

## **The Life of a Choirboy**

by Jonathan Rickert, St. Albans '55

As Lower School Head Alfred True once noted, “from the beginning the Choir has been a strong and wholesome element in the School.” During the late 1940s and early 1950s, choirboys came from varied backgrounds: fellow choristers’ parents included educators, civil servants, military officers, a D.C. policeman, and single mothers. What we all shared was previous experience under Wayne Dirksen in the junior choir (the Cathedral’s “farm system”), a growing love of sacred music, and loyalty to St. Albans School.

Starting out in the senior choir was a jolt. The first major work that my brother Phil '56 and I encountered as choirboys, in the fall of 1947, was a challenging mass by early English composer William Byrd. This was a difficult piece for us neophytes, and mastering it introduced us bluntly to the choirmaster, Paul Callaway, a highly skilled, dedicated musician and strict disciplinarian. Through relentless repetition and constant correction, he pounded into our resistant skulls what we disdainfully (and misguidedly) dubbed the “Byrd mess.” It was an appropriate launch into our Cathedral singing careers.

A choirboy’s life was full and demanding. While following the same curriculum as other Lower Schoolers, many of us were placed in separate “Choir Forms.” This arrangement facilitated our attendance at the hour-long choir practices each morning, plus evensong services Tuesday through Thursday. The full choir of boys and men practiced together for two or three hours on Friday evenings, while rehearsals and two services every Sunday filled most of that day. Thus, in addition to the time devoted to our studies, sports, and other school activities, we spent at least fifteen hours a week in the Cathedral.

Despite the heavy schedule, we choirboys managed to enjoy ourselves in a variety of ways, some of them unsanctioned. Before and after rehearsals we often played softball games in the cramped, irregular space between the choir room and the north transept – all nearby windows were protected with wire netting – and learned to play balls hit off the walls like expert left fielders at Boston’s Fenway Park. Touch football games, another favorite, took place in the same area or anywhere else nearby that was reasonably free of trees or flying buttresses. Some activities were less positive, however. Once a gang of us hid behind the stone wall along Woodley Road and pelted snowballs at passing cars and a truck carrying large sheets of plate glass. The cars escaped unscathed, although the plate glass was not so lucky.

Highpoints of our year were the midnight Christmas Eve service, conducted almost entirely by candlelight, and the joyous Easter morning service, with Easter lilies everywhere. Although the Cathedral was less than half built, dignitaries such as President Truman, George Marshall, John Foster Dulles, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, and Ethiopian

Emperor Haile Selassie attended services in which we were honored to take part. A special memory for me personally was the choir's participation in my father's funeral, in November 1950, attended by family, friends, and many students and faculty from Western High School, where he was a teacher.

The choirboys respected, even feared, Mr. Callaway, but were pleased when Mr. Dirksen sometimes filled in for him. They made an effective bad cop/good cop team, and we learned much from both. Mr. Dirksen, however, had an impish twinkle in his eye and related better to the boys. I recall that once, as we were marching out from a sparsely attended weekday evensong service, his improvised recessional on the great organ morphed unexpectedly into loud strains from the familiar and stirring *William Tell Overture*, much to our delight.

When our voices changed and our days as sopranos ended, many of us, myself included, remained in the Upper School and at the Cathedral as crucifers or men's choir members, on reduced scholarships. With lighter Cathedral duties, former choirboys contributed significantly to the school and distinguished themselves as students, athletes, artists, Glee Club singers, prefects, vestrymen, etc. Although we had left the Choir, we retained lessons, experiences, and a love of music that have enriched our lives ever since. And all of us, I believe, are better, stronger people for our tutelage under Mr. Callaway and Mr. Dirksen.

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