

An interview with Mrs Amy Young, 28th of August, 2001. The interviewer is Anne Doggett

Mrs Young, could we begin by talking about your early life? First of all, was music an important part of your childhood?

Yes, I came really with a musical family. My mother in a church choir, and my father a bandsman, and I learned the piano when I was very young, and became very involved in being pianist for many, many things in Ballarat. When I was only in my teens I was playing at 3BA for Sunday School of the Air on a Sunday, and then later in the afternoon for the Endeavour session. I played for what they called the Modernaires Quartet at 3BA. And just really did a lot of piano playing before I became involved in choral work. And it was when I took over from my brother at Burnbank St. Church, when he went away overseas, I was only 14, but that was when I started conducting large choral groups, the Sunday School Anniversary choir with the Church choir, so I have been involved in music from when I was very young.

And can you tell me something about the musicians in Ballarat in those days. Were there many good musicians in Ballarat?

Oh, when you talk about musicians, there were piano teachers. And when I first started singing lessons I learned from a lady called Madame Warburton and I used to go there in my lunch hour when I was working in the daytime. And I had my training with Madame Warburton until Keith arrived in Ballarat, and when we became friendly and I knew he did voice production, not only teaching singing, but then when he took over, my voice developed and I became quite - well a soloist as well as a good part of his various choirs.

And did you take part in any musical competitions in those days?

Yes I did, that was where I met my husband, because he was adjudicator at one of the competitions that I entered, and when I won first prize he came to see me to ask me to join a group that he had and was going to put in for South Street, so that was how we started.

Now could you tell me something about the YWCA Choir, and how you came to be associated with that?

The YWCA Choir started off as a small group with a lady called Evelyn Earles who was an organist and a teacher in Ballarat. And she left to be married to go and live in Horsham and they asked if I would take over the Ballarat YWCA Choir, which I did in 1950. And to think back after 45 years conducting, it wasn't always called the YWCA Choir because when YWCA left Ballarat we were not permitted to use the name. So we were always known as the Ballarat YW choir, so we kept on with that title, until some of the members in the choir who had families who told them that they were no longer young women, so it became - they altered the constitution altogether to alter it to the Ballarat Y Choir, naming the Y after my name Young, which I thought was a great honour.



Mrs Young with the choir of Pleasant Street State School after winning at South Street in 1944

And I believe that your leadership of the choir was the main reason for its continued success, but were there any other reasons why this YWCA Choir was so successful?

Well I put it all down to the folk that I had in my choir. Some were young girls, some were middle - no not middle aged, they all had to be under a certain age, but I was fortunate enough to have a lot of the students who had learned from my husband and they had this vocal training and I was able to get the balance and the blend and the interpretation into my choir work, which became known, so well known that that was when we were asked to make recordings. And from then on it just developed as a very well known, world famous choir.

And did the choir travel interstate or...

We did a lot of travelling. And this is where I feel that we were so fortunate in having people in the choir who were able to travel. We did very, very well in Sydney at an eisteddfod there. I was just looking through a book this afternoon and finding where the Ballarat choirs won more sections in Sydney. We did very well when we went to Adelaide, this was competitive work, but apart from competitions we did a lot of other work where we became quite famous through world conventions that were here in Australia and we were asked to represent Australia and to sing for the world. I know this is getting away from the Y Choir but I conducted a choir in the Melbourne Town Hall where the choir was made up of 40 singers from every state in Australia. They were brought to Melbourne two days before the world event where the Melbourne Town Hall also was reserved for all overseas visitors, and a few Australians. And I conducted that choir, that also was - Spotlight recorded that, so that was taken back with all these people who came from overseas, so again the name of Ballarat was publicised.

Could you tell me a little more about the records that the choir made?

