

The boys of St. Matthew's

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A dozen boys fan out in a wing-like pattern from a baby grand piano in the basement of St. Matthew's Anglican Church in the Glebe. Music director and organist Stephen Candow is urging them to use their diaphragm muscles to boost their sound.

"Now, you've got the notes," he instructs. "I want you to do it on a bigger scale." The young choristers respond and some achieve the exquisite sound Candow is seeking. Many of the boys are great singers and read music comfortably; others struggle to keep up. One keeps dropping his pencil.

The music director is teaching these eight-to-14-year olds to read scores, pronounce Latin words and master the complex rhythms of a challenging Elizabethan motet. He is also coaching them to work as a team.

Canadian Opera Company director Richard Bradshaw, who died suddenly last month, once observed that good choral training goes beyond teaching children to read music. "It teaches them how to think." The life skills learned in boys' choirs goes far beyond those passed on in school, he said. Born in England, Bradshaw was a paid organist by age 12. As he pointed out, many top singers -- classical and otherwise -- cut their teeth in church choirs, as did Handel, Bach and Mozart. It's no surprise that Bradshaw's son is now a chorister.

Scientific studies suggest that early music training has a profound influence on cognitive development. When St. Matthew's Anglican Church began to track down its former choristers for this year's 50th anniversary of the men and boys' choir, a pattern emerged. Many have achieved great success in music, literature, languages, broadcasting, sciences and the ministry.

The boys of St. Matthew's have made a difference.

And yet boys' choirs are rapidly becoming things of the past. Only a handful remain in Canada. It's a trend that concerns Candow, who was a boy chorister in his native Newfoundland.

He worries that losing this tradition will ultimately affect the quality of musicians -- singers or instrumentalists -- that Canada produces. At the moment, Canada's musicians box above their weight class internationally. But Candow wonders if we will maintain that edge if fewer children sing in choirs.

St. Matthew's follows an English choral model that involves regular practices, Sunday morning services, Evensong services and special concerts. This year, its boys sang in Mozart's Requiem, and will sing in Handel's Messiah and an anniversary concert featuring renowned baritone Gerald Finley, a former St. Matt's choir boy.

Now living in England, Finley first learned to sing at the church in Ottawa. At the Sept. 23 anniversary concert, he will sing world premières of works by Grammy winner composer/organist Paul Halley and Seventeen Voyces' founder Kevin Reeves -- both of whom are also former St. Matthew's choristers.

Halley says the English Cathedral tradition presupposes that eight-to-12-year-old boys are capable of singing some of the most vocally challenging and intellectually complex music ever written. "It demands a real commitment and honesty about working hard," says Halley, who moved to Halifax from Connecticut during the summer.

St. Matthew's men and boys' choir was formed by Gerald Wheeler, a British organist and musical director who came to Canada in 1956. Several months after his arrival, the women choir members of St. Matthew's then mixed choir were summarily dismissed so the creation of the male choir had a painful birth. Still, under Wheeler and his successors, the men and boys' choir grew to become one of the most important in Canada.

"The real ticket is that Gerald could evoke awe," says Ken Fisher, who sang in the men and boys' choir in the 1950s and '60s. "He had the capacity to pull out of the choir what he was looking for, an emotional statement within the context of what we were singing," he says. "When we achieved that, we knew something very moving had happened." Fisher calls the St. Matthew's choir of his time "a nexus for cultural expression." Children came from a variety of socio-economic and religious backgrounds, says the former community adviser. "We entered the 16th century and the 20th century (of choral music) simultaneously," he says.

A succession of top musical directors followed Wheeler, including Brian Law, Richard Dacey, Jeffrey Campbell, Jonathan Rennert, Andrew Teague (who created a separate women and girls' choir in 1990) and Matthew Larkin. Candow, whose music scholarships included studies in London and Dublin, came to St. Matthew's from St. John's, N.L., two years ago. He succeeded Christopher Argent, who died of cancer when he was barely 40.

