

HISTORY OF ST. MARY'S CHOIR AND ITS LEADERS

If you regularly attend the 9:45 Mass, you're familiar with the choir which sings at that Mass from September through June. But you may not know that each week, it is continuing a parish tradition now in its second century.



Records of music in the early years of St. Mary's are scarce. In fact, this photograph from 1902 is among the very few records of the existence of a choir prior to the Conroy period.

The first organist/choir director whose name is known today was Gerald T. Conroy. He served from Christmas 1926 until his death on April 22, 1964, at age 74. Parish records indicate that he lived at 25 Garrow Street in Auburn, enjoyed gardening and walking (he never owned a car), and also played for silent movies in the old Jefferson Theatre on State St. He also taught piano and voice to the students at St. Mary's school, and was involved in teaching Gregorian chant, directing school plays, and with the Lyceum players. He spent some summers with the Von Trapps in Vermont. A page from the Auburn Citizen in the church archives from 1934 describes the Easter ceremonies under his direction:

“Observance of the joyous feast of Easter will be carried out fittingly at St. Mary's Church, of which the Rev. Dr. William E. Cowen is the pastor. The high altars will be resplendent with floral adornments. The masses will be at the regular hours, with the solemn high mass at 10:30 at which Rev. Francis R. Burns of St. Bernard's Seminary will preach and extend Easter greetings. Fitting music will be rendered by the large choir under the direction of Organist Gerald T. Conroy.”

The members of the choir are named: 10 sopranos, 8 altos, 6 tenors, 9 basses – thirty-three in all. The program is as follows:

Processional: “O Filii et Filiae” - Palestrina. Introit: *Resurrexi* – Gregorian. Kyrie, Sanctus, Agnus Dei: Theodore DuBois. Gloria and Credo: *Mass of St. Benedict*, Joseph Muller. Gradual: *Haec dies*, Gregorian. Sequence: *Victimae Paschali*, H. J. Stewart. Offertory: *Terra Tremuit* – J. Wiegand. Benedictus: *Missa “Regina*

Pacis”, Pietro Yon. Communio: *Pascha nostrum* – Gregorian.

The modern reader will notice that this is indeed a large quantity of quality music, and secondarily, that Wiegand's setting of the Easter Offertory *Terra Tremuit* continues to be sung every Easter at St. Mary's. The choir temporarily dissolved upon Conroy's death in December 1964.

In the late 1960's, Msgr. Cuffney requested that a choir be once again formed, and it was restarted under the direction of John Stuart, with Kay Askew at the organ. Several of the current members joined at that time. Mr. Stuart was followed by directors Paul Brechue and Beverly Navarro. This picture shows the choir in the Stuart/Brechue/Navarro years, and is thought to date to the mid-1960s.



Organist Muriel Hickey has served St. Mary's Church for an astonishing forty-six years – from 1971 through August 2017! One can see several awards recognizing her in the church and choir loft – commemorating one milestone year after another, and at the dedication of the restored Barckhoff organ in May 2017, she was richly honored and a permanent plaque was hung in the narthex on the stairs to the choir loft, which will always bear her name. She has been honored by the Organ Historical Society with its Vox Organi award, by a certificate of appreciation from the national office of the American Guild of Organists, by a proclamation from Assemblyman Gary Finch, and by the the St. Cecilia Life-Time Achievement Award, presented by the Diocese of Rochester in Sacred Heart Cathedral in 2014. She is originally from Syracuse, is a graduate of Syracuse University, with a Bachelor of Music Degree and a Master of Science in Elementary Education. She studied with William S. O'Brien, Will O. Headlee and David Johnson, and is a member of the Syracuse chapter of the American Guild of Organists.