Yes Anne, I feel that the recordings we did publicised Ballarat more than anything else, because when you go away as we did to Sydney and Adelaide and these other places, but the recordings were bought and sold all over Australia and even overseas. We made our first one right back in 1956. It was done by Spotlight Super Sound it was called in those days. Then we recorded with Astor, we recorded with W and G records, we did some under the Galatone label and the World Record Club, Esquire and EMI, Drum and Covenant, so a lot of recording companies. And then we had some re-pressed in South

Africa and even in England, And then our records were used by the Education Department in New York, they were used in the BBC London I believe, and the ABC and all commercial radio stations in Australia used to play our records. So Ballarat makes music right around the world.

What were some of the major events at which the choir performed?

Oh, there are so many that I almost have to look at the list that I have and I probably haven't got the right list, but we had some, many - I suppose the two highlights would be the making of the recordings which were not only sold here in Australia, they were re-pressed in other countries and the - I'm trying to think - I'm sorry, I've got a little bit mixed up, but apart from the recordings I think making records and appearing on television for 11 years made us really very, very well known because the television went into every state in Australia and as I said, the records were even re-pressed overseas so that Ballarat, the name of Ballarat was very well known through our choral work.

What were the TV shows that the choir appeared on?

Well we appeared with Graham Kennedy way back, In Melbourne Tonight was one of them I know. But the main ones here in Ballarat with BTV6 it was called then, now it's named WIN, but on BTV6 Ballarat there was a session every Sunday called The Sounds of Sunday and my husband was responsible for the music that was part of that programme. And not only the Ballarat Y Choir sang there, but as the Y Choir combined with my husband's Ballarat Civic Male Choir known as the Ballarat City Choir, we did a lot of the work over the 11 years.

Were there any other highlights you can tell me about?

Some of the highlights that we appeared when we went to Melbourne, we were on with Graham Kennedy on the TV, Melbourne Tonight. But two very important occasions when we went down to Melbourne, Music for the People with Hector Crawford and the Australian Symphony Orchestra, Music for the People, because I remember we sang Keith's own Australian National Anthem that won an Australia wide competition and all the people - there were just so many thousands there and he got a standing ovation. We thought that was wonderful. But then for the Begonia Festival, we started off in the Civic Oval, with the stand with all our choir members. Then we did another section, Music across the Waters, where we sang from a steamer out on the lake. We sang with the RAAF Central band in Melbourne - that was a wonderful occasion. And the record, my Y choir girls, the very first record we made, My Souvenirs, was played at a World Conference in Mexico, with 600 people from 68 countries present and so that was a very important occasion too. And then Sunday Showcase on BTV6 was another session as well as the Sounds of Sunday, so we did quite a lot really over the years.

And I suppose the choir performed with some very well known musicians at times.

Well our choir, I think it might have been the mixed choir with the men, was heard by a very famous tenor, who used to be an Australian and went overseas and made his name overseas, Mr Ken Neate, Kenneth Neate. When he came to Australia he heard one of the Spotlight recordings and he asked if he could make a recording with our choir. So that was a very, very high compliment, and we made two records with Ken Neate and of course they went with him overseas back to where he performed, and so Ballarat, the

name of Ballarat was carried further with the records by Ken Neate. And the Ballarat City Choir.

Mrs Young, when you auditioned your singers for the choir did you have to refuse anybody who maybe didn't have a good voice or ...

I must have been fortunate because I didn't ever have anybody in my choir who was not up to the standard, but there was one lady who badly wanted to learn singing who was in our Church Choir and she used to sing an octave lower, she just couldn't sing in tune. And after training for about 12 months she became one of our best alto singers, because she stood next to me in the choir and she apparently had a good ear for music. So I think that anybody, it doesn't matter if they say they can't sing, I think they can be taught. But we have to have the good listeners as well as the singers, don't we?

That's right. Did they rehearse once a week?

With my choir, yes, we rehearsed once a week on a Wednesday night. We rehearsed with the City Choir on another night and - there was a lot of rehearsal when I think back. And of course for the work that we did we had to have a lot of rehearsals.

Did you find any difficulties of any sort when you were working with your choirs - any major problems?

