

## *i Coristi* Chamber Choir – The First Ten Years

*i Coristi* Chamber Choir was founded in September 1994 by its current music director, Dr. Debra Cairns, with seventeen members. Apart from singing, the first order of business was choosing a name. During the first few weeks of rehearsals, various names were proposed. After some discussion, a short-list of possible names was put to the vote, with the result that the choir became saddled with a name that has tripped up many a tongue over the years!

The process of establishing the choir as a legal entity was led by Lorna Arndt and the articles of association were signed by Dr. Cairns, Lorna, Cathy Grant, Michelle Green and Matthew Johnson, and witnessed by Walter Goetz. The original bylaws were also drafted at this time to permit incorporation under The Societies Act and subsequent registration as a charitable organization for tax purposes. The first president of the choir was Curtis Knecht.

In its inaugural season, the choir prepared two programs, giving its first performance in the West End Christian Reformed Church on Saturday January 28, 1995. The first program, containing works by de Victoria, Weelkes, Palestrina, Bach, Brahms and Bruckner, was also performed at Augustana University College in Camrose. The second program, also performed at West End Christian Reformed Church, on May 6, 1995, consisted of works by a wide variety of composers including Byrd, Britten, Monteverdi, Vaughan Williams, Elgar and Rutter. The choir repeated the program at St. Peter Lutheran Church in Stettler the following day.

From the outset, the choir established four practices that have become *i Coristi* trademarks. First, guest artists from the Edmonton area were invited to participate in the performances, being given an opportunity to perform on their own as well as with the choir. *i Coristi*'s first guest was organist Dr. Marnie Giesbrecht. Second, the choir instituted the practice of performing the program free at a seniors' residence or extended care facility, normally on the evening before the concert. Third, Dr. Cairns ("Debbi" to everyone except a few choristers who were in her university conducting or diction classes!) began the practice of introducing each section of the program orally to the audience, with a view to making a stronger connection with the audience than the music might make on its own. Last, but definitely not least, refreshments were served at intermission. This tended to result in rather more lengthy intermissions than the standard 20 minutes, but both choir and audience felt better! Many people still wax nostalgic for Christine Janicki's famous raspberry ganache, made only with the finest Callebaut chocolate. Unfortunately the supply was cut off in its prime when Christine, an alto in the early years of the choir, closed her bake shop and retired from the baking business.

In the latter part of the choir's first season, Debbi announced that she had applied for a sabbatical leave from her university position for the following year. Once this was approved, she arranged to have Dr. Marilyn Kerley conduct the choir during the 1995-96 season. So while Debbi was off in exotic climes in the south of France and Italy, the choir persisted through the usual Edmonton winter under the guidance of an interim director. In the only concert of the season, *i Coristi* performed a variety of motets, including Bach's well-known *Jesu, Meine Freude* and Duruflé's *Quatre motets sur des thèmes grégoriens*. After this concert, Dr. Kerley bowed out of the position and Bill Kempster, a doctoral student in conducting, worked with the choir for a brief, but exhilarating few months, preparing for a concert that unfortunately did not take place.

September 1996 saw Debbi's return from leave with renewed energy for another season with the choir. However, early in 1997 she announced that she was taking another leave from the university, effective the beginning of July, this time with no guarantee that she would return. At this point in the choir's young life, the members were faced with a major decision – whether to take over responsibility for running the choir or to fold it. After serious consideration of the alternatives, but without a great deal of agonizing, the choir decided to continue what Debbi had started and set out to recruit a replacement music director. As a result, Joy Berg was appointed as music director for the following year.

What might have turned out to be Debbi's final concert with the choir took place May 3, 1997. Highlights from this concert included Ravel's *Trois Chansons* (with its fiendishly tricky texts coupled with fast tempi), Rautavaara's *Suite de Lorca* and Schumann's *Zigeunerleben*. The concert was an emotionally-charged experience, as the singers poured everything they had into their director's farewell performance.

