

Chapter 8. “The Greatest Musical Event of its Generation” or Exotic Diversion? The visit of The Sistine Chapel Choir to Australia in 1922. Ian Burk.

The visit of the Sistine Chapel Choir to Australia in 1922 was eagerly anticipated, its scheduled departure from Naples on 5 March having been reported in February that year. (*Argus* 15 February 1922, 12; *Sydney Morning Herald* 15 February 1922, 13) Organized by the impresario Thomas Quinlan in association with the theatrical entrepreneurs Edward and Daniel Carroll, the tour was to last almost three months. Visits by international concert artists to Australia were certainly not uncommon at the time and, judging from newspaper reports and reviews, their concerts were generally well attended. The visit of the Sistine Choir however captured the imagination of the Australian public, King Edward VII having already described the choir as “the glory of Italy and the envy of the world”.¹

At a time when a certain aura, created by distance, surrounded the Pope, who remained in the Vatican, the visit of the choir with its close connections to the papacy and to the Sistine Chapel no doubt excited many Australians, especially Catholics. Not only might they have expected an exemplary sacred music repertoire approved by the Vatican but also performances which met the highest international standards. Newspaper reports suggest that the choir and its conductor were held in awe. The progress of the choir and the occasional personal drama connected with it was reported at every opportunity. The theft of some medals belonging to the conductor was one example. (*Argus* 26 April 1922, 10)²

The arrival of the 65-voice choir in Fremantle in Western Australia on 2 April was reported in the Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane press. (*Argus* 4 April 1922, 6; *Sydney Morning Herald* 4 April 1922, 10) The Melbourne *Argus* hailed the visit as “The greatest musical

¹ This quotation appeared on the front page of the printed programs.

² ‘Medals and Papers Returned’. When Monsignor Rella, conductor of the Sistine Choir, found on Saturday that his room at the Victoria Coffee Palace, Collins Street, had been broken into and most of his property stolen, he made it known that his numerous medals of honour and his papers were to him the most treasured portion of the booty obtained by the thief, and that he was less concerned about the loss of his money, although, he had been robbed of 6,000 Italian lire and £85 in English notes. Sentiment and perhaps respect for religious tokens must have moved the perpetrator of the robbery to respond to Monsignor Rella’s appeal. Yesterday a message was received by telephone at Raheen, the residence of Archbishop Mannix, Studley Park Road, Kew, that somebody had been seen throwing parcels over the fence. An inspection of the grounds was made, and 12 parcels in brown paper were found. These contained the medals, papers, and other articles stolen from Monsignor Rella’s room. No money was returned, but practically all the other articles were accounted for. Archbishop Mannix immediately communicated with the owner of the property and with the police.

event of its generation”, (*Argus* 15 April 1922, 20) while the *Sydney Morning Herald* was more restrained, describing it as “one of the great events of the musical year”. (*Sydney Morning Herald* 29 April 1922, 14)

Performing before packed houses (“Sistine choir”, *Sydney Morning Herald* 13 June 1922, 10), the choir gave seasons in Melbourne and Sydney, returning to Melbourne for another season by public demand. It then travelled to Brisbane for a short season, including a visit to Toowoomba, followed by a five-concert season in Adelaide, and a final concert in Perth, before returning to Italy. On the way from Melbourne to Sydney the choir performed in the provincial towns of Albury, Wagga, and Goulburn. According to one report, many hundreds of people were turned away from each concert in Melbourne. (“Sistine choir”, *Sydney Morning Herald* 6 May 1922,14) The following table shows the progress of the choir.

