The Heinz Chapel Choir: A Brief History

Bryce Yoder

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The Heinz Chapel Choir possesses a long history of enriching its audiences with a variety of repertoire that has changed and evolved over the past 80 years in the building it was established to serve, the Heinz Chapel. Looking back over the choir’s history imparts a cultural, musical, and historical understanding of Pitt beginning with the choir’s creation in 1939 and its founding conductor Theodore M. “Pop” Finney. Dr. Finney was brought to the University shortly before the dedication of the Chapel in 1938 to start a choir to sing its weekly services, this came to be known as the Heinz Chapel Choir. Heinz Chapel itself is non-sectarian in nature, but the motivation for the chapel’s construction carries a strong Christian influence. The university’s General Alumni Association wrote in their 1938 Alumni Review about the dedication of the chapel and how it would serve as a memorial for H. J. Heinz and his family. Reflecting on this, Reverend Henry Coffin said that “it is fitting that he should be commemorated by an edifice for Christian worship… No university can train young Americans without concerning itself with their spiritual convictions and life.”1 Although Heinz Chapel itself is now non-sectarian and sometimes hosts services that are not Christian in nature, its Christian foundation shaped the formation of the Heinz Chapel Choir as a liturgical choir. This identity would be shaped in the coming decades due to external factors ranging from war-time tensions and financial crises to internal changes and new conductors.

Pop Finney was responsible for crafting HCC’s image and beginning traditions that have continued until today, ranging from annual fall rehearsal camp to the singing of Brother James’s Air (a piece with a long history that could constitute its own research project). In many ways Pop’s choir was similarly structured to many British liturgical choirs and was reflected in the service-singing function of the choir and the repertoire of weekly anthems that were performed. Finney himself took various trips throughout the sixties to England, purchased repertoire from across the pond, and took a sabbatical to research English composer Henry Purcell2 (whose music appeared on HCC’s program the following year)3. During Finney’s tenure as the director of the Heinz Chapel Choir it maintained a consistent purpose and function over the course of roughly twenty-five years. The choir would meet four times a week on the twenty-third floor of the Cathedral of Learning to prepare weekly choral anthems for each service, in addition to occasionally touring domestically and performing around the Pittsburgh area. HCC solidified its musical home on campus in the Heinz Chapel as it became known for performing sacred works during vespers, an annual thanksgiving service, and an Easterly Bach cantata. This period was not without its challenges, Pop led the choir as nation-wide tensions began to affect the choir. World War II required a number of men in HCC to go overseas and Finney wrote in his book *We Have Made Music* that “What [the choir] undoubtedly lacked in tenors and basses we must have made up in the tenaciousness with which we clung to our work and to each other.”4 In 1945 the passing of Franklin Roosevelt necessitated a memorial service and choir to perform in order to honor “the only president most of the choir members could remember” as Pop wrote*.* However, after roughly twenty years of conducting, Pop and his wife, who came to be known as “Mom”, left an indelible mark on the choir. Their relationship served as a model for students of the choir and their connection to the choir is evident in the plentiful collection of letters from students and alumni that kept in touch with the Finneys throughout the years. The close of the fifties brought Finney’s transition from full-time director to “Director of Musical Activities”5 as his successor Don Colton assumed the full-time role as director continuing HCC’s established traditions throughout the beginning of the 1960s.

Don Colton directed HCC for five years continuing familiar traditions of choir camp, the singing of the Sevenfold Amen at services, and touring but also faced similar situations to Pop such as directing HCC at the memorial service for President John F. Kennedy. Don Colton also pushed to expand HCC’s reputation as a performing ensemble and “extend their talents to general concerts” as Pitt’s 1964 yearbook put it. After the direction of Don Colton came Paul Anderson who took over the choir in 1965, a year when Pitt faced a financial crisis and immense exterior pressures.

According to Robert Alberts’ *Pitt: The Story of the University of Pittsburgh, 1787-1987* the University of Pittsburgh required twenty-three million dollars in order to balance its current budget at the end of 1965. With much debate, Pitt sought to make up the deficit with state funds which would require becoming state-affiliated and structurally changing the way the university operated. Beyond restructuring of the Board of Trustees and other Pitt administration, the university debt became a hot button topic wherever funds were involved from tuition rates to student organizations. Alberts writes that “Heinz Chapel musical activities were to be cut drastically”6 which affected guest organists, visiting musicians, and possibly could have extended to the choir itself if the financial crisis continued. Allocations were being scrutinized for how effective they were for the entire student body. A Pitt News opinion article ran in October 1966 that singled out the Heinz Chapel Choir as one such student activity that receives funding but doesn’t necessarily benefit all students who pay the activity fee.7 Not only was the Heinz Chapel Choir precariously positioned as a student organization facing the repercussions of University debts, but the choir also held a questionable status as a religiously affiliated organization during a time period that one alum of the choir could only describe as “uprooting”. Over the summer of 1967 the Heinz Chapel Choir was as uprooted as the rest of campus amid Vietnam and Civil Rights tensions as Pitt students were bussing off campus to rallies in Alabama and Washington D.C. and protesting at home on Pitt’s campus. Nonetheless, the Heinz Chapel Choir was approved to continue in the new school year as a performance ensemble and no longer would sing weekly religious services. Paul Anderson led the choir in this new direction maintaining HCC visual appearance and choral traditions, and with the turn of the seventies his successor Don Franklin made a great effort to create a new reputation for a choir with a new purpose.

