

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE LONG HISTORY OF THE FRIDAY MORNING MUSIC CLUB CHORALE

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The Friday Morning Music Club is a remarkable organization, perhaps unique in this country for its longevity, independence, and selfless promotion of music. The FMMC played key roles in the founding of the National Symphony Orchestra and the Washington Performing Arts Society. It's nurturing of young artists helped propel Jessye Norman and Evelyn Lear onto the world stage.¹

The FMMC Chorale is proud to be part of such a venerable organization. A review of the Club's archives uncovered the Chorale's rich pedigree with roots tracing back to shortly after the FMMC was formed in 1886. It has performed under different names (chorus, chorale, vocal ensemble, choral ensemble) and different levels of activity, but concerted singing has been continuous, justifying the Chorale's claim to be by far the oldest secular singing group in the Washington area. This review honors the many members of our Club who have promoted the choral arts throughout our community for more than a century, leaving a legacy that will be passed on to future generations.²

¹ For general histories of the Club, see *The First Hundred Years of the Friday Morning Music Club* by Charlotte Shear (1987); and *A Brief History of the Friday Morning Music Club* (c1931).

² The Chorale gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Barbara Goff, the Club archivist, and appreciates the countless hours she has spent organizing the documents so they can be readily accessed. The archives themselves are worthy of note, a treasure trove of Washington musical history. It is not obvious why the Club was so

1886-1900

Singing has been an important part of the FMMC since it was founded by and for women. Some instruments, brass and woodwinds in particular, were seen as unladylike, but singing was quite acceptable. No specific record has been located noting the start of ensemble singing, but it may have been as early as 1887. That year Miss Aileen Bell (1850-1914), a very accomplished musician and cousin of Alexander Graham Bell, joined the club. She is referred to as "a good chorus director" early in [A Brief History of the Friday Morning Music Club](#).

The earliest specific reference to the Chorus was in 1894. The club had grown too large to continue meeting in members' homes and moved to the Washington Club, then at 1710 I Street. Programs were moved up to 10:30 from 10:45 to allow more time for chorus rehearsal afterwards. The earliest known program with Chorus participation is February 26, 1897, listing 4 canons ("O Beautiful Violet", "Good Night", "Happiness Ever is Fugitive Found", and "Snow in Spring") by Carl Reinecke. Programs have been saved "only" since 1896 and may not have been prepared at all before then.

continuously meticulous in keeping records for 119 years. It must have been very tempting at times to pitch the old dusty stuff, particularly when it all had to be packed up and moved yet again because the Club never had permanent office space that could contain it.

The Chorus is listed on seven more club programs by the end of the nineteenth century, usually with just one or two songs. Some of these works are still familiar, including the “Spinning Song” from The Flying Dutchman. The Chorus presented it twice, once at a Club all-Wagner program in 1899. Also in 1899, Mrs. R.C. Dean, later the Chorus Director, sang “Jerusalem, Thou that Killith the Prophets”, the hauntingly beautiful soprano aria from Mendelssohn’s Paulus, the same aria so ably sung by Ruth Doherty in the Chorale’s performance of the entire work 102 years later.

The 1898-99 season listed 23 singers in the Chorus: ten first and five second sopranos, plus four first and four second altos. The popularity of the Chorus grew over the next few years, with 27 members in 1899-1900 and 38 in 1903-04. Guests were invited to join programs when male voices or wind instruments were needed.

1900-1920

The first formal all-choral program was on April 24, 1903, featuring Sir Frederick Cowan’s cantata “A Daughter of the Sea”. The concert was repeated on April 28 “Complimentary to the Washington Club”. Cowan was a well-known conductor and composer in his time, but largely neglected now. The Chorale has obtained a copy of the score of this cantata from the Library of Congress. Perhaps performance of some or all of it could be considered for an appropriate occasion.

