

*Remarks by Craig Windham at the Dinner honoring Richard Wayne Dirksen
Association of Anglican Musicians, Region III Conference, February 17, 2002
St. Albans School, Washington, D.C.*

I have admired and respected Wayne Dirksen for most of my life. You all know him through the vibrancy and beauty of his music, and most of you know him as a friend or professional colleague. But I want to give you the perspective of someone who sang under Wayne's direction as a boy for four years and an adult for more than a decade in the Cathedral Choir. As a result of that tenure, I have many good friends who are former choristers. A number of them have contributed to my remarks. And that's as it should be, because Wayne and his music have profoundly affected our lives.

One of my friends, Seth Long, was a treble soloist in the choir about 10 years ago. He is now an investment banker in New York. He had tried to describe to his girlfriend how important the choir had been in his life, to no avail. She heard him out but didn't really understand. One warm summer evening, the three of us were standing outside St. Thomas church in Manhattan. Seth and I struck up an impromptu rendition of some of our Dirksen favorites: hymns, snatches of anthems, and that famous syncopation: *Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin*. After listening to our shaky singing and seeing the joy on our faces, she smiled and said, "Now I get it." I hope you will get a similar sense from my words of what has made Wayne so special to his flock of singers.

As an elementary school-age boy in the junior choir, the Cathedral and its music were strangely new and somewhat overwhelming to me. Wayne led the junior choir then, and he seemed larger than life to us: tall, imposing, and fiery, with that wild shock of hair. When he really got swept up in his conducting, the sleeves of his white cotta would fly up, making him look like a large eagle flapping his wings. Sometimes he would halt a

rehearsal to glare at a chorister who had made a careless mistake. But Wayne's bemused expression made us wonder whether he was going to berate the boy or burst out laughing. He kept us wondering, and that kept us on our toes.

The junior choir sings in Bethlehem Chapel. During the sermon, Wayne would sit between the two sides and angle his head carefully so the light would shine on his glasses, and we couldn't see his eyes. He may have been napping, but each of us believed he was staring directly at us, so we didn't dare misbehave.

Even when we were that young, Wayne impressed us with how much he loved music, and he planted the seeds of that love in us. He was passionate about music as worship. He wanted us choirboys to understand what an honor it was to sing in the cathedral, and how much our music-making could transform us. And transform us it did.

The transition to the senior choir was like stepping into the big leagues. In August of my first year, the choir went on a road trip to Detroit to sing at the opening of general convention of the Episcopal Church. The scene was to be a packed concert hall, televised live. It was a big deal to us, and we were full of nervous energy. That afternoon when we checked into our rooms at the YMCA, there were fruit baskets waiting for us. To blow off steam, a couple of guys opened windows and tossed apples and oranges down to the street below, barely missing the limousine of the Mayor of Detroit, who had come to welcome us. Wayne warned that if there were any further shenanigans, those responsible would be locked in a room with his dirty socks.

By evening, after a long wait for our time onstage, we were uptight. Wayne and Paul Callaway had plenty of details to attend to, but Wayne noticed how tightly wound we were, so he led a group of us outside for a walk along the Detroit River. The air was

cool and invigorating. He told a couple of jokes to put us at ease, he gave us some pointers on relaxing, and he told us how confident he was we would sing well. A small moment, perhaps, but one I will never forget. Because in an age where many adults see kids as an expendable nuisance, we knew that he cared--that he was genuine. That he *genuinely* cared. And that meant the world to us.

As a postscript, the next morning, when we came down to breakfast at the Y, Wayne was sitting at an upright piano, with a cigarette dangling from his lips, Bogart-style, improvising jazz. Not only was he genuine, but he also was--and is--cool.

And so was his whole family. In a school like St. Albans, where so many of our classmates and their families were concerned with status and wealth, the Dirksens were clearly not wealthy and cared much more about music, the Cathedral, the artistic life, and each other. Even their cars had character: One was nicknamed "the Crud Palace." Wayne has been known to enjoy a good game of poker, a cold glass of beer, and a good story or two. He once even composed a piece for someone who promised him a case of Wild Turkey. Wayne is a person who has always relished life and lived it to the fullest.

Wayne and his beloved wife, Jo, were a perfect match. They collaborated on a number of operettas for the St. Albans and NCS glee clubs, with names like "Houseboat on the Styx" and "Tularosa." Many of his works for church settings also have a dramatic flair, because Wayne is definitely a showman. He had an opportunity at one point to steer his career toward Broadway, but he declined. And he once told me he never regretted that decision. As one of my best friends from my choir days, Tim Groves, sums it up: Wayne is a man with a bottomless reservoir of talent who chose very intentionally to dedicate

himself to being a first-rate choir director and an extraordinary composer with a focus on glorifying God rather than becoming a commercial success in the secular world.

There was always a special thrill when Wayne conducted the Cathedral Choir. He challenged us. He pushed us. He inspired us. He was passionate about music, and we got caught up in the excitement and the emotion of his creativity. We were along for the ride-and we loved it. Because he gave music his all, he was able to draw out of us more than we knew we had to give.

During the recording of the Noel CD, we got bogged down on one piece. We had done numerous takes, but they were always torpedoed by page-turning noise or stupid mistakes. It was late at night, and we were all tired and cranky. Wayne reached down and some how got us revved up one more time. The next take went so well that he seemed transported by the music. But he got a little carried away and inadvertently blurted out a couple words as he followed along with us. The director said: "Cut!" And we all burst out laughing.

Maybe the best way to convey what it was like to sing for Wayne is to give you a taste of him at work. On June 2nd 1988, Wayne led his last full choir rehearsal as Organist Choirmaster of the Cathedral. I happen to have a tape recording of that rehearsal. Here are a couple of excerpts of Wayne working with the choir as we practiced his piece "Seek the Lord." [Tape]

A couple of years after he stepped down as Choirmaster, Wayne's successor, Doug Major was sick one Sunday. Apparently no one else was available to fill in, so Wayne was pressed into service. It was fun watching the boys try to size him up: They had sung his music but never seen him in action. Wayne was like a professional race car

driver getting back behind the wheel after a long hiatus. He was conservative for a few laps, then he eased down on the accelerator and put the car through its paces. By the time we sang in the service, he was in his full glory, raising the choir up beyond itself once again. When the offertory ended, two of the boys in front of me glanced at each other, and one of them mouthed the word "Wow!"

Every Christmas, Cathedral choristers past and present get together to go caroling. We usually visit hospitals and nursing homes in the area. It has been a tradition for more than 20 years. In 1995, I took a group to Wayne's house for a surprise visit. Among them were several Cathedral trebles who had never met him, plus several former choristers of all ages. We crowded into his living room and serenaded him. Then we asked Wayne if he would conduct us in "A Child My Choice." Even in that small room, the magic was there: the connection, the continuity, the love. As I looked around at the faces, I was deeply moved. And to this day, the others who were there tell me they were, too.

For those of us who as boys were fortunate enough to sing for Wayne, we had an experience of excellence that is all too rare in the lives of young people. But there was something more: On Wayne's watch, the Cathedral Choir not only made beautiful music, but it also had heart, and it had soul--qualities that I hope will be renewed and reinforced by the next cathedral choirmaster.

The privilege of singing for Wayne and savoring his music has been one of the great blessings of my life. I know that scores of other former choristers would agree. His passion and creativity inspired us and nurtured our spiritual formation. But most of all, singing under Wayne's leadership was a wonderful adventure--one that gave us a vivid glimpse of God's grandeur.