Larkin, now musical director of Ottawa's Christ Church Cathedral, directed the choirs at St. Matthew's from 1995 to 2002. Early choral training improves a number of cognitive skills such as learning languages, reading and mathematics, says the noted organist and composer. In Ottawa, some children have serious trouble reading in either English or French, he says. "By learning to read music, they begin to recognize visual patterns and learn how to form proper vowel sounds," he says. "They also learn a numerical language similar to mathematics because music is like points on a graph." Equally important, he adds, is the esthetic enjoyment they derive from music and learning to work together. While teamwork can also be learned in sports (Larkin is a keen proponent of physical activity), it doesn't provide the opportunity to be artistically expressive within a group.

"I'm still friends with kids I sang with 30 years ago," says Larkin who grew up in Kingston. "It's rare that players on a midget hockey team will still be playing together 30 years later."

Who were these boys and where are they now?

Paul Halley

Then: Treble in boys' choir from 1961-'66, assistant organist in his teenage years.

Now: Four-time Grammy-Award-winning composer, conductor, pianist, harpsichordist and organist. Director of Music at Trinity Episcopal Church, Torrington, Connecticut. Moved to Halifax during the summer to become director of music at St. George's Anglican Church and King's College Chapel.

Most vivid memory: A two-week canoe trip to Algonquin Park with fellow choristers Kim Muma, John Proudfoot, Chris Johnstone, Michael Walley and Don Barber led by men's choir baritone Michel Landry. Kim injured his back running along slippery boulders. Landry and Chris carried the injured boy away on a hastily assembled stretcher, eventually flagging down a train for help. The three remaining 13-year-olds were left to fend for themselves. A thunderstorm came up as they solo-canoed across a lake and they saw a mystical glow in the distance caused by the emergency braking of the train.

"Camping in the park that night with no adult supervision was frightening, exciting and a life-defining experience," he says.

Career aspirations: "I knew by age 11 that I wanted to be a cathedral organist. However, I found the atmosphere at Cambridge too rarified and when I graduated in 1973, decided to teach English in Nigeria with CUSO (Canadian University Services Overseas)." (Political unrest made this impossible and Halley went to Jamaica to teach music instead.)

Choir's influence: "I can't think of anything that had an equivalent impact and not a day goes by when I don't reflect on the quality of education under St. Matthew's musical directors Gerald Wheeler and Brian Law. It was far deeper than my education at Cambridge."

Rev. James Beall

Then: Treble from 1956 to 1960, rising to Head Chorister. Tenor, then bass from 1960 to 1977 in the men's choir.

Now: Priest-in-charge, St. Mary the Virgin, Blackburn Hamlet; chaplain at Ottawa's Saint-Vincent Hospital and Elizabeth Bruyère Health Centre. From 1980 to 2005, Anglican minister in Richmond, Aylmer and then at St. Bartholemew's in Ottawa. Taught English at Lisgar High School before entering the ministry.

Best memory: "The choir camps were excellent for music training and sports. I remember the thrill of singing a solo in 'Once in Royal David's City' in the balcony at the back of the church. I was scared stiff, of course."

Worst memory: "I haven't any bad memories although my worst experiences were giving up Saturday afternoons to sing at weddings and Sunday mornings when other kids were going to cottages. I never threw up or fainted at midnight services like some of the other kids."

Career aspirations: "I wanted to be a sportscast announcer but preaching isn't far removed. I also wanted to be a bus driver and I still like driving buses."

Choir's influence: "The choir influenced my ability to read scriptures. Doing solos made public performances easier. It also introduced me to the liturgy of the church and beauty of worship. I don't think I missed my calling when I taught English. As head chorister I had to manage other kids." (See Tim Wynne-Jones' worst memory.)

Peter Mansbridge

Then: Sang in the boys' choir in 1963, voice indeterminate.

