

A History of the Senior Choirs at First-St. Andrew's

From pictures in the archives, the two downtown churches of First Presbyterian and St. Andrew's Presbyterian had small choirs of about 15 members by 1850. In the mid 1880s choirs sat in the front pews. The "precenter" gave the note with a tuning fork and led the choir and congregation in hymns that were sung while seated. That changed in 1889 when it was "resolved that in future the congregation stand while singing instead of sitting as at present."

When Session refused a request by the Sabbath School teachers at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church for the use of the melodeon in Sunday School in 1869, the choir tendered their resignation! The matter appears to have been resolved, but an organ was not installed until 1888. Also in the late 1880s, First Presbyterian became the first Presbyterian church in Canada to use choir gowns. In 1890, Charles Wheeler came to St. Andrew's as organist and choir director and has been the longest serving director at 47 years. By 1902, the choir had grown to 23 women and 22 men.

In 1925, both First Presbyterian and St. Andrew's became United Churches. When they decided to amalgamate thirteen years later, both organists and choir directors left in order for the new First-St. Andrew's United Church (located in the old St. Andrew's) to start with a clean slate. Dr. Harvey Robb, an accomplished organist, was hired as the new director. The renovation for the amalgamated congregation created a chancel with choir pews facing each other in three rows on each side. During the renovation, the choir performed the Verdi *Requiem* twice. For both morning and evening services, the choir processed and recessed in new purple gowns and mortarboards. In 1963, Clark Wilson donated new wine-coloured gowns in

memory of his mother and the mortarboards, worn by the women, were replaced with tam-like hats.

Dr. Robb died in 1957 after 19 years of service and was replaced by 23 year-old Australian, Barrie Cabena who had a more eclectic choice of music. The choir had the unique opportunity of premiering many of his original compositions. For his first Christmas, the choir had the stimulating experience of singing Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*. During Mr. Cabena's 19-year tenure, a new Casavant organ was purchased and it and the choir were moved to the gallery. After extensive renovation to the organ, the choir took part in the Festival of Music, Art, and Drama in 1968 to celebrate the new organ. Although the years with Barrie Cabena were both fun and challenging, the sopranos and altos had a small revolt and the hats disappeared. Tim Zimmerman succeeded Barrie Cabena and stayed for two years. Those years were distinguished by brilliant organ playing and attention to liturgy.

In 1977 Alan Barthel came to FSA and in the next seven years produced ambitious concerts of interesting repertoire including works by Vaughan Williams and Durufle, Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass*, and premieres of several Canadian works. It was the era of Wintario grants and these funds enabled the hiring of large orchestras for concerts. During these years, the choir entered the Maclean-Hunter National Choir Competition, placing second in 1979 and first in 1980. In 1982, Alan Barthel organized a senior choir reunion to celebrate 150 years of choirs in the church. Choir members from past years were invited back to sing with the choir for the Sunday service and for a social time afterward. Additional projects that year included the production and sale of a choir record, Christmas cards, and Hasty Notes to

commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the church.

Paul Merritt arrived in 1984 and stayed until his retirement in 2016, making him the second longest-serving Director of Music with 32 years. He had a clear vision for the choir of mixing contemporary church music, particularly Canadian, with early and classical repertoire. He was committed to providing music for Sunday services that was of high quality and was appropriate for the theme of the service.

In addition to the music for Sunday services, the choir had the privilege of preparing concerts under Paul Merritt's leadership that ranged from Pergolesi (*Magnificat*) and Bach to Britten (*St. Nicolas*) and Leonard Bernstein (*Chichester Psalms*). The choir was challenged to sing in French, German, Hebrew, Italian, and Latin. Of significance has been the choir's connection with the English composer, John Rutter and his music. In 1986, he first came to FSA to conduct the London premiere of his *Requiem*, as well as coming three more times to conduct other concerts with the choir. The choir also had the opportunity of singing under visiting directors, Robert Cooper and Stephen Cleobury.

Another thrilling experience occurred in 2015 when the choir sang a concert of music by English composer, Will Todd, who accompanied the choir on the piano for his *Mass in Blue* and directed the choir for several of his other pieces. The choir had performed the London premiere of the *Mass in Blue* earlier in the year. In a very different vein, the choir did two concerts of opera music with the help of Professor Don Neville. Many of these concerts were accompanied by a professional orchestra which was made possible by the Friends of Music, a fund created in 1978

A History of the Senior Choirs at First-St. Andrew's

by Alan Barthel, that supports an annual concert series that includes the choir and other outstanding musical groups.

In 2008, the choir honoured Jean Comfort who, at age 90, had completed 70 years of singing in the choir. In the more recent years, she had served the choir as its librarian which required many hours of work for a 55-voice choir with a large repertoire of music. As a small token of the choir's appreciation, Rev. David McKane consecrated a plaque for the door of the choir room stating: The Jean Comfort Choir Room, In Appreciation for 70 Years of Faithful Service to the Senior Choir.

During the Merritt years, the choir was involved in outreach to the community by giving concerts dedicated to charitable causes such as the Salvation Army, Mothers and Children of Afghanistan, Habitat for Humanity, Gilbert and Sullivan for Mission and Service (G & S for M & S), and various cabarets for the Clark Wilson Music Apprentice and Eberhard Vocal Scholarship Funds. The choir also produced three CD's: *Favourite Hymns*, *Christmas Is Love*, and *Feelin' the Spirit* (spirituals, Gospel and jazz). For the church's 175th Anniversary in 2007, another choir reunion was held with many returning singers forming a massed choir of 80 who performed favourite anthems and premiered commissioned anthems by Canadian composers.

In 2016, Terry Head became the current Director of Music. His vision is to continue to develop the strengths of the choir by using the wonderful traditional music found in our extensive library, as well as using outstanding

contemporary compositions and promoting Canadian composers. His vision also includes future performances of major works such as *Elijah*, *The Creation* and others to pay homage to these great testaments of choral writing. His innovative programming included a concert of Canadian composers in honour of Canada's 150th Anniversary in 2017. Terry views the choir as the integral supporter of the congregational song by adding their voices to the hymn singing and performing meaningful anthems each week to support the liturgy. A diversity in the choir's repertoire keeps things fresh and interesting for both singers, congregation, and audience.

Over the many decades of the choir, the social aspect has been very important. The choir experience has been enriched with parties, humorous skits, and annual reports from the Amalgamated Sisterhood and Brotherhood of Choir Singers and Salt Mine Workers. Finally, singing in the choir is a way many people choose to express their faith: "Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart." (Ephesians 5:19)



350 Queens Ave. at Waterloo

519-679-8182 · www.fsaunited.com

A History of The Senior Choirs

at

First-St. Andrew's
UNITED CHURCH



350 Queens Ave. at Waterloo

519-679-8182 · www.fsaunited.com