

# Chorister shares joy of singing over 40 years of service

The joyous voices of St Mark's Choristers are greatly enjoyed and appreciated by St Mark's congregation and visitors. Not only do Choir members value their shared love of all things musical, but strong friendships, and examples of mentorship and servanthood are easy to see.

Take Helen Hoffman as an example. Helen recently retired from the St Mark's Choir after 40 years of incredible service. Michael Jensen shared: "Helen's example of dedicated and humble service of God and his people has been a model to us all. Her wonderful singing voice and musical knowledge have been put to good use in serving Jesus and his kingdom and she has drawn us to glorify God Sunday by Sunday."

Here's Helen's story, with reflections shared both by Helen and also by Rachel Wilson, a fellow chorister, who Helen has both mentored and been friends with for many years.

*Photo below: Long serving St Mark's Choir chorister, Helen Hoffman.*



## **Helen Hoffman - Reflections on 40 years of service in the St Mark's Choir**

### ***How did it start?***

In 1980, Barry Bowen, Musical Director at St Mark's was building the church choir: he rang my singing teacher, seeking decent sopranos who could sight read music and she suggested I go along for some handy working experience. Another chorister recruited was bass singer, clarinettist-bassoonist, Keith Game (later our much-valued verger and campanologist!). I was already singing regularly as a chorister (in Hebrew, of course) at Temple Emmanuel, Ocean Street, at their Erev Shabat, Shabat, and High Holy Days services (13 years in that role). So it became, Friday evenings, Saturday mornings at Temple, then weddings on Saturday afternoons plus Sunday choral Morning Prayer at 11:10am at St Mark's. Singing with me then at Temple and St Mark's was another existing chorister, Phoebe Ferguson. Jim Whild was a long-term Rector then. Once a month, the choir sang one of the many glorious Evensong services. The morning services alternated between Morning Prayer and Holy Communion from the Book of Common Prayer. In this way, the choir built up quite a wonderful and extensive repertoire of different services and anthems across the liturgical year, supplemented by various choral events, concerts, and Christmas carolling around and about (opening the Christmas "do" at the Art Gallery of NSW was a regular gig). In those days, the choir supported an additional band of loyal trebles, all very musical young lads from Cranbrook and/or Scots who often played various other instruments, a few of whom carried on into full-blown musical careers.

When gentle, beloved Jim Whild retired, services were moved to suit parishioner demographics. The 11:10am service shifted to 8am, morphing into Holy Communion; Evensong slipped over the horizon (people at sport or preparing for the working week). The Family service moved slightly to 10am. Rector Vic Roberts caringly steered us through the next 10 or so adaptive years. With Vic's arrival came a new Musical Director, William Clark - House Master and Director of Music at Scots. He ran a disciplined ship, the choir thrived, and our repertoire bloomed anew. In 2002, just as Vic was due to retire, I commenced as Church secretary-administrator, not long before intellectually provocative, erudite Boak Jobbins became our new Rector. I carried out administration work until late 2011, also warbling away as a St Mark's sop(rano). Following another interregnum, we were graced with our current Rector, warm, energetic, dynamic, approachable Michael Jensen! So, four Rectors later and many curates, Honorary and Assistant Ministers, not to forget a complete installation of the magnificent current Letourneau organ (gratis, the late Lady Nancy Fairfax as a memorial to her late husband, Sir Vincent Fairfax), the choir pops out the other end like Doctor Who in his Tardis. Time passes - we age and crumble; arthritic disability weakens lungs, so I must bow out of choral praise, though there's a familiar library of music retained.

### ***What do I enjoy about being in St Mark's Choir?***

Though recognised as a singer since earliest childhood I wasn't interested in centre-stage; rather, I'm uplifted by communal musicianship - magical moments of musical perfection - making music does it for me. An opportunity to blend with others to reignite musical giants - Bach, Handel, Byrd, Purcell, and the moderns - too many to mention, is my *raison d'être*. Always, it's more fitting to honour this gift in the best way possible - giving praise and thanks to God. It completes the circle: a gift given in turn gives praise to the giver. Being able to reproduce Biblical tracts and psalms in the framework of musical genius is the optimal use of my 'instrument'. Of course, I'll miss being part of St Mark's Choir but, however decrepit, I'll always be a singer because harmonies, and the perfection of a musical idea, swirl endlessly in my head.

