

Ode to the vote

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Hundreds of Victorian women will celebrate a centenary of suffrage this week by singing a song of love and justice. Katherine Kizilos reports.

More than 400 women will gather on Saturday to sing a song celebrating their freedom. The youngest will be five years old, and one of the oldest, in her seventies, will have travelled from Seymour for the occasion.

In recent weeks they have been rehearsing the anthem, *Love and Justice*, written by local musician Kavisha Mazzella. The song, a gift to the women of Victoria, commemorates the centenary of women's suffrage in this state.

Mazzella's challenge was to write a song about the historic struggle for women's rights that contemporary women would want to sing, and that they would be able to learn (in five-part harmony) in just four sessions. Judging by the joyful expressions on the faces of 300 singers attending a final rehearsal at Northcote Town Hall last Sunday, she succeeded. On Saturday their ranks will be swelled by singers from country Victoria who have also been practising the song and who will join them for the first time.

Mary Crooks, the executive director of the Victorian Women's Trust, approached Mazzella late last year after hearing a song she wrote celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Eureka Stockade. Crooks says she loved the song, and thought a women's anthem would be a good way to mark 100 years of the women's vote.

The anthem's premiere will take place at the BMW Edge theatre in Federation Square. The singers, from around Victoria, responded to ads placed in the *The Boite* and *Women's Trust* newsletters. More women signed up than were able to fit the space, a sign that although the centenary has not been making headlines, many Victorian women believe it to be important and want to celebrate it.

The singers at the Northcote Town Hall rehearsal included mothers and daughters, groups of sisters and community choristers: women from all walks of life and of different ethnicities. It was moving to hear the big, beautiful sound their disparate voices made and to watch the triumph and pride on their faces as they sang.

When she was approached to write the anthem, Mazzella says she felt "pleased and daunted at the same time". She remembers thinking "this is huge ... What ideas do you put in? There are so many things to say about women".

As part of her preparation, Crooks took Mazzella to the State Library to see the 26-metre long "Monster Petition" calling for the women's vote. It contains 30,000 signatures collected during a six-week door-knocking campaign in 1891. Despite this mighty effort, Victorian women were not granted the right to vote in state elections until November 24, 1908, after 19 attempts at passing the legislation. "I realised I knew very little about it," Mazzella says. "I was finding it hard to get a grip on this subject. I was trying to imagine what it would be like not to have what we take for granted today."

A month long trip to India helped her find this understanding, she says. "Generally speaking, (Indian) women are still second-class citizens ... everything there is so socially controlled." In India she also saw a television advertisement that talked about how water and food were becoming more scarce, but that one resource remained untapped: women. The ad ended with images of women from around the world walking together. It inspired the first line she wrote for the anthem: "Women are real gold for all of us to treasure."

Musically, Mazzella wanted the song to express "joy, and a yearning quality". Influences included *Misa Criolla*, the Argentinian mass written by Ariel Ramirez in 1964, and the theme music from the movie *Exodus*. A friend found her an op shop copy of the *Canto General*, the choral piece written by

Mikis Theodorakis with lyrics by Pablo Neruda. The canto arrived on Mazzella's doorstep in a brown paper bag. It had the "epic intensity of feeling" she was looking for, she says.

Mary Crooks wanted the song to record the battle for women's rights, as well as celebrating women's achievements now. And she wanted it to have a universal appeal. (A hope for the anthem is that it will be translated into other languages.)

Crooks also sent Mazzella a copy of the Victorian Women's Trust book, *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives*, based on an exhibition of the same name organised to celebrate women's contribution to the first 100 years of Australia's Federation. Many of these women had not received public recognition.

Women's achievements are often invisible, Mazzella says, but that does not make them insignificant. "Love is a very important aspect of women's work," she says. "We are not just head creatures. We are head and heart together."

At the final rehearsal she told the singers: "Put your hands on your bellies. I want you to think about your ancestors. I want you to think about what you have and what they did for you."

Hearing hundreds of women sing her anthem for the first time was "unbelievable, so fantastic", says Mazzella. "I was so excited, I cried. It was really, really overwhelming."

Love and Justice will be sung on Saturday at the BMW Edge theatre during the Victorian Women's Trust's final forum on the Centenary of Suffrage in Victoria, which will look at the relevance of feminism today. The forum begins at 2pm. After Saturday, the song can be downloaded by visiting www.vwt.org.au and clicking the "Women's Anthem" link on the home page.