilä and administrator Leila Ristiluoma- Tirilä.

2.4. *MAJOR CONCLUSIONS*

- Many choirs believe in the importance of commissioning new choral music and there is a wide variety of ways in which collaborations can successfully take place.
- Eltham East Primary School Choir’s method of collaboration is noteworthy because it involves the choristers as equal creative partners and the Choir’s administration has a responsibility to ensure that the process it has developed is open to observation and participation by interested others.
- Young choristers are extremely powerful and able artists and are capable of a more active role in the **composition** process, not just the **performance** process.
- Composers Tobin Stokes (Canada) and Olli Kortekangas (Finland) are vitally interested in an international choral collaboration if funding can be found to support such a project.
- In general terms, individual members of outstanding youth choirs have an astonishing degree of focus, self-discipline and self-motivation, and make music that comes straight from the heart.

- A successful and recurrent project (eg a biennial music festival) that requires volunteerism on a whole-community scale is capable of strengthening and enhancing the health and vitality of that community.
- There needs to be urgent material encouragement in Australia to establish choral festivals that are capable of drawing international choirs to perform.

2.5. *IMPLEMENTATION AND DISSEMINATION*

In order to implement the major lessons learned from my Fellowship, I propose to:

- Continue collaborations with Australian composers, incorporating ideas gathered from observations and discussions as outlined above.
- Explore ways in which the general choral community in Australia can be encouraged to develop creative collaborations with composers (eg contact with ANCA, music publishers, mailouts, joint choral workshops, press releases, proposals for presentations at choral conferences).
- Continue planning for an international collaboration and investigate possible funding for such a venture.
- Discuss with other choral directors methods of establishing a choral festival that will draw interest and attendance from international choirs.
- Implement ideas gained overseas to strengthen the Eltham East Primary School Choir program.

3. PROGRAM

FEBRUARY 14 – 19 Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

- Met with Colin Miles, Canadian Music Centre.
- Met with Diane Loomer, Director – Elektra Women’s Choir and Chor Leoni Men’s Choir re commissioning and funding of new works on both a single choir basis and international joint choir basis.
- Attended, workshopped and participated in rehearsal of Victoria Youth Choir.
- Met with Madeleine Humer, Director, Victoria Youth Choir.

FEBRUARY 21 – 27 Powell River, British Columbia, Canada

- Series of meetings with Don James and Terry Sabine, Powell River Academy re the Academy itself, Kathaumixu Choral Festival, and involvement of whole community in the biennial festival planning and implementation.
- Observed rehearsals of numerous school choirs over several days at Grief Point Primary School and Brooks Secondary School.
- Observed rehearsals of Powell River Academy Chamber Choir, Community Choir, Men’s Choir, Girls’ Choir, Boys’ Choir, Youth Choir, Academy Singers.
- Met with choir directors Walter Martella, Paul Cummings, Richard Olford, Lisa Fernandes.
- Addressed a Rotary Dinner on the subject of the Churchill Fellowship.
- Met with composer Tobin Stokes.
- Interviewed by journalist Ted Durnin from “The Peak” (Powell River newspaper).
- Observed rehearsals for a concert to conclude Powell River’s year as a Canadian Cultural Capital.

MARCH 1 – 5 Maribor and Ljubljana, Slovenia

- Observed various rehearsals with Carmina Slovenica (Youth Choir).
- Series of meetings with Director, Karmina Šilec.
- Observed rehearsals with Junior Carmina Slovenica.
- Meetings with Director, Franja Kmetec.
- Attended Ljubljana Choral Directors’ seminar – introduction of new collection of lullabies in Slovenian (Muca Prede Nitke Zlate) for children’s choir.

MARCH 6 – 23 Helsinki, Espoo and Oulainen, Finland

- Met with composer Olli Kortekangas.
- Attended at events as part of the Musica Nova Festival and the Church Choirs Festival in Helsinki.
- Met with Kari Ala-Pöllänen, Director, Tapiola Choir.
- Observed rehearsals and individual voice clinics - Tapiola Choir.
- Met with Tapani Tirilä, Director, Oulainen Youth Choir.
- Toured the new Oulainen Elementary School and workshopped with grade 5 music class.
- Observed rehearsals of Oulainen Chamber Choir and Oulainen Youth Choir.
- Meetings with staff at Sulasol Music Publishing Company, Helsinki.
- Met with Heli Vapaakallio, Executive Director of the Association of Finnish Choirs.

