



Dirksen in his role as precentor plans all the services and special events at the cathedral. "What will we do at this year's Open House?" he seems to be asking himself. Photo: Hushbeck

meet Richard Wayne Dirksen

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"There ought to be a center for the liturgical arts. That would mean music, dance, poetry, needlework—all of the things with which man surrounds himself and which he puts together to raise praise to God Almighty . . ."

At times Richard Wayne Dirksen waxes eloquent when he's asked to consider the future. The cathedral's lay precentor and organist-choirmaster has definite ideas about art, music, drama and worship as they meet at the proscenium-altar of a great Gothic building. He speaks from experience.

During the late-sixties and early-seventies Dirksen was Director of Advance Program at the cathedral. Ballerinas danced at the foot of the Pilgrim Steps, the harmonies of choir and orchestra soared with the vaulting. Plays evolved, and operas. Dirksen made the performing arts welcome at the cathedral and both the arts and the cathedral thrived.

He had come to the cathedral in 1942, while still finishing at Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory, as assistant organist-choirmaster under Paul Callaway. World War II intervened,

but he returned in 1945 and became associate organist-choirmaster in 1947. Three years later he took on the St. Albans Boys School Glee Club, melding it with the National Cathedral School Glee Club, and changed their repertoire from pop songfests to oratorios.

He stayed with the glee clubs for eighteen years, continuing as associate organist-choirmaster until 1964. Over the years he scored and conducted *Faith of our Fathers* for Washington, DC's 150th anniversary, directed the music for local productions at Olney Theater and Arena Stage, wrote an oratorio, *Jonah*, and composed *The Fiery Furnace* for the dedication of the cathedral's south transept in 1962. He and a friend began a modest recording business on the side, using a basement room full of second-hand equipment; a seven-record organ and harpsichord album won the French Grand Prix du Disque in 1951. He and his wife Jo created whole operettas for production at the cathedral schools.

By 1964, the year the Gloria in Excelsis Tower was to be dedicated, Dirksen had made his name. Beyond his skill as

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Fall 1978

a composer and musician, he was an able administrator—the highly structured and precise organization of music had conditioned him well. Dean Sayre placed him in charge of making all preparations for the tower dedication, which was a glowing success. The full-time job as Director of Advance Program followed.

During the years of Advance Program (1965-1976) the cathedral lived as it never had and more brightly and continuously than it has since. *Noye's Fludde*, *The Judas Tree*, Daniel Greenberg's *Play of Daniel* and *Play of Herod*, Gian Carlo Menotti's *Unicorn, Gorgon and the Manticore* and *The Egg* and *Martin's Lie* (the last two, world and American premieres, respectively). Ravi Shankar, Jose Limon, Leonard Bernstein conducting Haydn's *Mass in Time of War*, Dave Brubeck's *Light in the Wilderness* and *Gates of Justice*, John LaMontaine's *Novellis, Novellis, Shephardes Playe* and *Erode the Great* (the last two, commissioned especially for the cathedral) and Dirksen's own *Faustus*. Conferences on world hunger, death and dying, the charismatic movement, genetics.

Open House, now a joyously anticipated annual event, got its start under Advance Program. So did the Summer Festival, now in hiatus. During these years Dirksen also managed the Cathedral Choral Society and taught at the College of Church Musicians until lack of funding forced it to close down in 1968. In 1969 Dirksen took on the coordination of the regular program of worship, as well as special events, when he became lay precentor for the first time. He is the first and only layman in the Anglican communion to hold the post.

Last year, when the cathedral's financial plight forced staff cutbacks and it was decided that one member of the clergy should be among those let go, Canon Jeffrey Cave left the office of precentor which he had inherited from Dirksen. Dirksen resumed the post and later added the duties of organist-choirmaster upon the retirement of Paul Callaway. The workload, even during lean times when special events are more infrequent, is onerous.

"Schedules have to be made for everything," he says,

As organist-choirmaster Dirksen plays the organ and conducts the choir for Sunday services in the cathedral. Photo: Hushbeck



As pianist and composer—as well as conductor and choirmaster—Dirksen is at home with many musical instruments. A cascade of notes pouring through the halls of the office building signal that he is at the grand piano in the music room doing his daily exercises. Photo: Hushbeck

relaxing on the porch of his house on Garfield Street, "from the smallest baptism or intercession to visiting choirs to full festival eucharists."

But the amount of work to be done has never daunted Wayne Dirksen. Whatever the cathedral has needed in the past, he has been ready and willing to provide. Someday, when the cathedral is complete and free of debt, there will be more to do. There will be, he is sure, a Center for the Liturgical Arts at the cathedral.

"... a place where all the seminal ideas in the arts could be brought together at the stage where they really need to come into contact with the cathedral, with a sounding board that is vastly bigger, physically and spiritually, than any stage they have known. The program should be endowed, so it could comfortably afford to take chances without worrying about ticket sales, always open, reaching out for new modes of expression, on the cutting, experimental edge of religious experience, letting it *show forth*."

"It certainly doesn't have to be outré or avant garde. Sometimes the cutting edges are rediscovered all over again in old things, and of course the cathedral has a lot of old things and *should* have a lot of traditions. That's what cathedrals are for. The perpetuation of the boy choir tradition, one would think, would be the highest priority ever for a place such as this.

"And there needs to be a balance: worship, ministry, regular music program, outreach program in terms of the College of Preachers or the kind of social investigation that Canon Hamilton carries on. But I still have the feeling that the greatest communication in the world takes place among people in the dances they dance, in the songs they sing, in the legends they tell and in the many ways that they seek to worship God. It's in that seeking, that worship, that goes on in all men, that the greatest possible understanding must be brought." ✠

