



A HISTORY OF CHOIRS FIRST-ST. ANDREW'S UNITED CHURCH

From pictures in the archives, we know that by 1850 the two downtown churches of First Presbyterian and St. Andrew's Presbyterian had small choirs of about 15 members. In the middle 1880's, choirs sat in the front pews. The "precenter" gave the note with a tuning fork and led the choir and congregation in singing while seated. That changed in 1889 when it was "resolved that in future the congregation stand while singing instead of sitting as at present."



When Session refused a request by the Sabbath School teachers for use of a melodeon in Sunday School in 1869, the choir tendered their resignation! The matter appears to have been resolved, but an organ was not installed until 1888. The issue of choir gowns arose in the late 1800's. At that time, only the Anglicans wore gowns and surplices. First Presbyterian became the first Presbyterian Church in Canada to use gowns.

In 1890, Mr. Charles Wheeler came as organist and choir director to St. Andrew's and stayed for the next 47 years. A picture of the St. Andrew's choir at a picnic at Port Stanley in 1902 indicates that the social aspect of the choir was just as important then as it is in today's choir. At this time the choir had grown to 23 women and 22 men.

When First Presbyterian and St. Andrew's each became a United Church in 1925, they continued to worship separately. However, thirteen years later they decided to amalgamate, and both organists and choir directors left in order for the "new" First-St. Andrew's United Church (located in the old St. Andrew's) to start with a clean slate. Dr. Harvey Robb, an accomplished organist, came as the new director. The renovation for the new amalgamated congregation created a chancel with choir pews facing each other in three rows on each side. The choir processed and recessed for morning and evening services. When the church opened, the choir wore new purple gowns made of wool with gold cowls and mortarboard hats. In 1963, Clark Wilson donated new wine-coloured gowns in memory of his mother and the mortarboards, worn by the women, were replaced with tam-like hats.

The choir of the late 1930's and 1940's had an active social life: corn roasts in the fall at the Comfort farm and train rides to Port Stanley for June picnics. Although much of the music sung by the choir in this period was standard church fare and fairly traditional, the amalgamated choir did perform the Verdi *Requiem* twice while St. Andrew's was being renovated.

Dr. Robb died in 1957 after nineteen years of service, and 23 year-old Australian, Barrie Cabena, came. From the beginning, his choice of music was quite different and more eclectic. The choir also had the unique opportunity of performing many of his own compositions for the first time. He was very ambitious for the choir, and even for his first Christmas, the choir had the stimulating experience of preparing Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*.

During Mr. Cabena's tenure, the decision was made to improve the sound of the organ and choir by replacing the organ with a new Casavant and placing it in the gallery. In 1968 after extensive renovation, the new organ was installed and the choir moved to the back gallery. This was celebrated by the Festival of Music, Art and Drama. During the 19 years that Barrie Cabena was director, the choir sang challenging music, but enjoyed many social evenings of skits and fun. However, the sopranos and the altos had a small revolt and the hats disappeared.

Tim Zimmerman succeeded Barrie Cabena and stayed for two years. Those years were distinguished by brilliant organ playing, and attention to the liturgy. The long tradition of English church music was augmented by more repertoire from North America.

In 1977, Alan Barthel came and in the next seven years produced ambitious concerts of interesting repertoire including Vaughan Williams, Durufle, Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass*, and a number of Canadian premieres. It was the era of Wintario grants, and these funds enabled the hiring of large orchestras for concerts. During these years, the choir entered the Maclean-Hunter National Choir Competition, placing first in 1980 and second in 1979. The memories of choir members of that time are full of parties and laughter and even road trips. In 1982, Alan Barthel organized a Senior Choir Reunion to celebrate 150 years of choirs in the church. Members from past years were invited back to

join the choir for the Sunday service and a social time afterwards of food and reminiscences. Additional projects that year included the production and sale of a choir record, Christmas Cards and Hasty Notes to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the church.

Paul Merritt arrived in 1984 and, as of 2006, is the second longest-serving Director of Music (after Charles Wheeler's 47 years). He has had a clear vision for the choir of mixing contemporary church music, particularly Canadian, with early and classical repertoire. The main focus for the 22 years of Paul Merritt's leadership has been to provide music for Sunday services that is of high quality and appropriate to the theme of the service.