4. YOUNG CHORISTERS COLLABORATING WITH COMPOSERS

4.1. BACKGROUND

Since 1996 Eltham East Primary School Choir, under my direction, has been involved both in commissioning new works for children's choirs from a variety of Australian composers and in collaborating on an equal input basis with Australian composer Stephen Leek to create new choral music. The initiative was developed because at that time there was very little Australian choral music of high quality and merit available for young children's choirs (under 13 years).

Of necessity, the processes implemented to produce this new music were experimental and developed as we went along, since there were no guidelines available to assist us. Eight years on, and with four major projects completed, published and in use by other choirs, I believed that the program would benefit from the injection of new ideas from overseas composers and choir directors who were prepared to share their ideas and comments on the process with me. For this reason I applied for a Churchill Fellowship and long service leave, to enable me to travel and investigate.

Information gathered through professional reading and listening and through choral authorities and contacts both here and overseas led me to Canada, Slovenia and Finland as the places most likely to provide valuable sources of information. Further contacts in these countries were made once the Fellowship had been confirmed.

4.2. CANADIAN MUSIC CENTRE

(Western Regional Centre – Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada)

The Canadian Music Centre is a library of mostly unpublished contemporary music works and of recordings of performances of these works. Composers can apply to become "Associated Composers" of the CMC and their work is assessed for musical merit by a panel of peers. If accepted, a composer chooses to lodge any or all of his/her works at the CMC's four branches across Canada. Composers may add or withdraw works at will.

Pieces lodged at the CMC are then available for loan both in Canada and worldwide for a very small fee. The CMC has an excellent interactive website that makes pieces accessible and easy to find. Loan is an important option for most choirs, as publishing costs in Canada are prohibitively high and the music publishing industry is therefore floundering. If choirs choose to perform a work on loan, a multiple copy fee is negotiated with the composer.

Composer biographies and additional recordings are also kept in the Centre.

I was offered the opportunity to browse through the library and to choose any pieces that I would like to hear recordings of. Colin Miles, Western Centre Director, also spent time drawing my attention to many pieces of contemporary music that he thought would be of interest for their musical ideas, composition process and material appearance.

This visit was fascinating in the possibilities it presented. The works of R. Murray Shafer were of particular interest to me. The sheet music for pieces such as “Miniwanka” and “Snowforms”, both well-loved favourites in Canada, are in appearance very visual and composed of more pictographs, words and signs than notes. They allow extraordinary freedom for individual chorister improvisation within the piece. Many pieces are also written on a theme and have a text consisting of words from many languages relating to that theme.

All these elements also appear in the music of Stephen Leek and in reflecting on this the idea of some sort of international collaboration was born. I decided to discuss the idea with the composers I would later meet.

4.3. DIANE LOOMER

(Composer and conductor – Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada)

Although Diane Loomer’s chorister are not involved in direct collaboration with composers, Diane is responsible for many successful initiatives in the Canadian choral world. She is committed to finding and performing new music and she and her choirs commission new works regularly.

Her choirs hold regular Open Reading Sessions where any new music can be presented by young composers/students for a reading. The benefits are twofold: the composers receive positive feedback from practical musicians and are able to hear how their pieces sound; and the choir often finds excellent new music which it can then negotiate to perform.

Diane was also responsible for setting up a concert series in collaboration with the Vancouver Art Gallery. Each concert was a movable feast from painting to painting and gallery to gallery, with Elektra’s music carefully chosen to maximise the ambience of the settings.

An important collaboration recently occurred between Diane and her male choir Chor Leoni, a Swedish male voice choir, Robert Sund’s Orphei Drangar and English composer Bob Chilcott. The piece, based on Edwin Brock’s poem “Five Ways to Kill a Man”, although entirely written by Chilcott, was a most valuable collaboration. Diane and Robert had a clear vision of the type of piece they wanted and Chilcott chose this text in close consultation with the two directors. All three also worked closely together throughout the creative process to ensure that the piece was appropriate to the requirements of both choirs, since music for male voice choirs is not as freely available as that for mixed choirs, and any new piece had to be both user and audience friendly.

