

Chris Artley: On the Road of Life

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Winner of the IFCM Composition Competition 2022

Interview by Irvinne Redor, IFCM Communication Manager

Last year, IFCM launched the new World Choral Day anthem entitled, ***On the Road of Life***. This work is by an English composer living in New Zealand, **Chris Artley**. I was very fortunate to get a chance to chat with him early this year given his busy schedule with performances and international commissioned works he is working on. He is involved in the Teapot Summer School, New Zealand's premier non-auditioned choral school, that takes place every mid-January. For the past 12 years, Chris has also been part of The Graduate Choir New Zealand led by their music director, Terence Maskell.

How did your relationship with choral music start?

I've got to say, I was a rather reluctant child singer much to the dismay of my parents. It was only when I was probably 17 or 18 that I started getting involved with choral singing in the school choir. I really wish I'd done some singing as a child and that would've been very advantageous. When I was in London, which was nearly 20 years ago, I didn't do any singing. For the first few years here in New Zealand, I was not really involved with choral music except for an annual event – the Teapot Summer School – which actually has been very influential for my composing career. Whilst in London and Auckland, I've played in a few jazz and blues bands.

I've always thought that you were born in New Zealand! What made you move to New Zealand?

I was teaching in London and being there at the school for a

long time, it got to the point where I wanted a change. I looked in the teacher's paper and it said *"Wanted: Head of Music at Boutique Girls Private School in Auckland."* At first, I just laughed and thought that's a bit crazy and then I thought, maybe this could be a good idea. I applied for it, was offered the job, and then spent three weeks humming and hawing whether to take it, and then took the job. There have been times when there's been a bit of homesickness, but on the whole, it's worked so well. There is a very, very strong choral scene in New Zealand! It's quite astonishing considering the size of the population.



It's interesting to know that you were born in the United Kingdom. Is it something that influenced your composition style?

Oh, very much so! What I write is very much influenced by music from the UK. I have thrown in a few New Zealand elements

in the last few years, primarily the use of Te Reo, which is the Māori language. Most of what I write, however, is influenced by traditional Western European music, together with elements from the American choral music scene too.

I've recently written a work entitled *Papatūānuku* (Earth Mother in Te Reo), scored for double choir, organ, clarinet solo, and *taonga pūoro* (traditional Māori instruments), which we performed at Teapot Summer School in January 2023. This combines traditional choral writing with overtone singing, bird song motifs on organ, and clarinet, together with a wide range of improvised sounds on the *taonga pūoro*. It finishes with a short *karanga*, which is sung by a wonderful young Māori soprano. This piece has a lovely blend of styles and is the closest that I have come to writing a uniquely New Zealand sounding choral piece. Most of the things I write are actually intended for the international markets, whether it's commissions or competitions.

Speaking of competitions, maybe you could tell us more about On the Road of Life? How did you come up with the work?

Looking closely at all the details, it says writing for upper and lower voice, so two parts. I think the piano accompaniment was optional, but I thought that would be really good and it had to be something that would reflect the right sort of values for the **World Choral Day**. I'm very fortunate to collaborate with a brilliant lyricist, Michelanne Forster. I always have to work with someone on the text or find a poem or starting points. Once I got the text, though, it was pretty straightforward. I know you asked me my influences and I think with that song, it was almost more along the Elton John line. It was more pop-like in style than a lot of things I write, but I thought that suited the words and I wanted something that would be very appealing to lots of people. Even with a fairly simple song like this, I was thinking "*How can I keep the listeners' attention throughout?*" and not make them think, "*Oh, we've heard that already.*"



Chris Artley with David Squire and the New Zealand Youth Choir

Do you have any reminders that you would want people to know regarding the piece?

It's pretty self-explanatory in terms of what's in the music and if they want to throw in a bit of extra instrumentation, that's fine. If people are going to add a couple of their own verses and chorus, as a matter of courtesy, please get in touch and show me the words first. That would be appreciated! No need to ask if they're just adding one or two instruments, but if there's going to be any changes, then I think it's important to ask and check. If anyone does perform the piece and a recording is made, I would love to hear that. Also, if they would let their local performing rights society know about it, that would be much appreciated.

Is there anything you regularly do outside choral music?

I enjoy playing tennis and gardening. I love going on cycling holidays and walking holidays. Those are probably the things I do actively these days, but I also enjoy playing board games like Chess and Scrabble as well.

What's next for Chris Artley?

I'm always looking out for competitions, I'll certainly enter a few more. Choir seems to be my speciality, but I'm also keen to write more instrumental music. Long term, it would be lovely to write either a symphony or a piano concerto with some jazz elements to it. The thing is, I've got a full-time teaching job, so I always have to weigh up how much I can take on in terms of big projects and how to fit them in.

How do they get in touch with you?

I'm always interested in hearing from choirs. They can just visit my website, www.chrisartley.com. My official Facebook Page is *Chris Artley – Composer* and I've got my personal FB profile and Instagram which are also called Chris Artley.

*The winning piece in the **World Choral Day (WCD)** category of the **IFCM 2022 International Choral Composition Competition** was selected among 19 scores by a jury composed of international choral experts. Our official WCD Anthem until the end of 2023 is *On the Road of Life* by Chris Artley from New Zealand. You may download the resources for the music here: <https://bit.ly/AnthemWCD22-23>. Vocal guides and recordings were done by Alexander L'Estrange and Joanna Forbes L'Estrange.*

***World Choral Day** is an international choral event to extol the values of solidarity, peace, and understanding. Since 1990, thousands of choirs have been joining in the celebration of the WCD on or around the **2nd Sunday of December**.*

Edited by Patricia Abbott, Canada