

# Music of



*Elderly aged care residents enjoying Melbourne Recital Centre's Always Music program. Photo supplied.*

# the Mind



*Elderly aged care residents enjoying Melbourne Recital Centre's Always Music program. Photo supplied*

Though more research needs to be undertaken, there is evidence that music is beneficial for people living with dementia. **Steve Dow** talks to researchers, academics, support organisations and arts companies to find out what is on offer, and what else needs to be done.

As two violins, a viola and a cello whirl through the intermezzo fantasy and lyricism of Schumann's mid-19th-century String Quartet No. 1, a woman with an elegant bearing, dressed in a pink, puffy-sleeved dress and white dangly earrings, prepares to speak.

Susan Hamilton has been a clinical psychotherapist for 25 years. In 2019, she was diagnosed with a mild cognitive impairment, which means she has a one in two chance of developing full dementia. But a terrible disease does not mean life is terrible, she tells the audience in The Neilson performance space at Pier 2/3 in Sydney's Walsh Bay Arts Precinct.

"Many people only get a vague diagnosis and don't get the care they need," says Hamilton, who is sitting next to the four string players and a pianist from the Australian Chamber Orchestra. Five fellow speakers, who are also dressed impeccably for this performance of *To Whom I May Concern*, concur as they read letters penned about their lives after dementia diagnoses. They speak of bravery and courage, but also feeling angry, isolated and misunderstood.

After a dramatic *String Quartet, II. Vivace* by contemporary Australian composer Cyrus Meurant, Bobby Redman, a retired psychologist from the New South Wales Central Coast, speaks about her general practitioner trying to assuage her fears over her forgetfulness by telling her she was "fine". After a neurologist diagnosed her with frontotemporal dementia, the GP was unrepentant, saying, "We can't fix it, so does it matter if it has a name?"

**"Often people will lose the language, but they can sing the words to every song, and [after] having an experience with music, they can articulate their feelings a lot better."**

This public concert, one of two presented in February in a partnership between the ACO, Group Homes Australia and Dementia Australia, with support from the University of New South Wales, is testament to the fortitude of these storytellers, and yet more evidence that music has a critical role to play for people with many types of dementia and other cognitive impairments. Not only is music a soothing balm, but also a means of triggering memories and emotions long since presumed locked away.

Nell Hawe, wearing a sparkling emerald sequin dress, has just turned 55 and declares in the concert that she wants to have "a whole lot of fun" before she "loses it", having been diagnosed with younger-onset Alzheimer's disease in 2020. In an interview in the foyer with *Limelight* earlier in the day, she speaks of writing music, which carries themes of her "perfect imperfection" and "jumping in muddy puddles on rainy days".

Having devoted 30 years to working in aged and disability care - her favourite teaching subject as an assessor in this field was dementia - Hawe now lives alone in Port Macquarie, aided by support workers; her marriage did not survive her diagnosis. Her contribution to this performance, she says, is to talk about "friends walking out of your life because you can't do the things you used to do. I guess they see you as a changed person."

But she still has a spark, I protest, and the fact she is living with dementia is not immediately obvious.

"Of course, but I lost my driver's licence, and if you can no longer drive, then you can no longer meet up with friends. You can no longer work ... but you make new friends." Presenting a sunny-side-up demeanour nonetheless, Hawe attends music therapy and has eclectic tastes, ranging from country to blues, rock and classical, while her singing voice runs low to high.

"Often words or songs will come to me all hours of the day and night, because I'm up all hours. Through my music, I also want to teach," says Hawe, who plans to record her song about jumping in muddy puddles on rainy days so it can be played at her funeral.

Is that song about being in the moment?

"Absolutely. So, when life gives you rainy days, just go and jump in muddy puddles. We often think of all forms of dementia as doom and gloom and death - that is what dementia will ultimately lead us to, but in the meantime, we have to live our best lives."

Meanwhile, much more research is needed. A meta-analysis of eight studies of music therapy and dementia, published in the journal *Frontiers in Medicine* in 2020, promisingly found that "the intervention with music improves cognitive function in people living with dementia, as well as quality of life after the intervention and long-term depression."

The researchers, from the University of Castilla-La Mancha in Toledo, Spain, concluded that "music could be a powerful treatment strategy. However, it is necessary to develop clinical trials aimed to design standardised protocols depending on the nature or stage of dementia so that they can be applied together with current cognitive-behavioural and pharmacological therapies."





