

## **The Choristers History**

### **Beginning**

The Choristers began in 1977 when a group of eight Ursinus College graduates decided they missed the camaraderie of singing in a concert choir. By the following year, the choir had doubled in size and named itself The Choristers. Through 1984, the now 25 to 30 voice choir performed about 15 concerts per year of sacred anthems/motets appropriate to the season by invitation at area churches. Much of the music was a cappella. These years of frequent performing helped The Choristers develop its characteristic chamber sound which continues to this day.

In June 1983, the Artistic Director, David Spitko, took a sabbatical from the choir to serve as an unofficial assistant to Robert Carwithen at First Presbyterian in Germantown. It was there that he first directed an orchestra and was taught the basics of a more advanced musical program. David returned as Artistic Director in November 1984.

### **Early Years: 1985 to 1999**

The Choristers presented its first public concert in 1985 and performed with an orchestra for the first time in 1986 in a joint performance of Verdi's *Requiem* with the Oratorio Choir of Wayne Presbyterian in Wayne, PA. The first Executive Committee was elected, and by 1987 The Choristers began hiring its own orchestras and performing regularly at Upper Dublin Lutheran Church in Ambler, PA.

The mission of The Choristers includes offering performances of challenging and/or unjustly neglected choral works. The Choristers presented both well-known and more obscure works, sometimes with other area choirs. Performances included "Gloria" from the *B Minor Mass* by Bach, Rutter's *Magnificat*, Handel's *Messiah*, *Lord Nelson's Mass* by Haydn, *The Passion According to St. John* by Bach, Mozart's *Requiem*, *Frostiana* and *Testament to Freedom* by Randall Thompson, *Coronation Anthem No. 2 "The King Shall Rejoice"* by Handel, *Te Deum* by Haydn, Fauré's *Requiem*, Duruflé's *Quatre Motets Sur Des Themes Gregoriens*, *A German Requiem* by Brahms, and *Chichester Psalms* by Bernstein. A cappella performances included: *Mass in G Minor* by Vaughan Williams, *Songs from the Ark* by Ivor Davies, *Missa Papae Marcelli* by Palestrina, and Rachmaninoff's *All Night Vigil*.

During this time, The Choristers began hiring vocal and instrumental soloists. In 1992, the choir presented *The Passion According to St. Matthew* by Bach, with tenor Thomas Bogdan singing the role of the Evangelist. In 1997, Sophie Bruno, a well-known harpist in the Philadelphia area, joined the choir to perform *Ceremony of Carols* by Benjamin Britten. For its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert in 1999, the choir presented *To Hope! A Celebration* by Dave Brubeck.

### **2000 to 2009**

For the spring of the new millennium, the now 65-voice choir, accompanied by a 32-piece orchestra, presented a sold-out performance of Antonín Dvorák's *Stabat Mater* with a 32-piece orchestra. The next spring, at 70 voices, The Choristers successfully tackled Ludwig van Beethoven's monumental *Missa Solemnis*. In 2002, the choir presented selections from Duke Ellington's *Sacred Concerts*, accompanied by a big band made up of highly talented musicians from Philadelphia and New York. The soprano soloist for this concert, DeVonne Gardner, had the distinction of having presented more Sacred Concerts with Duke Ellington than any other soprano soloist. The atmosphere at the sold-out concert was electric.

In 2003, the choir presented Felix Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with a 34-piece orchestra, soloists Frank Mitchell (baritone), Maureen Francis (soprano), Alyson Harvey (alto), and Richard Slade (tenor), with a separate stage for costumed soloists allowing them to use props and add visual effects and movements to their roles. In 2007, The Choristers revisited Brahms' *A German Requiem*, this time performing the work entirely in German.

Other works performed by The Choristers in this period included Mozart's *Vesperae Solennes de Confessore, Requiem*, and, in a Philadelphia-area premiere, the Robert Levin edition of *Mass in C Minor*; Vaughan Williams' (wordless) *Flos Campi* with The Buxmont Chamber Orchestra; Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* with Ambler Symphony and the Wissahickon High School Camerata; Haydn's *Harmoniemesse*; Liszt's *Missa Choralis*; Antonín Dvorák's *Mass in D*; and Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*. Among more traditional Christmas concerts, the choir hosted two *Messiah* Sing-Ins, which were unusual in that the sections also sang the solo arias.