The Chorus continued contributing to several Club programs each season, with Miss Bell directing until 1906. She was succeeded by her assistant, Miss Vernon,

who in turn was replaced by Mrs. Dean in 1908. Membership was generally in the twenties in this period, but something must have happened in 1911. The Chorus was suspended and reorganized in 1912 with Mr. Heinrich Hammer “a prominent Washington musician” engaged as director. Google produced a few hits on Heinrich Hammer as a German-American composer, so he may indeed have been at least somewhat prominent. In addition, the Chorus imposed rules: roll call was taken 5 minutes before rehearsal, and a fine of 25 cents (equivalent to almost \$5 now!) was imposed for missing a rehearsal or concert without cause and 20 cents for tardiness. Unexcused absence from two rehearsals in a month excluded the member from the next performance. These draconian measures suggest that the number of active singers may have dropped below the official total, but they appear to have solved the problems, at least temporarily. The last concert of the 1912-13 season was an elegant evening affair at the Raleigh Hotel, featuring Carl Reinecke’s cantata “The Enchanted Swans”.

During World War I the Chorus sang five times for troops, no doubt raising their morale before shipping overseas. Mrs. Dean was again Director following Hammer’s resignation, possibly because of anti-German feeling.

Membership was up to 37 in 1918-19, but more troubles, probably financial, emerged. In October the Board of Governors proposed that the Chorus be self-supporting. Unable to comply, the Chorus temporarily disbanded. Apparently the funds were raised, because in January, it resumed

operations with Bainbridge Crist (1883-1969) hired as conductor. Crist definitely was a prominent musician; some of his works are still played. In fact he may have been a little too prominent; he was out of town for at least two concerts in 1919 and 1920, and Louis Potter took over conducting duty. This may have been Potter's introduction to choral directing. He later founded the Washington Choral Society as noted in an article by Thomas Mastroianni on a memorial fund established in his name in the January 2005 FMMC newsletter.

The Chorus sang its swansong on April 23, 1920. That evening concert featured a scene from "The Crusaders" by Neils Gade. This dramatic cantata for choir, soloists and orchestra, though not well known, is still available on cd. The Chorus played the role of sirens, probably with great glee. It also sang several other songs. Louis Potter conducted.

1920-1945

For reasons not now clear, the Chorus disbanded again as a regular function of the Club until 1945. Vocal ensembles continued to maintain the tradition during this period, but the regular programs, rehearsals, and fines for absences were suspended.

1945-1985

In 1945, Associate Members (those who had not auditioned as independent musicians) came to the rescue under Zita MacBride. Associate Members put on monthly Associate Musicals, and the Associate Chorus joined these performances. By early 1946, 20 women had joined the Chorus. The rental paid to the YWCA in 1946 (the Club venue for many years) included \$25 for 10 choral

rehearsals. In 1949, the Club constitution was amended to allow the Associate Chorus to sing at regular club programs, which it generally did twice each year.

Mrs. MacBride directed until 1952 when Sylvia Holtsberg took over. She directed for two years and was succeeded by Mildred Gleeson for another two years. Zita MacBride resumed her role as Director in 1956. The re-named Choral Ensemble filled most of a Club program at the Cosmos Club on April 5, 1957 with six love songs by Brahms, the prayer from Boris Gudonov and several other songs. The program lists 21 singers by name.

Marguerite Egeler assumed the directorship from 1958-60, and the group's name reverted to Chorus. Twenty-seven singers performed in January 1960, but more financial problems emerged thereafter. The Chorus delayed the start of the 1960-61 season but then raised sufficient funds (\$200) to hire George Manos as Director. Manos was director of the National Oratorio Society and later became familiar to many in the Washington area as conductor of the orchestra series broadcast from the National Gallery. He conducted four concerts over two years, with the name back to Choral Ensemble, but then resigned due to ill health.