Gwenda Darling and Beth Condon (viola) at the Australian Chamber Orchestra's performance of *To Whom I May Concern*, 2023. Photo © Maria Boyadgis

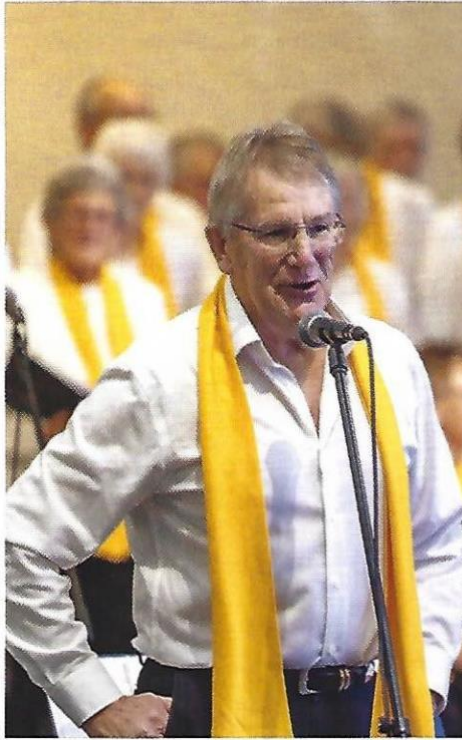


Daniel Yeadon (cello) and Susan Hamilton at the Australian Chamber Orchestra's performance of *To Whom I May Concern*, 2023. Photo © Maria Boyadgis

**Not only is music a soothing balm,  
but also a means of triggering  
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presumed locked away.**



Left to right: Val Schacht, Dennis Frost and Nell Hawe, with Cyrus Meurant (piano), Ilya Isakovich (violin) and Caroline Hopson (violin) at the Australian Chamber Orchestra's performance of *To Whom I May Concern*, 2023. Photo © Maria Boyadgis



Brian Triglone founder and conductor of Alchemy Chorus in Canberra. Photo supplied



Members of the Alchemy Chorus in Canberra. Photo supplied

The therapeutic need has never been greater or wider. A report released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in February this year found that dementia has now overtaken coronary heart disease as causing the greatest burden of illness, injury and premature death among people aged 65 years and older. Among that age group, dementia was responsible for almost 230,000 years of healthy life lost - a figure that has increased 62 percent since 2011.

Yet professional Australian arts companies are only just getting on board. *To Whom I May Concern* was based on a concept created by American psychotherapist and nurse Dr Maureen Matthews, who is currently the Director of the Early Memory Loss Program at the Stamford Counseling Center in Connecticut.

As part of a PhD dissertation, Matthews created a verbatim theatre performance in which people shared their personal stories by way of reading a personal letter. This grew into a program used by groups around the US to understand what it means to have a diagnosis of dementia.

Tamar Krebs, the founder and Executive Director of Group Homes Australia, brought the concept to Australia. She tells *Limelight* she struck up a partnership with the Australian Chamber Orchestra after she simply enquired about using their venue for the show. "In America, they did it in small community halls, without music. In Australia, I wanted it to be very spectacular, in a theatre, a little bit grander."

The philosophy, says Krebs, is one of "shifting perceptions and erasing stigmas" and "redefining the possibilities for those living with dementia ... instead of it being an invisible disease, we can really change the conversation on living with the diagnosis and living well."

Krebs says music has a "light bulb" role in dementia. "Often people will lose the language, but they can sing the words to every song, and [after] having an experience with music, they can articulate their feelings a lot better."

Tara Smith, the ACO's Director of Learning & Engagement, says a lot of UK and other international orchestras have been doing great work in engaging with ageing audiences and people with dementia. The Neilson space proved the perfect intimate venue to stage *To Whom I May Concern*. "I couldn't imagine doing it in a bigger venue," she says. "We're trying to make this a place where communities come and feel at home."

The Neilson is "working towards being dementia-friendly", says Smith, in line with a lot of UK venues. "Basically, dementia is [often] an invisible disability, so if you come wearing a sunflower lanyard, our staff know you have a disability that we can't see. We're looking at being an accessible venue in every way. So, if you have dementia, our venue and box office staff know what that might mean."

