

History of the Dandenong Ranges Orchestra

This year (2009) we are celebrating the 25th year of the beginning of what is now known as the Dandenong Ranges Orchestra. In 1984, the Dandenong Ranges Music Council launched a pilot program to form a string orchestra in the Dandenong Ranges which hopefully would evolve into a full orchestra. Under the musical directorship of Alex Cole, the Senior String Orchestra was formed. Initially there were 3 violin players and Joan Zavan, the groups Mentor, affectionately known as Aunty Joan to the players. Our very first performance was at a Bush Dance at the Monbulk Community Centre. With Alex, the 3 string players on violin and Joan playing the piano accordion we played “Travelling Down to Castlereagh” and “Botany Bay”. The event was to raise funds to pay the airfares of the composer Robert Smallwood to return from London to Melbourne, to conduct the Royal performance of his piece “Elements”.

On November 7th 1985 at the Royal Botanical Garden, musicians and singers from all over the Dandenong Ranges assembled to perform for the celebration of Victoria’s 150th Anniversary, opened by the Prince and Princess of Wales.

In 1986, the string orchestra relocated from Monbulk to Upwey High School for weekly rehearsals, and with more members joining the orchestra, it continued to develop and grow. Twice a year, other musicians would be invited to perform with the String Orchestra to produce two Symphonic Concerts that would be performed at the Monbulk High School Theatre.

In 1989, Alex resigned from his position of Musical Director and the group sought a new director. Christine Vincent was appointed the new Musical Director and later on the group changed their name to Dandenong Ranges Chamber Orchestra. Over a period of approximately nine years, Christine encouraged and directed the group to try all manner of musical performance under their own volition.. The group performed regularly at art openings, weddings, local community events and Christmas church services. The group also ran several informative evening string music workshops, covering all aspects of the workings of stringed instruments. One of the groups most avid supporters of this time, was a well known Emerald identity -Gus Ryberg. Every year, we would be invited by Gus to perform at the Nobelius Heritage Park Museum in Emerald, for the annual Nobelius family reunion in February. After Gus died in 2000, the tradition of the group playing at the Museum was abandoned.

Sadly by 1998, the group had diminished to four regular players, so it was decided to make one last mammoth effort to recruit all instrument players to form a full orchestra. With plenty of publicity, we held several sessions with different guest conductors, which attracted many new players. It soon became apparent, that reducing the term fees by half, with no auditions we could get this community orchestra happening. As luck would have it, a viola player who had played with the orchestra during Alex Cole's time had attended one of these sessions. John Collins had just retired from teaching and with some gentle persuasion, we invited him to become the Musical Director of the Dandenong Ranges Orchestra.

Over the 25 years, the group has experienced many wonderful opportunities, including working with well known composers - Robert Smallwood, George Dreyfus and Wendy Morrissey. For a short time, Wendy came along and joined the Chamber Orchestra and was very passionate about string composition. In recent years, the orchestra has had the privilege to receive instruction from members of the Australian Youth Orchestra and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. The Dandenong Ranges Orchestra with, 35 members, is still growing and developing and continues to encourage the community of the Dandenong Ranges to come and help us make music. In recent years the Orchestra has had the good fortune to be sponsored by International Trade Management (ITM). The Orchestra is extremely grateful for this assistance with expenses such as fees for guest artists and conductors, venue hire, purchase of music, etc.

The Dandenong Ranges Orchestra will always be eternally grateful to the Dandenong Ranges Music Council and in particular, Bev McAlister for her support and advice.

Significant Events:

- 1985 - Royal Performance of "Elements" for Victoria's 150th Anniversary
- 1986 - First Symphony Concert at Monbulk High School Theatre
- 1987 - Spring and Autumn Concerts at Monbulk High School Theatre
- 1988 - Opening of the Nobelius Heritage Park, Emerald
 - Joint Bicentennial "Australian Works" Concert, with Lilydale, Yarra Valley Orchestra. Music by George Dreyfus and Bruce Rowland (George Dreyfus attended the Concert.)
 - Alex and the orchestra, accompanies Helen Noolan in a tribute concert to " Dame Nelly Melba" at Lilydale
- 1989 - Combined Concert with the Margaret Sutherland Strings, Monbulk
- 1990 - Robert Blackwood Hall, performance of Wendy Morrissey's "20th Century Noah by Snail, Rhinoceros and Me"
- 1991 - Performance with the Sherbrooke Theatre Company, the melodrama "The Fair, the Fearless and the Frightful"
 - "Spirit of Anzac's" Concert with the Hilltop Singers
- 1992 - Dandenong Ranges Australia Day Holiday Festival, Rhododendron Gardens, Olinda
 - Joint venture with In Time Music Council, Upwey Music Makers Day
- 1993 - Performance at the official opening of the Mont De Lancey Historical Home and Museum.
 - Puffing Billy Olde Time Festival, Emerald

- 1994-5 Performances at many weddings in the Rhododendron Gardens at Olinda, also regular bookings at numerous Retirement Villages
- 1996 - "Symphony of Sounds" event at the Cardinia Reservoir Park
- 1997 - Puffing Billy Olde Time Festival, Menzies Creek Station
- Woorilla Dandenong Ranges Festival of Words, Pirianda Gardens, Olinda
 - Emerald Winter Festival, Gemco Hall, Emerald
- 1998 - First "Spring Concert" of the Dandenong Ranges Orchestra
- Performances at the re-opening of the rail line for Puffing Billy, from Lakeside, Emerald to Gembrook
 - "Festival of Christmas Carols" at the Upwey High School Stadium.
- 1999 - Emerging Composers, "Sound Scapes" Concert at Upwey Baptist Church
- Wendy Morrissey composes "Dance Movements" for the orchestra
 - A grant of \$1000 to purchase new music for the orchestra, from the Ian Potter Foundation
- 2000 - Sunday Afternoon "Dance" sessions at the Ken Laurel Dance Studios, Upper FTG
- String sessions with members of the Australian Youth Orchestra
 - Performance at the Puffing Billy Olde Time Festival
- 2001 - Celebrations for Centenary of Federation
- Federation Bush Picnic and Concert at the Emerald Heritage Park and Museum
- "Music, Motoring and Machines" at Mont De Lancy
 - Centenary of Federation Concert, Mt. Lilydale College
 - "A Celebration of Australian Music & Verse" Dandenong Ranges Community Cultural Centre, Upwey
- 2002 - Performance at the Emerald Winter Festival with the Hilltop Singers
- Christmas Charity Concert in The Basin with St. Gregorius Dutch Male Choir and Cranbourne Chorale
- 2003 - Producing a Christmas cd with St. John of God "Archway Allstars" and Hilltop Singers
- 2004 - Concert with the Ranges Young Strings at Truth & Liberation Concern, Bayswater Nth
- Close Encounters project with Brett Kelly & members of Melbourne Symphony Orchestra
 - Final Concert "Simply the Best" at Robert Blackwood Hall

Since 2004, the Orchestra has gone on to produce two annual Concerts and perform Christmas Music at the end of each year, For 15 years, the Orchestra performed a Christmas Carol Service every year for the congregation at St. Thomas's Church of England, UFTG.