In 1972, West Middle School music teacher Bob Stabile took over the choir and many more of the current members joined under his leadership. A graduate of SUNY Potsdam, Bob's unusual music style led the choir down many new paths. Under his direction, the choir learned Carl Wilhowsky's arrangement of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which was Msgr. Cuffney's favorite hymn and often requested by him. Bob's talent and knowledge of Ragtime, Vaudeville and English music hall numbers was also enjoyed by the choir and Msgr. Cuffney at many social events. The following picture shows the choir with Bob Stabile, Muriel Hickey, and Msgr. Cuffney, in 1975.



Bob left for the West Coast in 1976 and was followed by David Correll, who remained Choir Director until May, 2008. For the first ten years of David's tenure, the choir performed annually at a concert in celebration of St. Cecilia, martyred Patron Saint of Music. Works performed in these concerts included Henry Purcell's *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, Antonio Vivaldi's *Gloria in excelsis*, and Gabriel Faure's *Requiem*. David introduced music ancient and modern, from Gregorian chant to spirituals and modern compositions, and in addition to English and the Latin you might expect from a Catholic choir, our choir sang in Italian, German, French, Spanish, Hebrew and Polish. Holidays began to feature a wide range of music including traditional favorites as well as new pieces. Midnight Mass at Christmas is continues to be preceded by a half hour of music by the choir, congregation, and soloists.

Colleen Liggett joined St. Mary's as Choir Director and Cantor in September 2008. She has degrees from Eastman School of Music and Rutgers University, and additional study in Gregorian Chant, medieval song, vocal technique, and choral conducting. She regularly attends the International Medieval Congress. She had

been Cantor at St. Anne Church in Rochester since 1997, and for her last two years (2006-2008), directed their choir. She has also directed the Rochester Latin Mass Choir which sang for the extraordinary form of the Roman Rite, and for many years taught Renaissance Singing at the Hochstein School of Music. In 1999 she founded Schola Feminarum, a Rochester-based women's chant ensemble. In addition to her church work, Ms. Liggett performs many types of music. Since the late 1980's she has directed Musica Transatlantica, selecting singers to join her in presenting medieval and renaissance vocal music. She is known in the Rochester area for early music concerts and theater productions, for singing Shaker Spirituals, and for singing and playing traditional music. In addition she teaches singing, plays several early and folk instruments, and teaches 5-string banjo. The following picture shows the choir with Colleen at Easter 2011.

Ms. Liggett was followed by Mr. Joel Morehouse, from August 2012 until February 2016. During his time at St. Mary's, he began and accomplished many projects: fundraising, researching, and initiating a \$625k historical restoration for the 1890 Barckhoff organ; developing a strong Gregorian chant schola; initiating weekly Compline services in Advent and Lent; returning to strong classical repertoire at the choir Mass; and winning a NYSCA grant for a concert series. He also sat on several local arts committees including the Adams Foundation Piano Series. He also directed the Religious Education programs for the five parishes in Auburn. He left St. Mary's to earn a second master's degree in choral conducting at Syracuse University, graduating in 2017.

Dr. Aaron James began playing the organ for the choir mass at St. Mary's in 2014, and after Joel Morehouse's departure, served as music director until June 2017. He was born in Toronto, and has returned there to be the director of music at the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. He was the 2011 winner of the National Organ Playing Competition of the Royal Canadian College of Organists, and also won first prizes in the Florence and Stanley Osborne Organ Competition and the Howard Fairclough Organ Competition; he was also a finalist in the 2012 Franz Schmidt International Organ Competition (Kitzbühel, Austria). He performs regularly as an organ recitalist in both Canada and the United States, and has appeared as a soloist with the Eastman Graduate Chamber Orchestra, the Toronto Youth Wind Orchestra, and the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra. He is a Fellow of the Royal Canadian College of Organists, the College's highest academic distinction, receiving the Willan and Porter prizes for the 2012 Fellowship examinations. Aaron earned a rare double-doctorate at the Eastman School of Music in organ performance and historical musicology, and his research has been presented to acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic.