Under Joy Berg's enthusiastic direction, *i Coristi* expanded its musical horizons in a number of interesting ways during the 1997-98 season, starting the year by participating in a performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony (*Symphony of a Thousand*) with several other Edmonton choirs at the opening of the Francis Winspear Centre for Music. Concert programs included Bach's motet *Komm, Jesu, Komm*, Brahms' *Zigeunerlieder*, and Hugo Wolf's *Sechs Geistliche Lieder*. One of the performance highlights of the year was the world premiere on April 25, 1998, of Joseph Lai's *The Sound of the Trees*, a work for choir, piano, oboe and flute, with text by Robert Frost.

As it looked towards the 1998-99 season, *i Coristi* was again faced with the need to find a music director, as Joy Berg decided to move away from Edmonton. Fortunately, Debbi decided to return and the choir was delighted to welcome her back as its director. The choir again presented two concert programs. The first, in January, 1999, featured Castel Nuovo-Tedesco's *Romancero Gitano* and Palestrina's *Missa Ave Regina Coelorum*. The second, in May, included a wide variety of songs on the theme of symbolic flowers – lilies, represented in sacred songs dedicated to Mary, and roses, celebrating love. This program included some real musical gems: Trond Kverno's *Ave Maris Stella*, Maurice Duruflé's *Tota Pulchra Est*, and Morten Lauridsen's exquisite five-song set, *Les Chansons des Roses*, with its lush piano accompaniment.

One of the highlights of the 1999-2000 season was *i Coristi*'s participation in an event in November sponsored by Cantemus Canada, also featuring the Strathcona County Chorus and Cantemus Intermediate Choir, both conducted by Troy Lamoureux, and Spiritus Chamber Choir from Calgary, conducted by David Wilson. The choir also performed, this time as guest artists with the Edmonton Chamber Orchestra, in a Christmas program featuring Charpentier's *Messe de minuit pour Noël*.

In the second part of the season, the choir performed two programs, the first of which consisted of works based on texts by Shakespeare, with songs written by composers ranging from Thomas Morley to Ward Swingle. It included Vaughan William's *Three Shakespeare Songs*, with its inspired setting of *The Cloud-Capp'd Towers*. The final program of the year featured songs by various Canadian composers.

In a significant milestone for the choir, *i Coristi* entered the CBC Competition for Amateur Choirs for the first time in the spring of 2000 and was selected as one of two chamber choirs from Alberta to go into the semi-final round. While the choir did not advance to the final round, this was no mean

achievement, considering that this category is perhaps the most challenging one in the competition, both in terms of the number of choirs that enter and the calibre of the competition. Debbi was justifiably very pleased with this result and it was a well-earned reward for her long hours of preparation and rehearsal.

The 2000-2001 season was designed to celebrate the change from one millenium to another with a pair of “bookend” programs. The first, entitled *In Memoriam: A Century in Passing*, illustrated some of the more significant political events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in word and song, with an inspired text by Edmonton journalist, Satya Das, narrated by local theatrical legend, Dr. Walter Kaasa. This program was noteworthy for the number of different languages it required the choir to handle – eight in addition to English: Hungarian, Polish, Russian, Korean, Indonesian, two Chinese dialects and Latin! The second, *In Celebration: A Century Dawning*, included two major works; Vivaldi’s uplifting *Magnificat* (RV 610) and Mozart’s *Vesperae solennes de confessore*, a miniature masterpiece. The performance of these works was supported by the 15-piece Edmonton Chamber Orchestra and was a fitting end to a full and satisfying season.

In between these bookends, *i Coristi* again performed as a guest of Cantemus Canada, then set out bravely on its first significant foray into “non-classical” repertoire. The Celtic group *Sheela Na Gigh* were the guest artists for this program, and choristers and audience alike were caught up in the energy and vitality of Celtic folk music. As the first “cross-over” experience for *i Coristi*, it started something that was to be repeated in subsequent seasons.

This season also saw the release of *i Coristi*’s first CD, “If music be the food of love”. This compilation album included 22 tracks from several preceding seasons. Particularly noteworthy on the album are the demanding and rarely-recorded *Trois Chansons* by Maurice Ravel and the beautiful three-song set *O Mistress Mine* by Nils Lindberg. With works spanning four centuries, this *a capella* recording contains a variety of styles and reflects the broad range of classical repertoire the choir has performed over the years.

