

Samoa!

A Tour Report by Mark O'Leary (conductor) and

Charlotte O'Leary (singer)

The Young Voices of Melbourne arrived in Apia, Samoa, at midnight on 24th September 2011, and were greeted by a guitar band strumming merrily in the humid airport. As we emerged into the outdoors, a group of enthusiastic women delivered flowery leis to every chorister, even though it was the middle of the night. It was certainly a warm welcome.

After seven international tours to Asia, South Africa, North America and Europe, we had decided it was time to explore the rich musical offerings of our Pacific Island neighbours and Samoa was chosen as our 2011 tour destination. We had no contacts and we knew this would not be a tour with grand concert halls, but we suspected it might give us a glimpse into a world where singing is still an integral part of daily life – and we were right.

On arrival in Samoa we headed straight out to the beachside area of Lalomanu. Despite the warning in the choristers' tour manuals – “please be quiet so as not to wake other guests” – our 3:00am arrival at Litia Sini's Beach Resort gave way to much frolicking and laughing on the beautiful beach. We knew we had come pretty close to paradise when the sun rose over the rocky peaks and bathed us in golden light.

We got our first taste of Samoan musical culture at Litia's weekly *fiafia* (happy) show. We were entranced by the energetic dance and song of the local people. Firstly, the men (with very few clothes on) amazed us with their incredible strength, both physically and vocally, as they stomped and shouted and shook the floor in a breathtaking display. The women emerged

as the perfect counterbalance, with elegant flowing movements and simple harmonies performed with absolute delight. When the two combined the sound was awesome, really living up to the intent of the show – a ceremony of happiness.

Most of our time was spent immersing ourselves in the village culture of Samoa. It was an eye-opening musical experience for all the choristers. At every village or school, we would sing a selection of our repertoire and bring world music into the humble halls of the island. Unfailingly, the favour would be returned and we would be asked to sit down (and often presented with a coconut and a straw) while the community/school sang for us. With no microphones, or pianos or tuning forks for pitch precision, we experienced music in its most natural form – just voices as they were meant to be. The slap of a school bag would keep the time as the children sang traditional songs in multiple harmonies. This amazingly rich sound would often lead to spontaneous dancing by the older children. Once again we would experience that infectious happiness that exudes from these people as they share their culture. Our appreciative applause was unfailingly received by a hundred carefree smiles looking up at us from the dusty floor. To these people, performance is not a chance to take the spotlight. Rather it is an opportunity to collectively celebrate a rich cultural heritage.



It was interesting to experience the attempts of the older Samoans to preserve their culture in an ever-modernising world. In one particular village, we were greeted by many youths sporting smart-phones who were keen to capture the moment digitally. Many of us had cameras that were consequently kidnapped by enthusiastic girls who worked the room, eager to try out the latest in digital technology. Interestingly, the evening's shared performance strongly reflected this modern shift of the young people, with traditional Samoan dances being performed to a backing track of pop songs. The music appeared to act as a bridge that linked the generations – English lyrics with beautiful patterned lava-lavas, fast beats with flowing choreography. It was an intriguing performance with its contrasting aspects, but could also be seen as an attempt to engage the youth in their cultural traditions. Will this method of preservation be successful? Or will the allure of the modern age be too strong for this small island nation? We will have to return in ten years to find out.

We realised the true potential of the emerging choral scene in Samoa whilst attending the weekly rehearsal of the young adult choir conducted by June Ryan (our wonderful contact on the

island). We jumped in the bus and headed to the suburbs of Apia. After hearing the dulcet tones of a choir, we entered a big church. Much to our amazement, we had walked into the wrong rehearsal and June's choir was in fact next door. That there could be two beautiful churches with active choirs right next to each other truly showed the importance of worship through song in Samoa. We were blown away by June's singers. The warmth of their tone and the amazing blend of such strong voices certainly indicated the ingrained nature of singing in Samoan society. The musicality of the group was certainly evident, and was highlighted through their sensitivity to the phrasing and musical intent of their sacred repertoire. The group had only been singing together for a few months but their sounds defied all preconceptions of inexperience.

The Young Voices of Melbourne would like to warmly thank June Ryan for her help in the organisation of this tour. A tour to Samoa could not be undertaken without local help and June was incredibly generous with her time and energy in helping us. Without her expert knowledge and enthusiasm the tour would not have been the success that it was. By departing from the safety of a conventional choral audience, Young Voices experienced incredible hospitality everywhere we went and discovered something wonderful – the organic beauty of traditional music and dance. It was truly an inspiring tour and we would encourage other choirs to step out of their comfort zone and experience the Pacific Islands – you will not be disappointed.

Edited by Mirella Biagi, UK