

SIDNEY MYER MUSIC BOWL

It's been compared to a bird, a plane, and an umbrella.

Some say its unique aerodynamic shape was actually inspired by Louis Armstrong's trumpet.

Whichever way you look at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl, in the Kings Domain, one thing is certain: its one of our cherished icons.

Few other buildings in Victoria, let alone, Australia command as much affection and loyalty.

Victorians embraced the Bowl from the moment it opened in February, 1959 with a symphonic concert.

We loved the way this landmark structure combined the splendor of a concert hall with the relaxed feel of a sports arena and we have been camping under its sprawling tensile canopy ever since.

Attending Carols by Candlelight at the Bowl has almost become a rite of passage for us but this versatile venue, with fixed seating for 2000 people and room on the amphitheatre lawn for 10,000 more, has also been a home for Moomba and Music For the People, for religious crusades and rock concerts, for ice-skating and outdoor movies.

Abba and AC-DC, Paul McCartney and Neil Diamond, Pearl Jam and the Red Hot Chilli Peppers...these are some of the big acts that have also rocked the Bowl to its foundations. But its The Seekers who still hold the record for the biggest Bowl crowd ever.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Bowl and free public musical events appealing to all ages are the focus of celebrations.

But in recalling the Bowl's half century of entertainment, Melburnians might also pause to consider its architectural merits.

The Bowl was the city's first major purpose-built outdoor venue. The design of the tent-like roof, suspended from two tapering masts, was an amazing feat of structural engineering. And aeronautical experts were engaged to fine-tune its acoustics.

Marvelling at the Bowl's modern look in 1958, 'The Herald' called it "the most startling architectural piece ever seen in Melbourne."

In 2009, following extensive refurbishment, it looks better than ever...and there's no let-up in our love for this cultural icon.

The 'People's Bowl' - as it's often called - continues to inspire, entertain and unite everyone who comes under the shadow of its distinctive roof.

Beginnings

The sound of music has always drifted through the Domain. Army bands from the nearby Victoria Barracks held concerts in the gardens from the mid-19th century while Melbourne Symphony Orchestra performed outdoor concerts there in the 1930s and 40s.

These free concerts, known as Music for the People, were initiated by retailer Sidney Myer - founder of Myer department stores and a lover of classical music.

Inspired by a visit to the Hollywood Bowl in California, Myer expressed a wish that Melbourne have a permanent home for outdoor concerts.

So, following his death in 1934, The Sidney Myer Charitable Trust proposed funding a "music bowl for Melbourne" in the Domain. This idea, first raised during the war, found favour in the mid-50s when Melbourne was host city for the Olympic Games and in a modernising mood.

In February, 1956, the Domain was selected as the site for a 'sound shell' which would "provide cover over about an acre of stage and seating, have seating for a further almost unlimited number, fit into the landscape, be acoustically excellent and work within a tight budget."

Ken Myer, Sidney's son, asked two Melbourne firms to draw up plans: Grounds, Romberg and Boyd - comprising Roy Grounds, Frederick Romberg and Robin Boyd - and Yuncken, Freeman Brothers, Griffiths and Simpson.

'Gromboyd', as it was colloquially known, was at the forefront of modern Australian design but Yuncken Freeman - longer established and a strong force in Melbourne architecture - won the Bowl commission in September with a daring proposal.

Principal architect Barry Patten imagined "a sunken amphitheatre sheltered by a huge, flexible canopy floating over the grass."

The canopy, he explained, would be "stretched over a massive network of tensioned steel cables strung across two 22-metre high cigar-shaped steel poles."

The unusual shape of Patten's structure was inspired, he said, by the "similarity of cable structures like the Brooklyn Bridge and the section through Satchmo's trumpet" (seen first-hand during Armstrong's 1955 tour of Australia).

To illustrate the concept, Patten and his assistant Angel Dimitroff built a crude model made of six inch nails, cotton thread and rice paper. The Myer family was impressed but more sophisticated modelling was soon needed.

As Patten said: "Every problem we faced seemed to be for the first time."

Yuncken Freeman designers had to find clamps for cable junctions that would flex but not slip, anchors for cable ends that would not corrode, and weatherproof roofing material. Pre-cast concrete plates were too inflexible, so Patten settled on 'Alumply', a local product combining compressed plywood with aluminium sheeting.