Marjorie Gloyd, a new member of the Club, became Director in 1963. More active members joined, and the group again became a full-fledged activity of the Club. All singers had to audition to join or even remain in the Ensemble. The scope of the singing increased also, including a 1966 performance of the Bach "Magnificat." Lest the singers take

themselves too seriously, she also had them sing Randall Thompson's "Rosemary", one part of which is named "Chemical Analysis" (1970) and "O Can Ye Sew Cushions" by Granville Bantock (1971). Apparently Mrs. Gloyd took a year off, because Evangeline Everett Robinson was Director for the 1967-68 season. Mrs. Gloyd then returned and directed until 1976. Porpora's "Magnificat" appears to have been a favorite piece, being performed several times. One performance in December 1972 included Barbara Luchs, who is still singing with the Chorale--32 years later! Another was at the Kennedy Center. This performance, on March 15, 1974 in the North Gallery of the Roof Terrace, was accompanied by the FMMC Instrumental Ensemble, the predecessor of the current Orchestra. Most concerts in that period were in Barker Hall of the YWCA.

Frank Conlon took the reins in early 1976. Two years later the Club adopted a new policy of allowing the choral and instrumental ensembles to choose their own directors, the only two salaried positions in Club. The Choral Ensemble ran into membership problems later in 1978, but members mounted a successful recruiting drive. The December concert had 25 singers. Conlon has had a distinguished career as a pianist and teacher at the Levine School of Music and George Washington University. He is still a performing member of the FMMC, frequently playing at Club and Chorale concerts. He played the organ for the Chorale's 2005 Twelfth Night Concert, featuring Saint-Saen's "Christmas Oratorio".

Jeremy Young directed in 1979-80, and then Doris Mattingly, formerly

accompanist, took over for three years. About 20 members participated in these years, singing a variety of pieces old and new, the latter including FMMC composers, such as Natalia Raigorodsky's "Wake Ye People and Sing." Venues included Jordan Hall (1330 G St), the Mt Vernon Place United Methodist Church and The Arts Club (2017 I St.).

Golnush K. Ackert was engaged for the 1983-84 season after Mattingly decided not to renew. The Choral Ensemble sang madrigals and early sacred songs at the New York Ave Presbyterian Church. She may have been a demanding director; the Ensemble sang entirely a cappella. Membership dropped from 20 to 17 but overall performance was reported by the Chairman to have improved. In the summer of 1984, Ackert unexpectedly found herself unable to resume her duties for 1984-85. With the two problems of low membership and no director, the Ensemble canceled the fall program.

1985-2005

These problems were resolved in January with the hiring of the high-energy Martin Piecuch (pronounced PQ) as Director, and the Chorale started to move toward its current form. Piecuch was at times resident conductor at Wolf Trap Farm Park, Alexandria Choral Society, Washington Civic Opera and various other groups. He and Chairman Julia Snook planned to increase the size and visibility of the Choral Ensemble. For his first concert on April 26, 1985, the group was even labeled "The New Choral Ensemble." This all-choral program by 29 voices featured Randall Thompson's "Rosemary" (including "Chemical Analysis") and pieces by

Villa Lobos. Anna-Stina Ericson first sang with the group at that concert.

The next year, Piecuch led a "Festival of Choral Music" involving five church choirs plus the Choral Ensemble at the Aldersgate Methodist Church in Alexandria (where Piecuch was Choir Director). All music sung was by FMMC composers. The first Spring Concert was presented on May 2, 1986. In the fall of 1986 the group made the momentous decision to add men's voices. Rehearsals moved to Monday night to accommodate more peoples' schedules. The first mixed-voice concert was performed on December 12. Eight tenors and nine basses joined the 14 sopranos and ten altos (total 41 voices) in Mendelssohn's Second Symphony, the "Hymn of Praise." This was also the first concert using the name "Chorale" and the first with a full orchestra.

Seeking even more male voices, the Chorale arranged a 1987 Spring Concert program of Vaughn Williams "Serenade to Music" to be sung jointly with the U.S. Navy Band Sea Chanters. Unfortunately the Sea Chanters pulled out at the last moment for reasons never stated. Threatened with a debacle, the Chorale came through with a reasonable performance. Eight tenors and 13 basses (some pressed into service by Piecuch) sang with the 19 sopranos and 14 altos (total 54, at that point probably the largest vocal concert put on by the FMMC). A critic with the Washington Post apparently never noticed that the Sea Chanters were missing; the program, having been printed earlier, still listed them and he referred to them as participants.

