



A Brief Introduction to Volunteer Church and College/University Choirs in the United States and Especially in Cortland, New York

DONNA K. ANDERSON



“Non-professional” is a term often used to describe a singer, instrumentalist, conductor, etc., (or someone in an entirely different field of endeavor) who is highly skilled and talented, but who does not receive compensation for his/her services, who does not make his/her living from music, but one who sings or plays for the sheer joy of it and one who desires to share their musical gift, experience, and knowledge with their friends, neighbors, and all who may hear them. I firmly believe that many so-called “non-professional choirs” (volunteer choirs) are often equally as skilled and well trained as many “professional” choirs. A good example of this is the Purkyně University Chorea Academica, a choir that has toured internationally and that can stand toe-to-toe with any professional choir. And, I’m sure the same can be said of your choirs.



Church, Community, and College/University Choirs all play an indispensable role in the development and continuation of the great tradition and history of choral music in the United States. This paper will concentrate on Church Choirs and College/University choirs.



A. Church Choirs

The Cortland Standard, the area’s primary newspaper, “Serving Cortland and surrounding communities since 1876”, each week publishes a listing of churches and synago-

gues in 32 towns and villages within a 25 – 30 mile radius of Cortland. The listing for the city of Cortland alone includes 35 churches of varying denominations and one Jewish synagogue. A small, mixed selection of churches in Cortland, Homer, and Preble is included here. When the word “community” is used, it refers to Cortland and its surrounding neighbors, not just that within Cortland.

1. United Presbyterian Church, Cortland, NY is a large church with a large membership. The mixed choir numbers ca. 35 members and rehearses once a week. There is also a combination Choir/Bell Choir for 3rd through 6th graders with its own director. They rehearse once a week and perform occasionally. The organ is a 1970 Wicks with three manuals, 50 ranks and 2777 pipes. UPC serves as a community center, hosting recitals, free “Thursday Night Suppers” held at the Church and featuring an array of local artists, musicians, writers, and others who have a story to share. Once a month the Choir presents a concert at Walden Place, a retirement home on the outskirts of Cortland.

UPC presents an array of unusual programs. For example, on 28 April 2013 the community was invited to “An Interpretation of Psalm 139,” which included an exhibition of art work and photographs – all relating in some way to Psalm 139 – and created by

regional artists; poems relating to the Psalm; vocal soloists, readers, the UPC Church and Youth choirs, an organ interlude, and the setting, “You Are With Me, Lord,” (text by Smith/ music by Pitt-Watson) sung by the entire audience. A highlight of the program was a Power Point Photographic Survey of Psalm 139, the underscore of which was composed by the UPC organist, Paulette Fry. It was an astonishing achievement, and an example of the rich musical talent in Cortland’s churches.

2. St. Mary’s Catholic Church, Cortland, NY is one of the largest churches in the City, both in size and membership. The mixed choir numbers ca. 20–22. No audition is required. Rehearsals are held once a week and the choir generally sings at every service. The choir sings a variety of styles and genres, including hymns, cantatas, and motets depending on the season and the makeup of the choir. The Church organ is a Morey and Barnes tracker, built in Utica, NY in 1896, and has two manuals, 23 ranks, and 1900 pipes.

The Cortland County Council of Churches organizes a yearly Epiphany Choir Festival held on the First Sunday of Epiphany. This year St. Mary’s was the host church, and eight choirs from Cortland, Homer, Preble, and McGraw participated.

3. St. Margaret’s Catholic Church, Homer, NY is a relatively small church with a mixed choir of between 15 and 20 members. No audition is required. Rehearsals take place once a week and the choir generally sings for services twice a month. During the Christmas and Easter seasons, members of the congregation are invited to sing in the choir to celebrate those important holidays.

