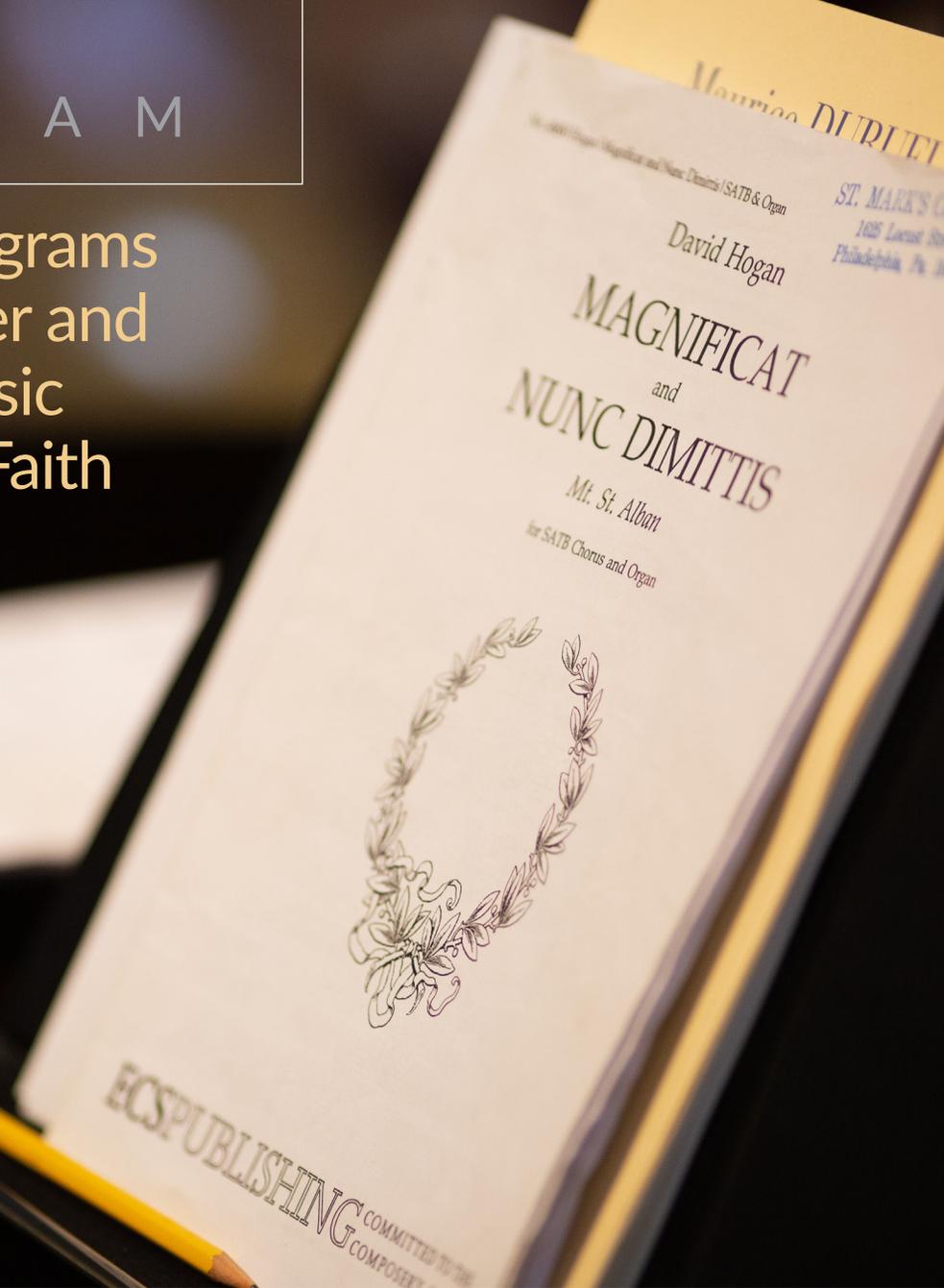


Chorister Programs Tap the Power and Joy of Music to Nurture Faith



Even as an infant, Stella Mische would sing herself to sleep at night, and wake up singing in the morning.

"We always used to say that for Stella, life was a song," says her mother, Barbara Mische.

Stella was baptized at St. Mark's Church in Philadelphia, as were her younger brother Elliott and sister Vivian. But like so many young families, Barbara Mische says, "Life got crazy, and we didn't come regularly."

