

Tuesday

Includes:

WHAT'S ON CAPE
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WHAT'S ON CAPE

ARTS • ENTERTAINMENT • CULTURE

World Travelers

Community's Music Bridges Continents and Hopeful Hearts

By David Frankel

This year, they're touring New England with the Boston Pops. Next year, they're going to Russia and Finland and Italy. Previously, they've sung in places like Albania and Czechoslovakia and the U.S.S.R., the latter two nations in 1990, just as Communism was collapsing. They've sung in 16 languages and issued 24 CDs and collected glowing reviews from major newspapers all over the world. Yet they began in the 1970s as the "dreadful" church choir of a small Orleans religious community, and have remained amateurs in terms of financial compensation, if not in terms of skill. Who are Gloriam Dei Cantores, and how did they get so good?

They started as the church choir of the Community of Jesus, an ecumenical Christian community of about 300 members situated near Rock Harbor in Orleans. Slightly less than a third of the community lives monastically, with a schedule of daily prayers that includes a great deal of liturgical singing, and at first the choir wasn't really up to the regimen. "We could barely handle a doxology," recalls Christy Haig, an alto who has been with the choir virtually since its inception. The community asked one of its members, Elizabeth Patterson, who had a strong musical background, to take things in hand. Ms. Patterson had studied Gregorian chant in England, and with the help of friends there, she began to shape the expert ensemble she continues to direct today.

But that ensemble couldn't have happened without extraordinary commitment on the part of its members. In 1987 the entire choir went, at its own expense, to study for a month with Dr. George Guest at Cambridge University in England. Since then, the members, most of whom also have regular jobs and family lives, rehearse as a group every day between 9 and 10 a.m., with rehearsals running longer if the performing schedule requires. They practice between half an hour and an hour a day on their own and they take master classes, theory classes, individual lessons.

"I was just in Rochester, N.Y. with one of our members who was taking his voice lesson up there," remarks Jim Jordan, the choir's assistant conductor and organist. The choir members leave jobs and families for weeks at a time to go on tour and several members have begun their own businesses so as to have the flexibility to meet their choir commitments. And they do all this without pay.

What motivates them?

The Community of Jesus sees the choir as one of its "major outreach ministries," says Ruth Vought, a community member who handles publicity for the group. And it is clear from talking to choir members that they

consider membership in the choir to be a mission in the Christian sense of the term. But, as befits a community which believes in finding the unity within different forms of Christian practice, it is a soft-spoken, respectful kind of mission.

"We went to the Soviet Union in 1990, when the doors of glasnost were just beginning to open, and we were the first choir to sing Russian liturgical music on a

When you ask choir members about the spiritual rewards of what they do, they keep returning to those tours of Eastern Europe. "There was a Bulgarian folk song, a little love song we learned as an encore," says Jordan. "We'd gotten it from a friend in Canada, and all she had said was, 'I guarantee you that they'll know this piece.' Well, every place we sang it, we got a standing ovation. We couldn't even sing the first word before

they were on their feet singing it with us. They were so overwhelmed that Americans would learn a song of theirs."

One difficult thing about going to Eastern Europe was "seeing what those people have endured," Mr. Jordan says. "In Albania in '92, the unemployment rate was over 60 per cent. We'd look out our window at Tirana's main square, and it would be packed all day with people who had no place else to go." Ms. Haig explains, "They had chopped down, literally, all their trees for firewood the previous winter, buses were driving around with no windows — Albania had been so isolated that whatever they couldn't make in their own country, they didn't have, and one of the things they didn't have was glass. At one point, we needed some music copied, and they had to bring in toner from another country."

"We didn't expect to see meat," Mr. Jordan says. "But then we started staying in people's houses, and they fed us beef. Our director said, 'Just so you understand, they're basically giving you the shirts off their backs.' We'd be in the house, and we'd try to do dishes, and they'd say, 'No, sit. You pray. I clean.'"

"This couple in Yugoslavia was having its 50th anniversary party," Ms. Haig says. "They had their extended family, their friends, and they essentially invited our entire bus to pull up and join them. How many people here would invite a whole foreign choir into their home? They were roasting a pig on a spit — they'd sing songs for us, and they wanted us to sing songs for them. We sang a medley of 'Over the Rainbow,' some Negro spirituals ..."

"When we were in Yugoslavia," Mr. Jordan says, "I remember walking into the house where we were staying. The owner, a little old lady, came up to me — she didn't speak a word of English, but I'd been traipsing up the hill, and I was sweating. She took the bandanna off her head and wiped the sweat from my forehead."

"In Russia, they have a tradition of giving flowers after a concert, just as we do, and after one concert, I got to go down and receive the rose from a little girl. And there was something about looking at that girl's face — any walls at that moment vanished. We were connected to those people, and their tradition, and their life. The music, the work, were what got us in that door. But what mattered was the connection."



The Gloriam Dei Cantores chorus from Orleans tours the world and is now traveling throughout New England with the Boston Pops Esplanade Orchestra.

Russian concert stage in 70 years," says Christy Haig. "It was such a gift, to give back to those people their own church music. During the Communist regime, they'd only heard the melodies sung with different texts."

