

Beyond The *Red* Door



MAKING A JOYFUL NOISE UNTO THE LORD

By E. Ray Walker

The recipe for a good church choir is pretty straightforward. Start with a soprano, blend in some alto, add a generous measure of tenor and a dollop of bass. Stand and project.

Presto, music! Not just music, but glorious, beautiful, joyful music. Amazing voices, how sweet the sound.

And so it is with St. Stephen's amazing Chancel Choir. Each Sunday, these musicians support and enhance the congregation's singing, bringing joy to all.

What is a choir? As Janet and Jamie Adams point out below, a choir ensemble is an organized group of people who sing together, making unified harmonious music. There may occasionally be a solo hymn, but that is rare. A choir is not Gladys Knight and the Pips.

What makes a choir great? St. Stephen's music director extraordinaire Wonhee Kang answers, "It is less about individual voices and more about listening — members adjusting to each other in real time, trusting the director, and caring about the text they're singing, not just the notes."

And the hardest role? "I'd say the section leaders — they have to hold their own line confidently while still blending, and often help newer singers find their footing mid-rehearsal."

Wonhee invited the choir members to offer their thoughts and perspectives from their singing experiences. Some accepted the invitation; here are their comments.

Janet Adams

For me, singing in St. Stephen's Chancel Choir is a calling coming from my love of God, love of music, and love of the congregation in which I serve.

I have a degree in choral music education, so my answers come from that and a lifetime of attending church and more than 55 years singing in small church choirs.

Anyone interested in singing and serving in a church choir should be welcomed, whether or not they have any training. It is up to the choirmaster to tap into, encourage and form a choral ensemble from any and all who show up to participate. We are praising God, not performing, so the quality is less important than the gift of praise.



The choir singing at our Tenebrae Service

Because we sing in a small volunteer choir, solos should be used sparingly. We are not a group of soloists with backup singers, but a choral ensemble.

It is hoped the choirmaster can form a vocal sound that praises God and draws the congregation into a deeper understanding and love of God in the larger context of a worship service.

Our most important service is to praise God in our singing together, next is to enhance our corporate worship. We may not always accomplish the goal that draws the congregation into a deeper love of God, but that should be our aim.



The choir processing down Davis St on Palm Sunday

Jamie Adams

A church choir is a task-focused organization with one task — to lead the congregation in worship. Greatness is primarily measured by how well the congregation thinks the choir is doing this task. A secondary measure of greatness is how well individual members of a choir think being in the choir contributes to their worship experience and overall happiness and well-being.

A great choir becomes an ensemble that is more than the sum of individual contributions. Indeed if the congregation can recognize individual voices in the ensemble, then the choir has room to improve.

A choir can be great without ever having solo singers. Solos have the potential to destroy the choir's sense of ensemble and shared purpose. Solos that showcase vocal abilities have the potential to take what the choir does and reduce it from worship leading to entertainment. If showcasing vocal abilities is desired, then it should be done in some other context besides the primary Sunday worship services.

I sang in my first choir in 1962 and, except for occasional summer breaks, I have been in a choral ensemble continuously since then. I have performed major choral works with the Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and National Symphony Orchestras as well as with several regional orchestras. I could go on :-)

Rolf Haugrud

I first showed up to St. Stephen's in March 2017 — uninvited — and, despite that I can't even carry a tune, I finally managed to pass an audition to sing in the Adult Sunday Choir four years later, chiefly out of sympathy. I perceive myself as window dressing within the choir.

I was raised by strict Lutheran parents in suburban Los Angeles and played the violin growing up, sawing away on J.S. Bach Partitas and the infamous "Chaconne in D Minor," much to the distress of a suffering neighbor.

My high school didn't have an orchestra; I took up the clarinet, which I was never very good at, but I passed an audition for an Army band. This was part of my exit strategy to leave Southern California in my rear-view mirror and earn my one-way ticket via the U.S. Army to West Germany.

Two days after high school graduation, I was in the Army. The 1977 Army was the post-Vietnam era Army, characterized by illiteracy and drug abuse.

Upon arriving in West Germany at the onset of 1978, my mentors and role models were drunken, drugged-out losers passing as Army sergeants. My 8th Infantry Division Band played the Beer Tent and Wine Festival circuit, punctuated by an occasional change-of-command ceremony. Our bandmaster, the product of a Vietnam battlefield commission, couldn't even read music, and this led to more than a few insurrection attempts.

