

Former Choirboy Steve Rickert's Memories of Wayne Dirksen

Wayne Dirksen provided my first exposure to singing organized church music. Starting at the age of 8 in early 1951, I sang for 1 ½ years under his direction in the Cathedral Junior Choir. I happily remember his paying us little choirboys with crisp dollar bills.

After I joined the senior choir, he would sometimes substitute for choirmaster Paul Callaway. My clearest memory of him as an organist was the time at the end of a weekday evensong when, as a recessional, he surprised us by playing an excerpt from the William Tell Overture, which was used as the theme song for "The Lone Ranger" radio shows. We choirboys were thrilled.

I will never forget the music Wayne composed which we sang. The rat-a-tat quality of his anthem, "Christ Our Passover," along with Leo Sowerby's cantata, "Forsaken of Man," represented refreshingly modern contrasts to traditional Easter time music.

I sang for two years under Dirksen's direction with the St. Albans School Glee Club. The piece he composed which I remember best was "Jonah," a musical tone poem of sorts, which made us singers feel like we were inside the belly of a whale.

I still have two documents relating to Dirksen around the time of the completion of the Cathedral that was celebrated in 1990. One was an interview of him in which he said, "St. Albans and NCS had never been together in any activity until 1950, when I asked Bishop Dun 's permission to have the boys and girls sing together."

The interview features Dirksen's high praise for Senior Choir director Paul Callaway. I have kept a photo of Dirksen and Callaway taken by choirboy Greg Wise at the St. Albans School sundial. With Dirksen standing on slightly higher ground than Callaway, the picture emphasizes their height differential even more.

The other item is a program for a tribute to Mr. Dirksen entitled a "Massed Choirs Concert" on April 15, 1991, to benefit the restoration of the Bethlehem Chapel organ.

The singers included the Senior Choir, the Cathedral Choral Society, and the St. Albans and National Cathedral School Chorale. Some of Dirksen's compositions performed that day included "Christ Our Passover," his tender hymn, "Child My Choice," and fanfares. The latter must have displayed him making "a joyful noise unto the Lord" (Psalm 100).

In 1985, I returned to the Cathedral Close for my St. Albans 25th Class Reunion. I walked over to the choir rehearsal room and happened to catch Mr. Dirksen there. During our conversation, I told him that my favorite choir piece was "As Waves of a Storm-Swept Ocean," by Haydn, which contained the sort of fortissimo music Wayne often composed. He immediately went back to the black music boxes, fetched me a copy, and signed a characteristically thoughtful note on it.

In addition to Wayne Dirksen's great all-around musical prowess, I consider him to have been the epitome of a "choirboy's choirmaster" in the way he was so warm-hearted, throwing himself into the music and making it fun for us to sing for him.