Now: Chief correspondent of CBC News, anchors CBC's flagship news program, The National, and host of CBC Newsworld's Mansbridge: One on One. Winner of 12 Gemini awards for broadcast journalism. Also served in the Royal Canadian Navy. Lives in Toronto.

Best memory: "The sound of singing within the choir used to amaze me. Some of the boys were truly outstanding. I was this little English boy with long hair -- one of those rare moments with hair -- so I looked the part of a chorister more than I sounded it. The choir director should have had me mouth the words."

Worst memory: "The realization that I wasn't going to make it as a singer. I moved over to filling up wine goblets for communion -- more of a solo role than part of a team."

Career aspirations: An underwater explorer.

Choir's influence: "I would love to be able to sing but I'm known for having no sense of tone and no musical abilities -- although ironically I'm now married to a woman (Cynthia Dale) who has all that."

Even my seven-year old son runs from me when he hears me sing. But it probably enhanced my appreciation of music and I enjoy listening to a good choir in church."

Of course despite his lack of musical abilities, Mansbridge does make money from his voice.

Tim Wynne-Jones

Then: Sang in the boys' choir as a treble from 1958 to 1963, becoming Head Boy.

Now: Two-time winner of the Governor-General's Award for children's literature as well as many other national and international awards. Books include *Rex Zero And the End of the World*, *The Maestro* and *Some of the Kinder Planets*. Wrote songs for Jim Hensen's *Fraggle Rock* and co-wrote the children's opera *A Midwinter Night's Dream* with the late Harry Somers. Still sings jazz and rock. Lives in Perth.

Best memory: "There were many, including a Christmas midnight mass broadcast on CBC when I sang a solo. On the other side of angelic, I remember a Sunday service that coincided with a Stanley Cup final. My ruff hid the chord from my transistor radio quite nicely. We had a way to pass information about the game. Raising the red anthem book meant that Montreal had scored and the psalter represented Toronto. The prayer book meant a penalty. Osborne (the rector) knew something was up but he couldn't figure it out."

Worst memory: "After a solemn procession around the church carrying a gigantic candle, a tall chorister (Jim Beall, who is now a minister) blew out the candle in my face (accidentally) and covered it and my hair with wax. The hair was the worst. I don't remember the details after that apart from the scalding pain."

Career aspirations: "I wanted to be an architect because I liked the idea of building daring houses that hung off cliffs. I did study architecture but failed miserably. If I had built anything it would have been very dangerous. It was a big loss to give it up but then I joined a rock band in Toronto before going on to study visual arts."

Choir's influence: "We learned how to work as a team and how to give our best efforts. You can learn these things in all types of way, including sports, but not at school. Music is the biggest inspiration in my life. There were moments in the choir of realizing that something extraordinary was happening, that we were in the

middle of a tremendous chord. You realized that you were part of this thing that was far bigger than you and that you were contributing to it."

David Sinclair

Then: Sang in boys' and then men's choir from 1956-64, first as a treble with an abrupt jump to bass.

Now: One of Canada's leading particle physicists. Director of the Sudbury Neutrino Observatory Laboratory and professor of particle physics at Carleton University.

Best memory: "Making friends in the choir. The choir was a social event and helped me socialize."

Worst memory: "I was never a very good singer. No one suggested that I should pursue a career in music."

Career aspirations: "I always leaned towards science and technology in part because my father was a paleontologist. (His father was also president of the Ottawa Choral Society.) I had a chemistry set when I was young but I didn't blow anything up."

Choir's influence: "The choir helped develop my liking of music and I particularly enjoy the type of music that the choir performed. It also helped develop self-confidence and performance skills. I am in a position where I get up and teach students."

Daniel Taylor

Then: From boy chorister to baritone and counter-tenor in men's choir, 1975 to 1986.

Now: Montreal-based internationally renowned counter-tenor just back from tours of Asia and the U.S. His 50 recordings include baroque and renaissance music and Bach cantatas. Has recorded with British actor Ralph Fiennes. Founder of Montreal's Theatre of Early Music, visiting professor at McGill University and patron of the Ottawa Bach Choir.