This collaboration provided me with much food for reflection. Clearly there are many ways, often very subtle, in which collaborations happen between choirs and composers. At the same time it strengthened my conviction that, especially for **young** choristers, there is much to be gained in terms of both their future musicianship and their more immediate interest and involvement in the music they sing from equal and direct creative collaboration with a composer.

4.4. POWELL RIVER ACADEMY OF MUSIC

(British Columbia, Canada)

The Powell River Academy of Music is responsible for the biennial Kathaumixu choral festival that brings together outstanding choirs and choral musicians from around the world. Even more importantly, it has also established an astonishing tradition of music for so relatively small a community. Under the leadership of Don James CM the academy supports a large number of choirs and other music groups in its community music school program.



**Infants' Choir, Grief Point Elementary School,
Powell River, British Columbia**

**Don James rehearsing Academy Chamber Choir
Powell River, British Columbia**



The elements of the Powell River program that made the biggest impression on me – apart from the amazing commitment and organizational talent of Don, Terry Sabine and their team – were:

- The success of the community volunteerism that produces the Kathaumixu and the positive results this engenders for the health of the community; and
- The generational tradition that sees so many talented young people leave the community for further training and return to it, either as guests or permanent members, to teach, perform or otherwise facilitate the continuance and growth of its music programs.

Over one fascinating week, I participated in the life of the Academy and absorbed the way in which the teams interconnected to produce a wonderful concert to mark the end of Powell River's year as a cultural capital of Canada. (The submission to become a cultural

capital had been yet another Academy initiative). I believe that the lessons learnt from these observations will help to strengthen the operation of my own choir program.

I am certainly more aware than ever before of what the Australian community is missing by not having a choral music festival of a stature similar to Kathaumixu – although I acknowledge the difficulties caused by our well-documented “tyranny of distance”.



**Powell River Chorus
Powell River, British Columbia**

4.5. *TOBIN STOKES*

(Composer - Victoria, British Columbia)

Important Canadian composer Tobin Stokes is someone whose future career was formed as a member of choirs in Powell River and Don James has been one of his foremost mentors. Tobin has a close association with the Academy, the town and the Kathaumixu, having been commissioned over the years to write its choral anthem and a number of special pieces for the festival. He is currently establishing a similar relationship with the recently-established Symphony Orchestra of the Pacific – another Academy initiative.

Tobin has for many years worked closely in conjunction with Canada’s First Nations people, particularly in the Powell River region, and has incorporated their representatives and musical ideas, at their request, into much of his music.

When writing choral music for children Tobin believes that it is important to connect choral music with the music to which children listen at home. He stresses the importance of bridging the gap between pop and classical music but at the same time ensuring a new piece remains as “musical” as possible. Any new piece, he says, “Must be true to the composer’s musical heart”. It should be enjoyable on the first hearing and make an audience want to hear it again, but above all it must be “both beautiful and musical”.

Tobin was extremely enthusiastic about the idea of an international collaboration between Australian children and composers from different countries and keen to pursue the possibility. One suggestion he made was that we might offer the same text to different composers and to perform the results.

4.6. *CARMINA SLOVENICA*

(Maribor, Slovenia)

Under the direction of its brilliant conductor Karmina Šilec, Carmina Slovenica is without doubt one of the world's foremost choirs. My visit to Maribor was as much about observing the elements of its rehearsals with a view to improving rehearsal practices with my own choir as it was about discussing with Ms Šilec the music that the choir sings and commissions. On both counts the visit was a fascinating experience.



Junior Carmina Slovenica performing
Ljubljana, Slovenia

The choir commissions at least three new pieces a year and tours internationally an equal number of times. The Concert Choir is made up of girls aged between 12 and 22 years of age, but there are several junior choirs through which children progress to reach it. This experience produces girls of outstanding musicianship and technical ability and of astonishing versatility. The level of commitment and self-discipline apparent in rehearsal is simply astounding but an excellent indicator of the reasons for the choir's reputation in performance.

Composers often present the choir with new pieces, hopeful that the choir will perform them, however Ms Šilec prefers to find new repertoire herself, knowing what will best suit the choir in terms of content, tessitura and ambience.