To calculate likely loads on the structure, wind tunnel tests were also conducted at Fishermen's Bend. These aeronautical lab tests on trusses and stresses - involving CSIRO scientists - confirmed a vibrating Bowl would still be "sound and safe."

Building

Construction finally began in February, 1958. Almost 35,000 cubic metres of soil over 1.43 hectares was excavated with the earth banked into giant mounds.

Hailing it as "a mammoth man-made engineering job", the press invited readers to "imagine a giant ice cream, cut half down the centre and then laid flat. The wider portion of this cone is supported by pylons as high as six-storey building."

Within months of the first sod being turned, Melburnians could see the "biggest big top" for themselves. Giant steel and fibreglass masts were sunk into the earth, giant cable sockets were locked into the earth, and cable riggers - described as "human spiders" - dangled from the Bowl's complex web of pre-stressed steel.

As work neared completion, the canopy was "plucked" and "played" like a harp to ensure cable tensions were correct.

Sidney Myer trustee Baillieu Myer called the emerging Bowl "an old dream come true...we feel that this is something of which my father would have approved wholeheartedly."

Architect and critic Robin Boyd was another admirer and called Melbourne's Bowl and Olympic Swimming Pool "the two climactic buildings of the period ... popular palaces of sport and culture respectively."

The Bowl's significance was confirmed in July, 1959 when it beat 52 other entries to win a prestigious American Institute of Architecture Award. The jury hailed Melbourne's newest building as a "new concept of enclosing space which could be a great influence on the architects of our time."

What's more, the Bowl came in on time and on budget: around \$200,000.

Opening

"This great Bowl will open a new era in the opportunity for musical appreciation in Australia."

So said Prime Minister Robert Menzies at the official opening of the Sidney Myer Music Bowl on February 12, 1959.

The gala concert, attended by 30,000 people, united members of the Melbourne and Sydney Symphony Orchestras who played a "colourful travelogue" of music by Wagner, Bizet and Gershwin under the baton of American conductor Alfred Wallenstein.

The sound was perfect, thanks to five speaker columns and a "sound delay device" which - Melburnians were told - "permits all members of an audience to hear a performance without interference from unwanted echoes."

Three days later, the Bowl hosted its first Music for the People concert. Compered by Roland Strong, it featured the Australian Symphony Orchestra and fulfilled Sidney Myer's vision for accessible performing arts.

American evangelist Billy Graham proved just how adaptable the new venue could be. In late February, his Down Under crusade held two weeks of meetings at the Bowl and often attracted 70,000 picnicking pilgrims.

Carols by Candlelight

It had been a cherished Christmas tradition in Melbourne since 1938 but when Carols by Candlelight found a permanent home at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl, audiences swelled.

The inaugural Carols concert - broadcast live on radio - was in December, 1959. Baritone Charles Skase sang 'How Great Thou Art', popster Johnny O'Keefe crooned 'Silent Night' and compere Norman Swain marvelled at the "thousands of Melbourne people" covering "the green slopes that arise away from me."

Forty-seven years later, Carols by Candlelight continues to enchant Victorian families armed with picnic hampers, rugs and candles but the festive acts have changed. In 2008, we were entertained by Hi-5, Marina Prior, David Campbell and Anthony Callea.

Entertainment

The Sidney Myer Music Bowl transformed Melbourne's arts scene.

As Baillieu Myer observed: "No other city has an open-air entertainment centre so close to its heart."

Plans were laid for ballets, operas and plays. Melbourne Theatre Company director John Sumner imagined Shakespeare: "You could even do the battle scenes."

But from the start, the Bowl was mostly about music. Starting in 1961, Summer Lunchtime Music shows drew big audiences. Bigger ones still attended Music for the People. Conductor Hector Crawford attributed its success to "a careful selection of musical items in which there is something for everyone."

Suzanne Steele ('The Songbird of the Gardens'), Glenda Raymond, Jon Weaving, and Charles West were crowd favourites and filled the air with arias. In February, 1963, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip attended 'A Royal Concert' at the Bowl where Sir Bernard Heinze led the Victorian Symphony Orchestra in a program that included Grainger, Gounod and Elgar. Trumpeters from the RAAF supplied the fanfare.

Entertainment at the Bowl entered a new era in the spring of 1967 when The Seekers starred in a Moomba show. Judith Durham, Athol Guy, Bruce Woodley and Keith Potger were Australia's number one musical export at the time and 200,000 people - one tenth of Melbourne's population - came out to greet them.