Best memory: "There were some wonderful moments at the (St. Matthew's Choir) summer camp including the highly competitive soccer and 'Crocker' games (I still hear the chant of the first team that I coached); a trip to St. John the Divine in New York; and the television recording I took part in with (then St. Matthew's music director) Richard Dacey directing the music."

Worst memory: "Richard announcing he was leaving with his family to return to England. Eyes cast down at the floor ... silence amongst the choir."

Career aspirations: "I didn't know then ... I don't know now ... "

Choir's influence: "Music has developed a 'sacred place' in my heart, in my life and in my work."

Tim McCoy

Then: Treble in boys' choir from 1975 to '79, later bass in men's choir. His brothers Jeremy and Matthew also sang in the choir.

Now: Cellist in the National Arts Centre Orchestra. (Jeremy is a much-recorded double-bass for the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, New York. Matthew is an organic farmer whose wife owns a restaurant and pub in Berwick, N.S., that showcases East Coast musicians.)

Best memory: "Choir-organized trips to Camp Buck-Eye near Parry Sound for two weeks of music, swimming, canoeing, skits, old movies and food on heaping platters. Cabins were inspected daily to ensure nothing was growing. We played 'Crocker,' an adulterated version of cricket using a slightly deflated soccer ball, milk crates and an over-sized bat."

Worst memory: "I got lost one day at Camp Buck-Eye playing 'Capture the Flag' when I ran into the woods late in the afternoon. I started to panic until I stumbled across train tracks that led to a road. When I ran back to camp with the flag, they didn't even know I was missing."

Career aspirations: "I started playing cello at age 6 on a quarter-sized instrument. In high school, I played in the Ottawa Symphony and Ottawa University Orchestra. I was a good student and could have gone into any field."

Choir's influence: "Singing definitely helped my ear and I tell my cello students to sing. It is a really beautiful experience and I always felt transformed by choral evensong. It enriched me in a musical way that I didn't realize at the time."

Kevin Reeves

Then: Treble in boys' choir and tenor in men's choir from 1967 to 1982. Also served twice as interim choir director.

Now: Renaissance man. He is the director of the Ottawa Regional Youth Choir and founder and musical director of Ottawa-based Seventeen Voyces, a superb chamber choir celebrating its 10th anniversary. Award-winning television drama and documentary producer and caricaturist. Has written two children's operas and is writing another based on the story of Grey Owl.

Best memory: "The most important for me was singing a solo

from Fauré's Requiem with the newly formed National Arts Centre Orchestra. Sir William McKie, a former organist from Westminster Abbey, played the organ. My whole body turned into pins and needles but when I sang I went into another world."

Worst memory: "Wondering why certain kids got promoted and I didn't."

Career aspirations: "Working in special effects in film."

Choir's influence: "It certainly set me on the path I'm still on. After all, I'm still having rehearsals of Seventeen Voyces at St. Matthew's. Being in the choir was the greatest influence in my life and a few others would say the same thing. Brian Law (music director at St. Matthew's from 1965 to '79) had a personality you wanted to sing for. He wasn't completely a tyrant. He was hilarious in his British way. We became a musical army."

Gerald Finley

Then: Treble in the boys' choir from 1970 to 1975, moving to bass in the men's choir until 1979.

Now: World-famous bass-baritone who lives in England. Has sung in the great opera houses of the world including the Metropolitan Opera in New York, Royal Opera Covent Garden in London and the Théâtre du Chatelet in Paris. On Sept. 23, he will sing in a concert at St. Matthew's Anglican Church as part of the men and boys' choirs' 50th anniversary reunion.

Worst memory: "In February 1975, while singing a soprano solo in Fauré's Requiem, my voice suddenly stopped. No sound came out. It was pretty traumatic. Within six months I was in the bass section."