Will *To Whom I May Concern* continue? "I'm not sure yet about the [future] format," says Smith. "We did a pilot last year with one private performance and it was so moving, we had more demand from people wanting to see it. The fact that we're putting these people on stage alongside some of the best musicians in Australia ... it could be any one of us sitting up there, you know?" Maree McCabe, the Chief Executive Officer of Dementia Australia, says she was extremely moved by seeing the first concert of *To Whom I May Concern*. The emotional impact came from the "level of authenticity" with which people told their stories. "It was raw, it was inspiring ... and they described it as quite cathartic," she says.



While more research is needed on music and dementia, McCabe believes "we can get so wound up in the research that we sometimes just forget about people's quality of life, and how to enhance that. There are certainly enough studies to show that music makes a difference ...to connect people with tunes and memories that might otherwise be inaccessible."

But what of those who cannot physically get to concert halls? Felicity Baker, a Professor in Music (Music Therapy) at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, says her research for the Creative Arts & Music Therapy Unit at The University of Melbourne shows singing to people with dementia helps improve their symptoms, reducing agitation while generating autobiographical recall. Baker created the Homeside study, an international program that guides carers to use music to help people with dementia complete everyday tasks, and to "tune in to their loved one's state".

Baker told ABC radio that the program is about teaching carers to use music in "mindful" ways, "not just putting on any piece of music" but thinking about what music is best according to the time of day. Some music might be better suited to nighttime, for instance, to help someone settle.

While people with dementia are known to suffer a "devastating" loss of recognition of loved ones, "music has this really amazing capacity to stimulate this auto-biographical recall," and research just completed in care

homes found music was "significant in reducing depression in people in particular with dementia," says Baker.

"There's this idea of regulation through music, when you tap into someone's emotions and they recognise something, [so] that they're immediately distracted from their preoccupation with whatever is causing them distress, but also they're able to then take on the energy of that music and it helps to calm them."

Baker recalls working with one man living with dementia, who loved the song *Crocodile Rock*. She would sing the Elton John song to him to help calm his agitation, slowing down or modulating her voice at different times.

Baker has been working with the CSIRO to develop an e-music therapy application. A team led by Dr David Silvera at CSIRO's Australian eHealth Research Centre is developing an algorithm to choose the music to play to people, with dementia, using sensors to monitor patients with dementia, their agitation levels and their responses to the music.

Baker envisages this eHealth application could become "part of the continuum" of the relationship between people with dementia, their carers and music therapists. While nothing can act as a substitute for such human relationships, the technological innovation is intended for times when carers cannot always be present for people living with dementia, particularly when trying to settle and relax at night.

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**"There's this idea of regulation through music, when you tap into someone's emotions and they recognize something, [so] that they're immediately distracted from their preoccupation with whatever is causing them distress."**

At the Melbourne Recital Centre, the emphasis is on taking top-tier musical artists out to aged care facilities across Victoria, although the participation of audiences is mostly singing and clapping along. The Music Always program started in 2015 and grew out of a different program that offered ticket and transport subsidies to people in the community who faced barriers getting to the centre.

"We used to bring a lot of aged care partners' residents in for performances," explains Belinda Ashe, the centre's Learning & Access Manager. "We sat down for a roundtable with them, and they said, 'It's lovely that you provide the transport and tickets, and the residents love the concerts, but it's actually quite difficult to bring all of the residents into the city, and a lot miss out because they can't be transported very easily.'"

These days, artists programmed at the centre are sent to where audiences living with dementia are being cared for. These artists include a number of string quartets, prominent, wind ensemble Arcadia Winds, and the Paris-based jazz vocalist Hetty Kate, who comes to Melbourne every couple of years to do a Music Always tour because she loves the program so much.

"It's not just music; it's good, high-quality music," says Ashe. "People in aged care facilities shouldn't be shut out from that. They still deserve to see and hear the best quality music in Australia."

That said, does the Melbourne Recital Centre have to think about tailoring the music to a broad audience, many of whom will favour popular standards to classical?

"We don't want to compromise the musicality of these artists, but we also want to ensure that it's an inclusive performance for the residents, and so we do ask the artists to play something a little familiar. So, if it is a classical ensemble, we do ask them to bring out a couple of the big classical numbers that people, will hum along to, because they've heard it throughout their lifetimes, even if they haven't been to a [classical] concert."

Elsewhere, the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, which launched its We're Sharing the Joy program during the pandemic, sends orchestra members to homes for older communities and to other deserving audiences. The QSO launched a Healthy Ageing pilot concert and program in the QSO Studio in May, with more outreach performances for older audiences in Brisbane and Mount Isa under the Sharing the Joy program in July.