Stella's love of singing, which continued to grow as she did, helped them find their way back.

St. Mark's Choir of Boys and Girls seemed like a perfect fit for Stella, and her family. "We were ready to engage in the life of the church a little bit more," Barbara says.

The Boys and Girls Choir has been nurtured by two wonderfully talented, accomplished, and dedicated professionals, both of whom are keeping alive the English choral tradition among children and youth in the Diocese of Pennsylvania.

The chorister program was started at St. Mark's in 2013 by Darryl Roland, who served at both St. Mark's and St. James School simultaneously before he was hired as Music Director and Artistic

Director of the Chorister Academy at Saint Peter's Church, Philadelphia, in 2015. The Chorister Academy, an affiliate of the Royal School of Church Music America, started in 1868 to train boys to sing in what was then St. Peter's Choir of Men and Boys. In recent decades, it has provided musical education and training at a professional level to girls and boys.

When Roland arrived at St. Peter's, he created an intergenerational choir, a tradition that can be traced back to the Middle Ages, with boys and girls from the after-school Chorister Academy program singing with adults for Sunday church services, concerts, and choir tours.

St. Mark's, which also is affiliated with Royal School of Church Music America, continues to have a separate Boys and Girls Choir that sings nearly every Sunday on their own and performs with the adult choir about once a month. Robert McCormick, who joined St. Mark's as Organist and Choirmaster in 2016, has grown the chorister program from about 14 students when he arrived to about 23 now, and it is a key part of St. Mark's Christian formation ministry.

Initially, Barbara Mische says, they chose the St. Mark's chorister program for Stella primarily because of its superb musical education and training, with Christian formation viewed as an added plus. "Over time, both aspects equalized," Barbara says.

Last year, after five years in the chorister program, Stella was confirmed at St. Mark's. "She didn't hesitate for a minute as a 12-year-old might," her mother says. "I think it's helped her develop into a lovely young woman."

Elliott, now 11, joined the chorister program the year after Stella, and Vivian, 8, joined last year. The family that sings together worships together. On family trips, Barbara says, her children often break out in song. And one of their favorite games is, "Guess That Hymn Number."

"It's really a part of who they've become," she says.

The same can be said of Barbara, who has engaged in the life of the church to the degree that she now serves on Vestry as accounting warden.

"It's not just about making something beautiful, as wonderful as that is," McCormick says of the chorister program. "It's about more than that. Seeing the power of music to form children in faith and really strengthen their faith and nurture them is something that I find remarkable."

As Roland puts it: "So the centuries-old tradition continues in the 21st century as a viable way to train young people to be involved in music and also to be involved in their formation." ▶



▲ St. Peter's choristers rehearse during Sing Philadelphia, a camp where they learn the fundamentals of choral singing and music theory.



“We believe that a Christ-like community—‘Love God, Love Your Neighbors’—is one of love for everyone.”

Saint Peter’s: Their Minds are Growing’

Darryl Roland recalls a Christmas concert “early in the game, when I started,” when he was working with a church in Evansville, Indiana. Since it was a formal concert, involving the complex Christmas portions of Handel’s Messiah, the young children from the choir were not performing with the adults.

But Roland noticed a young girl from the choir, probably about 7 years old, sitting with her parents in the audience. And she was singing along because she had heard the music during rehearsals.

He realized that “just being in the environment—hearing the tone, hearing the repertoire—it’s like osmosis.”

That lesson has been confirmed many times through the years since, and Roland sees it now in the intergenerational choir he started at St. Peter’s.

“We don’t view our choristers as a children’s choir, but rather as a treble section in the intergenerational choir of St. Peter’s Church,” Roland says. “We’re a choir of boys and girls, and men and women, who are singing as a single ensemble.

“What makes this kind of program unique or different is that you are intentionally, at the very beginning at age 7, training the child to sing on a professional level with an adult. That doesn’t mean that, at age 7 or a precocious 6-year-old, you’re throwing them into an 8-part Byrd motet. But from the very beginning, they sit with the choir on a regular basis and are involved in various degrees. When they’re sitting with the choir as a whole, even when they’re not singing, they’re assimilating and they’re hearing and their minds are growing.”

The fact that the chorister programs at both St. Peter’s and St. Mark’s are affiliated with the prestigious Royal School of Church Music (RSCM) is significant. Founded by Sir Sydney Nicholson in England in 1927, RSCM is an educational charity committed to promoting the study, practice, and improvement of music in Christian worship. Its original focus was primarily on the English choral tradition.