A noteworthy “extra” in 2001 for those members of *i Coristi* who wished to accept it was an invitation to participate in the first Edmonton “Sunrise Celebration” event, produced by CBC Radio 2 and broadcast live-to-air on Easter Sunday, April 15, from Edmonton City Hall. Several hundred choristers from nine Edmonton choirs, anchored by Pro Coro Canada and the University of Alberta Madrigal Singers, formed a massed choir. Those of us who got up at 4 a.m. or earlier to get there for the 5:12 a.m. start will probably take vivid memories of this spectacular occasion to their graves. In particular, anyone fortunate enough to have been standing by the basses from the Ukrainian Male Chorus of Edmonton will not soon forget the low notes in Rachmaninov’s *Shestopsalmiye* and *Blazhen muzh!*

Encouraged by the success of the Celtic concert with *Sheela Na Gigh*, Debbi programmed into the 2001-02 season a concert consisting entirely of jazz. Featuring the wonderfully crisp playing of the Bill Richards Trio, this program introduced the choir to dramatically different repertoire than it was accustomed to singing and introduced the audience to a different side of the choir. With vocal coaching assistance from Paula Roberts, the choir and its intrepid music director grooved their way down Route 66, hung out with the nightingales in Berkeley Square and went a capella in Acapulco!

Of course, the choir offered its audience some regular fare as well, with much of the latter part of the season devoted to getting ready for *i Coristi*’s Big Adventure – its first tour. Following the choir’s solid

result in the 2000 CBC competition, Debbi applied to have the group perform at the Podium 2002 conference in Toronto. The application was successful, with *i Coristi* being the only Alberta choir selected to attend this prestigious biennial event. This led to a vigorous effort to raise money to support the tour. This effort included a Cabaret Soirée at the university Faculty Club, replete with silent auction, desserts, and entertainment provided by members of the choir and friends. The program featured a dubious vocal solo by one member of the choir who appeared to be suffering from (or perhaps enjoying) mild gender confusion. Oh well, all in a good cause!

After a send-off concert on May 11 in Edmonton, the choir spent a week in Southern Ontario, giving well-received performances in Hamilton, London and Stratford before arriving in Toronto for Podium. With lodgings right on the University of Toronto campus, members enjoyed ready access to shopping, sight-seeing and conference sessions. The final performance of the tour, to a packed hall in Hart House, was a resounding success and helped to put *i Coristi* firmly on the national choral map. A wonderful end to a truly memorable tour and season.

The 2002-03 season began with a program that contained a number of choral masterpieces, including two sections of Brahms' Opus 74 (*Warum ist das Licht gegeben dem Mühseligen* and *O Heiland Rieß*), and Telemann's *Laudate Jehovam, Omnes Gentes*. In January, the Bill Richards Trio returned to help the choir Accentuate the Positive, with another entertaining program of jazz. *i Coristi* also reached another milestone, with its first performance with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, in Berlioz' *Roméo et Juliette*. The final concert of the year, in May, included an number of madrigals and other shorter pieces on the theme of love, in a program anchored by Brahms' wonderful *Liebeslieder Wälzer*.

This season, the choir has continued to provide interesting programming to its loyal audience. In November 2003, the first concert of the year, fittingly entitled *Reflections*, included selections from eight previous seasons. This trip down memory lane included such choir favourites as Gawthrop's *Sing me to heaven*, Belmont's *If music be the food of love* and Finzi's *My spirit sang all day*. During the season, *i Coristi* has also worked to produce its second CD, *Echoes – Ten Years of Song*, being released in conjunction with the choir's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration and a second trip to the Podium conference, this time in Winnipeg in May, 2004. The choir also entered the CBC Radio Competition for Amateur Choirs, and once again was selected as a national semi-finalist in the chamber choir category.

The final concert of the year prior to *i Coristi*'s trip to Winnipeg opened with Haydn's beautiful miniature *Missa Brevis in F (Jugendmesse)* and closed with two choral gems from Saint-Saëns, *Deux Chansons, Op. 68*. The program also included world premiere performances of two works commissioned for the choir's anniversary: Allan Bevan's *My Mother*, a wonderfully evocative setting of a text by the Irish poet, Francis Ledwidge; and Marco Burak's *The Muses on Mount Helion*, an energetic and intricate setting of texts specially written by Jen Frankel for the piece. Both works were performed beautifully and were a fitting tribute to the choir on this important occasion.

