

SECRETS OF CHOIRS REVEALED

By Tim O'Toole

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It's that time of year when our ears are filled with holiday music — sacred and secular, classical and pop. Malls resound with “O Holy Night” and “Frosty the Snowman.” Schools abound with interfaith programs to fill families with tidings of comfort and joy.

If you enjoy caroling with friends, why not consider a year-round opportunity to make music at your favorite house of worship? I'm talking about choirs!

Why do some people gather on Thursday evenings for hours of rehearsal and show up early Sunday morning for a final run-through while others linger over a second cup of coffee and their Sunday Times Union?

Why do folks seek out fragrance-free deodorant, forego perfume and after-shave, and don heavy robes on humid mornings? Because that's the way it is, and we like it.

Some of us offer our voices as gifts to God. Some relish the camaraderie. We all enjoy the personal satisfaction of tackling and taming a difficult piece of music — and our neighbors' smiles when we get it right.

For those with residual energy after the vocal workout, Thursday nights (a common denominator for many choirs) are convivial. Hymns derived from old English pub songs can come full circle. For those who shy away from public displays of mirth, an ad hoc house party fills the bill.

Singing in a choir is a great way to meet people in a friendly environment. No bar tabs, no hangovers or late-night taxis to strain the budget. Free Sunday morning coffee and snacks are followed by brunch with harmonious homeys.

There is the joy of providing special music — carols for Christmas and Alleluia's for Easter; hosannas for Palm Sunday and requiems for Good Friday. If that last one sounds too somber, there is always Mozart's rousing Requiem (check out the Amadeus soundtrack). Choir robes are a great fashion equalizer. No one can tell if you are wearing last year's dress or a CROP Walk T-shirt. And you are always guaranteed a good seat for services.

Humor is a key component of every choir: veiled comments concerning the conductor's foibles; chuckles when the guest organist pulls out one too many stops, giggling over quaint lyrics, attendance rivalry between the tenors and basses or the sopranos and altos; and inside jokes like “Definition of an optimist: a choir director with a mortgage.”

There are even glossaries of musical terms updated for the 21st century. To wit: *allegro* is not an antihistamine; *glissando* does not refer to the parking lot in February; and *accelerando* does not mean “Christians, start your engines.”

Preaching to the choir is harder than it looks. Many choristers have the real-life equivalent of doctorates in theology and remember every word of every sermon, for better or worse. So it is a genuine act of faith for the minister to turn his or her back. Some choirs hide behind screens (and God knows what goes on back there), but those who are front and center must remain alert, grin where appropriate and repress facial expression as necessary.

Consider the fun, fellowship and community choirs provide. Auditions are optional. Just follow John Wesley's advice: “Sing lustily, and with great courage.”

Music can lift the spirits. Whether you are singing “Don't let the lights go out” or “Silent Night,” you affirm fundamental truths of humanity — of love conquering oppression and hope conquering fear.

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