

The Armed Man — “no ordinary piece of music”

by CAL WEBB and JIM FAGAN

“I feel privileged”, “love the music”, “inspiring”, “restores peace in my mind”, “an emotional journey”, “haunting”, “uplifting”.

Welcome to the inner thoughts of Noosa Chorale singers as they prepare for their two concerts of “The Armed Man—A Mass for Peace” at the J Theatre at the end of this month.

The choir has performed Sir Karl Jenkins’ celebrated work twice in the last 13 years, each time to a standing ovation. President Donald Grant says, “Our singers love it. This is no ordinary piece of music. It is an emotional journey, exploring the descent into war, its hellish horror and, finally, the desire for peace.

“It has been presented 3000 times since it was composed in 1999. This is a world record of performances by a living composer. It was commissioned by the Royal Armouries to mark the millennium and first took place in the year 2000 at the Royal Albert Hall in London.”

Chorale singers will feature as soloists and for soprano Debbie Boyles it will be third time around. She told Tune In, “The Armed Man is not a celebration of war, nor does it glorify war. On the contrary, while it’s gory and gruesome



Noosa Chorale performance of The Armed Man in 2015 at The J Theatre

in parts, the truth of peace is beautifully written in this music.

“This time I’m singing under the direction of Kim Kirkman. The previous concerts were led by Adrian King and I was privileged to sing the alto solo parts in both concerts. Ten years later and I’m singing as the soprano soloist, my favourite solo is ‘Now the guns have stopped’. It is a haunting reminder of the consequences of war, resulting in such terrible loss.

“The final song at the end of The Armed Man is a hymn based on Revelation 21 verse 4, beseeching us to praise the Lord. It was a glorious moment in the 2012 and 2015 concert, as I’m sure it will be when we sing at the end of the month.

For bass soloist John Davies it will be a particularly moving occasion. He said, “This will be the third time I have sung The Armed Man and the harmony in the hymns will stir emotion and the memory of the battle my late wife Barbara had in making sure she was able to attend and listen to the choir sing for her last time at a concert.

“The last hymn we sing will help to restore peace in my mind and allow for



Basses John Davies (left) and Kevin Bratby

a way forward for those who have also lost a dear one.”

Whether having sung The Armed Man before, or confronting it for the first time, the strong feelings it evokes in singers is very affecting.

Alto and choir librarian Pam Sage just loves “the music of this inspiring piece. I love its harmonies and melodic lines and the mix of emotions the music embodies”.



Alto Pam Sage



Sopranos Belinda Griffiths (left) and Debbie Boyles

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Alto Kay Cartwright says, "This is the third time I've sung The Armed Man and I've never tired of it. Quite the opposite in fact – I've enjoyed singing it even more each time, and I'm especially enjoying Kim's approach to the piece."



Alto Kay Cartwright

Carolyn Hay, also an alto, says, "As with the last time I sang the piece, I'm finding the emotional journey in the music to be quite overwhelming as it moves through the ravages of war to the final uplifting movement celebrating peace."



Alto Carol Monks

As another third-time singer of The Armed Man, alto Carol Monks feels "privileged to be singing this wonderful, emotional, sad and joyous mass for peace. The

world has not learnt very much over the years and I think to be performing the mass now is very appropriate and hope peace may one day prevail in the world".

The relevance of this music to our troubled times is so central to this performance, as Jonathan Anstock notes, "We need to be singing for peace more than ever in these challenging times. Karl Jenkins' masterpiece is extremely potent, thought provoking and potentially healing."

After first finding The Armed Man confronting in its music style and theme, tenor Mark Taylor says he "began to think about the popularity of war movies - another art form that engages audiences with tensions of battle.

"It enabled me to embrace Jenkins' expressions of military advances, brutal circumstances, courage, triumph and peace - all woven in with familiar Latin prayers.

"I really want to sing this well, and tell the 'armed man' story in our classic musical way. But I know I'm going to choke-up with the pathos of some parts."

For Mark, there is also a special significance to the "Call to Prayer" movement in the piece: "I'm also expecting to feel very nostalgic when the soloist sings the Adhaan. I've heard this call to prayer 3-5 times every day during 22 years in the Arabian Gulf.



Saleh al-Alyani intones the call to prayer in the Chorale's performance of The Armed Man in 2012 at Bicentennial Hall

"It became as natural as birdsong, and it's not from my faith but it is from the faith of many friends and colleagues who have my respect for their deep and earnest desires to live well, and to live in peace."

Noosa Chorale music director Kim Kirkman has been a professional musician for 20 years and admits he was at a loss for words after hearing The Armed Man for the first time.



Music Director Kim Kirkman

And now that he has had the chance to work with the choir for its two performances at the end of this month, he has even more admiration for Welsh composer Sir Karl Jenkins' powerful work on the savagery of war and the joy of peace.

"The music is strikingly honest and present. There are no frills. It has an authenticity and impact which very much speaks to the theme of the piece."

"The first half of the concert will start with a plainsong from the Gregorian chant period, which pleads 'grant us peace'. We shall follow with the Albinoni Adagio, a stunningly beautiful string orchestra work."

The choir will then present Allegri's Miserere which is a baroque period piece that was kept under lock and key for performances in the Sistine Chapel only. That was until a precocious young Mozart wrote it out from hearing it once!

Four soloists from the choir will form a semi-chorus to sing sections of the Allegri Miserere: sopranos Paige Allen and Belinda Griffith, tenor Brenton Lovett, and bass Jonathan Anstock.



(l to r) Belinda Griffiths, Jonathan Anstock, Paige Allen, and Brenton Lovett

This choral work will be followed by a very special Jewish piece called Kol Nidrei which is scored for string orchestra and cello solo. One of the choir's basses, Kevin Bratby, will play the cello part.

Kim says, "We finish the first half with Barber's Adagio for Strings with a twist. The choir will also take part. The music has been set to the words of the Agnus Dei that we performed at the very

beginning of this half. This piece is incredibly moving.

“I believe all of these pieces are some of Western music’s most haunting and beautiful. A great way to prepare the audience members for an incredible second half with The Armed Man.”

Noosa Chorale presents:
“The Armed Man—A Mass for Peace”
at the J Theatre, Noosa Junction
Friday May 30 at 7pm
Saturday May 31 at 2pm
Tickets \$45.
Book now at www.thej.com.au
or phone 07 5329 6560.



Noosa Chorale performance of The Armed Man in 2012 at the Bicentennial Hall



Chorale sings at Anzac Day ceremonies

Noosa Chorale sang “Abide with Me” and the Australian and New Zealand national anthems at the ANZAC Day Dawn Service at Verrierdale Hall (pictured) and at the Eumundi Commemorative Service at the Eumundi amphitheatre.

Janet Brewer accompanied the choir on piano, and Pam Sage conducted.

Photo: Simon Hennessy

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