

This history of the Bucks County Choral Society has been prepared by Fran Waite and Kingdon Swayne for members and friends of the Society in connection with the Society's tenth anniversary year, 1982-83.

THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

Beginnings • The Johns' Era

In the 1972-73 school year, David Johns was director of choral music at Central Bucks West High School and a master's degree candidate in music education. He sensed a gap in the cultural life of the Doylestown community, and resolved to try to fill it. That winter he placed an advertisement in the Daily Intelligencer inviting singers interested in starting a community chorus to come to a first rehearsal in the choral music room at Central Bucks West. Seven brave souls responded. But it was an idea whose time had not yet come, and by the end of the school year the group had forty voices, an official identity as the Bucks County Choral Society, and a successful concert under its belt. That first concert was held on the afternoon of June 3, 1973, in the Lenape Junior High School auditorium. Accompanied by Tina Buonomo, the performance featured excerpts from Brigadoon and other pieces.

SIX months later, on December 2, 1973, the chorus performed its second and last concert under David Johns' direction at Lenape. The work was Handel's Messiah, accompanied by members of the Bucks County Symphony Orchestra. Current members who have been with the Society since its first year include Carola Benecke, Elizabeth Burke, Norman Christy, Dons Daniels, Verna Horoff, Pat McCann, Lois Moore, Bill Moore, Peggy Nace and Fran Waite.

HOLDING THE FORT - The Moore Era

Early in 1974, determined to continue, the group reorganized and sought a new director. Into the breach stepped a member of the tenor section, John William (Bill) Moore. With a master's degree in music education from West Virginia University, Bill's musical specialty is the trombone, but he willingly stretched his skills to encompass the new field of choral directing. The Salem United Church of Christ became the center of the Society's musical life at that time. The first concert under Bill's direction took place on June 2, 1974, featuring the Vivaldi Gloria. During the Moore era there began what became a series of four annual fall concerts to benefit the Martin Luther King Scholarship Fund of the Central Bucks Council of Churches. The choir also performed during the Mercer Museum's Christmas festivities. Accompanists during this period were Tina Buonomo and Marsha Page.

Another Interim, Yes; Stagnation, No! - The Sauter Era

It is hard to characterize the next two and a half years in the life of the Society. During the Moore era the Society's leaders were busily beating the bushes for

a permanent director. Not finding the right person, in the spring of 1975 they persuaded Ruth Sauter to take the baton temporarily. Ruth is a graduate of Beaver College (A.B.) and Temple University (M.A.), with advanced studies in Trenton State College and Westminster Choir College. She is a music teacher and choral director at Central Bucks East High School. The Society had found a qualified professional, but Ruth felt unable to make a long-term commitment. In the end, she submitted to a series of arm-twistings by Society officers, led by Carola Benecke, and stayed on as temporary conductor for two and a half years.

But these were not years of marking time. Ambitious works were tackled, including Handel's Messiah, Haydn's Lord Nelson Mass, the Mozart Requiem, Poulenc Gloria, and the premiere of Finley Shugard's The End of the Days. There were fruitful collaborations with the Bucks County Symphony Orchestra, the Pro Musica Orchestra, and the Temple University Orchestra. Accompanists during this period included Ruth McConnell, Carolyn Klingel, Sharon Bertha and Margaret Lea.

The Sauter era was also a time when, with some prodding from Ruth the Society's officers were giving serious thought to housekeeping matters—incorporation, bylaws, tax exempt status, funding strategies. These were to come to fruition in the next era.

THE SECOND FIVE YEARS

Dynamism out of Stability • The Heckler Era

Whether in the world of engineering or the world of the performing arts, stability is an essential precondition for dynamic movement. The rocket must have a stable launching pad; artistic organizations need a stable base to support the creative ferment.

In the fall of 1977 the Society found the stability of artistic leadership it had been seeking when Elma S. Heckler of Hatfield was persuaded to become the music director. Elma holds a B.S. degree in music from Juniata College and a Master of Music degree in choral conducting from Westminster Choir College. She has been music director at Zion -Mennonite Church in Souderton and at Pleasantville United Church of Christ in Chalfont.