4. Preble Congregational Church (United Church of Christ), Preble, NY is a rural church with a small congregation. Stephen B. Wilson serves as choirmaster and organist. The mixed choir numbers ca. 8 members. No audition is required. There are no weekly rehearsals, but the choir rehearses every Sunday morning before the service. Christmas Eve is the major celebratory ho-

liday with a great deal of music, for which visiting singers and instrumentalists from around the area are invited to participate. The Church organ is an Allen digital – 2 manuals, an equivalent of ten ranks, and no pipes.

5. Grace Episcopal/Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Cortland, NY has developed a unique series of free concerts for the entire community. “The Arts at Grace” concert series, as it is called, strives to present high quality concerts to the public. A key aspect of the series mission is the belief that quality music should be accessible to everyone without charge. The series also seeks to build bridges between various entities in Cortland County, including churches and musical organizations, and to involve members of the community with the assistance of professional musicians. Area visual artists are given the opportunity to display works at a reception following some performances.

The Arts at Grace presents varied, diverse programs including classical, jazz, American music and crossover artists who blur traditional genres. Interested amateur musicians are invited to join professionals by participating in choruses and other ensembles. Through the Young Artist concerts, the series helps build a sustainable musical culture for the community while supporting career development for young area musicians who look to a career in music.

The Arts at Grace is a perfect example of the creative and generous outreach to the community at large that makes the musical life in and around Cortland so vibrant.

6. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir

I can’t conclude this section without mentioning the legendary Mormon Tabernacle Choir, based in Salt Lake City, Utah, perhaps the most famous of all volunteer choirs. Founded in 1847, the Choir today consists of ca. 325 men and women, all talented musicians chosen by audition, all members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and all between the ages of 25–60. The singers are not paid; but instead, like all volunteer choirs, love to



contribute their time and talent for the joy of singing and to share the beauty and power of music with people everywhere. The Choir practices and performs weekly and is often accompanied by the orchestra or the organ in the Salt Lake City Tabernacle. The organ, like the Choir, is a wonder of the world. It has been rebuilt and enlarged several times since its origin in 1869. The current organ was the work of the former Aeolian/Skinner organ firm, completed in 1948. It contains five manuals, 206 ranks, and 11,623 pipes.

B. College/University Choirs

1. St. Olaf Choir is a 75-member mixed choir of undergraduate students at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. It is often described as the premiere a cappella choir in the United States. The choir was founded in 1912 by F. Melius Christiansen (1871–1955) as an outgrowth of the St. John's Lutheran Church Choir in Northfield. F. Melius was the choir's conductor from its inception until 1942.

The student singers in the St. Olaf Choir are committed to rehearsals five days a week in addition to completing a full schedule of academic and music courses. And, in addition, the Choir has a full performance schedule of local, national, and international concerts. Some highlights are the Choir performances in Kennedy Center and at The National Conference of the American Choral Directors of America, which included singing at the Walt Disney Concert Hall sharing the stage with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. In 2005, the choir performed at the White House for President George W. Bush and First Lady, Laura Bush, and guests, to commemorate The National Day of Prayer.

The St. Olaf Choir is perhaps best known for its annual performances in the St. Olaf Christmas Festival, one of the oldest Christmas music celebrations in the United States. The Choir has a large discography of over 27 recordings.

2. Concordia College Choir is a 72-member mixed choir of undergraduate students at

Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota. It was founded in 1920 and was developed into international renown under the direction of Paul J. Christiansen (1914–1997), son of F. Melius Christiansen. Paul J. was brought up in the same Lutheran Choral Tradition as his father before him, and, like his father, he composed and arranged numerous works for a cappella choir. The Concordia College Choir has performed in Kennedy Center, Carnegie Hall, and important venues internationally.

One of the Choir's greatest legacies is its annual Concordia College Christmas concert, often broadcast on National Public Radio, PBS, and local stations, and heard by more than 30,000 people annually. The Choir has recorded numerous albums of music in all styles and eras. Concordia College describes its purpose (and by extension, that of the Concordia Choir) "to influence the affairs of the world by sending into society thoughtful and informed men and women dedicated to the Christian life."

