

Community

CHORUS *of* HOPE

Every year, hundreds of children from schools across far-western NSW get the opportunity of a lifetime: They're chosen to join Moorambilla Voices, the choir that changes lives.

Left to right: Bridie Hayden, Archie O'Connor, Gracie Leonard, Anabelle-Rose Cole, Jaylan Walford, Matilda Tancred, Alana Spora and Oscar Martin before the first Moorambilla Voices gala concert in Dubbo in September.

WORDS *by* JANE NICHOLLS · PHOTOGRAPHY *by* NONI CARROLL

It's a perfectly still spring evening as around 300 schoolkids from all over far-western NSW – abuzz with excitement and aflutter with nerves – carefully take off their shoes and socks, line them up and head onstage at the Dubbo Regional Theatre and Convention Centre. “They’re barefoot so they are grounded – it makes for a much better performance,” says Michelle Leonard, artistic director, choirmaster and founding visionary behind Moorambilla Voices.

The girls’ hair is in tight, neat braids and all the children wear T-shirts with a striking rainbow serpent design – black T-shirts for the high schoolers, white for older primary schoolers and yellow for the Year 3 littlies. “So we don’t lose them when we all head outside for the sand dance,” Michelle says.

As their families and friends fill the tiered rows of seats, Michelle and her chamber orchestra of professional musicians set up in the cosy orchestra pit. The excited hubbub of the crowd quietens for the Welcome to Country and then *Riversong 2023* begins.

Four high-school girls in front of the heavy red stage curtain begin singing *Yindyamarra*, a song in Wiradjuri language. “It celebrates the beautiful Wiradjuri world view about moving slowly, calmly and with respect,” explains Michelle. On the other side of the stage, the spotlight picks up four boys. As they sing, the curtain parts and the full choir – a mixture of bright smiles and small frowns of earnest concentration – joins in. Moorambilla magic is again casting its spell.

“It feels amazing being onstage and looking out at the audience,” says 10-year-old Elsie Hall from Dubbo. It’s her second year with Moorambilla Voices. “I thought it would be tricky singing in language, but then Michelle taught us and after, I was like, ‘I didn’t know I could do that!’”

In the audience, her mum Lisa says there are certainly tears among the parents. “You’re just so proud of all

these children,” she says. “The kids love Michelle – after the concert they were chasing her around for her autograph.”

Lisa’s eldest daughter, Charlotte, 13, has moved up from the primary-school choir to the high-school Maxed Out Company. “Michelle sees things in us we don’t see in ourselves, and believes we’re capable of more,” Charlotte says. “You look at your sheet music and think, ‘Oh, that note’s really high’. But she gets you to sing it and if it’s no good, she’ll just work you up to it.”

Little sister Mary, eight – a hopeful for Moorambilla next year – is in awe. “When I see them on the stage, I just think, ‘How do they do that? How do they sing that high?!’”

Kids growing up in regional and remote Australia simply don’t have the same breadth of opportunities as most city kids, which can narrow their aspirations. Michelle Leonard has been on a mission to change that since 2005 when she used a grant to put on a small choir festival in her hometown of Coonamble, which was in the grip of a heartbreaking drought.

“I’m the eldest of four and we all did two instruments – piano at a minimum, then another,” says Michelle, 52, who went to boarding school in Sydney from Year 9, then the Conservatorium of Music before becoming a teacher.

“Mum taught us for several years and then, to her undying credit, would drive us two hours to Dubbo every six weeks for lessons. Invariably I’d leave my music or my clarinet in Coonamble, so I have a lot of empathy for children who are vague!”

Now Sydney-based and a mother of four herself, Michelle’s vision for Moorambilla – named for her father’s hobby farm – was to use music to show country kids their potential. As she points out, a lot of effort and funding goes into

supporting sport to improve physical and mental health and help flip disadvantage, and the arts can do the same. “Singing is important neurologically – for connection, mental health, self-esteem and self-awareness,” she says. “People want you to do mindfulness exercises and practise breathing – that all happens in a choir!”