In addition to the music for Sunday services, the choir has had the privilege of preparing concerts ranging from Pergolesi and Bach to Britten and Leonard Bernstein. The choir has been challenged to sing in French, German, Hebrew, Italian and Latin. Of significance has been the choir's connection with the English composer, John Rutter and his music. In 1986, he first came to FSA to conduct the London premiere of his *Requiem*, an unforgettable experience. John Rutter came three more times and the choir also had the opportunity of singing under visiting directors, Robert Cooper and Stephen Cleobury. A highlight for the choir was the preparation by Prof. Don Neville of two concerts of opera music. Many of these concerts were accompanied by a professional orchestra. This was made possible by the Friends of Music, a fund that supports an annual concert series which includes the choir and other outstanding musical groups.



During these years, the choir has been involved in outreach to the community by giving concerts dedicated to charitable causes. These concerts have included the Salvation Army, Mothers and Children of Afghanistan (2002), Habitat for Humanity (2005), Gilbert and Sullivan for Mission and Service (G & S for M & S), and various cabarets for the Clark Wilson Music Apprentice and Eberhard Vocal Scholar Funds. The choir has also produced two CD's, *Hymns of Praise* and *Christmas is Love*. The proceeds from sales of these CD's went to the operating budget of the church.

It is interesting to speculate what has kept generations of singers singing in the choirs of First and St. Andrew's for 175 years. Certainly there is a camaraderie of being with people who value music of high quality. This camaraderie was enhanced by the establishment of the Amalgamated Sisterhood and Brotherhood of Choir Singers and Salt Mine Workers, which always made sure that management did not take advantage of its workers! The choir experience was also enriched by many humorous skits and presentations of the Lofty Choir Awards at the choir's Christmas and June parties. Finally, singing in the choir is a way many people choose to express their faith: "Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart." (Ephesians 5:19)



Celebrating 175 Years in 2007

Concert Repertoire Since 1984

1984	Te Deum Cantata 4 Five Mystical Songs	Mozart Bach Vaughan Williams
1985	Cantata 78 Coronation Anthems Missa Brevis in F Magnificat	Bach Handel Mozart Pergolesi
1986	King David (Robert Cooper, Guest Conductor) Requiem (John Rutter, Guest Conductor)	Honegger Rutter
1987	Music for a Royal Ceremony (Joint Concert with St. Paul's Cathedral Choir) Mass in G Solemn Vespers Magnificat	 Schubert Mozart Buxtehude
1988	Messiah, Parts II & III Rutter Christmas Concert (John Rutter, Guest Conductor)	Handel
1989	St. Nicolas Gloria (Joint Concert - St. Mary's Children's Choir)	Britten Rutter
1990	Requiem Rutter Christmas Concert (John Rutter, Guest Conductor)	Faure
1991	Requiem	Mozart
1992	Magnificat O Sing Unto the Lord Missa Brevis in D O Praise the Lord with One Consent (Stephen Cleobury, Guest Conductor)	Pergolasi Purcell Mozart Handel
1993	Iolanthe Requiem Chichester Psalms	Gilbert & Sullivan Durufle Bernstein
1994	The Company of Heaven	Britten
1995	Samson Dona Nobis Pacem	Handel Vaughan Williams
1996	Rejoice in the Lamb Jonah (Canadian Premiere)	Britten Mathias
1997	Mass in G Sprig of Thyme African Mass (Concert of Spirituals)	Schubert Rutter Luboff

1998	Five Mystical Songs	Vaughan Williams
1999	St. Nicolas An Evening of Hymns (Launch of <i>Hymns of Praise</i> CD)	Britten
2000	Requiem (John Rutter, Guest Conductor) Requiem Cantata 80	Rutter Faure Bach
2001	Benedicite	Carter
2002	Requiem Christmas Concert	Mozart
2003	Chichester Psalms Cantus Psalm 100 Songs and Sonnets Choral Works of Cabena (Happy Birthday Barrie Cabena Concert)	Bernstein Rutter Vaughan Williams Shearing
2004	Opera Gala Concert	
2005	Choral Works of Rutter (Happy Birthday John Rutter Concert) Messiah, Parts I & III (Concert with Symphony Hamilton)	Handel
2006	Opera Gala II (Scenes from La Traviata, La Cenerentula, Nabucco, Tales of Hoffman)	

First-St. Andrew's United Church
350 Queens Avenue
London, ON N6B 1X6
Tel: 519-679-8182
www.fsaunited.com