



# Bringing the music home

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artistic director



I grew up in Coonamble and my parents are still there. Coonamble used to be a really extraordinary place. There was a Brigidine convent, the first in Australia and those nuns literally ran it like an annex to the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. In the height of the dance period there was something like 20 jazz bands. Can you imagine that? A country town with this enormous number of people who sang and played instruments and knew about music? (My grandparents met playing in an orchestra for the black and white movies.) Now two or three generations on, there's nothing. Not even a town band.

In 2006, I was working with the National Children's Choir, Gondwana Voices, and I got this bee in my bonnet about starting a regional children's choir. I left my daughter at home in Sydney and took off in the car with the regional arts development officer from Outback Arts. We were on the road for the best part of ten days: Walgett, Brewarrina, Lightning Ridge, all the way out.

I got into the schools and ran 40 minute workshops with all the children. And then I extrapolated those that had the capacity, often to the complete amazement of the teachers. They were like, 'Oh no, you don't want that one!' And I'm like, 'Oh yes I do!' Because often the naughty ones are the ones who shine on stage or are the ones with a capacity but no way to express it. Then I worked with the communities and the schools to get these 45 young boys to come into Camp Cyprus in Baradine. Baradine is this fabulous little town about 40 kilometres from Coonamble. We got a composer, Dan Walker, funded through Festivals Australia and I asked him to write a song cycle that the kids and adults would perform for our first *Moorambilla Festival* in Coonamble. I wanted the music to reflect the kids' real lives and experiences.

After the first rehearsal all the boys, the lot of them, bolted out of the hall and took off down this cliff and into the dry creek bed below. I just stood there and thought, 'Hmm, it's good we have public liability insurance! Now how do we get them back?' Of course we did. They brought stones and creatures and things in their pockets and they were so excited. And that's where the lyrics came from. The first song was called *Out There* and it's all about that sense of freedom that you have as a kid to just take off until the sun goes down and you're called home. Different themes were taken up in the different movements.

That first camp was in August and then in September, the men's choir that I'd formed for Coonamble's sesquicentenary joined the kids for another week. These men have huge voices. They're tractor tenors. They get out there in the paddocks and they put on the radio and open their mouths and just belt it out. Initially, they were playing shy, ('Nah, I'm not doing that!') but after they heard the boys sing, they were so impressed there was no stopping them. The men and boys formed the *Songs in the Key of Bloke* and *Moorambilla Regional Boys' Choirs*. By festival time we had over 120 men and boys – grandfathers, fathers and sons, all on stage together. They sang to their women and brought the house down.

Over the festival weekend, we held lots of workshops including 'shower singing' in the shop fronts down the main street. When those sessions finished, everyone would just spill out onto the street and sing whatever they'd learnt. It was way in people's faces. It was cheeky and naughty and I didn't care because I wanted people to get the idea that it's normal to sing and there's nothing wrong with you if you do.

It has become a massive, absolutely massive commitment. We fundraise, we get the scholarships. We've now worked with the Australian Business Arts Foundation to create a vehicle for tax deductible donations. Because my thing is, if I want you to sing in this ensemble it's because of your skill alone. I'm not interested in anything other than your capacity. And that's the way I want it to continue. It means we have the most eclectic group of human beings in a choir that under normal circumstances just wouldn't be together. This year out of 150 children, 45 are Indigenous.

There's always a bit of scepticism when you're trying to start anything from scratch but it quickly disappeared. I had this fabulous group of women, the old Rodeo Committee, supporting us and after the 2006 festival they said, 'Right. That's the blokes done. The next one is going to be women and girls. Let's go!'