Today Moorambilla Voices is a combination of many art forms: Music, singing, movement, taiko drumming and visual art, working with original Australian compositions. The experience of being a part of it, says Michelle, “elevates excellence, equity and opportunity” for these rural kids.

In September this year, her accomplishments were recognised when Michelle was named national runner-up in the AgriFutures Rural Women’s Award. The previous month, Moorambilla received a prestigious Art Music Award (from the Australasian Performing Right Association and the Australasian Mechanical Copyright Owners

Society) for “long-term commitment to creating Australian art music with and for young people in regional NSW”.

“Moorambilla has offered me all these new experiences, meeting musicians and learning how it all works,” says Bridie Hayden, 17. She lives in Trangie – population 1073 as at the 2021 Census – and has been

Top to bottom: Jaylan Walford, Bridie Hayden and Gracie Leonard are members of the high-school choir; camp week at Baradine; Michelle Leonard, during rehearsals, has an unlimited capacity for bringing out the best in the children she teaches.

part of the choir since Year 3. She’s now in Maxed Out. “We don’t really have anything like that around here, there’s just the racecourse,” she adds.

Led by Michelle’s force-of-nature determination, Moorambilla now receives both state and federal government funding and philanthropic donations to keep the show on the road every year.

Michelle estimates close to 43,000 children have now gone through the singing and musical literacy workshops, which today run from Armidale to Yeoval “and everywhere in between”, covering 140 schools and 60 towns.

She hopes the attention from the awards will inspire others to join in supporting the program. As it is, she makes sure that a family’s financial hardship never prevents their child from joining the choir if they’re selected.

“We find a way,” says Michelle. “Some of our generous donors support a choreographer or a composer, others want to help support

the children. We don’t have any corporate sponsors yet – that’d be really nice!”

Each year, up to 350 kids are selected from the school workshops to join the three choir ensembles and Maxed Out Company. They come together for residential rehearsal camps in tiny Baradine in August



Primary-school ensemble members Deegan Little, Elsie Hall, Matilda Tancred, Hamish Soster, Oscar Martin, Annabelle-Rose Cole, Matilda McKinnon, Gilbert Maxwell, Archie O'Connor and Alana Spora.

and reunite the following month for the gala concerts in Dubbo. This year’s *Riversong: Marks on Country* went across two nights, with a live feed outside the theatre and free community events in the park.

“The children’s confidence is built through working with Michelle and the other artists – the dancers and composers, and Gamilaroi artist Frank Wright,” says Lisa Hall, who’s been one of Moorambilla’s hard-working volunteers since her girls joined.

“At the most recent camp, the composer was standing beside Michelle, singing her music for the children so they could hear it and learn it ... They’re being exposed to these amazing artists and it brings out the confidence in the kids to go on stage and perform.”

The 2015 documentary *Wide Open Sky* showed Moorambilla Voices in glorious action, from the school workshops to the camps, all the way to the concert, which back then was in a hall. The children grow before your eyes as they work with Michelle, musicians and composers. Even the primary-school kids understand that this is their chance for something bigger.

Lightning Ridge’s Opal Trumper was an open-hearted 10-year-old in *Wide Open Sky* and spent four years with Moorambilla. “I wasn’t a very confident kid. Moorambilla really helped me find that confidence that I had in there somewhere,” says Opal, now 20. “I was a kid growing up in the middle of nowhere and we never went anywhere. With Moorambilla, I went to Baradine, Dubbo, then Sydney and Melbourne. One year we went to Canberra and I was fortunate enough to have a bit of a solo part singing in front of the governor-general. I was so nervous but now I get to look back and say, ‘I did that!’”

Today, Opal is a farmhand and nanny for three kids on a farm stay near Lightning Ridge. Every week she drives four hours to Dubbo for her enrolled nursing course at TAFE. “If I had never



gone to Moorambilla and experienced those amazing opportunities, I don’t think I would have jumped into nursing, or I would have left it a lot later,” she says. “Moorambilla boosted my confidence in a crazy way.”

