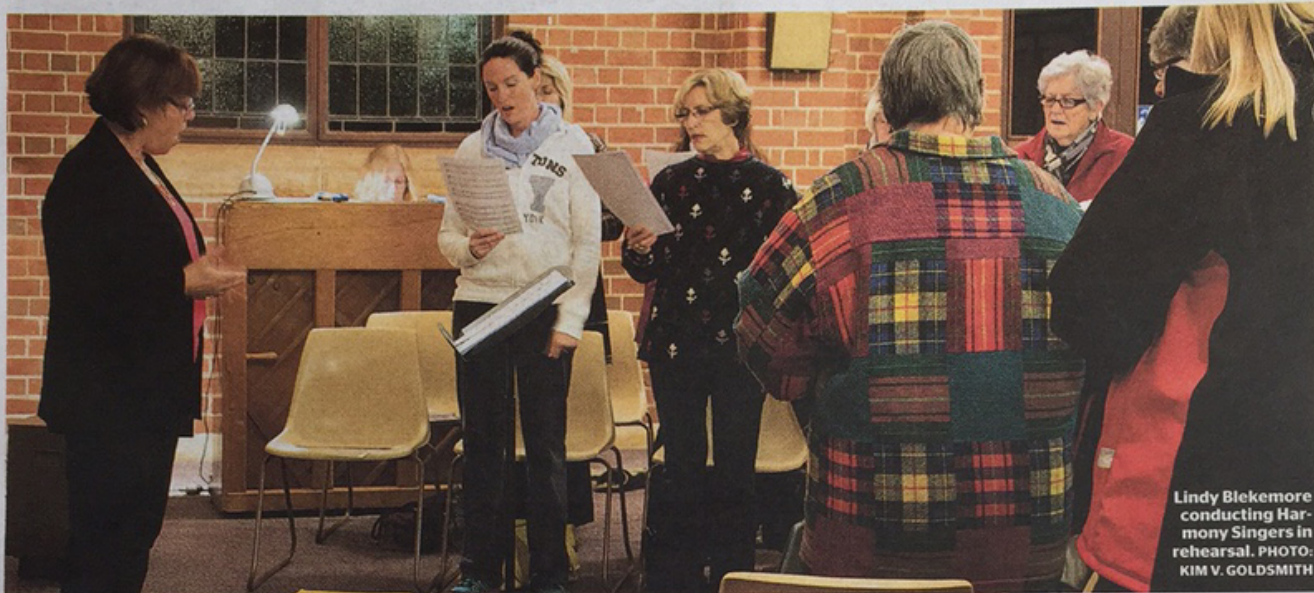


# Songbirds sought for chapel sized challenge



Lindy Blekmore conducting Harmony Singers in rehearsal. PHOTO: KIM V. GOLDSMITH

BY KIM GOLDSMITH

**A** CREATIVE arts project to be performed next year in Dubbo aims to do something that has never before been done in the city, by creating unlikely and sometimes challenging partnerships between artists and community.

The Chapel Project is what's known in the arts sector as a multi-arts project, involving about 80 people including many professional artists.

In this case, choral musicians, high school music students and teachers, community members who like to sing are working with digital media and projection artists, combining their passion, their skills and creativity into one outcome – the production of bird inspired choral music and video projections designed to be shown and performed inside Dubbo's St Andrew's Chapel.

Underpinning concepts have been developing over the past 12 months with the aim to challenge, inspire and entertain.

It's a work that seeks to pay homage to the guardians of our natural environment and the collective creativity of regional artists and communities as contemporary storytellers.

At this point I must confess my involvement. I'm the lead artist and producer of The Chapel Project.

My birdsong recordings will provide the inspiration for the commissioned choral music – an idea I've been playing around with for the past couple of years, in between developing new installation works and producing films.

However, it wasn't until discussions with Dubbo's Harmony Singers began last year that a breakthrough occurred in the shape of classical pianist and choral composer, Sally Whitwell.

She's just released her fourth album with ABC Classics and as we go to print she's winding

up a trip to China and Mongolia with the Sydney Children's Choir and Gondwana National Indigenous Children's Choir.

Whitwell will be the project's composer and she's excited about it, going on the record as saying the appeal of this project is it involves so many members of the local community in the creation of an original work.

"New works that engage so immediately with a community are, I believe, particularly important to the future of the arts in regional NSW and also more broadly throughout Australia," she says.

"I've had the privilege of creating several new works with various youth and community music organisations in some of the major cities, including Gondwana Choirs, Woden Valley Youth Choir and Leichhardt Espresso Chorus, but to connect with a community that is a little further afield is an opportunity I will cherish."

Whitwell's involvement is made possible through a Country Arts Support Program (CASP) grant – an Arts NSW devolved funding program administered by Regional Arts NSW and local Regional Arts Boards on behalf of the NSW Government.

The composition of the choral music will come together through workshoping with the choir, school students and community members over two days in Dubbo, starting on July 27.

Harmony Singers Dubbo conductor, Lindy Blekmore is counting down the days to Whitwell's arrival, keen to take full advantage of working with someone of this calibre.

"We're looking forward to seeing the new ideas and different vocal techniques that we'll learn from Sally."

"The work based on birdsong will be very different from the traditional music we do, which is sacred, gospel or jazz – it'll be a very much more

modern take on choral singing.

"On the other hand, she'll be amazed at what Dubbo can produce because we've been generally recognised for our sporting prowess and not necessarily the arts...to be able to showcase what we have and can do will be a positive."

Blekmore says the response to the project from within the choir has been mixed; there's a feeling of having been challenged.

"For some in the choir, it'll take them out of their comfort zone because of the modern vocal techniques, not having music in front of them that has already been written and is an unknown."

"But it's awesome we're being challenged and who knows what'll happen. It'll all come together in the end, but I think the process for all of us will be confronting as we're putting our own talent on the line and asking 'Are we good enough?'"

"It's putting yourself out there for development as well as criticism."

The Chapel Project team has put a callout to anyone in the community who enjoys singing to be part of the production by turning up to the first workshop at 6.30pm, July 27 at the Western Plains Cultural Centre Community Arts Centre.

**“For some in the choir, it'll take them out of their comfort zone because of the modern vocal techniques, not having music in front of them that has already been written and is an unknown.”**

– Lindy Blekmore (left), Harmony Singers conductor

Blekmore says it's a chance for people who can't commit to regular, weekly choir sessions to be involved in a group performance and to celebrate their creativity.

"Who knows what talent we have out there – the music scene in Dubbo is fairly tight but a project like this brings people out of the woodwork who have maybe not had the confidence or contacts to know where to go."

In preparation for Whitwell's two day visit to Dubbo, Harmony Singers have been working with Dubbo's public high schools to give band, choir and elective music students an opportunity to be part of The Chapel Project 'Birdsong' composition.

Blekmore says the teachers she's had contact with are excited about the opportunity for their students to work at this level.

"Some of the teachers are looking at it from a professional development perspective, in terms of understanding more about the composition process. So, it's not just the kids who will benefit."

She admits she also has another agenda involving the schools in the project's birdsong composition.

"Singing in choirs isn't perceived as cool in general, this project will change that," she grins.

The Chapel Project performances are scheduled for October 2016, with the final show set down for the opening day of the national arts conference and festival, Artlands Dubbo.

In order to finance the development of the project's video projections and the performance costs, the project team is now waiting to hear about the outcome of Arts NSW grant funding, as well as setting up a crowd funding campaign with the aim of extending the life of the project beyond next year's one-off performances.

Details can be found at [www.theofficialchapelproject.com](http://www.theofficialchapelproject.com)