3. One of the largest and most varied choral programs in the United States is that at **Indiana University Jacobs School of Music** at its main campus in Bloomington, Indiana. IU offers eleven Choral Ensembles including the Pro Arte Singers, NOTUS Contemporary Vocal Ensemble, University Singers, University Chorale, Symphonic Choir, Opera Chorus, the Singing Hoosiers, International Vocal Ensemble, All-Campus Chorus, University Children's Choir, and Vocal Jazz Ensemble. All of these choirs present concerts throughout the year – the upper-level choirs often tour both in the United States and abroad.

The Symphonic Choir (audition required) is the foundation choir for Freshman and Sophomore School of Music singers. It is also the performing group for Masters Choral Conducting students. Students in the Symphonic Choir work on basic skills such as sight singing and vocal production. Successful students often "move up" to the University Chorale, Opera Chorus, and University Singers.

The Pro Arte Singers is the “top, professional level” vocal ensemble in the Jacobs School of Music. Auditions are required and the roster of the group is made up of both graduate and undergraduate students from ALL departments in the School of Music.

IU has four different Children’s Choirs, starting in age from kindergarten through 6th grade moving up to the Select Middle School Youth Choir (9th through 12th grades). Founded in 1980, the mission of the Children’s Choir program is to teach young people to value and experience excellent singing, by developing their musical skills, self-expression, personal growth, and an everlasting love of music. Such students will likely become members or leaders of choirs in their community, in high school, college and in their adult lives.

The All-Campus Chorus reaches out to members of the IU community, including students, faculty, and staff. No audition is required, and no previous musical experience is necessary.

(An African American Choral Ensemble is offered by the IU African American Arts Institute.)

4. The State University of New York College at Cortland Department of Performing Arts (the combined Music and Theatre Departments), offers two major vocal ensembles: The College Singers and the Choral Union. Both are under the direction of Professor Stephen B. Wilson.

(A Gospel Choir is offered by the SUNY Cortland Africana Studies Department. The Gospel Choir is open to all students with no audition required. It presents a concert at the end of each semester, often with several other local and regional Gospel choirs, and has toured in the United States and abroad.)

The College Singers is a ca. 20-25 member student choir consisting of both Performing Arts majors and non-majors. Auditions are required for all singers except Performing Arts majors. The College Singers rehearse 50 minutes three times a week, and presents a concert at the end of every semester.

The choir also appears off-campus at special community and church events.

The College Singers repertoire ranges from Medieval and Renaissance works, choral works from the Classical, Romantic, and Contemporary periods, Broadway and “pop” music, and works composed by their conductor, Professor Wilson. The selection of music, naturally, rests with the number and range of singers available each semester.

The Choral Union is made up of College students, faculty, staff and singers in Cortland and surrounding communities. No audition is required. The group rehearses once each week for two hours and presents a concert each semester. The size of the Choral Union fluctuates from ca. 55–75 each semester. The long list of compositions performed by the Choral Union includes numerous works by J. S. Bach and G. F. Handel, Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, the Brahms and Fauré Requiems, Beethoven’s Mass in C and Choral Fantasy, and works by Professor Wilson, to name a few. Wilson credits much of the success of both The College Singers and the Choral Union to the two pianists who serve as rehearsal and concert accompanists.

In 2010 and 2013, the Choral Union, choirs and singers, orchestral musicians, vocal soloists from the College and surrounding areas, and numerous church and community choirs in the region, joined together to present J. S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* (2010) and Giuseppe Verdi’s *Requiem* (2013) all under the direction of Professor Wilson.

The *St. Matthew* performance included 65-70 singers, plus a children’s choir, two orchestras, double chorus and six paid soloists. The Verdi Requiem performance included 92 singers. A professional contractor assembled the orchestral musicians who were paid, as were the four soloists. Both performances were largely funded with contributions from the SUNY Cortland administration, a wide variety of generous community donors, and fund raising by members of the Choral Union. Both concerts were presented to the public free of charge.





