

***Liberating Voices: Towards an Ethnography of Women's Community a cappella Choirs in Australia*** by Julie Ann Rickwood

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***Excerpt pp 85-86***

The Cyrenes began in 1989 when Lyn O'Brien, a Canberra woman involved in community music and women's support services, decided that Canberra was decidedly short of women performers. A public notice was placed in numerous cafes and community arts spaces calling for interest. The 20 women who attended the first meeting formed the Cyrenes of Asherah. The name is an interesting and creative amalgamation of two suggestions that came from the early members. "Cyrenes" is an alternative spelling of the sirens of Greek mythology whose enchanting singing lured unsuspecting sailors into perilous waters, and "Asherah" is an Assyrian name for a goddess.

The early costume for choir members consisted of the conventional black of many choirs, but overlaid with a brightly coloured rainbow scarf worn in individually selected styles. Subsequently, this costume changed. At the time of fieldwork, the women wore clothes of black, purple and green, of their own choosing, overlaid with a printed scarf in washes of the same colours and with the scientific symbol for "female" painted in gold (see Plate 3.2). The individualistic approach to costume could accommodate both formal and casual moods for performance within the set colour scheme.

The Cyrenes has undergone a number of changes in musical direction. It began with a musical director from the Canberra School of Music but within six months established itself as a collective, relying on the musical skills of its members to bring and teach repertoire to each other and to make decisions inclusively.

As Lyn O'Brien explained:

It's a cooperative choir. It's not like a traditional choir where someone gives the orders. All women are as important as each other... Everyone in the choir has something to contribute if they're in the right situation. It's about taking women beyond the threshold so they say 'Yeah, I can do this!'.

In practice, this approach resulted in the musical direction and control being concentrated among a few choir members who had more skills, energy, commitment and, ultimately, power than others. Consequently, energy levels waned, tensions grew and group negativity resulted. At the end of 1991 a mass exodus left a handful of women who were keen to keep the choir going. Recognising that the members with enough skills to lead the choir had left, those remaining employed a musical director and sought membership through various avenues. Many of those who left sought to establish another women's group but this did not happen.

Under the direction of Chrissie Shaw, a local performance artist, the Cyrenes, as it was renamed, grew in size, strength and musical ability. It maintained its collective decision-making process, including the selection of repertoire, as well as the day-to-day operations.

Shaw, who had not previously led a choir, worked within the limits of that process and philosophy, and led the choir in successful performances. After three years, she left to concentrate on her musical direction with the Trade Union Choir and her individual performance career.

At the beginning of 1995, Loani McRae, a member of a folk music group named Spindlewood, was asked to lead the Cyrenes. Under the direction of McRae, and with a committed focus on musical development, the choir reached a new plateau of "maturity and professionalism" (Anon 1996:8), with a steady active membership of 25 women.

Unlike the BWC, the Cyrenes began and continued for some time on a solely self-funded basis through membership fees and, to a far lesser degree, payment for performances. After two years, however, it began to apply successfully for small grants to offset the costs of producing demonstration tapes, organising an event for International Women's Day, and a musical development workshop. At the end of 1990, the Cyrenes recorded a track entitled "Sinje-nje-nje", a traditional Zulu song, on a compilation album called *We're Not Square* which was produced by Community Radio z)(X. The choir has made three demonstration tapes and has sold taped copies of their live performance at the 1996 National Folk Festival. It was also planning to record on CD.

In 1996, the Cyrenes promoted itself as an:

*a cappella* choir which was founded in 1989 to provide a forum for women to get together in a safe and fun environment to sing songs that celebrate the strength, power, energy and joy of being women. It has continued to grow and develop since that time and is now a choir of 30 women singing songs from an eclectic and diverse repertoire.

***Excerpt from Conclusion, p 173***

As a result, I conclude that the overall experience of women's community *a cappella* choirs is an empowering and creative activity that affects the members in a diversity of ways: spiritually, musically, physically, emotionally, politically, socially, soulfully, even economically. As choir members, these women's lives are given greater dimension, their personalities more expression, their identity multiplicity, their creativity acknowledged and their gender a broader definition. Essentially, through the experience of choir, women are liberating their voices in a diversity of ways and, in turn, are exploring gender, identity and the experience of music in an Australian contemporary context.



...continued to grow and develop since then...  
...women singing songs from an eclectic and diverse repertoire. (Cyrenes  
1996a)

Plate 3.2: The Cyrenes Publicity Photograph  
(By Katherine Pepper, 10 September 1996)