"The choir studied extensively to learn both the Russian language and the authentic musical style," says Jim Jordan. "We worked to become a Russian choir. We had extra rehearsals, language tapes ..." Ms. Haig explains, "One of the biggest blessings was to come out of one of those church services and have people babbling to you, because they can't believe you aren't Russian." Mr. Jordan adds, "We couldn't convince one little elderly lady, we kept trying to explain...no Russian, English...she wouldn't believe us."

"In Russia, women cover their hair during church services," Mr. Jordan says. "So the women in our choir did too, out of respect. The people came up to us afterwards; they couldn't believe that we would care." Ms. Haig adds, "Someone came up to me after a concert and said, 'I was told all my life that Americans didn't care.'"



THE ISLAND PACKET

Friday, February 14, 1997

Gloriae Dei Cantores showed full splendor

BY JANE SHAW
Special to The Packet

The Gloriae Dei Cantores sing with one voice. And what a voice it is. Appearing Saturday, Feb. 8, at First Presbyterian Church, the 40-voice choir offered a program of early music that transcended conventional boundaries. While scale and proportion were a study in small forms, artistic levels and expressive impact were great indeed. Elizabeth Patterson directed and the concert was part of the Hilton Head Orchestra's current season.

Programming ranged from Gregorian to Russian liturgy to works by Mendelssohn to 20th Century motets. Languages included Latin, Russian and German. Singing was exclusively a cappella.

Purity of sound and refinement of diction are striking aspects of the Gloriae Dei Cantores. Tone quality is round and vibrato-free, with each note perfectly centered. The Cape Cod-based group boasts excellent choir voices — clear, free and strong. Musicianship is well developed, vocal technique sufficient. Tonal shimmer and radiance were pre-

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sent throughout, while texture was sheer, translucent.

Diction was impeccable. Initial R's, each perfectly rolled, were flawless. Purity of vowels produced impressive textual clarity. Ensemble skills are perfectly honed, with each consonant executed as if from a single singer.

Watching director Patterson is as impressive as listening to her choir. She is a study in controlled energy, firmly rooted to the text and its inherent phrasing. Her hands travel in small arcs, fingers sometimes curled, sometimes jabbing straight ahead. Everything works splendidly.

Patterson's eclectic style is most effective in outlining phrases, which are carefully constructed, with shadings perfectly etched. Attacks were infallible, endings elegantly tapered. Dynamics were dexterously achieved, with no single voice protruding.

Five works were presented in the Gregorian section. Of these, "A Hymn of Repentance" by Georgiy Sviridov

was memorable. Sung with fervor and abandon, the piece was distinguished by accuracy of style. Russians have a way of fusing text to melodic line, executing delicate scoops of text and tone, undeniably Slavic. The choir, Americans one and all, delivered these segments with impressive self-confidence.

Of the five commissioned motets by contemporary American composer Gerald Near, the chorus section was a stand-out. The work's bright texture was enhanced by hand bells, creating a splash of intriguing tone colors.

More tone colors were evident in "Rex Gloriae," a set of four motets by contemporary Welsh composer, William Mathias. Accessible yet defined by integrity, the work is distinguished by rainbows of tone clusters, open fifths, and plum-colored, squashy

tonalities. Sopranos distinguished themselves with celestial, soft singing in the upper register.

The concert included two assisting artists. The Gloriae Dei Brass Ensemble performed two works, one by Near and "Ceremonial Piece" by William MacDavis. The musicians delivered both with refined, symphonic playing.

Organist David Chalmers offered another Near work, "Banners," and two works by Marcel Dupre, of which Prelude and Fugue in B Major, Op. 7 was impressive. Jordan was aided by a page turner who not only turned, but also adjusted stops for the performer. I always thought that was cheating.

(A performer and instructor of vocal arts, Jane Shaw is a regular contributor to The Island Packet.)

THE ST. AUGUSTINE RECORD

SERVING THE COMMUNITIES OF ST. JOHNS COUNTY SINCE 1894

MONDAY, February 17, 1997

Voices like God's handbells

By MARGO POPE
Special to Compass

There is an expectation that when a professional group sings a cappella, it must sound perfect.

Whether it's a barbershop quartet or a 44-voice choir, the sound must be unified. There is no musical instrument for backup and a stray sound spoils the whole presentation.

The human voice is the most precise musical instrument, but it's also the most difficult to control. The sound can be controlled with the right breathing techniques, but all singers must be tuned into each other to make it work.

Certainly Glorise Dei Cantores understands that mission and fulfills it to the utmost. They know their audiences expect perfection and their musicianship and talent enables them to reach it.

At last week's concert in the Cathedral-Basilica of St. Augustine, the setting was demanding for an a cappella choir but the quality of the performance

was not distorted, although the building's high ceilings and cruciform design could easily lend itself to such acoustical problems.

At the same time, however, the vast openness was just what

the Glorise Dei Brass Ensemble needed for its program. The sound of the trombones, trumpets, French horns and tuba reverberated through the building and energized the crowd. It did not matter that the fanfares were not familiar. They demanded the audience sit up straight and take note.

If there was one flaw, it was that there was no narrator to enhance the program notes. With a choir that sang in English, German, Latin, Russian and Italian in one evening, such a narration might have been of service.

Perhaps, though, that is the beauty of this kind of performance. You can sit back, listen and draw your own conclusions.

**CONCERT
REVIEW**