In Perth, a small ensemble from the West Australian Symphony Orchestra - trio, quartet or quintet - regularly performs in aged care homes as part of its

Music For The Ages program. WASO's Community Engagement Coordinator, Christina Claire, says the program began in 2018 and includes opera, ballet, jazz and popular tunes such as *Moon River*. "We have seen residents with dementia, Alzheimer's ... tapping hands and feet, humming, singing and conducting along. They find a moment of peace and respite, where the brain centres in on the sounds."

But the past few years have been an especially challenging time for running such programs. At the Sydney Opera House, a pilot Art, Music & Dementia program, featuring classical musicians playing harp, violin and flute in the intimate Utzon Room, was paused in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A spokeswoman says a restart is being considered, with nothing confirmed.

While specific dementia-friendly performances are not on offer elsewhere at the Sydney Opera House, there are relaxed performances, with sound and lighting modifications. "Depending on the level of dementia experienced, people may become confused, agitated or unexpectedly verbal," the spokeswoman explains, "and the relaxed audience environment allows them to come in and out of the venue and talk to their carers for reassurance."

In 2020, the Canberra Symphony Orchestra piloted an eight-week Music and Memory program, performing music for people living with dementia at Goodwin Village Ainslie, with concert programming based on the preferences of participants.

While the CSO's Marketing and Communications Manager, Jacqui Douglas, says the program's findings were "exciting" – reducing insecurity and restlessness and repetitive behaviours, with anecdotal improvements in mood and social interaction - the program was "resource-intensive" and "limited to a small group of participants".

Therefore, the orchestra pivoted instead to a "broader aged-care concert program to reach a wider audience".

"The programming for these concerts is informed by what we learnt through Music and Memory, with the inclusion of well-loved and recognisable songs," adds Douglas.

Community choirs fill the gaps. Stepping into the spotlight in 2016 was Canberra's all-volunteer, unpaid Alchemy Chorus, whose members come from three groups: people living with dementia; a partner, relative or close friend of each of them; and volunteers, who also help out by making morning tea.

The chorus meets each Thursday and performs concerts twice a year. Inspired by the Giving Voice

Chorus in Minnesota, designed for people with dementia and their partners, the choir's repertoire is unashamedly popular due to the importance of familiarity, running from Doris Day to The Seekers to The Beatles.

Founder and conductor Brian Triglone tells *Limelight* he had experience in community choirs and some time on his hands. He hadn't had any close contact with anyone with dementia, yet Alchemy has been successful, spawning similar choirs in NSW and Queensland.

The group, which receives no government funding, is "wonderful" to conduct, and also "a challenge". To be "inclusive - you've got to satisfy all three groups, and you can't do songs that are tricky. Songs that nobody's heard, we throw them out straight away." To keep those with musical experience interested, "I do a few little simple harmonies," says Triglone. "We've never claimed to be therapeutic in a medical sense, and there are lots of studies on the benefits of music and dementia, but I'm yet to read anything that says music has any long-lasting effect on the progress of dementia."

"We aim to give people a good experience for two hours a week, and this is why the carers are so important. We're aware of the responsibility on them. [The carers] are reluctant sometimes to go out, but when they come to choir, they're among friends who really understand what it's all about."

Choir members living with dementia run the spectrum from barely showing symptoms to barely being able to participate, but there is no discrimination, and no one living with dementia is ever turned away.

"From those who are really aware, we get wonderful feedback, saying that Thursday is the best morning of the week. The carers will say, 'I normally can't get them out of bed, but when I tell them it's choir day, they're up like a shot.'"

Anecdotally, choir members who normally say very little will suddenly engage. The key is about being seen, being treated as a valuable human being with the full spectrum of wants, needs and joys, as well as a desire to participate and be seen. Each session, a segment called A Little Bit Proud, asks someone to tell the group about something they're proud of.

Recently, one choir member living with dementia said he was proud of his wife for looking after him. The group dissolved in tears.

"Sometimes it's surprising," says Triglone, noting that previously unrecognised talent can be unearthed.

"In the middle of a practice, I will think of a song that would suit someone, and I'll say to this person living with dementia, 'Would you like to have a go at this?' And they come out and sing it like an old professional. It just pops out."\*

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