Contributing to the success of these two concerts was the availability of a superb concert venue, located in a large, beautiful building at 19 Church Street in Cortland that was once the First Baptist Church, then the United Community Church; and now, thanks to an enterprising and generous Cortland entrepreneur, is an important center for regional community and private events.

The sanctuary is ca. 7500 square feet and has a seating capacity of 525. Organists will be interested to know that the venue houses a well-maintained and preserved N. P. Möller organ, built in Hagerstown, MD in 1930. It has four manuals, 107 ranks, and 1400 pipes.

The generosity, cooperation, and good will generated and shared by area churches of all sizes and denominations, by SUNY Cortland and other area colleges, such as Ithaca College, and Tompkins-Cortland Community College, is equaled only by talented regional volunteer church and secular choirs and instrumentalists, and professional regional musicians, all of whom are recipients of financial support from business and private donors. The blend of academic, communal, and faith-based groups has created a true “musical community” in and around Cortland – an exciting, rich and vibrant musical climate that is treasured by all, and that is accessible to all.

Sources Consulted

A. Church Choirs

A. 1. United Presbyterian Church, Cortland, NY

Phone interview with Paulette Fry, UPC Organist, 20 September 2013.

Phone Interviews with Dorothy Troike, UPC Elder and Choir member, 11, 30 September and 4 October 2013.

A. 2 St. Mary's Catholic Church, Cortland, NY

Phone interview with Armand Discenna, Organist and Choirmaster, St. Mary's, 23 September 2013

A. 3 St. Margaret's Catholic Church, Homer, NY

Interview with Mary Lee Martens, Interim Choirmaster and Pianist, St. Margaret's, 16 September 2013.

A. 4 Preble Congregational Church (United Church of Christ), Preble, NY

Interviews with Stephen B. Wilson, Organist and Choirmaster, PCC Church, 19, 24 and 30 September 2013.

A. 5 Grace and Holy Spirit Church, Cortland, NY

Information from David Neal, Artistic Director, The Arts at Grace, 01 October 2013.

Phone Interview, written material from Jo Ann Wickman, Co-Chair, The Arts at Grace, 01 and 02 October 2013.

A. 6 The Mormon Tabernacle Choir

http://www.utah.com/mormon/tabernacle_choir.htm

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salt_Lake_Tabernacle_organ

B. College/University Choirs

B. 1 St. Olaf Choir

<http://wp.stolaf.edu/stolaf-choir/about-the-st-olaf-choir/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St.-Olaf_Choir http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._Melius_Christiansen

B. 2 Concordia College Choir

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Concordia_Choir http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_J._Christiansen <http://www.concordiacollege.edu/music/ensembles/choirs/the-concordia-choir/>

B. 3 Indiana University Jacobs School of Music Choral Program

<http://www.music.indiana.edu/precollege/year-round/choir/calendar.shtml> <http://www.music.indiana.edu/departments/ensembles/symphonic-choir.shtml> <http://www.music.indiana.edu/departments/ensembles/all-campus.shtml> <http://www.indiana.edu/-aaai/aace.shtml>

B. 4 The State University of New York College at Cortland

Interviews with Stephen B. Wilson, Music Director and Conductor, The College Singers and the Choral Union, 19, 24, and 30 September 2013

Interviews with David McNeil, McNeil Development Co., 24 September and 02 October 2013. Phone Interview with Daniel McNeil, McNeil Development Co., 30 September 2013.

Résumé

Studie reflektuje situaci v neprofesionálním sborovém umění v regionu města Cortland ve státě New York (USA). Sbory jsou rozděleny do dvou základních kategorií na sbory církevní a univerzitní. U jednotlivých sborů je pojednáno o způsobu jejich práce, zázemí a repertoárového zaměření.

Donna K. Anderson, PhD, Professor Emerita, SUNY Cortland Dept. of Music/Performing Arts, Doktor Honoris Causa, Univerzita Jana Evangelisty Purkyně, 21. November 2007.