

Singular Sounds

For the Twin City Choristers, the Sea Notes Choral Society, and some of the state's best university a cappella groups, coming together to sing produces a harmony in both life and in the music they share.

By Jimmy Tomlin

50 Years with the Twin City Choristers

When Dr. Permillia Flack Dunston founded an all-male black chorus in 1957, she never could have imagined that 50 years later, the Winston-Salem group — known as the Twin City Choristers — would still be thrilling audiences with their warm, resonant music. But here we are, half a century later, and the group is preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary with a gala concert event next month at The Arts Council Theatre in Winston-Salem. The roster of singers may have changed — with the exception of a few remaining original members — but the music is every bit as popular as it was back when the group started.

“The Twin City Choristers is a group of men who are just community folk,” explains Fred Tanner, who has served as the group’s musical director for about five years. “We’re not all musicians. We come from all backgrounds — bankers, an ex-sheriff, a pharmacist, a doctor. [We’re] just regular people.”

The common bond they share is their love and appreciation for choral music written for the male voice.

The chorus, which currently has about 30 members, sings all kinds of music, with and without accompaniment — from the classical standards of Brahms and Mozart to popular songs like “You’ll Never Walk Alone” and “Climb Every Mountain” — but much of its repertoire of late has focused on old African-American spirituals.

“I think it’s turned to religious music because many of our engagements are at churches,” Tanner says. “But we also do some secular music, stuff from musicals, show tunes, contemporary gospel. Music is not always readily available for all-male choruses, so we have to sing what we can find.”

By the same token, though, the fact that the Choristers are an all-male chorus accounts for a large part of the group’s appeal, Tanner says. “It’s not a common sound,” he says.

“Most choruses are SATB [soprano, alto, tenor, and bass], but when just male voices sing, it’s a different sound from any other sound, and I think that’s part of our popularity.”

Although the group’s members aren’t required to be trained singers, Tanner says, not just anybody can join. “There’s an audition, but it’s not a strenuous audition,” he explains.

“They have to have some knowledge of melody and harmony. Not all of our members can read music — a lot of it’s done by ear — but they do have good voices.”

Coming together

The Choristers have a history as rich as their sound. Dunston, who is now deceased, founded the chorus in 1957 at the encouragement of Dr. A.L. Cromwell, a Winston-Salem dentist and musician who, in the 1920s, had directed a male chorus called the Twin City Glee Club. The Choristers consisted primarily of male high school students from Carver High School, where Dunston taught music.

“I can remember sometimes we didn’t have a lot of guys show up for concerts,” recalls 80-year-old baritone Rudy Anderson Sr., who has been a Twin City Chorister since 1958 and refers to himself as one of the group’s veteran “war horses.”

“We started out as about 25 guys — baritone, bass, and tenor — but sometimes we came up a little short, with maybe about 18 guys. But the magnificent part about it was that it always came together. It would surprise me all the time; we’d be short on guys and come up with one of our greatest concerts.”

Anderson, whose son Rudy Anderson Jr. also sings with the Choristers, has done his share of solos through the years, including one of his favorites: the old African-American spiritual, “King Jesus Is A-Listening.” His son, a second tenor, sings solos, too.

Dunston, the group’s founder, left after only a couple of years, when she accepted a teaching position in neighboring city. The Choristers continued to perform under various directors until 1980, when Dunston returned to Winston-Salem to accept a position as chair of the music department at Winston-Salem State University. She took over the Choristers again, and that’s when the group really began to grow and enjoy success, especially in and around Winston-Salem, where they performed in countless churches, schools, and concert halls.

The Choristers also began to travel throughout North Carolina and even embarked on a tour several years ago, performing in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut.

As diverse as the group is — young and old, from all walks of life — Anderson is quick to point out that the members all get along famously, and that’s a key to the Choristers’ success. “It’s really a great group of guys with a lot of camaraderie,” he says. “Even when we get together during rehearsals every week, it’s just like a family reunion. We have a lot of fun together, and I think it shows when we perform.”