

## **A Brief History of the Armidale Choral Society (compiled by Anne Brown)**

The Armidale Choral Society as we know it today was formed in 1971. Its immediate precursor was the University Choral Society, which was formed during the late 1950's when Campbell Howard, of the Tamworth office of University Extension, visited the campus for rehearsals on Monday nights. The earliest rehearsals were held in Booloomimbah, upstairs in the original billiards room, which at that time was being used as a lecture room. There was no piano in this room, and Lois Kesteven used to come to rehearsals to 'give the note'. (She had 'perfect pitch'). On completion of the new Union building, rehearsals moved to what was then the new staff common room, on the western side of the western courtyard. The group comprised academic and clerical staff (and their partners), students and interested townsfolk: anyone who wanted to be involved in choral singing. The repertoire at this time was made up of songs and madrigals, and there was a performance of Bach's *Peasant Cantata*.

During the 1960's Campbell Howard relinquished the baton to Neville Meale, who had arrived to teach music at the Teachers' College during the 1950's. With the advent of the Music Department at UNE, it was no longer seen as appropriate for townspeople to sing in the campus choir. Consequently, rehearsals moved to the music room of the Teachers' College, under the baton of Neville Meale, who I think may have been the first president, although he preferred a very loose organisation. Rehearsals were still on Monday nights, and many of the singers remained the same. The accompanist at this time was T.G. (Tom) Brown. This was the group known from that time as The Armidale Choral Society. The first performance was Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, in Madgwich Hall. Neville's philosophy was that this should be a choir open to any person who wished to sing in it. The object was to sing for enjoyment and to encourage people in music-making. This ethos is still an important part of the choir, and over the years, hundreds of people have joined in for various periods, gaining both pleasure and enrichment from the experience.

The choir has always attracted most singers when the performance of large choral works has been scheduled. Handel's *Messiah*, and settings of the masses by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven have been high points. However, works by Vaughan Williams (*Five Tudor Portraits*, and *Hodie*) and Benjamin Britten's *StNicolas* and *Noye Fludde* as well as Brahms *German Requiem*, Faure's *Requiem* and Mozart's *Requiem*, have been popular with singers and audiences alike. The performance of Beethoven's *Mess C Dur* in St Mary's Cathedral in October 1976, and April 1977 was, as the recording attests, an especially pleasing achievement on the part of both orchestra and choir.

Occasionally, Neville Meale asked someone else to take the baton. Elizabeth Wadleigh, also of the Teachers' College staff, introduced the choir to some more contemporary music. Since Neville's retirement at the end of 1981, the choir has had no 'resident' conductor, but has been privileged to work with many talented musicians. Amongst these have been Wendy Huddleston, Graham Maddox, Janis Laurs, Peter Maddox, David Gee, Deidre Rickards, Laurie Pulley, and Terry Norman. We have also enjoyed distinguished accompanists, including Wendy Huddleston, Robyn Driscoll, Robyn Bradley, Wendy Nano and Keith Power. These lists are not exhaustive, but serve to show that the distinction between "Town" and "Gown" has not been very firmly drawn! Rehearsal venues have changed over the years, moving from the Teachers' College to Armidale High School, and currently to the Music Room at PLC. (Monday night continues to be choir night!)