Don Franklin, a baroque musicologist in training, ambitiously brought about many changes ranging from the appearance of the choir to the traditions it held and while many of these changes proved to be temporary, some received more pushback than others. In an attempt to clarify the choir’s secular identity many programs from this era are titled “Heinz Chapel Concert Choir” or “HCCC, additionally Franklin attempted to retire Brother James’ Air from the choir’s repertoire. However, the extra “C” of concert didn’t stick and both alumni and students alike were up in arms before Brother James’s could be removed from the choir’s repertoire. Don Franklin’s visions for the choir and departures from tradition remain a unique period of time for the choir. As a Baroque scholar he introduced repertoire to the choir that It had never sung before, and some that perhaps had never been sung on our continent. Notably, through collaborations with the University of Pittsburgh Orchestra and the Ohio University Baroque Dance Ensemble, the “Prologue” of Rameau’s *Castor and Pollux* was performed for the first time in over two hundred years.8 Another first for the choir, in 1974 HCC took its first international tour with the help of the Heinz family and great student fundraising efforts. As the first Pitt vocal group to tour in Europe, Don Franklin described their itinerary as “ambitious”. It included performances at Trinity College, Cambridge, Saint Severin in Paris, a Papal audience, and an invitation to the American consulate in Florence, Italy.9 This success laid the ground work for HCC to continue touring internationally and opened to the door to broadening its repertoire.

After Don Franklin left the choir in 1975 and the one-year term of Marjorie Kleiman, Grover Wilkins III expanded the Heinz Chapel Choir’s international endeavors with a particular affinity for France. From 1980 to 1984 the Heinz Chapel Choir toured to France three times and students that toured were required to study French and sleep in homestays abroad. These month-long tours showcased Grover Wilkins’s interpretation of the Heinz Chapel Choir post-state affiliation, which he said was to be an “active, aggressive proponent of new music and rather lesser known works in the choral repertoire, especially American. That’s our position as musicians – to be curious about new music and to get it in front of the public.”10 Moving through the eighties, the Heinz Chapel Choir continued to go to choir camp, tour, and perform under the direction of two more conductors, Herbert Jones who began in 1984 and went on to pursue a doctorate at Pitt and afterwards William Burkhart conducted from 1986 until 1989.

Bill Burkhart’s departure in 1989 introduced John Goldsmith to the Heinz Chapel Choir. As the only director to rival and even surpass Pop Finney in his tenure with the choir, Goldsmith brought a blend of old identity and new traditions with him to HCC. Visually, John Goldsmith’s HCC harkened back to liturgical days of the choir with his use of the purple velvet robes provided by the Heinz family, but the robes were quickly retired again in favor of a tuxedo and dress combination that the choir maintains to this day. In 1990 the choir and Heinz Chapel began to host an annual spring Chamber Choir Festival to showcase high school a cappella choral music. During this time HCC reestablished a reputation for singing from the side aisles of the chapel (which had previously been done by Don Franklin). As Goldsmith’s years continued with HCC, he programmed many pieces of American origin including his own arrangements and most notably started his holiday concerts with his own incredible arrangement of O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Under Goldsmith’s direction the over 50-year-old Heinz Chapel Choir grew to be much more global than it had ever been before in both repertoire and tours. John Goldsmith reinvigorated the choir’s ability to travel internationally and established an average of touring once every three years. During his tenure he led the choir to over twenty countries across the world including Brazil, Peru, China, across Europe and concluded with his final tour in the Balkans in 2014.

John Goldsmith unfortunately died two years after he retired from Pitt and in 2018, with the support of alumni and friends, the Heinz Chapel Choir commissioned a piece of music in his memory, titled “When Spring Comes Walking”.At the choir’s 80th anniversary celebration, now under the direction of Dr. Susan Rice after Goldsmith, HCC premiered this piece to an audience of alums and loved ones. Rice has continued to carry on an intangible legacy of the choir and sharing its music globally. In addition to bonding, frolicking, and reading from *We Have Made* Music at every choir camp and continuing to tour (once internationally to the U.K. and twice domestically as of 2019); the Heinz Chapel Choir has remained an integral part of the Heinz Chapel itself and Pitt’s community.

Throughout eighty enriching, musical, and sometimes tumultuous years, the effect the Heinz Chapel Choir has on the fifty-some members that make up its ranks, seems to have remained the same. Through war-time tensions and financial crises the Heinz Chapel Choir has changed in function, but not changed in its core. That core is the love its members share for the music and for each other. One alumnus of the choir from the 1960s wrote that “For me being a member of the choir was my warmest memory of my four years at Pitt. We were fun-loving, warm, and cohesive. We may not have been the best singers, but we practiced hard and made the most from what we had.” And in my own humble opinion, to ‘make the most’ of the Heinz Chapel Choir is know the value of its family and its legacy. Most importantly, to be in HCC is to be proud of the fact that “we have made music”.

Works Cited

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10. The Pitt News. June 2, 1982. p. 3. <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A31735066372909/viewer#page/3/mode/1up>

Other Resources:

* Pop Finney Collection in the Archives, notably personal correspondence with students and alumni.
* Bound Programs in the Finney Music Library from 1938-1963.
* Heinz Chapel Choir Scrapbooks in Archives including: Pop Alumni Scrapbook, Yearly scrapbooks from 1967-1977.
* HCC University Archives containing recent programs from 1991-2001, 2018.
* John Goldsmith Programs in the Music Building