



Inclusive choirs for those living with dementia

About *Alchemy Chorus*

Alchemy Chorus was begun in Canberra in 2016 by Brian Triglone OAM, based on the Giving Voice Choirs in Minnesota.

We chose the name after a poll of early members and volunteers. Alchemy means the blending of various elements to produce something valuable and that seemed to fit our aims. We started with about 40 members and now have 95 registered members. Attendance with our membership group will always be uncertain but we average about 80 each week.

We are completely independent and a not-for-profit, self-funding incorporated association. No-one is paid.

We've been covered extensively in the media including segments on the ABC's Australia Wide program, ABC radio and several magazines and newspapers. For more information, visit: <https://alchemychorus.com/>

How we operate

An Inclusive Working Choir

Alchemy Chorus is **not a dementia choir**. We are a working choir which welcomes those living with dementia who, along with their care partner, are still able to benefit from and contribute to practices and performances. There are no auditions and every voice is valued.

There are several reasons for targeting this group, but probably the most important one is that we offer an activity which can be enjoyed by both carer (a relative or friend) and participant (those living with dementia). The responsibility on a carer is enormous and often unrelenting and so we offer a weekly opportunity for the couples to engage in a normal, enjoyable activity where integration is paramount and where carers in particular can share their experiences. For this reason, our choir is not designed for paid carers.

Whilst we target those mainly in the early to mid-stages of dementia, we never ask anyone to leave as their dementia progresses.

Practices and Performances

As a working choir we perform at least twice each year in concert and there are often opportunities to entertain at appropriate functions too.

So, while our practices are great fun, we incorporate into them most of the things a regular choir would include such as a warm-up and parts singing. We encourage soloists, especially from those with dementia and we've had some wonderful and very moving discoveries of hidden talent.

At the end of each term, we have an in-house concert where any member is welcome to perform. There is usually a long list of performers and it's a lot of fun. We also have visiting performers such as Keith Potger from *The Seekers*, as well as local soloists and a ukulele band and we have combined with another community choir to put on a great concert with about 90 voices.

The *Alchemy Chorus* uniform is white top with black bottoms and a gold scarf, provided by the choir.

Practice Format

Our practices start at 10.00am but there is coffee and tea available prior to that for early birds. We sing till 11.00 when we have a break of about 20 mins, after which we sing again till 12.00. Morning tea is a vital and popular part of the day when all members can share experiences with others in similar circumstances.

Most weeks we also ask one couple to give us a potted history of their lives. The aim of this segment is to recognise people's contribution to society, to remind us that there was a life before dementia and that this illness can strike people of all intellects, vocations and abilities.

Each week we sing about 14 songs unless we're practising for a concert. We divide the choir into two sections and often teach one side an easy part to a song while the other sings the melody. We also divide along gender lines for some songs and teach two fairly easy harmonies. Sometimes the parts are SATB, but it depends on the song. It's largely a case of making the song interesting to the carers and volunteers and still within the capabilities of those with dementia. We use the free musical notation program Musescore to help learn parts.

Volunteers

The volunteers are vital to the structure we use. As well as practical support, they provide a solid musical base, helping the participants in particular to find their part. Male volunteers are especially important in encouraging men who, like most men of that era, are reluctant to sing because of the unflattering remarks their music teacher may have made about their voice in primary school!

Songs

We've found that those with dementia roughly fall into the age group 60 -85 so we choose songs that they'd have sung or heard in their teens or early adulthood. While we do quite a few melancholy songs, the most popular are the livelier songs.

Of course, we take suggestions from the members.

We always conclude by acknowledging birthdays (the birthday people conduct "Happy Birthday") followed by "Reach Out and Touch Somebody's Hand" and "Now is the Hour".

Charges

We charge \$10 cash per couple each week and average about 80 attendees per week. The aim is to charge as little as possible, but to allow for unexpected costs such as a temporary replacement conductor or pianist. Volunteers are not charged.

We operate on school terms.

Name tags

Everyone is given a name tag which is marked P (Participant - person with dementia), C (Carer) or V (Volunteer). The name of an emergency contact is written on the back of every name tag.

Song Folders

Everyone is given a black A4 folder with the song lyrics. This can also be used in performances, but we find that many of the members, including the participants, can sing quite a number of the songs from memory which enhances performances considerably. The *Alchemy Chorus* logo, with a space at the bottom for a name, is slipped into the front cover.

Carers' Responsibility

We ask every carer to sign a declaration that they will remain with the participant for whom they are responsible during the practice. If the carer is unable to attend but the participant still wants to come, we arrange for a volunteer to meet the participant and act as their carer for the day. This is always only a temporary arrangement.

Member Liaison and Care

We have a member liaison person who handles any matters relating to the welfare of our members, following up on sick members, reporting family events such as new grandchildren, hospitalisations etc.

We always have at least one trained first aid officer at practice.

We also have a Choir Manager who is responsible for all the practical matters including volunteer rosters, initial interviews and membership enquiries.

Database

We run a protected database which holds everyone's name, status, address and contact details.

We also register attendance each week to help us with our budgeting and to balance our takings.

The value of singing

Finally, recognising that wholehearted singing is most beneficial for lifting the spirits, try to encourage that and discourage timidity. Our unofficial motto is "let it go!"

And we might add that all of us involved in *Alchemy Chorus* find it incredibly rewarding and lots of fun. If you'd like to share this wonderful experience by establishing an *Alchemy Chorus* in your area, we would love to hear from you.

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