"When I saw that sea of people, I almost died of fright," Durham said later. But calming their nerves, The Seekers went on to please the biggest-ever crowd in the southern hemisphere with all their hits: 'The Carnival Is Over', 'Morningtoun Ride' and 'Georgy Girl'.

From that day on, the Bowl became a hotspot for Aussie rock. Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs turned up the volume in the early 70s. So did Madder Lake, Kush and AC-DC.

But overseas acts were just as keen to perform on its vast stage. Paul McCartney and Wings played there in 1975, Abba in 1977 and Bob Dylan in 1978.

As audiences for Bowl rock concerts grew and became more boisterous, Melbourne City Council was urged to crack down on noise, rubbish and bad behaviour.

Night shows were abandoned in 1981 after a raucous AC-DC gig erupted into what police called "uncontrollable disorder and violence."

Daytime rock concerts at the Bowl continued but authorities decided the Bowl would "not be available for concerts where there was likely to be a problem with the control of noise levels or non-paying crowds."

Further changes followed a Mushroom Records Concert in January, 1982 which was marred by drunken behaviour. Responding to a police report which noted vandalism to trees and the consumption of "10,000 dozen cans of liquor", Melbourne City Council agreed to erect a seasonal wire mesh fence. This barrier set a line which increased the size of the site to 2.734 hectares.

Since then, the Bowl has been a safe and secure venue for every kind of rock act. From Dire Straits (1986) and Neil Diamond (1994) to Michael Jackson (1996), the Red Hot Chili Peppers (1997), Metallica (2004) and Bon Jovi (2008).

Summadayze is held annually on New Years' Day, but not every event has been celebratory. John Farnham, Delta Goodrem and Vanessa Amorosi headlined a memorial concert for victims of the Bali bombing in October, 2002. A Tsunami Benefit Concert in February, 2005 featured a reformed Daddy Cool and Cold Chisel. And Make Poverty History on November 17, 2006 united Bono and The Edge with Pearl Jam and some of Australia's top acts.

Management

When the Sidney Myer Music Bowl marked its 25th anniversary in 1984, Victorian Premier John Cain called it "the nearest thing we have to a concert venue that is all things to all people."

The opening of a temporary ice-rink on the stage confirmed this. For the first time, Melbourne had a year-round outdoor venue.

The Victorian Arts Centre Trust, which assumed management of the Bowl in 1980, decided primitive facilities dating back to the 1950s needed to be replaced and approved improvements to offices, dressing rooms, and the stage.

In 1989, a hydraulic scissor lift was installed in the orchestra pit so the pit floor could be raised and lowered. Space was also made for a tank under the stage which could be filled with water, then frozen for ice skating.

To ensure the Bowl remained "a world-class outdoor performance venue and a vital part of the performing arts in Melbourne", the Trust went further and commissioned a Conservation Management Plan. This plan, released in 1996, identified the Domain structure as one of "considerable historical, social and cultural significance" and recommended extensive building works to bring its facilities in line with other Arts Centre venues.

In 1999, the go-ahead was given for a \$20 million refurbishment of the Bowl with \$3 million coming from The Sidney Myer Fund, the Myer Foundation and Myer family members.

Building works - managed by Victoria's Office of Major Projects - were extensive. The Bowl's signature canopy was repaired, a new balcony was added, and technical infrastructure was replaced. But throughout this intricate and complex renovation job, lasting two and a half years, architect Gregory Burgess ensured the "charm and warmth" of Barry Patten's original design was respected.

The site finally re-opened in late 2002 and in the spirit of Sidney Myer's legacy, the first concert for our better looking Bowl was free. Star players included the State Orchestra of Victoria, the Melbourne Chorale and the National Boys choir.

Arts Centre CEO Tim Jacobs hailed it as "the beginning of a new chapter for the Victorian Arts Centre and for its unique outdoor performing arts venue."

In 2009, the story of the Sidney Myer Music Bowl continues.

Fast Facts

- * The Bowl has fixed seating for 2030 people in 26 tiered rows.
- * Surrounding lawns can seat up to 10,000 people.
- * The stage area is 27.4 metres wide by 19.5 metres deep.
- * The orchestra pit can accommodate 80 players.
- * The total area of the Bowl's canopy is 4055 square metres. At its highest point, it is 20 metres tall.