

## Organist living a new pipe dream

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IN 1973, when June Nixon became St Paul's Cathedral's first female organist and choir director, women in senior posts were still novelties.

An article in *The Age* on April 21 that year marvelled at the "diminutive, gamin figure" in flared, embroidered jeans taking on such a calling.



June Nixon, with members of the boys' choir. PAT SCALA

In fact, Dr Nixon was 31, was a Melbourne University music graduate and a Fellow of London's Royal College of Organists.

St Paul's had changed Ms Nixon's job title from "master of the choristers" to "choral director", because "mistress" would be "a trifle provocative".

It was the era of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Ms Nixon said in the article she wasn't offended by the idea of rock music in a religious setting. But she said this week she would never have played it - "I'm trained in classical music and specialise in music for the church." But she did fulfil a wish, stated in the article, to compose her own sacred music - more than 200 pieces, in fact.

At the St Paul's 10.30am service this Sunday Dr Nixon will retire after 40 years as music director.

A recipient of a Doctorate from the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1999, she is the cathedral's longest serving current staff member.

She played organ at Jim Stynes' funeral and conducted the choir for Prince Charles and Princess Diana, and for the visit to St Paul's by Pope John Paul II in 1986.



June Nixon is retiring after 40 years as choir director and organist at St Paul's Cathedral.

She says emotion isn't always advisable in her job because it affects concentration, but she was very moved when the Pope said "thank you" and shook her hand. "It was such an historic occasion," she said.

Dr Nixon has provided music for 11,000 services and worked with more than 500 men and boy choristers. The longest-serving, at 40 years also, is her husband, Neville Finney.

Dr Nixon auditions all the choir boys - aged from nine to 14 - for about six places a year, and is conscious that it can change lives.

Each boy gets a scholarship to Trinity Grammar in Kew, and many could never otherwise have afforded private school fees.

In 1974, a Deer Park boy, son of German immigrant factory workers, joined the choir.

That boy, Siegfried Franke, is now an organist at St Paul's, and at Christ Church South Yarra, and teaches at Trinity Grammar.

"I started learning the organ from her when I was 12 at St Paul's, and went on to study music. She very much gave me my start in my career," Mr Franke said.

Other boy choir alumni include harpist Marshall McGuire, opera singer Joshua Bloom and David Ratnanayagam, an organist at Durham Cathedral in England.

Dr Nixon says retirement after decades of strict routine - nine choir rehearsals and at least six church services a week - will be an adjustment, but she will continue to teach, mentor and compose, to travel and spend more time with family.

"There is a certain relief about it, the thought of being able to do what I want to do, when I want to do it."