

## **All God's Critters Got A Place In The Choir...(Bill Staines, 1979)**

### **Ministry of Music at Grace/Grace-Westminster (1882-1986)**

When I took over responsibility for our Music Library I was intrigued to find there up to 60 copies of each of such classics as Handel's Messiah and Samson, Mendelssohn's Elijah, Brahms' Requiem, Haydn's Creation, Mozart's Requiem, and more. Not all of the music was sacred; for example, Scenes from the Song of Hiawatha, a three-part cantata composed by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, was also there. There were also examples of Tonic Sol-Fa Notation translations of Handel's Samson, The Death of Minnehaha, and Schubert's, The Song of Miriam, presumably used by choir members who could not read music. Some examples of what I found are on the table here at the front of the sanctuary. Curious about all this, I read Bill and Mary Chapman's history of this church in search of clues about the music program.

Between 1882 and 1888, John Lake's Methodist Mission worshipped, first, in the open air, then in tents, in a sod stable, in Mrs. Dulmage's large, roomy kitchen, in Mrs. Grace Fletcher's comfortable front room, and in a number of other quaint locations. The Stone School, built in 1888 and located where Victoria School now stands, was used by the Mission for Sunday Worship services. By 1891, W. P. Bate, who lived near the Stone School, was the organist and choir leader. Land, purchased in 1884 at the corner of 10<sup>th</sup> Street and Eastlake Avenue, was used in 1892 to build the first church in the entire settlement, at which, by 1909, a Mr. A. S. Newcombe was being paid \$2.00 per Sunday to lead the choir. The larger Grace Methodist Church opened in 1910 at the same site, had an organ and, by 1914, an orchestra with at least 11 members, which played occasional special music during worship services but mostly for the hymns.

A major advance on these early musical efforts occurred in 1924 on the appointment of Peter Copeland as choir leader. Under his leadership, the choir took first place in the Province's Music Festivals in 1925 and 1926; in 1927, the choir took home the provincial Championship Shield and went on to national and international ventures. By then, the choir had about 40 members; by 1936, this had grown to 60 members, and there was a waiting list to get in. Obviously, Copeland's arrival sparked the purchase of the many copies of major works I mentioned earlier. None are dated but some have Copeland's signature in them, notably Mozart's Requiem, which was performed sometime between 1944 and 1949. We have some details of the performance from a written report at the time: "The Requiem was sung, first, on a Remembrance Sunday then, soon after, at a vesper service on Sunday afternoon. The entire program was another tribute to the Director, who has introduced so many new and difficult oratorios to the music lovers of Saskatoon." Clearly, it was Peter Copeland who initiated the formidable music program we have today.

Copeland's music program was further enhanced when another new Grace Methodist Church building opened in October, 1928, and our three-manual Casavant electric pipe organ was installed, designed by the internationally renowned organist, Lynnwood Farnam. But, the nineteen-thirties brought new challenges to church finances so that, in 1935, the music committee was asked "to effect economy in choir salaries, if possible." I don't know how many choir members were salaried, maybe just the organist and choir director, but even as late as 1985, one or two choir members were paid section leaders. Beginning in 1929, the Church also had a budget for radio broadcasting of regular church services, a practise suspended in 1931 for financial reasons but reinstated in 1938 for four services a year, a tradition continued into the late nineteen-fifties.

I couldn't discover exactly when Junior choirs began but there is a 1951 photograph in archival sources of a Junior Choir with 32 children, aged about 9-16, and their leader, Lloyd Rodwell. Junior choirs seemed to advance and recede during the next fifteen years or so but by the mid-sixties had disappeared altogether. However, in 1968, at the time of amalgamation of Grace and Westminster congregations, the new organist and choir director, Sheila Shinkewski (from Westminster Church) encouraged the formation of a junior choir, which has ebbed and flowed from that time to the present under various names, such as Grace-Westminstrels and Grace Notes.

Following the retirement of Peter Copeland in 1951, Harry Jones, who had been the organist since 1942, became choir director as well, a position he held until his retirement in 1965. He returned in 1971 until 1977. In 1978, the name Janet Wilson appears for the first time, for just six months, but Janet returned in 1986 and is now our longest-serving organist/choir director (32 years), beyond Harry Jones's 29 years, and Peter Copeland's 27 years.

There were other short-term organists/choir directors along the way but it has been our good fortune to have had three such long-serving, highly talented leaders as Peter Copeland, Harry Jones, and Janet Wilson, to provide the foundation for our reputation for worship through music. But, the long period of major classical choral contributions initiated by Copeland and sustained by Jones faded as, first radio, then music recording technologies, proliferated. Church choirs, increasingly, were replaced by universally accessible sources of major musical works such as oratorios.

During the years of Janet's tenure, the role of church choirs has, therefore, changed. No longer is it common to have major works performed like those named earlier. Worship services have become less formal, more relaxed. Concerts may involve major choir contributions but not the old classics except, maybe, limited excerpts. It is a testament to Janet's skill and willingness to embrace change that have led us to our present vibrant Ministry through Music, a reputation built on a long, storied tradition.

John King, November, 2017.