Dates	Place	Number of Concerts
15-29 April	Melbourne	13
6-27 May	Sydney	17
3-17 June	Melbourne	16
20-24 June	Brisbane	6
28 June–1 July	Adelaide	5
7 July	Perth	1

Under the direction of Monsignor Antonio Rella, the choir presented two seasons of concerts in Melbourne, the first for a period of two weeks beginning on 15 April and the second for two weeks beginning on 3 June. The second season was extended from one to two weeks due to public demand. The first season consisted of fourteen concerts and took place in the Melbourne Town Hall. The second season was presented in the Princess Theatre, where the choir “occupied the stage which was set as a chapel”. (“The Sistine Chapel at the Princess Theatre”, *Table Talk* 8 June 1922, 37) This may well have been in response to earlier comment that the Town Hall was not the ideal surrounding for sacred music. (“Sistine Choir”, *Age* 17 April 1922, 9) No doubt the “pseudo-Gothic scenery” which included “a window with very remarkable tracery” at the Princess Theatre lent a certain authenticity to the music and to the choir itself. (“Sistine Choir”, *Argus* 5 June 1922, 8) As one critic observed in a review of the very first concert at the Town Hall, the fact that the choir wore vestments - purple [maroon] cassocks and white surplices - added to “the religious mood”. (“The Sistine Choir”, *Age* 17 April 1922, 9) In fact, the same critic seemed uncertain whether

the performances were concerts or religious observances, commenting that “such music should of course be heard in its true surroundings, that is, a church, to be fully understood” adding later that “the religious mood was at times marred by applause”. (“The Sistine Choir”, *Age* 17 April 1922, 9)

The choir also performed to a packed congregation at Vespers in St Patrick’s Cathedral on Sunday, 11 June, but the fact that the concerts took place in the neutrality of the secular venues probably meant that they attracted a wider audience than they would have done had they taken place in a church. At the time Protestants were loath to, or even nervous about entering Catholic churches. By the same token the Catholic Church positively discouraged, if not forbade, its own adherents from entering Protestant churches. There was no public broadcasting at this time, so any promulgation of music was largely by means of live concerts. In Sydney the choir performed at the Town Hall and at the Hippodrome, in Adelaide at the Exhibition Hall and in Brisbane at the Exhibition Building Concert Hall. (Pixley 1976, 19-20)

Controversy arose immediately upon the choir’s arrival when it was announced by the promoter that the choir would present first and foremost compositions from the ecclesiastical repertoire but might also include operatic and lighter forms of music in the second half of each program. (*Argus* 4 April 1922, 6) This had been foreshadowed in a press article on 24 February where it was stated that the “programmes will be of an attractive variety, including joyous madrigals and merry national airs, up to the impressive Te Deums and beatitudes of which Palestrina composed such brilliant examples”. (*Argus* 24 February 1922, 4) In fact the *Advocate*, the Catholic weekly newspaper in Melbourne announced that the choir and soloists would perform solos, duets, and choruses from operas by Wagner, Puccini, Bizet, Gounod, Lalo, Verdi, Massenet, and Ponchielli. (*Advocate* 30 March 1922, 5)³ Due to public outcry or pressure from Catholic circles, the printed programs reveal that the programs consisted entirely of sacred music, with the exception of a curious work by the Italian composer and priest, Licinio Refice (1883–1954) entitled *Greetings to the Australian People*, specially composed for the tour and sung at the beginning of every concert.⁴ The reviewer of the opening concert in the *Australasian* commented that even though the opening program was

³ It should be pointed out that of the men of the choir, all of whom were professional singers, several had had operatic training. A group of nine, known as the Sistine choir soloists, made an extended tour of Australasia singing such repertoire three years later in 1925. A group of ten had already returned to Australia to give concerts in 1923.

