

## *An Interview* by ELLEN PERKINS

WHEN RICHARD WAYNE DIRKSEN CAME TO WORK AS assistant organist at Washington Cathedral in February, 1942, he knew that he wouldn't be staying for long. The U.S. was in its seventh week of World War II and the draft was in full force. Except for the three-and-a-half years he spent in the Army during the war, though, his life and the lives of his wife and children have been intertwined with—both enriching and enriched by—the life of the growing cathedral.

Probably the first layman to be named precentor of a cathedral in the 400-year history of the Anglican Church, Wayne has served Washington Cathedral in a variety of positions since 1942. He has been assistant organist, associate organist and choirmaster, director of the St. Albans and National Cathedral School Glee Clubs, assistant musical director of the Cathedral Choral Society and director of the Advance Program. From 1978 until 1988 he served as both canon precentor and organist/choirmaster for the cathedral. Currently canon precentor and head of the cathedral's Worship Department, he is responsible for the planning of all the Consecration Year services.

In addition to his work at the cathedral, Wayne has kept busy composing music, teaching, directing, conducting and performing professionally as harpsichordist, pianist and organist. Among his numerous compositions are five operettas, an oratorio, many church pieces (forty-two published) extended works in free form and six hymns in the 1982 Hymnal.

Wayne and his wife Jo, who were high school sweethearts, met as seventh grade classmates in Freeport, Illinois and married in 1942. While he was directing the glee clubs they collaborated on three operettas. "Jo is a writer," he said, "and we work together very well. She wrote the librettos and I wrote the music and lyrics." Jo remembers that when she needed songs to advance the action of her stories, she would tell Wayne what she wanted the songs to say and he would put her ideas into music. "Sometimes I would say, 'make this a waltz' or 'this must be a tango!'"

All four of the Dirksen children were baptized in the cathedral and graduated from cathedral schools—sons Richard, Geoffrey and Mark from St. Albans and daughter, Laura, from National Cathedral School. Their eldest son, Richard, is the business manager at National Cathedral School and Cathedral Ringing Master.

**ELLEN PERKINS:** Music has been such an important part of your life—were your parents musicians?

**RICHARD WAYNE DIRKSEN:** My mother played the

*Cathedral Ase* Fall  
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# Richard Wayne Dirksen

*Canon Precentor Richard Wayne Dirksen.*

piano, and she was a very good singer for a church choir singer. There was a piano in the house for as long as I can remember. My father was an organ builder, so actually I was around pipe organs from the time I could hold keys. He was a marvelous, competent builder of anything, not just organs. He was quite an inspiration to me in every way.

**EP:** How did you come to Washington Cathedral?

**RWD:** In the Fall of 1941, I was beginning my second year at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. I was studying with Virgil Fox, one of the best known concert organists in the world. Paul Callaway, the cathedral's organist/choirmaster asked if he could audition two or three of Virgil's pupils to become an assistant here at the cathedral. That's how it was in December. Three of us had played for Paul at the Conservatory, and we were to be told in writing what our successes had been.

I went home for Christmas that year. It was a very somber December for everybody in America because, on December seventh, Japan had set the Americans right in the middle of the war. Instead of thinking about continuing education or jobs, I was thinking about when my draft number would come up.

When I got back to Baltimore there was a postcard from Paul Callaway. The last line said "I'd be glad to see you in Washington if you can come and be interviewed by the Dean." So, I went to work at the cathedral just before my twenty-first birthday, on February 1, 1942.

**EP:** What was the cathedral like when you arrived?

**RWD:** There was a lot of building already here. All of the crypt was done, foundations were in, the North Transept was completed, but its bosses not carved. The Crossing, as we know it, was there. There was no South Transept, but St. Mary's and St. John's Chapels were completed, and the Great Choir was as it looks now, but no marble paving had been laid on the rough concrete floors.

The choir room was exactly as it is to this very day. The first day I came to the choir rehearsal, I sat on the window ledge behind the piano, right where the piano is now, and watched Paul rehearse the boys.

**EP:** World War II interrupted things.

**RWD:** I enlisted in the Army in June, 1942, the day after I played my graduation recital at Peabody. I played at the cathedral and then went out to Walter Reed General Hospital. It was time to get involved. An hour later I had the uniform and was working as a private in the Army. For two-and-a-half years I was organist/choirmaster at Walter Reed and then I finally wound up in Europe in a special service company. While in that, I put together a four-man show which played all over northern Europe. That taste of show business over there was pretty successful, and I loved it. Come to think of it, I've been in it ever since.