Today, the school’s work is far broader and more diverse, as well as more international and ecumenical, with more than 11,000 affiliates in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Nigeria, and throughout Europe.

RSCM America has more than 400 affiliates crossing denominational lines and the boundaries of nearly every state.

“You don’t have to be an Episcopal Church to be a member. You don’t even have to be a church. You can be a school,” Roland says. “It’s really about promoting good musical education to young people.”

The chorister programs at both St. Peter’s and St. Mark’s follow the same approach, welcoming children of all backgrounds and religious traditions, including none at all.



Sing Philadelphia spreads the joy of music.

"We're a community that strives toward being a Christ-like community. And we respect all faith traditions. We're quite upfront that you do not have to be Christian or Episcopalian. We believe that a Christ-like community—"Love God, Love Your Neighbors"—is one of love for everyone. So you are not going to be judged, you're not going to be pressured. You're going to be received as part of the community."

While adhering to the principles of the RSCM program, most affiliates adapt them to their own use. Roland is no exception. He employs what's known as the Kodály method, developed in Hungary in the mid-20th century, to introduce 7-year-olds to music and music theory, or written notation.

"It did not come out of the English tradition, but it is a very effective way of training

young people," Roland says. "It's sound followed by symbol. So you're getting them to hear certain intervals through folk songs and then to see it on the page so that they can hear what they see, as opposed to entirely teaching a child by rote – for example, playing it on piano or singing it and repeating it until they have it memorized. The Kodály method helps the singer to hear music and read it in their mind."

Roland uses Kodály songs as an integral part of the annual Sing Philadelphia summer camp that St. Peter's holds for the community. Under Roland's instruction, the week-long choir camp for boys and girls ages 7-12 teaches classical repertoire with special attention to breathing techniques, vowel formation and choral tone, sight singing and intonation, and music theory. ▶



▲ St. Peter's intergenerational choir processes into church; service inside; Roland directs the choir during the summer camp.



▲ St. Mark's Organist and Choirmaster Robert McCormick leads the after-school chorister rehearsal. Opposite: Children pay attention to McCormick's directions. ►

The camp, which drew 32 participants in 2019, has a tiered tuition program that can provide full or partial scholarships to ensure that children have equitable access to the exceptional music experience it offers—regardless of a family's financial resources. It also helps recruit children to the Chorister Academy program.

Fourteen of the 32 families with children attending this year's Sing Philadelphia expressed interest in the Chorister Academy. Of those, 11 are now members.

Roland's previous experience developing the award-winning Cathedral Choir School of Delaware and serving as its Artistic Director informs his thinking on the future of the chorister program at St. Peter's. The Cathedral Choir School, located in Wilmington, provides music training, leadership development, mentoring,

and academic support for children from underserved areas of Wilmington.

"Over 50 percent of choristers were from at-risk zip codes," he says. "We were able to expand the program with very significant academic support, with research-based mentoring and tutoring and homework help."

St. Peter's applied for and received a grant from Philadelphia's MENTOR Independence Region to establish a formal mentoring program this year. The first phase is to start a program that can accommodate children during the hours of the after-school program from 3-6 p.m., and expand its transportation help.

The Delaware program received national recognition, including a 2005 Coming Up Taller award, the nation's highest honor bestowed on after-school programs for

children and youth by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities and its partner agencies.

"A lot of people have the same vision here, and it will grow with good leadership, and also organically to what makes us unique," Roland says. "Choristers, in my experience, from every part of the demographic continuum, will say their experience is so much better because of the diversity."

St. Mark's: 'Nothing Less Than Excellence'

It's late on a Friday afternoon in September, and the Boys and Girls Choir of St. Mark's Church are rehearsing a difficult portion from the French composer Maurice Duruflé's setting of the Latin *Requiem* that they will perform at a special All Souls Day service in November.

And Robert McCormick isn't happy. But not because of the performance or effort of the choristers fanned out in a semi-circle before him.

"I saw on Facebook that someone wrote a new piece of music that they said is very simple so a children's choir could sing it," he told his young students. "That made me so angry! What I want to do is take a picture of this and say, 'This is what children should be singing!'"

The choristers laugh, and then return to the solemn and complex piece of music on the stands in front of them.