⁴ A selection of printed programs from the Melbourne and Sydney seasons are contained in the National Library of Australia, Canberra.

less varied than advance notices had led the public to expect, the large audience which had assembled to greet the choir was not a whit perturbed. ("Sistine Choir", *Australasian* 22 April 1922, 727)

In the press article of 4 April heralding the arrival of the choir in Freemantle, it was revealed that, of the Australian public which had put forward requests for inclusion in the program, 40 per cent had suggested Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli*. ("Sistine Choir", *Australasian* 22 April 1922, 727) It is not clear how or by whom this information was solicited. It is interesting to speculate on why it was such a popular choice and how the work was familiar to Australians. No record of earlier performances of this work in Australia has come to light. In the event, the printed programs reveal that the work was performed in its entirety in the Fifth Program on 20 April in Melbourne. Kyrie and Credo from the Mass were subsequently performed during the second Melbourne Season on 9 June. There was a change of program each time the choir performed. This may well have encouraged people to attend more than one performance. Apart from works by Palestrina, Vittoria, and occasionally Viadana, Anerio and Marenzio, works of Lorenzo Perosi, a composer of note and an authority on Church Music at the time dominated the programs. In addition he held the post of Perpetual Director of the Sistine Choir from 1898 until his death in 1956. Due to indisposition, Perosi's assistant, Monsignor Antonio Rella, conducted the choir on the Australian tour.⁵ The concerts given in Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth drew on the same repertoire that was presented at the Melbourne concerts.

The concerts in Melbourne possibly gave many their first opportunity of hearing early polyphonic music from the Latin repertoire. English music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and a few works from the Latin repertoire adapted to English words had been staple fare at St Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Melbourne since it opened in 1891. It was promoted to a wider audience by the organist A. E. Floyd in 1917 when he began a series of public concerts featuring this music which continued up until the mid 1930s. In spite of occasional protestation in the press and other public forums, the *motu proprio*, issued by Pope Pius X in 1903 was largely ignored in Melbourne and Sydney. This decree advocated the use of Gregorian Chant and music in the style of Palestrina as being the most appropriate type of

⁵ 'An acute spiritual crisis, the culmination of eight years of growing psychological disturbance, forced him [Perosi] to abandon his Rome post in 1915, and in 1922 he entered a mental hospital. In 1923 he was sufficiently cured to resume his position, which officially he held until his death'. John C.G. Waterhouse. "Perosi, Lorenzo." *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. 30 Jan. 2012 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/21357>>.

music to be performed in church services. In Melbourne there was generally a dearth of choirs, especially of those capable of performing polyphony. Despite many salutary efforts, there appears to have been a lack of willingness to perform this type of music on the part of choirs that had the adequate resources, such as those at St Patrick's Cathedral and St Francis's Church, and on the part of their conductors. Judging from the repertoires of these two choirs, and that of Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, for that matter, they appear to have preferred the more immediate musical gratification or emotional response provided by the Victorian Romantic composers and the Classical composers, with which they were familiar, rather than the more austere and unfamiliar style of Renaissance composers. (Bryne 1995, 99-101; O'Farrell 1971, 171)

Visits by international concert artists to Australia were common and subjected to lively and sometimes severe criticism. Take the contralto Marguerite D'Alvarez for instance, better known as Madame D'Alvarez, who was famous in Europe and America. She undertook a tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1922, the same year as the Sistine Choir. Her great reputation having preceded her, Australians flocked to her concerts. It was reported in the press that people were queuing before daylight at the Melbourne Town Hall waiting for her concert that afternoon. In spite of her fame, she received the following review of one of her concerts in Melbourne.

People who are inclined to be bigoted about such things as beauty of tone, accuracy of intonation (otherwise known as singing in tune), intelligent phrasing (otherwise known as taking a breath in the right place), and so on, know by this time that Madame D'Alvarez sometimes (though not by any means always) takes very liberal views thereupon. (*Argus* 25 September 1922)

This is hardly a good review. It would appear that on this occasion, her personality and not necessarily her musicality was what enthralled or captivated her audiences.

