



In January 1963, Dirksen, then associate organist and choirmaster, rehearses the Cathedral Choir of Boys with David Koehring, fellow of the College of Church Musicians.

Lift Up Your Hearts

Canon Precentor Emeritus Richard Wayne Dirksen (1921–2003)
Master Musician & Liturgical Impresario

BY MARGARET SHANNON

Oh that I had a thousand voices, a thousand ways to praise my God! “In these words a deep human longing is expressed,” Canon Precentor Richard Wayne Dirksen wrote in his 1974 introduction to *Music at Washington Cathedral*. “The grandeur and dimension [of cathedrals and temples] comprise thousands of such ‘voices,’ expressed in

stone, wood, iron and glass, and all combine in an architectural unity that becomes a symphony of eternal praise to Almighty God.”

“The worship and program of Washington Cathedral,” he further explained, “are as diverse in detail as the building itself. A unifying force in all that happens is the quality and variety of its musical resources and

repertoire.”

Truth be told, Dirksen himself was often that unifying force.

Organist & Choirmaster

He was born in Freeport, Illinois, the son of an organ builder. Early organ lessons with Dr. Hugh Price at the American Conservatory in Chicago led to advanced study with Virgil Fox at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore.

He was barely twenty years old when he became assistant organist of Washington National Cathedral in February 1942. But the day after he graduated *magna cum laude* from Peabody in June 1942, Dirksen enlisted in the Army. He was stationed at Walter Reed General Hospital and later served in the European Theatre of Operations.

In May 1946, Wayne Dirksen was reunited in the Cathedral music department with Paul Callaway, organist and choirmaster since 1939. They would work together for the next thirty-one years, training choir boys and men, playing and conducting music for thousands of services. When Callaway retired in 1977, Dirksen continued for another fourteen years as the Cathedral’s fourth organist and choirmaster.

Master Musician

A prodigious composer, Dirksen wrote more than 300 works—anthems, hymns, psalms, canons, and service music, and also descants for brass and trumpet fanfares, theatrical productions, and oratorios. The Hymnal 1982 includes six of his hymn tunes.

Paul Callaway performed every-

thing that Dirksen composed for the Cathedral. "Thus did I gain steady confidence," Dirksen said, "by quickly hearing what was satisfactory, and learning what was not as good."

From 1949 to 1969, Wayne Dirksen also directed the glee clubs of both St. Albans School and the National Cathedral School. He introduced them to the best in church music and delighted in their response to the operettas that he and his wife Joan created for them.

Dirksen sang in the inaugural performance of the Cathedral Choral Society on May 13, 1942. For its first thirty-five years, the society was an integral part of the Cathedral's music department. During twenty-six of those years, Dirksen served variously as rehearsal accompanist, assistant musical director, business manager, and interim music director.

Cathedral Choral Society Music Director Dr. J. Reilly Lewis reflected on the influence of his teacher and mentor. "He was a stickler for detail, but his defining characteristic was an unbounded enthusiasm for music combined with an irrepressible energy. He was also a great motivator, helped in no little measure by his physically commanding presence."

Over the course of a half-century, Dirksen oversaw several renovations of the great organ. Between 1973 and 1975, he directed a major enlargement of the organ, which prepared the instrument for the larger space of the completed Cathedral. At last, Dirksen had his "thousand voices" (10,250 to be exact) of this "merry organ" to praise God in a thousand ways.

Liturgical Impresario

Dirksen was a particularly able administrator. In 1964 he added to his growing list of responsibilities those of director of advance program. Under his leadership, the Cathedral inaugurated the annual Open House

and Summer Festival—now fixtures on the Cathedral's calendar.

Dirksen's extraordinary abilities were further recognized in 1982 when Dean Francis B. Sayre, Jr., named him Cathedral precentor—the first member of the laity to hold that liturgical office in the 400-year history of the Anglican Church. That same year, he was also made a Cathedral canon.

The citation for an honorary doctorate attests to his "boundless energy, abundant creativity, and uncompromising high standards." Indisputably, the ceremonial events surrounding the consecration of the completed Cathedral in September

at his home in Washington, was held at the Cathedral on August 26.

The Cathedral family and hundreds of musical colleagues from Washington and across America joined Dirksen's children—Richard, Geoffrey, Laura, and Mark—in the overflowing great choir.

The service replicated the one he had worked out in loving detail when Joan Shaw Dirksen, his collaborator and wife of 52 years, died in 1995.

The Rev. Dr. Francis H. Wade, rector of St. Alban's Episcopal Church, delivered a homily intended specifically for the assemblage of family, church musicians, clergy, and staff. "We who decide where

"A unifying force in all that happens is the quality and variety of its musical resources and repertoire."

—RICHARD WAYNE DIRKSEN

1990 stand as enduring testimony to the multifaceted talents of Canon Dirksen.

Influence of the Cathedral

Canon Dirksen told the Anglican Musicians last year that the vastness of the Cathedral itself was the strongest influence on his life and work. "Its magnitude and beauty offer endless inspiration to the artist and ennoble the richness of its worship and culture," he said. "An incomparable aesthetic paragon, it is unlimited in challenge for special gifts and service, ever inviting discerning attention and attracting excellence. Its essence is that of the Eternal and Mysterious Holy One, accessible to human aspiration. Therein lies its greatest power."

A Life Celebrated

A memorial service for Canon Dirksen, who died on July 26, 2003,

'Alleluias' go," Wade warned, "can easily be separated from the power of grace. We who put crosses on things and things on crosses can sometimes forget what crosses mean. Most of us have learned much from Wayne Dirksen over the years. Let us learn from him once again: There is a deep and wide difference between holy things and holiness."

The Dirksen hymns, chants, and anthems sung by members of the Cathedral Choirs of Men, Boys, and Girls included his much-loved memorial anthem, now his own valedictory: *Father, in thy gracious keeping, Leave we now thy servant sleeping.* ■■