



Richard Wayne Dirksen

In the nearly 40 years since he arrived at the Washington Cathedral from Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory, Richard Wayne Dirksen has achieved national recognition as a composer, conductor, impresario, and performer. He has written, solely or in collaboration, works ranging from massive, serious choral pieces (*Jonah*, *The Fiery Furnace*) to light operettas (*Tularosa*, *Houseboat on the Styx*, *The Flamingo Hat*, *The Rose and the Ring*). Celebrating the 1975-76 Bicentennial, he directed a festival of music and performances which brought to the Cathedral an unparalleled mix—diverse talents ranging from Giancarlo Menotti and Leonard Bernstein to Ravi Shankar, Jose Limon, and Dave Brubeck. He has directed the Cathedral Choir and the Cathedral Choral Society, taught at the College of Church Musicians, and served as lay precentor for the Cathedral (the first layman in the Anglican communion to hold that post).

To me, as to more than a generation of St. Albans boys, Wayne Dirksen was the guide out of primordial tonelessness. For two decades he was the developer of raw musical talent on the Cathedral Close. He trained 8-to-11-year-old aspirants to the Cathedral Choir in the junior choir. And he educated adolescents of both sexes in the pleasures of good choral music in the St. Albans and NCS Glee Clubs. In the junior choir, he developed a steady stream of enthusiastic but disciplined entrants to one of the world's great choirs. In the glee club, he overcame the liabilities of still-changing voices and the barely controllable distractions of one of the few sanctioned coeducational activities on the Close to install in rank amateurs an enduring love of music and elicit from them a quality of performance that frequently overshadowed later college efforts.

Mr. Dirksen projected his musical knowledge by a combination of sheer physical intensity and vigor. His six-foot, three-inch frame seemed ten feet high as he stood on a podium over a choir room full of small boys. His face, capped by a shock of wavy coal-black hair, was animated and often flushed with excitement or frustration. Mr. Dirksen was constantly in motion, hands, arms, and head always moving, often singing along himself to show the way through a tough passage. He glowered at the boys, flirted with the girls. He alternately insulted, implored, and, when a piece finally went right, praised. Sometimes he simply tilted his head back, closed his eyes' and smiled, looking happy and exhausted. He made singing fun. He inspired loyalty.

I came to see these qualities as a member of the junior choir and the glee club. But I saw them best while in the Cathedral Choir. There, as Associate Choirmaster, his enthusiasm and energy complemented perfectly the measured discipline of Paul Callaway, the Choirmaster. Never have I known two so profoundly different men—Dirksen the vibrant, emotive, creative giant, Callaway the controlled, taut, almost reclusive perfectionist barely five feet tall—to work in such efficient combination. I have occasionally wondered whether the discipline that made the Choir great could have been sustained in young boys without the leavening influences and occasional flamboyance of Wayne Dirksen. He played clear, strong musical lines on the Cathedral's great organ, and favored brass and other bright-sounding stops. He improvised brilliantly. Callaway, by contrast, preferred subtler musical lines and stops; he was a truly competent improviser but did not seek opportunities for it. Dirksen is believed to have pioneered, and certainly participated in, the hallowed and practical custom on hot summer Sundays of wearing nothing under his purple cassock but his jockey shorts. Friday nights after rehearsals, he would chat with choir boys as though they were real people. He played touch football and softball with us during the breaks between the Sunday morning service and evensong. For years, he and Mr. Callaway took the choir boys to Griffith Stadium annually to see the Washington Senators play. Mr. Callaway always looked mildly bemused by it all; Mr. Dirksen saw to it that every boy was plentifully supplied with hot dogs, then cheered and jeered himself hoarse. Later, he began an annual chili-and-softball picnic at his home in Bethesda, where the main event was a day-long softball game that always seemed, to everyone's delight, to last a hundred innings.

Wayne Dirksen is a man of great and diverse talents and powerful personality. Others of his standing in the musical world might well have disdained the burden of teaching class after class the fundamentals of good singing and a respect for the rich traditions of choral music. Wayne Dirksen was willing to do both, and St. Albans has been enriched by his presence.

— Donald Irwin, '61