The stage presence of the Sistine Choir seemed to produce a similar response from audiences. However, actual criticism of the choir and the performances was to a certain extent somewhat muted and in some cases excused. No one, it seems, wanted to upset the illustrious visitors! In Sydney, the opening concert on 6 May was accorded an extensive report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* two days later. ("Sistine Choir: Choral Enchantment", *Sydney Morning Herald* 8 May 1922, 7) It consisted mainly of a description of the mood and content of the concert, theatrical and musical. It also commented on the choir's and the conductor's attire, drawing attention to the white lace-edged surplices of the choir and to the exquisite Venetian

point lace of the surplice worn by the conductor. On the musical side, the reviewer stated that although the music was all unaccompanied, interest was sustained by “the sweetness, power, and certainty with which they take up the contrapuntal passages, and unite in a quite unrivalled harmony of ensemble”. By contrast, the observation was also made that “occasionally the tone of the male voices was momentarily harsh, due to forcing the tone in order to obtain a maximum resonance”. The reviewer concluded that “this seems to be the Italian vocal style, whether on the stage or in the church”.

The Brisbane season opened on 20 June. The following day the *Brisbane Courier* reported that the Sistine Chapel Choir opened its season with “great éclat” before an immense audience at the Exhibition Concert Hall. (“Sistine Choir Concert”, *Brisbane Courier* 21 June 1922, 15) Having summarily dismissed the choir and its performance with this accolade, the remainder of the report consisted of an extremely long list of presumably very important people who attended the concert. So much for music criticism in the *Brisbane Courier* at the time! In fact, this very newspaper was more interested in the choir’s reaction to the kind of food it was given to eat during its stay in Toowoomba than in what and how it sang there. (“Choir’s Meal Complaint”, *Brisbane Courier* 22 June 1922, 4) *The Queenslander* however gave a long and detailed account of the concert. (“The Sistine Choir”, *Queenslander* 1 July 1922, 18-19) The reviewer noted that

the singing, remarkable as it was, proved to be flawless, neither from the point of view of good tone and that of intonation. In fortissimo passages there was a tendency on the part of the tenors to dominate the situation to the consequential detriment of blend, tone, and balance.

The reviewer then went on to intimate that these were insignificant criticisms in the context of the overall effect and the overwhelming positive reaction of the audience.

In Melbourne, both seasons were widely reported and extensively reviewed in the press, including the three major daily newspapers and two weekly journals. The performances were enthusiastically received. The reviewers praised the expressiveness and the rhythmic and vocal vitality of the choir, at the same time revealing that the interpretations were somewhat Romantic in style. However, the choir’s intonation was criticized by three of the reviewers; one held that it was “not their strong point” (“The Sistine Choir”, *Age* 17 April 1922, 9) and another that it “was sometimes far from true”. (“Sistine Choir’s Harmony Again Heard”, *Herald* (evening ed.) 5 June 1922, 16) *The Tribune*, a journal of Catholic information and literature, perhaps not surprisingly, commented that “the work of this choir cannot be judged

by any standard set hitherto in Melbourne”. (“The Sistine Choir”, *Tribune* 20 April 1922, 5) This was potentially an explosive comment, given that by this time the choir at St Paul’s Cathedral enjoyed an international reputation for excellence. If A.E. Floyd who was in charge of the music at St Paul’s and concurrently the music critic of the *Argus* took exception to this, he got his own back when he reviewed the first concert of the second season.

The points wherein this choir might by some be thought to compare unfavourably with a typical English cathedral choir, such as that of the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Westminster, would be the intonation and the tone quality.

However, he concluded with a show of charity, perhaps tinged with a characteristic drop of acid, adding, “but into that question would enter of necessity the consideration of differing national ideals and predispositions”. (“Sistine Choir”, *Argus* 5 June 1922, 8)⁶

