



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER WEAVING



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*"This is why we sing, why we lift our voice; why we stand as one in harmony. This is why we sing, why we lift our voice. Take my hand and sing with me"*

The words to *A Sound of Hope* couldn't be more apt, especially when performed by members of Melbourne Singers choir.

Singing from the plush surrounds of

their rehearsal room in the Sofitel Hotel every Tuesday evening, the community choir brings together employees from Melbourne businesses, disadvantaged people and migrants from the Fitzroy and Collingwood housing estates.

Melbourne Singers is the brainchild of opera singer and entrepreneur Tania de Jong AM. The choir is the pilot program of Creativity Australia, which de Jong formed a year ago with a mission to bring creativity and creative programs to the people of Australia.

"The idea is to bring together these very diverse voices as one," she says. "It doesn't matter about your background, nationality or age, it's about bringing people together in the most socially inclusive forum possible. People experience profound transformations through the choir - new friendships but also new opportunities."

For conductor Shaun Islip, leading such a diverse group has its challenges, but the rewards make it worthwhile.

"It's both the finished product and what they actually embody in terms of their passion for the music and for one another, it just shines out of them," he says.

"They are a community in every sense of the word. Musically it is much more of a challenge, particularly as a lot of them have English as a second language or a non-language in many cases."

It's a concept that Peter Kronborg realised when he tried to look over his fellow choir member's shoulder to read her song words, only to discover they were in Chinese!

Kronborg is the executive chairman of Oppeus International, a management consultancy group in Collins Street. As

deputy chair of Creativity Australia, de Jong convinced Kronborg to join the choir, despite his fear of public singing.

When asked to nominate the single best thing about the choir, Kronborg has three: "One is the joy I get from singing; it's just amazing how it brings joy out in your chemistry and your mind," he says. "The second is connections with people that I wouldn't normally meet; I just learn so much from that. Then there's the sense of achievement of doing something and just getting something right."

As well as weekly rehearsals, the choir performs for concerts, charities, corporate and special events. Last year they sang at eight public performances at major venues including Parliament House, BMW Edge and the Melbourne Convention Centre. Before each performance, a few choir members will tell their story, which often brings audience members to tears.

One such speaker is Nathalie Mbala, who couldn't speak a word of English when she arrived in Australia from Cameroon five years ago. She tells audiences how the choir helped her gain confidence and prepare for a job interview with ANZ that she was terrified about. Much to her delight, she got the position.

"When I come here I enjoy and

relax and completely forget everything and sing with all my heart and all my head," she says. "I meet new people and my communication skills are growing. I even have the possibility to learn all the accents."

For some workers, getting out of the office in time for the 5.15pm start can be a struggle. Mark Jankelson is a general manager of human resources at ANZ and joined the choir last month with his daughter Nina, who works at Deloitte. He has a standing appointment every Tuesday for rehearsals.

"I treat it like anything else in life, it you make a commitment, you honour it, and you don't let things get in the way," he says.

"I just find it a great separation from work and it's great fun. It's amazing that a group with no practice at all, can just make such beautiful sound, this is extraordinary."

The choir's biggest strength is bringing together people who would be unlikely to meet in their everyday lives. For choir member Adolf Mora from West Papua, it's a chance to make friends and also learn more about Australia's culture and traditions.

"Back home I actually did a lot of singing with friends, but the songs we sang are so different to the songs we sing in the choir because back home

it's traditional," he says.

"To come here and sing in English is very difficult for me because I have to learn all the words and try to remember them. With the public performance, I am a little bit nervous, but I have friends around me so I build up my confidence."

Elok Nur falls in both categories as a business worker and also a migrant to Australia. An engineer for Exxon Mobil, Nur was working in Jakarta before she was transferred to Melbourne. Without any family or friends, Nur admits she initially found life quite difficult being a head-scarf-wearing female in a secular country. At the choir though, she doesn't feel alone.

"The choir has a beautiful spirit," she says. "The music brings us together but it's more than that, it's because we want to be together, to share the joy and all the beautiful things that we have."

"It's a funny feeling because my family isn't a modern family, it isn't so multicultural, but here it has the same atmosphere as when I am home. It's one of the things that I really look forward to every week, I know that by Wednesday I will feel refreshed again." ■

*Melbourne Singers Choir welcomes new members. For more information, visit [creativityaustralia.org.au](http://creativityaustralia.org.au)*



Adolf Mora

Nathalie Mbala

Elok Nur

Mark Jankelson with daughter Nina

Peter Kronborg