While both Roland and McCormick are adept at using humor and positive encouragement to help choristers learn, they hold themselves and their charges to very high standards.

"I'm always asking for nothing less than excellence," McCormick says. "Obviously, someone who is less experienced has a different definition of excellence than someone who has been doing it for years. But I ask everyone to bring their best to the table because that's what God asks of us.

"I think sometimes we adults think we need to simplify or dumb down for children. Don't do that. Children are bright, inquisitive, and love to be challenged. It's a strong

belief of mine that children will respond to challenges and that they want to be challenged. The choristers here respond to very sophisticated music and also to being asked to perform at a high level."

It is because the bar is set so high for the choristers that St. Mark's and St. Peter's and other affiliates of the RSCM pay them a stipend. It's not much, starting at just 50 or 75 cents per rehearsal, Sunday service, and performance. The amount increases as choristers are "promoted" through different levels based on achievement in meeting certain standards and effort, among other criteria. At both St. Mark's and St. Peter's, choristers are expected to attend two rehearsals and Sunday service virtually every week during the school year. The stipends are accumulated over the course of each semester, and then paid to the choristers.

"The stipend is meant to underscore the seriousness of the commitment," McCormick says.

It also sends a message to the children and youth that they are doing something that the church considers to have real value, he says.

And in many ways, McCormick says, that value is priceless. ▶

High Standards



"I think that music—liturgical music especially—can have an almost sacramental quality," he says. "I'm not a sacramental theologian. I don't even play one on TV. But there's something to the idea that music can mediate something holy."

There's a quote often attributed to Saint Augustine, although its sourcing is questionable, that McCormick says rings true nonetheless: "He who sings prays twice."

"I talk about how the choir's role in the liturgy is to help the congregation pray, so

people in the pews can pray through music," he says. "And our fundamental job is to glorify God, and everything else is secondary to that."

McCormick grew up attending a Methodist Church in Macon, Georgia, where he fell in love with music, and especially the organ, at an early age. He attended Westminster Choir College in Princeton, N.J., and was confirmed in The Episcopal Church his freshman year there after visiting several Episcopal churches in New York and Philadelphia.

Before joining St. Mark's, he previously served as Director of Music at St. Paul's Parish, K Street, in Washington, D.C., and as Organist and Music Director at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin in New York City.

Although the chorister program at St. Mark's was less than three years old when he arrived, "so much of the hard work had been done in building the groundwork by Darryl (Roland) and in the interim year before I was hired," he says.



▲ St. Mark's choristers rehearse twice a week to sing almost every Sunday, including once a month with the adult choir.

“The choristers here respond to very sophisticated music and also to being asked to perform at a high level.”



▲ McCormick, top, sets the bar high for choristers while making the experience fun.



Like Roland, McCormick also has adapted the RSCM program over the years, describing the curriculum he uses to train choristers as “the same idea, same principle” as the original..

And like St. Peter’s, St. Mark’s holds an annual week-long Summer Choir Camp that serves as both community outreach and a feeder for the Boys and Girls Choir. The younger children (ages 3-7) participate in a half-day session involving prayer, singing, Bible stories, arts and crafts, games, and musical presentations. The older children (generally 8 and up, although some 7-year-olds are accepted on a case by case basis) participate in the full-day Choir activities, which include singing, music composition and theory lessons, musical presentations, and field trips. This year’s camp drew almost 50 children, with slightly more than half in the younger group.

“We’ve certainly had some choristers who originally came through the camp,” McCormick says. “We don’t necessarily expect that everybody who comes to the camp is going to join the choir. But it certainly is a vehicle for recruitment.”

Choristers actually form the core of participants in the choir portion of the camp. This summer, a dozen St. Mark’s choristers attended, along with 10 new, potential choristers. Of those, two are now part of the choir.

Regardless of whether a church has the resources for a full chorister program, McCormick says it’s important to recognize the role that music plays in Christian formation. “I’ve known choristers who say they come to believe in God after having been a member of the choir,” McCormick says.

McCormick also has talked with his parish priests and adult members of St. Mark’s choir about the importance of “nurturing and teaching children through music and singing in the context of liturgy.

“We ask the question, who’s going to do this in 20 or 30 years if we’re not teaching children to do it now? So we’re investing in the future of the church,” McCormick says. “We’re doing our part to help equip the adults of the future to be able to do this.” ■

Priceless Value