The intense musical experience leads children to literally find their voice and build self-belief. “Michelle brings such passion and knowledge and she draws out the best in the kids,” says Lisa.

“I love unlocking capacity – it’s like a fabulous jigsaw puzzle,” says Michelle, who brings her unique musical gifts

along with her teaching and mothering experience to the party. “I’ll walk into a room and can spot the ones who are creative risk-takers. Then there are others who I work with to get them to a point where they’ll be brave enough to show me their capacity.”

It’s a confidence trick Michelle says helps the kids, their peers, teachers and even parents to “see them in a different light and perhaps change the trajectory of what they believe their life could be, into a life of possibilities”.

Like his Maxed Out mate Bridie, Collarenebri’s Jaylan Walford, now 16, has been with Moorambilla since Year 3. He remembers when Michelle turned up at his primary school. “I thought, ‘This lady is crazy,’ but before I knew it, I was singing and at my first camp,” says Jaylan, a Gamilaroi man.

“He was incredibly shy, with a beautiful, crystal-clear soprano voice,” says Michelle. “When he landed into camp, in Year 3, he just grew, particularly when he started to move.

“Jaylan has grown not just



Community



Left to right: A scene from Moorambilla’s video *The Shape of Water*; performers and drummers at the Dubbo gala. Opposite: Wiradjuri choreographer Neville Williams-Boney leads rehearsals.

study music after school. “It’s shaped me in a lot of different ways,” he says, “and made me who I am. I’m very proud to be a part of it.”

Michelle’s drive to build a repertoire of Australian compositions has seen Moorambilla commission more than 100 works. “All incorporate First Nations language and world view,” she says. *Goodhigoo Yanmay*, the album from Maxed Out’s recording at the Opera House, will be available for digital download from December 2. “That title means, ‘We carry the song and the song carries us,’” Michelle explains. “Our songs will carry these young people through all the stages of their lives, and they carry the songs.”

The \$15,000 grant Michelle received from Westpac as NSW finalist for the AgriFutures Rural Women’s Award went towards funding that Opera House recording. The additional \$15,000 she received as national runner-up will go towards a 2024 tour “to return the repertoire to the communities and landscape that inspired it and sing it back to Country”.

Bridie, who’s not Indigenous, loves singing in language and her friend Jaylan helps her to understand the words and the meaning behind them. “I enjoy learning more about Country,” she says.

She adds that the experience has helped hone her study habits as she goes into Year 12. “You have to practise before a performance, and now I use that format for studying at school. Moorambilla makes you believe you can strive for whatever you want to do

when you’re older. I definitely want to go to university.”

The magic echoes for years after the applause and Michelle stays in touch with an astonishing number of the kids, many of whom have gone on to win scholarships and coveted university places.

“It changes their belief in their capacity,” says Michelle. “The older kids are taught how to be still, how to walk on stage, how to hold an audience and be able to calm their breath after dancing to go into singing.

“When they go for a job interview, it’s so easy. ‘I’ve performed in front of hundreds of people!’ Or when they’re writing an application for early entry into university, they put their Moorambilla experience on their CV.”

While the Moorambilla vision is about lifting up young people, Michelle reckons we should all be singing. She’s also artistic director of the Leichhardt Espresso Chorus in Sydney’s inner west, a ‘non-auditioned choir’ for adults. “What’s the worst thing that could happen if the whole country were singing weekly in choirs, with Australian repertoire about our place in the world and how we can positively contribute to that?” she says.

“The impact it has on the children is electric and once you’ve seen that, you simply have to be an advocate for the importance of the arts as a lifelong pursuit. Be joyful, sing, dance, connect to your magnificent country.” **AWW**

To discover more, head to moorambilla.com

“Moorambilla makes you believe you can strive for whatever you want to do.”

– Bridie Hayden

as a musician but as a young leader. When Maxed Out recorded at the Sydney Opera House this July, he worked with his nan and his uncle to put some lyrics into language for one song. Having him own it, teach the language to the kids and then have them perform it really encapsulates that artistic and leadership journey that Moorambilla can give a child.”

Jaylan is in Year 10 and plans to