After finishing my four-year commitment in June 1981, I fled the Army Band program forever and reclassified to military intelligence, from which I eventually retired after 35 years and three combat tours.



*The choir rehearsing for our
2023 Bishop visit under
previous choir director Craig Ames*



Lina Marengo Frank

I have had the blessing of singing with the choir since 2006, and for me, chorale music is simply another way to express my praise to God. Especially when I sing solo, it becomes a moment of personal prayer and thanksgiving.

From September through May, our choir lifts voices together each Sunday, drawing our congregation closer to God through the gift of music.

We are blessed to have an amazing music library at St. Stephen's, and I love seeing it put to use again, bringing back music our congregation knows and loves.

*Lina Frank & Michael Sherlin
singing at our "Lessons and Carols"
Christmas service*

INTERESTED IN JOINING?

The choir practices weekly on Wednesday night from 6:30 to 8 and every Sunday morning at 9:15 in the choir room. During the summer months, they meet only on Sunday mornings.

These summer months are an excellent opportunity for anyone curious about the choir to come any Sunday morning to try it out. Interested singers should contact Wonhee at musicdirector@ststephensculpeper.net.

CHANCEL AND OTHER CHURCH NOMENCLATURE

The “chancel” in “Chancel Choir” refers to the elevated area where the choir, organist, priest and acolytes sit.

The names of the various parts of an Episcopal church can be baffling to newcomers. A quick primer:

—Enter the church’s beloved front red door to a small room with stairs on each side. In a typical house, this room might be called a “foyer,” but in the Episcopal Church it is called the “narthex,” the entryway connecting the outside world to the interior worship space.

—Enter the main worship area from the narthex to the “nave,” the congregation’s sitting area. The word “nave” comes from the Latin *navis*, or “ship,” which was an early symbol of the church.

—Up front is an elevated area called the “chancel.” The chancel transitions people from the nave to the holiest spaces. Technically, the chancel reaches all the way to the wall, but ...

—Inside the chancel’s communion rail is the “sanctuary.” Housing the altar, the sanctuary is the most sacred part of the church.

—That little side room next to the sanctuary is called the “sacristy” or “vestry” room where altar hangings and linens, sacred vessels and liturgical books are kept until needed for use in worship.

Now you know.

‘THE CHORAL,’ A CRITIQUE

The acclaimed movie “The Choral” on Netflix is generating much critical attention.

A synopsis:

Set in 1916 during World War I, it follows a Yorkshire choral society recruiting young members as older men enlist. After losing most of their chorus members to the army, an ambitious committee hires a demanding, uncompromising new choirmaster, Dr. Henry Guthrie (Ralph Fiennes), who recently returned from Germany. The community attempts to stage Edward Elgar’s ‘The Dream of Gerontius,’ choosing a British piece to lift their spirits during wartime chaos.



The Summer Choir singing their anthem during our regular church service.



*Dr. Wonhee Kang DMIN
Music Director*

With her extensive experience as a music director, St. Stephen's music director Wonhee Kang has solid credentials to critique the film.

"My take on it is a bit different from a simple wartime drama. To me, it reads as a story about the therapeutic power of communal music-making — a village using the choir to hold its grief, its fear, and its hope for the men who didn't return, all at once. That society didn't just rehearse for a performance; they processed loss together through it. That is very much aligned with how I think about our own choir's work, even outside of wartime: singing together is never just about the notes, it's about a community regulating and healing together in real time."

5 (POSSIBLY) TRUE AND ACCURATE FACTS

According to Professor Google, the font of all knowledge:

—According to studies from the University of Oxford, singing in a choir lowers stress, boosts the immune system and increases social bonding.

—Studies show that choir members' heartbeats can synchronize simply by singing together in unison or harmony.

—The oldest surviving choral music dates back to Ancient Greece, including the *Delphic Hymns* from the 2nd century BC, which were carved in stone.

—The largest recorded gospel choir consisted of 21,262 participants, set by the Iglesia Ni Cristi (Church of Christ) at the Philippine Arena in the Philippines, on May 22, 2016.

—The Sistine Chapel Choir (known as the Pope's personal choir) is widely considered one of the oldest active choirs in the world, with roots tracing back to the 4th century under Pope Sylvester I.

A CORRECTION

Last month's *Beyond the Red Door* on St. Stephen's stained-glass windows contained an error. The article said that the stained-glass windows of St. John and St. Stephen are similar in that both saints are holding a quill pen and an open book. St. Stephen is holding a pen but not a book.

We regret the error.