Best memory: "The first time I sang in an opera when the L'Opéra du Québec came to Ottawa in 1971. Also singing with the choir in North of Superior (an early IMAX film screened at Ontario Place in 1971). And the choir's annual sleigh ride was the most wonderful opportunity to throw your fellow choristers off and get them soaking wet in the snow."

Career aspirations: To be a veterinarian. "I worked at the Experimental Farm and studied sciences focused on ... veterinary medicine at the University of Guelph. Experiences working on farms and the Experimental Farm made me realize the work was a lot dirtier than I'd thought -- not just small animals and urban pets. I turned down a science scholarship to Trinity at the University of Toronto."

Choir's influence: "It instilled a sense of professionalism, teamwork and discipline. I liked the drama of the church services -- full of ceremony and orderliness. It was like joining a big club -- and we got paid, of course."

Matthew White

Then: Sang in the boys' choir from 1981 to 1987 as a treble before joining the men's choir as a counter-tenor until 1991.

Now: Internationally acclaimed counter-tenor with a full schedule of concert and opera work and recording. Lives in Montreal.

Best memory: "I have fond memories of finally being asked to join the men of the choir on Friday nights for beer after practice. Being included in the adult ritual seemed, at the time, to mean that I was finally there -- a full-fledged adult. In reality, it was probably a way of making myself feel a little better about not being invited to cool parties."

Worst memory: "During an after-school rehearsal, I quietly used a very rude word under my breath when (then music director) Richard Dacey was admonishing me for something. It felt like the air been sucked out of the room and all the other boys sat waiting for the blast from the A-bomb that had just gone off. I remember the look of disbelief ... on Richard's face when he quietly said, "Get out and don't come back." Luckily for me, after a couple of months suspension and some serious punishment at home, I was allowed back in the choir."

"When I first joined the choir, I didn't enjoy it when the Head Boy flipped lit matches into my hair after lighting his cigarettes."

Career aspirations: "Being a singer was never on the radar and it still seems like it was a default career. I guess the good part is that I never had to make a decision."

Choir's influence: "I have many good memories and ones that are cringe-worthy. It was a great place to learn about the value of discipline and working in groups for a worthwhile endeavor, but it was more than that. Along with school and time at home, it was where I spent my childhood. From personal memories of shame and embarrassment for having behaved in a precocious or selfish way, to memories of real pride and a sense of accomplishment, I feel that my years at St. Matthew's were where I grew up."

Christopher Goddard

Then: Treble in boys' choir from 1995 to 2000, becoming Head Chorister and then tenor in men's choir.

Now: Composer in Residence for the McGill University choir. Twenty-year-old pianist in third year of a combined major in composition and music. Recently, the McGill choir performed Goddard's Three Psalms, an eight-part choral work he describes as "a tip of my hat to church choir days."

Best memory: "Ball hockey (played by the choristers before practice) because that's when you interact with the other kids. Also, our trip to New York City where we sang in Central Park and St. John the Divine Cathedral. I'd never been to a city that big, although we were held on a pretty short leash. I was excited because I bought a fake Rolex on the street for \$10. It died a couple of months later."

Worst memory: "Getting told off by Matthew Larkin (then music director). No one was safe at any point. He is pretty passionate and intimidating and had a way of pushing you away and bringing you back with his charisma. He instilled loyalty."

Career aspirations: "It was always going to be music."

Choir's influence: "It was a strong formative experience that required a huge commitment of time and dedication. I'm now studying with musicians and relatively few had that choral background. It influenced me musically, spiritually, and I learned about responsibility. It was my first leadership position."

Peter Nagy

Then: Chorister from 1968 to 1976, becoming Head Boy, then tenor in men's choir from 1976 to 1978.

Now: Montreal-based lawyer with Asia Pacific practice and experience in entertainment, construction and human rights law. Speaks eight languages including French, Finnish, Swedish, Greek, Mandarin and Japanese. Now learning Korean.

