

Choristers now have even more cause to sing
In 50th anniversary year, group becomes Arts Council member
By Layla Farmer
The Chronicle

The Twin City Choristers have a lot to celebrate this year.

It marks the 50th anniversary of the all-male vocal group's founding, and just recently the group became the Arts Council of Winton-Salem/ Forsyth County's newest member, joining the Sawtooth Center for Visual Art, the N.C. Black Repertory Company, the Winston-Salem Symphony and other local arts institutions.

Choir director Dr. Fred Tanner says the group is excited about joining the Arts Council. "It's going to open some doors," he commented. "That's a means of support for us and it gives us some kind of credibility in terms of being a viable organization in the community."

The mission of the group has been to provide an outlet for men to sing and to serve in the community, Tanner said. The members' grand voices have been a worthy gift to the city since the group's inception. Tanner said music is in the blood of members. "They enjoy singing, and they enjoy sharing," he said.

There are usually about 35-40 members on the Choristers roster, many of whom have been singing with the group for decades.

Choristers President John Young joined the group more than 20 years ago. "For me, it's rejuvenating, you know?" Young said. "You might feel a little tired and when Tuesday nights come, you get in there and you get filled with the spirit of singing and the camaraderie that we enjoy."

Ironically, the male group was founded by a woman. Dr. Permillia Flack Dunston put together the group in 1957. The longtime music educator was the one-time chair of the Winston-Salem State University Department of Music. Dunston almost lived long enough to see her beloved group reach this year's milestones, but she passed away in October of last year.

Tanner, a retired dean of the college of Arts and Sciences at WSSU, knew Dunston both professionally and musically. He said she was an innovator in many ways. "The unique part about it was that there were not too many male choruses around when Dr. Dunston did this," Tanner said.

The Twin City Choristers represent a long standing tradition in Winston-Salem, traveling to churches and community events to give stirring, free concerts. They achieved 501(c)(3) status earlier this year.

Many members of the choir have academic ties to Dunston, who devoted her life to education. Tanner once worked under Dunston during her tenure at WSSU and joined the group at her insistence. He has directed the group for the past six years, writing and arranging music to suit its needs.

"The problem that we have is that music for men is not readily available because most of music is for soprano, alto, tenor and bass," he explained. "I've been writing some music for the group and we've been doing the standard spirituals, the old, classical pieces, for men."

“From the Heart” a special concert to commemorate the choir’s gold anniversary will be held Oct. 14. There will be a cost for tickets for the first time in the group’s history, and proceeds will be used to establish an endowed scholarship in Dunston’s honor.

“This is something that we want to do and I think that it would be fitting to do this in her honor ... and also enlighten people to her contributions to this community musically, because not many people know what she did,” Tanner said.

Two charter members, Rudy Anderson Sr. and Garland Wallace, still retain their places on the choir.

Wallace first met Dunston when he was a student at Carver High School, where she taught music and directed the glee club that he sang in. He describes the group as “just a bunch of old guys who like to sing,” and says that being a member has been an unforgettable experience for him.

“It’s therapy, believe it or not, it’s really therapy,” he remarked. “It just gives you a good feeling of what God is doing and what he has done and what he can do.”

Wallace insists that members have had harmony on and off the concert stage.

“I can’t remember ever, since we’ve been together, any arguments among the members,” he said.

Tanner says directing the group is vastly different from anything he’s ever done, in part because of the dedication of the members.

“It’s not so sterile and academic; they sing from the heart, and as I said, most of the choristers are not trained musicians,” he commented. “It’s gratifying to me to see the joy that it brings to them because they enjoy singing so much.”

The choristers are excited about the concert that will honor the memory of their beloved founder, Wallace said.

“This is ... the most important concert that we’ve done,” he stated. “We can’t wait to get (to practice) on Tuesday evenings to get together and do our thing.”

The Twin City Choristers will be feted for its latest achievements on Friday, Sept. 7 from 6 - 9 p.m. at WhiteSpace Gallery (in the Piedmont Leaf Lofts at 401 East 4th St., Suite 202). The reception will celebrate the group’s induction into the Arts Council and its longevity. The “From the Heart” 50th Anniversary Concert will be held Sunday, Oct. 14 at 4 p.m. in the Arts Council Theatre at 610 Coliseum Dr. For more information, contact Rudy Anderson at 336-744-0048, or Shonta Moore at 336-682-1841 or e-mail info@thetwincitychoristers.com.