

No teacher in my nine years at St. Albans influenced me as much as Richard Wayne Dirksen. I was not a star singer during my three years in the glee club, but the experience gave me, a mediocre student, a glimpse of what it meant to strive for excellence.

“Pay no attention to people who say you have to start at the bottom,” I remember him saying. “Start at the top. The pay is better there, and the hours are better, too.”

Dirksen challenged us with difficult pieces of music, and he resisted school authorities when other commitments prevented us from having enough time to rehearse. When we had an upcoming performance but a rehearsal's timing prevented us from riding the bus to an away baseball game, he told us to come in our uniforms and he would drive us to the opponents' field in time for the first pitch.

I had the privilege of singing in the chorus in a Handel oratorio and Verdi's Requiem in the National Cathedral, and then reading a review in the Washington Post the next morning. It was a transcendent experience for a confused teenage boy. I got a taste of international music with the *Missa Luba* and modern themes in Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde*.

And there were lighter moments. In 1966 I was in the cast of *Little Mary Sunshine* a brilliant operatic satire of old-time musicals with stout-hearted rangers and a kind-hearted heroine. And one day Dirksen had us sing a limerick that was so bad I think he must have been joking, or maybe testing us to see how many would notice how awful it was. I can find no reference to it on Google. But for some reason, I still remember the words:

There once was a terrier of Aberdeen
Who walked out in a cloak of black gabardine.
All the critics of style
Thought the fashion was vile,
That no terrier had ever the drabber been.

(Ed: It's from *A Sketchbook of Animals* by English composer Thomas Pitfield, 1903-1988)

The most memorable musical performance I sang in was *The Unicorn, the Gorgon and the Manticore* a ballet fable about conformity by Gian Carlo Menotti. It centers on a man who lived in a castle, “scorned the countess's parties,” “yawned at town meetings,” and “did not go to church on Sundays.” The man adopts as pets, in sequence, the three mythical creatures of the title, shocking the townsfolk, but soon they want the creatures too. The man appears to kill his pets, shocking the townsfolk even more, and they seek revenge on him.

The message was, to me, that it is okay, even trend-setting, to be a nonconformist.

Glee club was one of the few places where St. Albans boys saw girls from National Cathedral School, though they arrived and left at different times and sat on the other side of Dirksen and his piano. But during and after performances, there was some mingling. During one of these times, Dirksen's daughter Laura introduced me to a

classmate, who would become my first girlfriend. Who says extra-curricular activities are worthless?

Once, during a performance in the Cathedral conducted by Paul Callaway, Dirksen actually left the building to assist my father, who was having car trouble.

He was able to convey a deep seriousness in our choral endeavors, repeating passages until we got them right, and at the same time he found ways to make the experience fun. I'll never forget the lesson.

-- Nick Grabbe, St. Albans '67