A successful collaboration with Cantilon Chamber Choir in February provided an opportunity for each choir to connect with potential new supporters and, in the case of *i Coristi*, potential future members. This collaboration illustrates the growing linkages between choirs in Edmonton, a phenomenon that reflects the tremendous development and vibrancy of the choral community in the city. This growth in the number and calibre of choirs in the Edmonton area is a tribute to the commitment and talent of people such as Dr. Cairns. She, along with her colleagues in the conducting program at the University of

Alberta, has provided invaluable guidance over the past two decades both to students in the Department of Music and to singers in her choirs. *i Coristi* has been the primary beneficiary of her time and skill in the wider community, for which its members and supporters are truly grateful.

In the course of its first ten years, *i Coristi* has travelled along some interesting musical paths, some of them familiar and others quite unfamiliar. It has enjoyed the services of committed volunteers, both from the choir and from friends and family members. It has also been fortunate to have within its ranks capable pianists, two of whom have been served the choir as its official accompanist – Nola Shantz (soprano, 2000-01) and Carol Bartel-Nickel (alto, 2000 to the present). Many other choir members have served on the *i Coristi* board, steering it safely through the always challenging landscape in which performing arts organizations operate. Without this commitment, the choir could not function as it does.

As a small choir, with members ranging in number from 16 to 24, it has been and remains a close-knit group of talented individuals from Edmonton and beyond who share a common interest in singing and challenging themselves musically. It comes as no surprise, then, that strong and enduring friendships have been formed and maintained after individual members have left the choir. For example, a number of “old” members still meet on occasion for Beer Night to enjoy each other’s company and to catch up on the latest news. This group performs together from time to time as a community service, simply for the pleasure of singing. In addition, former members of *i Coristi* are always welcomed with enthusiasm to concerts and other choir events. It is, indeed, a family, now numbering 100 members and it will no doubt continue to grow well into the future.

Despite some early challenges, or perhaps because of them, *i Coristi* has continued to grow and expand its musical horizons, offering interesting programs to its audiences and valuable opportunities for singers to discover their voices under the guidance of one of Edmonton’s most respected musicians – Dr. Debra Cairns. This choir is a tribute to her vision as its founder and her commitment to musical excellence. May the next ten years bring this choir and its director more of the same excellence and friendship.

Peter Malcolm  
Founding Member – Bass (September 1994 to June 2002)  
May 9, 2004

## **i Coristi's Guest Artists**

### **1994-95**

- Marnie Giesbrecht, organ
- Musica Transalpina* (Bill Damur, Tom Jamieson, Terry McDade), recorder, lute, gamba, crumhorn

### **1995-96**

- Trudy Olford, organ; Olivia Walsh, cello

### **1996-97**

- Joachim Segger, piano

### **1997-98**

- Hiromi Takahashi, oboe; Stillman Matheson, organ
- Judy Pearson Hafso, storyteller; Roger Admiral, piano; Trevor Sanders, guitar; Gerrard McKinnon, percussion; Judy Lowrey, piano; Katherine Lee, oboe; Mary Sullivan, flute

### **1998-99**

- Carl Lotsberg, guitar
- Janet Scott-Hoyt, piano

### **1999-00**

- Nora Bumanis, harp; David Hoyt and Gerald Onciul, French horn
- Roger Admiral, piano

### **2000-01**

- Walter Kaasa, narrator (within original text by Satya Das)
- Sheela Na Gigh*
- Lisa Feledichuk, soprano; Edmonton Baroque Orchestra

### **2001-02**

- Bill Richards Trio: Bill Richards, piano; Greg Dust, bass; Gordon Graber, percussion

### **2002-03**

- Rob Zylstra, organ; Ondrej Golias, bassoon; Andrew Wan, violin; Neda Yamach, violin; Doug Millie, cello; Mathew Stepney, double bass
- Bill Richards Trio
- Carol Bartel- Nickel and Megan Miller, piano

### **2003-04**

- Cantilon Chamber Choir
- Marnie Giesbrecht, organ; Susan Flook and Joanna Ciapka-Sangster, violins; Colin Ryan, cello