Serious budget problems again emerged in this period. Then as now the Chorale required many rehearsals, for which Piecuch expected to be paid, and the more ambitious programs required additional fees for music rentals, rehearsal space, etc. The Club could supply only \$1800 in 1986-77, but the Chorale needed \$4000. Natalia Raigorodsky Parris (composer as noted above and still an FMMC member) offered the use of her Bethesda house, which included a large room well-suited for concerts, for a fundraiser. The benefit concert raised \$2222 (1800+2222=4022; probably not a coincidence). Another benefit in the 1991-92 season raised over \$1000.

Programs became increasingly ambitious. In December 1987 the Chorale sang Honegger's "King David" a difficult piece, although a simplified orchestration for a small instrumental ensemble was used. An-Ming Wang joined the Chorale for that concert. The Spring Concert in May 1988 was joint with the FMMC Orchestra (although it is not clear if this was an official Orchestra function or an ad hoc ensemble including Orchestra members, as is done now), including Fanfare for the Common Man, Copland; The Rio Grande, Constant Lambert; An American Trilogy, arranged by Jacques Rizzo; Folk Song Symphony, Roy Harris; and Battle Hymn of Republic; William Steffle. About 40 voices were on these programs.

Piecuch undoubtedly raised the profile and level of achievement of the Chorale quite significantly. He promoted the music of FMMC composers. He also created a great deal of controversy both within the Chorale and with the Board of

Governors. The 1987-88 season was his last. Piecuch has gone on to a notable international career, including serving as permanent guest conductor of the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra. He does not appear to include the FMMC in his resume.

Webster Alexander Rogers, Jr., the current Director, initially was appointed for the 1988-89 season. Thus he is the longest serving Chorale Director with the possible exception of Aileen Bell. He has built on the advances initiated by Piecuch— major-chorale programming and fully orchestrated concerts at least twice each year.

His first season included programs in the Kennedy Center lobby, at the Lisner Home, the Sumner Arts Center and the National Gallery as well as the major Twelfth Night Concert at Eldbrooke United Methodist Church and Spring Concert at Wesley United Methodist Church. The Chorale supplied refreshments for the audience after some of these concerts.

The Spring Concert for 1995 was Handel's "Israel in Egypt" with 53 voices at St. Columba's Episcopal Church. "Israel in Egypt" will again be sung in 2005. The Chorale first sang the Brahms "Requiem" in spring 1996. It was repeated in 2000 and 2005.

In recent years the Chorale also has performed Bach's "Mass in B Minor", Mozart's Requiem, Fauré's "Requiem", Handel's "Messiah", Haydn's "Mass in Time of War", "The Seasons", and "The Creation", and Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis". It has sought out neglected masterpieces such as Mendelssohn's "Paulus" and Schubert's "Mass No. 6". It

has also introduced original works by FMMC composers, including the world premiere of Wang An-Ming's "Gloria" and Leonard Moses's "The Flight into Egypt".

It is remarkable what the FMMC Chorale can do with a modest number of amateur singers. The recent performance of the Brahms Requiem is a case in point. The Chorale had intended to present Honegger's "King David" at a Winter Concert, but several factors converged to preclude that less than a month before the announced date. There was also an additional Twelfth Night Concert with Saint-Saen's "Christmas Oratorio", so only two weeks were available to rehearse the "Requiem." The Chorale came through splendidly, giving one of its best performances ever. The concert was given as memorial and benefit for the victims of the Asian tsunami. Over \$1500 was collected and sent to the International Rescue Committee.

In April 2005, the Chorale sponsored a benefit Gala at the Woman's Club of Chevy Chase, featuring a concert version of excerpts from *The Mikado*, with a reception and silent auction. The Gala was a great success, raising about \$6000 and providing a very pleasant experience for the audience.

The future appears bright for the FMMC Chorale. Membership, achievement, and enthusiasm remain high. The legacy of a couple of dozen women who simply enjoyed getting together to sing is safe.