Continuing its mission of performing undeservedly obscure music, The Choristers also presented several less often performed pieces, including the opening chorus from Bach's *Cantata 190 (Singet dem Herrn)* and the entire *Cantata 191 (Gloria in excelsis Deo)*; Handel's *Utrecht Jubilate* and *Chandos Anthem #11 (Let God Arise)*; and Domenico Scarlatti's *Te gloriosus*. The fall 2004 concert, built around the concept of music for choir and organ, included Finzi's *God Is Gone Up*; Howells' *Like As The Hart*; Mathias's *Let The People Praise Thee, O God*; and Stanford's *Nunc Dimittis* from *Evening Service In C, Op 115*. In 2006, the choir performed a program of works celebrating the gifts and power of light including Lauridsen's *Lux Aeterna*.

The Choristers has held several benefit concerts featuring spirituals and gospel hymns for area charitable organizations. In September 2001, the choir performed Rutter's *Requiem* with less than two weeks' preparation to raise funds for the American Red Cross in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. The concert, including a volunteer orchestra, raised more than \$5,000 in a free will offering.

In 2008, The Choristers commissioned its first work: *The King of Peace* by area composer David Hobbs. The world premiere was performed on April 26, 2008, along with Randall Thompson's *Frostiana* and Rutter's *Mass of the Children*, with the Bel Canto children's choir.

For our 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary concert in 2009, we ended the decade as we began with Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. In Fall 2009 we performed Robert Ray's *Gospel Mass* accompanied by The Eric

Mintel Jazz Quartet featuring Rosella Washington, mezzo soprano and Warren Cooper, baritone.

### **2010 - 2019**

The Choristers created both an Endowment Fund (initially funded with a bequest from long-time choir member, Lindsey Robinson) and an Operating Reserve Fund. These funds continue to grow and will ensure the future of the Choristers by providing resources to hire an artistic director upon the founding director's retirement. We also hired Associate Director, Kelly Wyszomierski which allowed for expanded sectional work, coverage in the event the Collaborative Pianist or Artistic Director were unavailable, and overall collaboration with the Artistic Director.

In this decade, The Choristers revisited several works including Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, Dvorák's *Stabat Mater*, Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Mozart's *Mass in C Minor*, Bach's *Passion According to St. Matthew*, Brahms *Requiem* (for our 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary), and Mozart's *Requiem*.

We also included many contemporary composers in this decade. Highlights include:

- Jazz and blues selections from George Gershwin's opera *Porgy & Bess* which opened in October 1935 featuring an entire cast of classically trained African-American singers—a daring and visionary artistic choice at the time. The Choristers again contracted Rosella Washington (Soprano), Frank Mitchell (Baritone) and new to The Choristers, Taiwan Norris (tenor). This concert also featured Aaron Copland's *Old American Songs*.
- Vaughan Williams' *Dona Nobis Pacem*, written as a prayer for peace, and featuring Maureen Francis (soprano) and Ben Wager (bass).
- De Animals A Comin' with choral music all about animals, including Eric Whitacre's *Animal Crackers* and *Little Birds*, Davies' *Prayers From the Ark*, Barber's *The Monk and His Cat*, and Lennon/McCartney's *Blackbird*.
- Partnering again with local composer David Hobbs for the world premier of his work *Jubilate and Te Deum*, along with Bruckner's *Mass in E Minor*.
- Kile Smith's *Vespers* accompanied by Piffaro, the renaissance band. This was the marriage of new music by a living composer with the feel of the older renaissance style.
- Shades of Light with mezzo soprano, Suzanne DuPlantis including Lauridsens's *Lux Aeterna*, Ellington's *I'm Beginning To See The Light*, Whitacre's *Lux Aurumque*, and *Sunrise* by Ola Gjeilo.
- Another living composer, Carol Barnett's *The World Beloved: Bluegrass Mass*, accompanied by The Depue Brothers Band including fiddle, mandolin, guitar, banjo and string bass, with Carol Latimer (soprano), Emily Drummond (mezzo soprano) and Colin Doyle (tenor).
- Byrd's *Mass for Four Voices* composed in 1592 juxtaposed with Gjeilo's *Sunrise Mass* composed in 2012
- A commission for original music by Tom Hasani, *Persian Folk Songs* performed in Persian and premiered in Fall 2019.

## **Recent Years**

The global COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in early 2020 and caused The Choristers to pause in-person rehearsals and concerts. However, through Spring of 2021 The Choristers rehearsed virtually and created four virtual choir performances: the hymn *Unto Thee, O Lord*; the traditional Welsh *Lullaby for Christmas*, Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*, and Krichner's *Unclouded Day*. You can find them on YouTube.

We are coming together in Fall of 2021 with the expectation (subject to the pandemic) of performing our concert entitled *A Celebration of Black Composers* including works by Dawson, Burleigh, Carter, Dett, Powell, Hailstork, Ellington, Hogan and Ray.