This was not the first time a comparison had been made with an English cathedral choir. The reviewer of the very first concert of the tour in the *Age* observed that “those who looked for beauty of tone were probably disappointed”, pointing out that the choir did not produce the “soft fluty tone so much favoured in English cathedrals”. (*Age* 17 April 1922, 9) The critic of the *Australasian* also pointed out that one should not expect the “same qualities as one finds in the choirs of the English Church among these singers”, but gave no reason for the statement. (“Sistine Choir”, *Australasian* 22 April 1922, 727) The Sydney Morning Herald critic noted that “every school has its faults, that of our English cathedrals sometimes erring on the side of over-reserve”. However, the reviewer in Melbourne’s *Table Talk* maintained that although it was not the kind of singing to which the audience was accustomed, it had a great “soul-stirring quality”. (“The Sistine Choir”, *Table Talk* 20 April 1922, 14) In spite of any shortcomings, the choir’s performances captured the imagination of the critics and the audiences and served to further promote the appreciation of sixteenth-century music. The critic of the *Australasian* even ventured to hope that the choir’s visit might help raise the standard of choral singing in the choirs of the Roman Catholic Church. (“Sistine Choir”, *Australasian* 22 April 1922, 727) In the review of the opening concert in the *Australasian* the writer commented:

Presumably there were in the audience many singers of the music of the Roman Catholic Church with ears to hear and intelligence to

⁶ According to the scrapbook containing the newspaper cuttings of Floyd’s reviews, Floyd began as music critic for the *Argus* on 4 May 1922, so presumably he wrote the review. See ‘An Organist’s Life’, and scrapbook containing Floyd’s *Argus* reviews for 1922. Floyd: GM.

take to heart the lessons of the choir's singing, so that it is not too much to hope that the choir's visit may help to raise the standard of choral singing in the choirs of that great denomination.

During the visit, Antonio Rella went to hear the choir of St Paul's Cathedral under Floyd. Unlike many of his fellow believers in Australia, Rella appeared to have had no fear of the temporal or eternal consequences of entering a Protestant cathedral. In an article published in the *Australian Musical News* Rella is reported to have spoken of the boys' singing there in a most laudatory fashion: 'Those boys are trained on the right lines; their singing is sweet and pure, and Dr Floyd knows his job' (Young, July 1922, 515-519)⁷ was his summing up. The consequences of his comments as a result of this visit were two-fold. They further enhanced Floyd's success at St Paul's in recovering and promoting the early music heritage of the Anglican tradition and at the same time indirectly highlighted a deficiency in the Catholic Church, which had not been successful in promoting theirs. Also, after the Australian visit, in an article in the *Tribune*, reprinted in the *Melbourne Advocate*, Rella deplored the state of Catholic church music in Melbourne, particularly attacking the use of women singers in choirs. (*Advocate* 6 July 1922, 3)⁸

The point was not lost on those in the Catholic Church who were agitating for something similar at St Patrick's Cathedral to what obtained at St Paul's Cathedral. However, it was not until the 1930s that concrete efforts were made to raise the profile of music, in particular music of the polyphonic school, in the Catholic Church in Melbourne.

In conclusion, judging from the serious and informed reviews of the concerts, what the performances by the choir lacked in finesse, beauty of tone, and true intonation, they made up for in emotional fervour bordering on the operatic. Given this, a musical spectacle it may have been, but not necessarily "the greatest musical event of its generation". (*Argus* 15 April 1922, 20)

The visit of the choir was however a cultural success, providing Australia with a musical diversion. The choir's performances brought an Italian flavour to a repertoire, albeit an ecclesiastical one, both of which were generally foreign to a largely Anglo-Irish population.

⁷ The event took place on Friday 16 June 1922 and was reported in the evening edition of the *Herald* on that day in an article entitled "Boy Choristers Impress".

⁸ As previously mentioned, the *motu proprio*, instruction on the content and performance of sacred music issued by Pope Pius X in 1903 was largely ignored in Melbourne. This document had been prepared with considerable input from Perosi, the chief conductor of the Sistine Choir, and his deputy Rella. It is therefore not surprising that Rella spoke his mind on the matter of Catholic sacred music in Melbourne, albeit after he had left Australian soil.

Coupled with this, and perhaps the most significant benefit of the visit was that it provided impetus for musical reform within the Catholic Church, particularly in Melbourne.

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