

Festival Director's Report 2009

by Alvena Ferguson

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Reading back over my 2008 report, it commenced "...the Festival has had a tough time over the last 2 years...". We thought that was tough, but nothing prepared us for the shock this year of being completely left out of funding from Arts NSW, along with the 3 other major music festivals on the north coast.

After receiving this bad news in early January, strenuous representations by Peter Besseling MP plus emails and letters from Festival members, friends and supporters to the State Government and the Premier, the week prior to the Festival's proposed commencement we were unexpectedly allocated \$9,000, the same amount we had received the previous year. In the meantime, generous financial support from the community and businesses, donated to ensure the continuation of the event, we decided we were safe to proceed, and in the end we had a modest financial success. They say that any publicity is good publicity and I feel personally confident that our 77% across the board attendance was in part due to the community realisation that unless they continued to support CHMF, it could disappear from the scene.

One of our major financial decisions at the conclusion of the 2008 Festival, when our Artistic Director Trish O'Brien retired early, was for the Management Committee to "go it alone" and devise the program ourselves. We are entitled to feel proud that what we offered this year was accepted as one of the best programs for some time. There may be perceptions amongst some music lovers that a music festival without an AD is not serious about what it does, but there are distinct advantages too. We had been hearing via our surveys and ad hoc feedback from concert-goers that there was an over-emphasis on strings, and that is understandable when you have a string player as your AD, and this comment is in no way a reflection on either of our past ADs. However this year the Management Committee was free to choose a wide range of performers, instrumentation and repertoire, without needing to consider any existing allegiances to a particular instrument, players or styles. It did seem to work very well by all accounts, and it is exceptionally pleasing that we were financially successful enough to re-pay two loans made so generously in 2007, which at that time enabled us to remain solvent. Our major benefactor Yvonne Fisher also converted her loan into a gift, thereby absolving us from the requirement to repay a further \$10,000. "Thank you" is not enough to say, Yvonne.

Notwithstanding our improved financial position reported by the treasurer, we are already suffering from the anxieties of rounding up funding for next year, whether it be government grants or private and corporate sponsorships, coming up with a program to entice audiences and worrying about our audience development strategies, without which there may soon be no audiences for CHMF.

There is no doubt that our area is saturated with entertainment options, many of them local, amateur and cheap to attend. Ten years ago this was not the case, and there was a real hunger for the sort of performances which CHMF presented. People looked forward

each year to what the Festival would bring to local residents by way of excellent music experiences. With the drop in revenue suffered by clubs due to the smoking ban and increased poker machine taxes, those venues are now very aggressively pursuing the entertainment dollar, with high profile performers who once would have been considered outside their market range. Clubs, wineries, galleries, and restaurants are all using musical entertainment as a hook to get the punters in to spend on their other products, be it alcohol, meals, etc. Club managers have told me directly that they don't expect their shows to turn a profit - they are a way to get people through the door so that they spend on meals drinks and gambling. CHMF has only one product to offer - our music program. Having said this, it still remains that the CHMF annual program, by and large is not being provided by any other presenter between Newcastle and the far north coast. Bellingen Jazz focuses on one genre and is quite successful in doing so. Tyalgum has a program of classical music but while the performers are good they are not out of the top drawer. Bangalow has a totally different "feel" with its on-site collaborations and attention to Australian classical composition. With access to the far more sophisticated Brisbane market which provides most of its audience, Bangalow can afford to take these risky avenues.

That leaves our Camden Haven Music Festival - presenting professional musicians mostly at the top of their game, straight out of capital cities and with national and international reputations. Our programs often include workshops, free community events, catering and hospitality, and a friendly community feel. **We** know how good our chosen musicians are, and our overall product, but it is disappointing when local audiences by and large don't seem capable of discerning the difference between our top-quality international artists - and what they cost, and local amateur performers who can put on a concert for no more than \$25 a ticket and still come out in front. There can be room for both levels of entertainment, and our challenge is to get the message across to many more people that they are both worthy of support and participation.

We are due for our three-yearly Strategic Review in the next couple of months, at which our direction from 2011 to 2014 will be discussed and planned. At that Strategic Review it will be necessary to decide if CHMF continues in its present format, becomes shorter in length, goes to every second year, or terminates. These Strategic Reviews are largely undertaken by the Management Committee who would be expected to carry forward the decisions, but my personal view is that all financial members, and some selected subscribed "friends" should also have input to those discussions.

There are many aspects to each possible forward direction which will need to be teased out, but to give everyone a few thought starters:

Continuing as we are - will ensure ongoing funding dilemmas if we wish to maintain our high quality and offer more unusual music experiences

Become shorter in length each year - which events should be culled? Knowing that classical events usually need to be financially cross-subsidised by other music forms, and that classical music has been the core of our being since 1996, it would be brave to cut the classical component. On the other hand, returning to a mainly classical program would ensure we were not attractive enough to government or corporate supporters because of its more limited appeal

Becoming a two-yearly event - allows more time to plan but may be difficult to hold on to sponsors, dedicated audiences and organisers

Terminating the Festival - would be a disappointing outcome, but perhaps the most realistic. No doubt if we did this, at some point in the future, someone would say "this area needs a good music festival, let's start one up!"

My thanks go to the outgoing Management Committee, as well as to subscribed Members and Friends, for your support of me personally and of our proud organisation. It will be a pleasure to continuing working with the new Management Committee for our 15th CHMF in 2010.