No, not with my choir. I must have been very fortunate, and again I give the credit to Keith and his teaching, because we were one of the few choirs that performed at every concert without holding music. The girls were young enough to be able to memorise and learn their work and they depended on me in front to give them whatever was necessary in the way of interpretation or which part had to be brought in. And no, I was very fortunate, I had a wonderful group of girls. And after I resigned, after 45 years, I knew it was a shock to a lot of them, but they still continue to sing now. They had to use another name, and they sing under the name now of the Treble Clefs. And they still sing around Ballarat and I've been invited to some of their concerts and they do some of the pieces I trained them with and it's almost as if I'm standing in front, they sing them exactly the way I trained them. So that's a real thrill when I go to their programmes, and hear some of these pieces again.

It's a wonderful tribute to your leadership and your musicianship.

I was given the gift and I'm just so glad that I could use it the way I have over the years.

Now can I ask you something about the various competitions in Ballarat? I believe the South Street competitions are known by everybody, but perhaps the St. John's competitions are not so famous. Can you tell me something about these?

St. John's competitions went for years and years and it was a preparation really for a lot who wanted to enter South Street. Because the, even though it was only more, not only a local group, but the singers would come from just round about Ballarat. But then they had the experience of being judged by - they had very good adjudicators, that's what I said, my husband was one of them, when he first came to Ballarat. But they did have good adjudicators who gave great help to the competitors, particularly I'm talking now about the singing, the vocal work. And then when they had been singing in St. John's for perhaps a couple of years, then they would enter South Street and some of them went on

to becoming very, very well known singers. And some of my husband's singers, I can remember a friend of mine now, she got into the semi-finals of the Aria which is the biggest section at South Street. Two others won the Courier Ballad, which in those days was the most popular section, I think, of the vocal work. But his students all did so well and then I reaped the benefit.

Now Mrs Young I know you've received some wonderful awards for your services to music. Would you be able to tell me about some of the major ones?

Well, the last one that I received of course, the Order of Australia, that came as a complete surprise, I had no idea I had been nominated. And then they contact you to ask you if you will accept the award and then they make an arrangement for you for the presentation and it was on Australia Day and I had to go up to the Gardens and be on this huge platform with all these important people to receive that award. So that, I think, was the main one, that was back in 1989. But then in 1996, the year after my husband died, I was awarded the Citizen of the Year. Ah, I'm wrong, the Citizen of the Year was on Australia Day, and the Order of Australia was in June, in the middle of the year, on the Queen's Birthday weekend. Yes, I'm sorry I made a mistake there. And then, of course there were a lot of other awards, the 3BA V.I.P. award that they used to give out to people who did anything special for Ballarat and oh there just quite a number of those that were given through the years, because during 45 years there's a lot of work to be done. And for some reason or other I was very, very fortunate in being nominated for so many of these awards.



And after all that you've contributed to the musical life not only of Ballarat but of Australia, I believe you still contribute musically to various groups. Would you be able to tell me about your current activities in the world of music?

Well I am so pleased that I can still play the piano, and that my memory is - I was able to memorise so much of my music which a lot of people can't do. My older brother was a very famous musician but he always had to use music when he played. But I was given the gift of memorising music. And now I go to quite a number of the Queen Elizabeth homes. I go to Midlands Terrace on a Wednesday and to Sebas. on a Friday, to Eureka Village, the Pleasant Homes. And I play for what they call their Happy Hour where they sing a lot of the songs that they learned way back in their childhood. And it brings back such memories for them, it's always a real treat to see and to hear the happiness in their singing. Quite a lot of them don't even need the books, because they remember the words. But this is what I'm very happy to be able to do right now. Not only it takes away a little of the loneliness since my husband died five years ago. We did so much together that when he was gone and I was left alone, after I recovered from - I had delayed shock for a while - but then I just wanted to do something, and instead of taking on choral work again I decided to visit all these places and play for them in what they call, as I said, the Happy Hour.

Mrs Young it's been a great privilege to talk to you today. Thank you very much.

Oh I must thank you for even listening to all my rambling. But no, I would encourage other people if they can, if they have a gift to use it, because they say that if you don't use what you have you lose it and I think that that is very true. But thank you Anne, very much, for listening to all my work and it brings back a lot of memories to me too. So thank you to you.