An impressive feature of this choir program is that it incorporates regular extended warm-up sessions and occasional drama, dance and tai chi workshops as a means of opening the senses and exploring the ways in which intensity and thought "drive" vocal sound. All this makes even a regular rehearsal a riveting experience from which one could not fail to learn.



Focus and energy
Carmina Slovenica in rehearsal



Carmina Slovenica
Rehearsal warm-ups

4.7. TAPIOLA CHOIR

(Espoo, Finland)

This arguably most famous of all children's choirs has an impressive history of commissioning new works, working regularly and closely with composers, and indeed, over time, producing some of Finland's foremost choral composers.

Many composers submit new pieces to the choir for consideration but its director, Kari Ala-Pöllänen, finds that generally it is better to commission a composer to become familiar with the way the choir works and the choristers sing and to compose for them once a relationship has been established.

On occasion the choristers have provided words for text, for example working with Finnish composer Olli Kortekangas on "A" ("Water"), where in groups they recorded conversations about water, which were used by the composer to create the text.

Kari Ala Pöllänen lists the following as important elements of the commissioning process:

- The process must be a continuous dialogue between choir and composer.
- It is advantageous to workshop often with different composers.
- Composers who have been commissioned to write a new piece are invited to spend time getting to know the choristers at one of their music camps, to learn about the choir's sound and to try out ideas with them.
- Commissioned composers should be given guidelines that include acceptable vocal range, the choir's vocal strengths and weaknesses and possibly a subject for the new piece.

Observation of the choir's regular rehearsal and individual clinical work also provided many valuable ideas for warm-up exercises, repertoire and one-on-one activities.



Kari Ala Pöllänen and chorister – individual vocal clinic
(Tapiola Choir, Finland)

Tapiola Choir in Rehearsal
Finland



4.8. *OLLI KORTEKANGAS*

(Composer – Espoo, Finland)

A prominent Finnish composer who has worked with many Finnish choirs including, on many occasions, Tapiola Choir, Olli Kortekangas was a man I was looking forward to meeting. He had arranged for me to attend concerts as part of the Musica Nova Festival in Helsinki. These concerts, one for accordion and one an opera premiere, clearly indicated the vibrancy of musical composition and performance in Finland. The performing arts are well funded by many foundations in Finland and there is a lively music-publishing house, Sulasol, which supports the process of presenting new music quickly to user groups.

In a city of just 1 million people the available live performances on any evening of my time in Helsinki numbered on average 7 and were of the highest quality. Also there were two music festivals running concurrently while I was there – the Musica Nova Festival and the Festival of Church Choirs, which offered many concerts of hugely varied repertoire every day.

Olli Kortekangas's creative relationship with Tapiola Choir is of long standing. His great strength, like Stephen Leek, is that he has a deep understanding, not only of how to compose for choirs, but of the differences to be considered when composing for young voices. His collaboration with Tapiola Choir and its choristers on the piece "A" (see above) is a good example of this.

Olli also works closely with the Oulainen Youth Choir and has, with them, established a collaborative project with the Japanese Shizuoka Children's Choir and Japanese composer Michio Mamiya. This collaboration resulted in 2003 in a new piece called Kigi no uta (Song of Trees) which has been performed by the two choirs involved, both in Japan and Finland. The piece includes some sections by each composer, and some by both composers jointly. Also, it uses both Japanese and Finnish words and was prepared for performance by the choirs in joint workshops.

Discussions with Olli about his philosophy for collaboration and his experiences of creative collaborations with young choirs proved extremely valuable. Also after listening to and studying sample pieces of our own collaborations at Eltham East, Olli is extremely interested in being a part of an international collaboration should this eventuate. Preliminary discussions with relevant officials also indicated that an application for funding in Finland for his part of any such project would be seriously considered.

4.9. *OULAINEN YOUTH CHOIR*

(Oulainen, Finland)

One of the exciting community programs of Oulainen [population 8000], a small town six hundred kilometres to the north of Helsinki is the Oulainen Youth Choir, under its director Tapani Tirilä. Visiting the rehearsal of this vibrant group was an absolute delight. The Choir's repertoire includes a fascinating range of music with many exciting pieces by Scandinavian composers.

