

SINGING FOR THE SOUL

NICOLA CARTER spoke with a choir of refugee women from Bosnia and found that singing is about more than just music.

The Blue River Choir, also known as *The Bosnian Women's Choir*, has been reaching new heights of creative expression and fame as it draws increasingly larger audiences to its performances around the country. Brisbane, Canberra, outback New South Wales and Sydney, have all been hosts to the choir who have entertained their audiences, bringing Bosnian and other communities together through music.

The name of '*Blue River Choir*' comes from the poetry of Mak Dizdar, a famous Bosnian poet. Dizdar's poem about the Blue River tells of a legendary river that is wide, deep, and very beautiful. This river is a metaphor for connection with the land and its beauty, and for a spiritual belonging of the land to the soul. The 'blue' of Blue River is only an approximate translation from the Bosnian. This 'blue' refers to a particular shade of dark blue, and the 'Blue River' is a river of this shimmering and deep blueness.

The Blue River Choir's love for their music and culture is over-

whelming. They speak about their choir and the friendships and renewed sense of community it has brought them, with enthusiasm. Almost all choir members are refugees and they expressed the heightened importance to them as refugees, of social connection and community. Newcomers and founding members alike spoke of the welcoming and accepting atmosphere of the choir. "All the women here are best friends. We chat, we exchange ideas, we try to help each other in any ways that we can," says one choir member. Another one adds: "We look out for each other. If someone doesn't come one week, we are ready to look, to see if she is okay. Being in the choir stops you from feeling the isolation".

The women are quick to acknowledge the therapeutic, healing aspects of the choir. They talked about feeling a renewed sense of self-esteem, increased happiness and confidence in themselves. "The choir has been the best rehabilitation for me. At the time...when I left my country...I

didn't leave the traumatic experiences behind then. It was after being in the choir that I started to feel better...that it started to be easier to cope with," says Muniba, one of the choir members. Another woman, Izeta, describes the choir as being like medicine. "We are singing the words of our forebears, our mothers and fathers. We are remembering our country and our past...and that is a healing thing," she says.

The Blue River Choir sings a wide variety of Bosnian songs, including opera, popular, and folk songs. Many of the songs bring messages to the listener, telling stories of love, fortune or destiny. Some songs are very emotionally expressive and sad: "Some we don't sing...we refuse because we cry," said one choir member. Most of the women found it difficult to name a favorite song, and said that they loved them all. One woman however, named a song about the first leaves to fall from the trees in the autumn as her favorite.



The Blue River Choir

How did these women become part of the choir? One woman said: "Well, the first time I came just to be with my friend. But then I stayed!" Another said: "The first time I came to choir I felt scared. But now all the women respect me. I respect them all, and I like them all. We learn about life and about each other here".

Sladjana Hodzic is the conductor and founder of the *Blue River Choir*, and was formerly a conductor of the Sarajevo City Choir. "I knew as soon as I landed in Australia that I wanted to start a *Bosnian women's choir*," says Hodzic. Soon after her arrival in Australia, Hodzic began talking to community members about her vision for a Bosnian choir in Australia. The first small gathering of choir members occurred soon afterwards, and the choir was born. Numbers have now grown to almost forty women.

Choir members are deeply committed to professional standards. They train in breathing, voice projection and technique, and study music theory. Their work is supported by a grant from the New South Wales Ministry for the Arts, which is auspiced by Friends of STARTTS, the volunteer organisation, which supports STARTTS'

work. This grant covers some of the choir's travelling expenses, and has enabled them to purchase some basic equipment. However there is still an urgent need for more funding.

For many of the women, going on tour has been one of the most exciting aspects of choir life. This has the additional benefit of helping to accustom them to Australia and its many communities. The support received from audiences, and the existence of a loyal band of 'groupies' who follow the choir around the country as it performs, also contributes to the thrill of touring.

The choir has recently introduced dancing into some of their concerts and performances. One enterprising choir member led the way in this development when she was inspired to express herself creatively through dance. Dancing has now become a component of more than a few choir rehearsals.

Perhaps the strongest picture of the *Blue River Choir* comes from their description of a recent performance in a local park. This performance spontaneously grew into a party, a carnival of life and living that went late into the night. There were performers

and guests, children, mothers, fathers and grandparents, friends and onlookers. The trees were lit up with fairy lights, and there was dancing, singing and feasting. The atmosphere was one of celebration, as barriers came down, and people gave themselves over to the fun and revelry.

This party seems to describe the spirit of the *Blue River Choir*. It is a choir which is doing much to bring cohesion, connection and meaning to the lives of its own members, the Bosnian community as a whole, and to the growing number of other groups and communities in Australia who are coming into contact with them.

Nicola Carter is a generalist counsellor at STARTTS

For further information on the Blue River Choir, please contact Cathy Preston Thomas at STARTTS, on 97941915. Donations towards the work of The Blue River Choir would be most gratefully received. All donations over \$2, which are made to the choir, care of Friends of STARTTS, are tax deductible.

