

Diocesan Festival Choir celebrates the Easter season

By Emily Morrison

When Easter falls early as it did this calendar year, the Diocesan Festival Choir celebrates the season with a song of jubilation. Whether the choir's primary offering will be a joyful Schubert Mass or a pensive Bach cantata all depends on how many weeks of rehearsal can be fit in between January and the customary concert date in April, so time is literally of the essence.

Still, when the audience fills the Sisters of St. Joseph Motherhouse Chapel nearly to capacity and the Gothic rafters ring with heavenly harmonies, the effect is approximately the same from year to year: the Diocesan Festival Choir lives up to its name once again by "making a joyful noise unto the Lord" in a truly festive way.

The group's 12th annual concert was certainly no exception. Staged twice this Easter season — at St. Stephen's Church in Geneva on Sunday, April 13, and again at the SSJ Motherhouse Chapel on Sunday, April 20 — the performance featured Schubert's *Mass in G*, followed by a selection of choral music written expressly in celebration of Christ's resurrection. The Perinton Baroque Ensemble presented three Baroque dances for harpsichord, two flutes and cello continuo, followed by Bach's *Trio Sonata in G Major*.

The choral finale juxtaposed Gregorian chant with contemporary chorales, complementing a passage from Haydn's *The Creation* with the festive *Te Deum* of Russell Woolen, commissioned by the diocese in 1980 in honor of Father Benedict Ehmann's 50th jubilee. The audience sang along on the antiphon, a congregational refrain that concluded the performance in a true spirit of festive fellowship.

Founded in 1974 by the Diocesan Music Commission to encourage and promote an appreciation of serious church music, the Diocesan Festival Choir is comprised of 60 to 75 members culled from parish choirs all over the diocese. Cutbacks in the diocesan budget several years later caused the group to consider its viability as an independent organization. A board of directors was appointed, and the choir decided to continue on its own, under the direction of founding conductor Sister Virginia Hogan, SSJ, who reports that the board has been quite successful in fundraising, budgeting and other administrative pursuits. New members are always welcome, and membership drives comprise a large part of the board's most essential pursuits.

"My original idea was to give the singers an opportunity to do something on a scale the average parish choir couldn't handle," explains Sister Virginia, a graduate of Nazareth College who earned her master's degree in music and went on afterward to do advanced conducting studies with Frederick Fennell at Ithaca College, and both Robert Shaw and Joseph Flummerfelt at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, N.J.

Although the diocesan choir draws its members from approximately 30 parishes in the Rochester area, Sister Virginia's intent was never to replace the parish choir or discourage Festival Choir members from belonging to their own churches' choral



Conductor Virginia Hogan, SSJ, quiets the rest of the choir as soloists Barbara Staropoli, SSJ, and Christopher Jones sing a duet.

groups. Indeed, the effect of membership in the larger ensemble is often quite the opposite, since the Festival Choir provides added training and repertoire, much of which is taken back by members for use in their own parish choirs during the remainder of the year.

In addition, the choir performs a number of other functions in the diocese, depending on the needs of particular parishes. "We sang at Father Tom Rosica's ordination (on Saturday, April 19), and went to Elmira to perform at an Irish festival there," Sister Virginia adds. "We've also gone around to various parishes to do liturgies at the request of the pastor, to encourage existing choirs, to perform where there is no choir, or to start a choir. We even sang at a wedding."

The primary difference between the diocesan choir and many parish choirs, in Sister Virginia's estimation, is the former's exclusive focus on the music of classical and serious contemporary church composers. "There is no folk idiom or guitar music," she points out. "I've also tried to keep the choir aware of Gregorian chant, as well as music by prominent present-day composers."

Music selection for the group's annual concert appears to conform loosely to a certain formula Sister Virginia has worked out over the years. "What seems to work well is to do a major piece like the Schubert Mass, along with shorter pieces," she explains. "I want to give the choir as broad a spectrum of good church music as I can."

Such considerations as the size of the choir in any given year, and whether Sister Virginia feels the group can learn a complex piece in the time allotted between January and April, also figure prominently in her programming strategies. Past selections have included several Schubert and Haydn Masses, Faure's *Requiem*, Dubois' *The Seven Last Words of Christ* (a passion performed last year on Palm Sunday), a number of Bach cantatas, Benjamin Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb*, and the Easter portion of Handel's *Messiah*.

"Schubert's music is so singable and melodic. He's kind of a natural choice — a marvelous songwriter, a very prolific com-



Virginia Hogan is pleased with the sounds she hears.

poser," comments Sister Virginia, who once conducted a group called the Concert Chorale, and currently conducts the Perinton Community Chorus and Orchestra and a women's chorale known as the Perinton Chamber Singers, as well as Sunday liturgies given by the SSJ Motherhouse Chapel choir. A freelance conductor whose individual appointments have been quite possibly as numerous as her favorite composers have been prolific, Sister Virginia also guest conducts at music festivals and choral workshops all over the state of New York.

Sister Virginia's longevity as director of the Diocesan Festival Choir, moreover, is paralleled by the survival of this exemplary choral group as an independent entity. She ascribes its success primarily to the dedication of the 12 to 15-member board of directors, without whose administrative abilities she's certain the choir couldn't survive.

The rest, of course, is attributable largely to plain hard work on the part of conductor and choir members, organist and rehearsal accompanist Susan Matteson, and such talented and versatile soloists as soprano Barbara Staropoli, another Sister of St. Joseph who has performed with the Festival Choir for many years.

"We work hard with the choir to develop tone quality and music reading — things that



Jeanne Arthur of St. Mary's Parish, Scottsville, glances toward the conductor for her cue.

will be helpful to them in their parish situations," says Sister Virginia, who assigns the Motherhouse chapel itself star billing. "The chapel is very conducive to music performance because of the large sanctuary space," she observes. Renovated only a few years ago, the chapel gained additional utility as a performance space when the communion rail was removed and the sanctuary area thereby enlarged.

"The acoustics are quite good," Sister Virginia concludes. "The sanctuary forms a kind of shell, that throws the music forward. It's a very 'alive' sound."

When the Church's ancient festive hymn of prayer resounded in the chapel's open-beam ceiling during the April 20 performance of the *Te Deum* this Easter season, some 400 to 500 participating audience members would have been hard put to disagree. The Diocesan Festival Choir literally "resurrected" dormant notes from the two-dimensional oblivion of the printed page, bringing their joyful harmonies to vibrant life.

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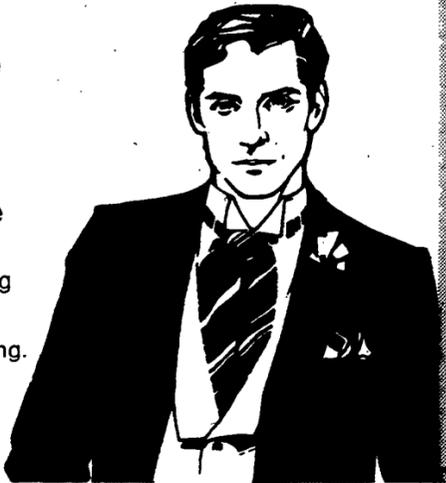


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