The Choir travels widely and also hosts, and performs with, choirs visiting Oulainen. The town's reputation as a choral centre also encourages prestigious groups such as the Kings Singers to include it in their Finnish performance itineraries.

Speaking with Tapani about the collaboration between the Oulainen and Shizuoka choirs and about their collaboration with composers Kortekangas and Mamiya provided much interesting insight into how such a collaboration can be made to work successfully. The choir's administrator, Leila Ristiluoma Tirilä, was extremely helpful in facilitating this meeting and in providing the background of the choir and its organization.



Oulainen Youth Choir in Rehearsal, Finland



Warm-ups, Oulainen Youth Choir, Finland

5. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions I have reached as a result of my Fellowship are:

- It is important to communicate as widely as possible with other choirs to discover what paths they are following and what innovations they are implementing in their own programs.
- Commissions and collaborations are absolutely vital in maintaining a healthy repertoire and must be encouraged at all levels.
- Many choirs are making new music happen through commissions or collaborations with composers.
- Young choristers are capable of a high degree of direct creative involvement in writing of new music.
- There is much to be gained for all participants in an international collaboration between choristers and composers.
- The choral community in Australia has ongoing problems with implementing successful international choral festivals. A major problem is our distance from America and Europe. Therefore there are very few opportunities for Australian choirs to work with choirs from overseas. Although many ideas have been tried, I believe there is scope in Australia for more community-based choral festivals, organized by a choral association, but using general community volunteer groups, local buildings, schools and organizations (Powell River model). This would both reduce the (often prohibitive) funds that participating choirs need to raise to attend and foster a greater sense of community (rather than competition) between participating choirs.
- More international choirs would visit Australia if there were more performance opportunities – particularly high standard choral festivals.
- Australian funding bodies for the performing arts are too few and too prescriptive about what they will and will not fund. Finland, a country of only 5 million people, values the performing arts highly and funds performing arts initiatives accordingly.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

On reflection, I would make recommendations in a number of areas. These include personal teaching practice and communication of elements of a successful international choral festival, as well as ideas for composer/chorister collaborations.

1. Actively pursue the idea of an international collaboration between Australian choristers and composers in Australia, Canada and Finland.
2. Investigate possibilities in Australia, Canada and Finland for funding such a project.
3. Communicate both the findings from my trip and the process guidelines for creative collaboration as practised by Eltham East Primary School Choir through:
 - The school's website;
 - Conversations with directors of other children's choirs; and
 - Articles submitted to national choral magazines, both in Australia and overseas.

4. Implement ideas to strengthen the Eltham East choir program, such as:
 - Creating a junior feeder choir where vocal technique and music reading can be taught;
 - Extending warm-ups to increase focus and physical fitness;
 - Holding occasional weekend workshops that incorporate tai chi, dance and dramatic improvisation with a view to improving choristers' audience communication skills;
 - Encouraging local composers to workshop with young choristers to increase their understanding of children's vocal ranges and limits with a view to writing music for young choirs that is attractive, realistic and achievable but at the same time offers musical challenges that will continue to interest young singers; and
 - Introducing the use of tuning forks (when appropriate) at the same time as introducing new a capella pieces, to give choristers more responsibility for their performance.
5. Hold discussions with choir directors and administrators, education authorities and choral associations about the possibility of creating an international festival that uses some of the lessons of the Powell River model, particularly the use of educational facilities and community volunteer groups.

.....and finally

In retrospect I am extremely grateful to the Churchill Trust for its excellent recommendation that Fellows not program their time too tightly. It would have been easy to do so and indeed, one initially feels a certain responsibility to squeeze in meetings with as many people as possible. It was highly beneficial to have reflection time between visits, and I find now that I can mentally revisit each experience separately and with clarity of memory.

Another aspect of the trip for which I am grateful is that it gave me real time - for the first time since I began my choir - to reflect on my own rehearsal practices and my own leadership of my choir and to resolve to make certain changes and improvements that should benefit the choir's program greatly.

“Let us take our children seriously! Everything else follows from this ... only the best is good enough for a child.”
(Zoltan Kodaly (1882 – 1967))

“I always loved music; whoso has skill in this art is of good temperament, fitted for all things. We must teach music in schools; a schoolmaster ought to have skills in music, or I would not regard him.”
(Martin Luther 1483 - 1546)