Best memory: "When I found out that I was chosen as Head Boy. Brian Law (then music director) was a great disciplinarian and favoured the stick, not the carrot, so it was an incredibly thrilling moment. Also, playing British Bulldog before practice. A player carries the ball and everyone jumps on him -- reminiscent of rugby but with no rules. I twisted my ankle a couple of times and was hit in the jaw but even if you had a bloody nose, Brian Law wouldn't let you skip rehearsal."

Worst memory: "Countless scoldings by Brian Law. He was extremely intimidating and as a result I was petrified of adults until my early 20s. It was hard for me to talk to an adult as an equal -- everyone was "'Sir' until I went to a kinder, gentler part of the world." (Nagy studied in Finland and Sweden).

Career ambitions: "To be a singer." Nagy supported himself through university in Helsinki and Gothenburg as well as McGill law school by singing in professional choruses. He still sings with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra chorus.

Choir's impact: "It was much more seminal than public school. I learned self-discipline. Before joining the choir I sat in front of the television all the time. Choir taught me to enjoy concentrating on work and even now all my free time is spent concentrating on languages. Most boys who studied with Brian could have become professional singers. It really was a music factory."

John Rayner

Then: Treble soloist in boys' choir and tenor in men's choir from 1951 to 1956. In the choir when it changed from a mixed choir to men's and boy's choir.

Now: Economist, treasurer of the Canadian Association of Rhodes Scholars, chairman of the board for Tradex Mutual Funds, a not-for-profit fund for the public sector. Assistant deputy minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1984 to '97.

Best memory: "I remember when (music director) Gerald Wheeler introduced us to plainsong, which helped the choir sing together in a quiet reverential tone. I also remember we were paid 50 cents a service and \$1.50 for weddings which always happened on Saturday afternoons."

Worst memory: "In my day, the church basement hadn't been completed and we used to go into a dark, dusty, cave-like space below the basement. I managed to stab my arm on a piece of board. It got infected and I had to confess what I had done to my mother. I still have a puncture scar."

Career aspirations: "I was very interested in entering the Anglican ministry and went to Bishop's University to study theology at age 16. After a few years I changed my mind and entered the Canadian Officer Training Corps for three years." (Later won a Rhodes Scholarship and studied at Oxford.)

Choir's influence: "It taught me an awful lot about music and diction. It must have been a jolly old shock for Gerald Wheeler (music director, 1956 to 1965) coming from England to hear the Ottawa Valley twang. I still remember how to say, 'Glo-rius.' My younger brother Mike was Head Boy in the choir because Wheeler recognized he was a natural leader." (Michael went on to become president of the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants and Comptroller General of Canada. He died in 2004.)

Leo Trottier

Then: Treble in the boys' choir and counter-tenor in men's choir from 1990 to 2001.

Now: Doctoral student in cognitive science at the University of California at San Diego, studying temporal dynamics in vision or how people perceive the world when moving their eyes. Recent recipient of a major three-year Natural Sciences & Engineering Research Council of Canada fellowship. Helped develop the cognitive science undergraduate program at the University of Toronto. Computer whiz.

Best memory: "I don't think I realized that it was fun at the time -- not in the social construct of being fun like 'cheering for your sports-team' sort of fun. But part of me realized that I was having a great time. I really enjoyed being Head Chorister and some of the concerts were tons of fun. And I remember when I was just starting, the sweet calmness and simplicity of waking up on Sunday mornings and walking reflectively to choir with my younger brother Giacomo."

Worst memory: "I had a habit of being late -- to the extent that I had nightmares about it. While I don't have any memories of being atrociously, terrifyingly late, I know it happened too many times. When I was 11 or 12 I forgot to bring my music to an informal concert and botched the entire thing. Although Matthew Larkin (then music director) said it went fine, I'm skeptical."

Career aspirations: "Almost certainly not a singer or a scientist but I had high hopes in general."

Choir's influence: "It definitely improved my musical ability and I became adept at sight-reading and vocal dexterity. It also gave me a lot of confidence or I wouldn't be where I am now. I always advocate early childhood music training for the development of other skills."