### ***Anecdotes***

I remember, Harvest Festivals, a few thousand weddings (some very grand, some astonishing!), hundreds of funerals, some stunning Carols services and excellent concerts to raise funds for choral music. Various former choristers have become well known professional musicians. I've known some stellar people in 40 years with the St Mark's Choir - it's been a bit of a wrench to bid farewell. If Bill's caught flat-footed (that's a pun, Bill) - I'll prop up if I can, but it's time for young talents to find the thrill of making music for the praise of God in His holy place.

### ***Giving Service***

Joining a church choir over time is a growth experience. We progressively gain musical insight, finesse, sensitivity, appreciation of musicians and composers, and discover how mutual cooperation radically improves performance; so we learn to give and support each other and the congregation, support the ministry, and above all, give our best efforts as our offering to praise God. Music is a universal, non-lingual language, well understood by any culture as we adjust and react to sound. Done well, we can draw the church together, lift spirits, bring out poignancy, declaim triumphantly, draw people into contemplation, engender due and righteous fear of God our Father (the first commandment). It is, therefore, deliciously pleasurable when you give your best and it works for all those present and is, hopefully, pleasing to God: if you're helping the congregation as well, it's absolutely joyously fulfilling. I've prepped rosters for scripture readers for the 8am service, and for the after-service nibbles while people chat outside - we call these the After8s. Once a month, I also used to supply the nibbles until arthritis

really made things too difficult. Any of these extra little duties bring me a real feeling of pleasure being of service. Doing little things for the St Mark's family gives a kickback of pleasure. In fact, anything one can do to ease a situation for others delivers a warm rush of pleasure to our hearts and lifts our soul. I can't recommend highly enough the happiness I receive in serving our congregation in any capacity. It satisfies a basic human need to nurture; helping others injects us with a burst of joy; it conforms to the second commandment (to love others) - and we all benefit, the giver and the receiver. It's a no-brainer.

## **Rachel Wilson - Reflections on the service of Helen Hoffman to the Choir of St Mark's - "Then Sings My Soul"**

Just over 27 years ago, as a timid but enthusiastic 12-year-old, I turned up one Friday evening to audition for the St Mark's Choir. All I had wanted to do, for as long as I could remember, was to sing. Despite having very limited experience, and I'm sure not singing the beautiful hymn "*Praise My Soul the King of Heaven*" that well, Bill Clark (the Director of Music at St Mark's both then and to this present day) told me I was in. Less than five minutes later I was sitting in rehearsal next to the woman who would come to be my choir mum, mentor and dear friend.

As a young girl, Helen was the perfect mix of straight talking stalwart, and compassionate encourager. Her knowledge of church music was something I stood in awe of. All Bill Clark had to say was "Hymn 217" and Helen would immediately respond with "To Hyfrydol or Blaenwern", knowing the words to "*Love Divine all loves excelling*" better than most of us know our own names. While she would open her hymn book each week, I am convinced that she has never had cause to actually look at either words or notes. She imparted much of this knowledge to me, and to the other young people in the choir, yet there was something more profound, more significant in what she gave us.

I still remember the first time Bill asked me to sing a solo in the choir concert. I was terrified, and my nerves were getting the better of me, until Helen reminded me what I was singing for. This was not a concert where I was to be the star, the limelight firmly on me. Rather, I was the light shining towards the one who made all the stars, the true light. It was Helen who, with her combination of intellect, compassion and understanding, reminded me of that most important lesson, drawn from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, to "*let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*" (Mathew 5:16).

And this lesson had weight, because Helen not only believed it, but lived it, every day. Serving our church community for 40 years, in the choir, on morning tea and reading rosters (and organising them) and as parish secretary. Helen has always been there, whether for a quiet chat or some much needed encouragement or support. When she sang "*Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you.*" (Hymn 650) they were never empty words. It is no wonder that so many of us in the choir, and the wider 8am parish, count her as one of our dearest friends. She is one of the best examples I know of someone who lives Christ's command to love her neighbour.

And this love for others is exceeded by only one thing. The love Helen has for God. In almost 30 years of singing with Helen, I have only ever seen her sing with complete joy and absolute devotion to God. She raises her voice to praise the God whom she has trusted throughout her life, and so others might have a glimpse of the "*Measureless might, ineffable love*", the joy on her face truly reflecting one who "*with true adoration shall sing all their days*" (Hymn 133).

Helen's legacy at St Mark's is of a sublime voice raised in worship, of compassionate care and connection with others, of a heart set on understanding God's love and showing it forth to others. She has "*sung the wondrous story of the Christ who died for me*" (Hymn 233) for us for 40 years. What a blessing she is to us all!