

Choir's sacred repertoire is new music to children's ears

By Teresa A. Parsons

It is likely to be a few years before Rochester's Cathedral Choir School lives up to the image its name calls to mind.

Nowadays, the choir usually rehearses in director Jura Litchfield's living room rather than in a large, imposing church. Instead of row upon row of fresh-faced warblers dressed in matching robes, the choir consists of a dozen ordinary kids in jeans and sweatshirts, many of whom are making their first acquaintance with the sacred choral repertoire.

They do, however, aspire to the venerable traditions of such European cathedral-based ensembles as the King's Choir. And, Litchfield pointed out, the Cathedral Choir School has come a long way after just two summers together. "This is a group of kids interested in classical vocal training in the tradition of the European cathedral schools," she observed. "For just beginning, they're a good, quality choir."

The children, aged eight to 15, have actually only rehearsed together for a handful of weeks spread over two summers. Litchfield established the choir last summer by offering an intensive two-week training course, organized in collaboration with a similar group from the Buffalo area. The local effort was funded with a \$1,000 grant from the Lift Program, which is administered through Arts for Greater Rochester.

Choir members re-grouped near the end of June, 1987, and have been practicing once a week since then. Their numbers are small, but Litchfield knew from the first that quantity wasn't her goal. "I favored a small, motivated group as opposed to a large group," she recalled. "Some of the finest cathedral schools in Europe are small in size. If (singers) are trained properly, the numbers aren't really important."

In addition to directing the Cathedral Choir School, Litchfield is a singer, conductor and choir director at St. Paul's Church in Webster. A graduate of Columbia University with a master's degree in music, she also serves on the Diocesan Music Committee.

Litchfield became versed in the cathedral school tradition several years ago when she took a summer training course for choir masters offered by the Royal School of Church Music. "I have always had a great interest in the development of children's voices," she said. "That course gave me a heavy dose of exposure to several internationally known choir directors."

Following the guidelines established by the Royal School of Church Music, Litchfield designates the Cathedral Choir School's new, inexperienced singers as "probationers." Each year, as the members gain new skills, they also rise in rank.

Among the first skills a probationer would master, for example, would be the ability to sing all the verses of a hymn solo. By the time



One of the youngest members of the new Cathedral Choir School, Ryan Lee, 8, opened wide to echo instructor Jura Litchfield.

a member reaches the fifth, sixth or seventh levels, he or she would be expected to sing more sophisticated, polyphonic melodies. As choir members move from one rank to another, they earn color-coded ribbons which denote the singer's status.

Choir members come from a variety of denominational backgrounds. Litchfield, director of public relations at St. Bernard's Institute, tries to keep the group's activities within the context of worship. "There are lots of choirs that operate without any kind of liturgical setting," she said. "But I'm enough of an ecumenist to believe that this could be open to a variety of traditions without harming anyone's faith."

Litchfield hopes to continue the choir's rehearsals on a regular basis throughout the fall. Although membership has been free of charge so far, she may begin charging a small per-session fee to help fund the group. "It takes a while to get the word out, to earn a commitment from the community and an awareness that this opportunity exists," she said.

The Cathedral Choir's summer season will conclude with a concert on Sunday, August 23, at 10 a.m. in the First Congregational Church, Fairport. Among the pieces the group plans to present are "Like a Father" by Cherubini, "Per Crucem Tuam," "The Call" by Vaughan Williams, and several English hymns.

The choir welcomes new members. For more information, call Jura Litchfield at (716) 377-6807.



Cathedral Choir School Director Jura Litchfield rehearsed her band of budding vocalists in preparation for their first concert later this month at the First Congregational Church.

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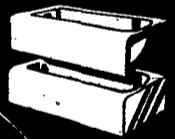
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