During most of the same period the Society also enjoyed stability of administrative leadership. Audrey Close served as President from 1977 to 1981. Collaborating closely with Elma, and with the support of an effective board of directors and other volunteers from among the singers, Audrey led the Society to a

new state of organizational and fiscal stability. The Society was incorporated and ratified its bylaws in 1977. It established tax-exempt status in 1979. It recruited its first contributing patrons in 1977 and its first contributing business patrons in 1979. It received its first substantial grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts in 1979. Atlantic Richfield Corporation and the Prudential Insurance Company have also made substantial grants, beginning in 1980.

While the board of directors addressed the financial fundamentals, Elma was busily revolutionizing the Society's approach to musical fundamentals. Some of us learned for the first time that we sang with our feet and our shoulders and our belly buttons as well as with our vocal chords, lungs, and diaphragms. Consciousness of the whole self - physical, mental, emotional,

Pre-rehearsal warm-up sessions were full of surprises-back rubs, dancing, "yawn-sighs," singing through a "hole" in the middle of the forehead. We were amazed to discover that the distance from B up to C was longer than the distance from C back down to B. We have never quite figured out what Einstein would make of that, although he could probably handle it better than Newton!

Members of the Society in good standing in the fall of 1977 were "grandfathered" into tenured status, but newcomers had to survive a demanding audition. As applicants began to exceed the Society's practical capacity of 60, qualified singers had to be turned away. Even the "grandfathered" submitted to a compulsory audition in 1981, causing a good deal of anticipatory agony that was allayed when the time came by Elma's caring and supportive audition style. And of course we knew in advance that the purpose of the audition was not to "fire" us but to get a sense of our strengths and weaknesses in the interest of building a better blend of voices.

There were two important milestones in 1978. First, Joan E. Gurniak joined the Society as accompanist on piano and organ, replacing Kim Heindel. Joan is music director and organist for All Hallows Episcopal Church in Wyncote. As accompanist, she sets an impossibly high standard of focused alertness-never misses a downbeat, plays eight parts on eight staves with consummate ease, sneaks the piano quietly into an a capella rehearsal to sustain the wavering tenors, slyly hits the concluding chord at the end of an a capella passage to give the chorus a gentle measure of its flatness.

Second, there came to be celebrated the start-of-the-season ritual of a full day's musical workshop. These began at Deer Park near New Hope and moved this fall to Bucks County Community College.

All this mind-boggling activity has a single goal: the pursuit of excellence in that elusive quality choristers call their "sound" - the product of disciplined control of breathing, enunciation, pitch, volume, tonal quality, neural impulses, various bodily cavities, sternums, shoulders, belly buttons, diaphragms, knees, feet, and probably a few other things as well.

Has excellence merely been pursued, or is the Society actually capturing a bit of it now and then? Let us look at the record. The Society no longer performs only in Doylestown, but is in demand for concerts in other parts of the Bux-Mont area-Souderton, Chalfont, Holland and Newtown, so far. In the fall of 1982 it moves on to wider audiences with an appearance at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1981 the Salem United Church of Christ was filled not once but twice for the Festival of Christmas Music, setting a pattern for the future. The grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts weren't political or capricious; they followed careful auditions of concert performances by critical officials.

Major new musical works of the Heckler era have included a Pachelbel Magnificat, the Mozart Coronation Mass, a concert version of Bizet's Carmen, and Brahms' Alto Rhapsody and Liebeslieder Waltzes, as well as such modern works as the Durufle Requiem, Randall Thompson's Frostiana, and Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms.

L'ENVOI

At the ripe old age of ten, the Bucks County Choral Society is a little like a partially filled glass of water. Should one describe it as half full, or half empty? Should one emphasize the progress made, or the high goals set but not yet fulfilled? What is clear to even the most casual observer is that there is present in rehearsals and performances, in board meetings and refreshment committee sessions, a spirit of creative interaction between leader and followers that produces joy and satisfaction and, from time to time, flashes of that elusive excellence whose pursuit will remain the Society's principal preoccupation. And those who contribute the most will continue to gain the most from the experience.

ADDENDUM

Tonight's performance of Elijah climaxes the

celebration of the tenth anniversary. The season has also included performances at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the annual Festival of Christmas Music at which time the Magnificat by Richard Averre was premiered; a combination concert/workshop with two Harrisburg area choirs under the direction of Robert Page; the annual choir workshop with Richard Averre of Bucks County Community College and Gail Poch of Temple University; and area concerts at churches and retirement communities.