**EP:** And when the war ended, what were your plans?

**RWD:** Jo and I were married when I was at Walter Reed and Rick came along right early. When I went

overseas Jo and Rick went back to Freeport to live with my parents. I went back to Illinois to be mustered out in October and was planning to enroll in college.

**EP:** What happened to change your plans?

**RWD:** The telephone rang in the first week of December. The interim organist at the cathedral was having difficulties and Paul Callaway was still with the Army in the Pacific. I was asked to come right away and I said, 'well, why not! Sure we'll be there!' So, we packed a couple of suitcases and came here.

**EP:** What happened when Paul Callaway returned?

**RWD:** When Paul got back after Easter, we decided to continue working together for a couple of months. We got along very well. At the height of his power, Paul Callaway was as good as any organist in the world. He was a marvelous choirmaster and a fine conductor. He founded the Cathedral Choral Society and built it to be the powerful institution it is today, and he founded the Opera Society of Washington. Paul was a great ambassador for the cathedral. My job was pulling together the inside—keeping things going here and, of course, doing the music in the schools.

**EP:** What type of programs did you do in the schools?

**RWD:** St. Albans and NCS had never been together in any activity until 1950, when I asked Bishop Dun's permission to have the boys and girls sing to-



*Canon Dirksen has served the cathedral in a variety of positions since 1942. Here in the early days with, l-r: Bishop Noble Powell, Organist and Choirmaster Paul Callaway and Dean Francis B. Sayre, Jr.*

gether. When I started leading the Glee Clubs here, what the heck, I was only twenty-six years old, so I still thought that I was as young as they were. We began to do some Mozart Masses and other classical music. We did a concert with symphony musicians, an operetta and a Christmas pageant each year. I wrote four Christmas pageants and five operettas, and conducted many concerts for them.

**EP:** How did you feel about giving up the glee clubs after eighteen years?

**RWD:** We had a great love affair, those glee clubs and myself. That was the hardest divorce. Such breaks come finally because life goes on and you're just adding stuff to the cake, putting more icing on



*Working to bring out the best in a young voice.*

and building it up, you know. But then you reach a certain stage and, although you're enjoying it all it's going to diminish because other things are going to come along. You have to make changes. Sometimes you make them because you just can't do one more thing. In '68, when the dean asked me if I would become precentor, I was then assistant organist and choirmaster, manager and assistant musical director of the Cathedral Choral Society, and director of the Advance Program. I knew there was no way I could do all those and the Glee Club at once. With greatest reluctance, I let the glee clubs go.

**EP:** Despite the fact that you've been extraordinarily busy, you seem to have a close relationship with your own children. How did you manage that?

*Directing, conducting and performing professionally have been part of the Dirksen career.*



**RWD:** Jo and I have been very, very fortunate in our four children, we feel. I think it's more their mother's doing than mine, and yet they all grew up doing what I was doing in a way. The boys all sang in the choir and Laura, Geoff and Rick sang in the glee clubs—when I was the director. Mark was only ten years old when I dropped that job so he missed part of the action there.

**EP:** What is your vision of the Cathedral now that it is almost complete?

**RWD:** The cathedral is its own marvelous example of aspiration, of dedication, of what can be accomplished when God is the inspiration. If I have any vision it is that it's simply to restate and reinforce the only possible reason for its existence: that is to inspire, to elevate, to uplift. And in so doing it ennobles the spirit, it enriches the lives of those who come to it, and pray in it, and worship in it, and share in it. What more should it be?

I do not gainsay, in any way, whatever a wise and spirited leader might want to do. It would mean all different kinds of programs could flow from it. But they will be, and must be, excellent programs. They must not be phony programs. They must not be for the self-aggrandizement of those who put them on. They must always reassure that God's work is being done in a quiet, rich, and willing way here.

**EP:** Have you any advice for people starting out today

**RWD:** You've only got one life to live, so for heaven's sake, build a cathedral. You don't have to build a Gothic cathedral. Build a cathedral of your life. Find that thing that you want and can do better than anybody else, that's good enough to offer to God, and share with all others. And, when you find that, you've got a cathedral.

I feel a lot of people have cathedrals. I meet artists and artisans who have cathedrals. I meet musicians who have cathedrals. I meet men like my father who have their own cathedral. There was nothing he couldn't build with his hands.

Most important, make of your life itself a "temple not built with hands" . . . make it, your life of giving to others, cathedral-like in dimension, and in authority, in richness and in loving, all embracing example.