Philip Joseph Fillion, the current director of music, began at St. Mary's on Pentecost 2017. He directs the Choir and Schola Gregoriana, and accompanies the four weekend masses on the recently-restored 1890 Carl Barckhoff and 1872 Garrett House organs. He also directs the Tyburn Academy Schola Cantorum, training high school students in the Gregorian chant sung weekly in the school mass, and is the accompanist for the Masterworks Chorale in Skaneateles.

In 2017 he earned a Master of Music in Sacred Music and Organ at Westminster Choir College, where he studied organ with Daryl Robinson, conducting with James Jordan and Joe Miller, and liturgy and theology with Steven Pilkington. While at Westminster, he accompanied the Westminster Kantorei, including on their 2016 European tour, and the Westminster Master Singers.

He was formerly Organist of the Cathedral Basilica of Ss. Peter and Paul, Philadelphia, interim Organist and Choirmaster at Grace Church, Newark, and Organist at St. John Lutheran Church, Wheaton. In 2015, Fillion earned a B.Mus. in Organ Performance at Wheaton College (Ill.), where he studied organ, improvisation, and harpsichord with Edward Zimmerman, John George, and David Christiansen. His activism at Wheaton College was cited by TIME Magazine in February 2015. A native of Rochester, N.Y., in high school he studied organ with Stephen Kennedy and counterpoint with Margaret Henry at the Eastman Community Music School.

The following page is a summary list of choir directors/organists/cantors at Saint Mary's Church, from the most recent to the first-named:

CHOIR DIRECTORS

Philip Fillion
Aaron James
Joel Morehouse
Colleen Liggett
David Correll
Robert Stabile
Paul Brechue, Jr.
Beverly Navarro
John Stuart
James Hennessey
Gerald Conroy.

ORGANISTS

Muriel Hickey
Kay Askew

The Bells of St. Mary's, by Gary LaLonde and Philip Fillion

Jesus-Joseph, Mary, and John first rang out over Auburn in 1926, more than 50 years after our parish was founded. It took that long for the dreams of pastors and parishioners to be realized.

Who named these bells is a secret lost to history, but named they were: Jesus-Joseph is the largest, Mary is the second-largest, and the third is called John. They have diameters of 49 ½”, 40”, and 33”, respectively. Those with musical ears should listen closely when they next call out: the three together constitute an E-flat major chord.

It was our fifth pastor, Father John J. McGrath (he first served at St. Mary's as an assistant) who oversaw their installation in the tower. Saturday, Feb. 26, marks the anniversary of his death in 1932.

Today, it is almost impossible to imagine our church without the tower and the melodious bells. Yet, it was May 10, 1925 that work finally began, with a William Reilly listed as builder. The Holy Name Society and parishioners provided funds for the first bell; the second was donated by the Rosary and Scapular Society, and the third was given in memory of John Stack.

Bishop Thomas Hickey blessed the “Bells of St. Mary's” on Sept. 21, 1926, and their lovely sound was first heard on Oct. 3 of that year. They remain a fundamental part of Auburn's history, and each day continue to ring at every quarter-hour, and for the Angelus.

Miscellaneous Memories compiled by Colleen Liggett:

Over the years, the choir has been invited to sing at numerous festivals, dedications, and celebrations including weddings, baptisms, and funerals in and out of the Auburn area. They've often sung at our Confirmation and First Communion Celebrations. They've sung in over half the churches in Auburn, including St. Francis, Holy Family, St. Alphonsus, Sacred Heart, Ss. Peter & Paul, Trinity Methodist, First Presbyterian, First United Methodist, the Church of the Nazarene, and Westminster Presbyterian. They've also traveled to St. Patrick's in Aurora and St. Patrick's in Seneca Falls. In addition, the choir was chosen in the 1980's to sing during the Christ Mass at the Cathedral in Rochester and for a Diocesan festival at the Keuka College Chapel.

Locally they've performed for various celebrations at Hoopes Park, Cayuga County Nursing Home, Auburn Nursing Home, and Mercy Health and Rehabilitation Center. They've greeted area residents with Christmas Carols on the steps of City Hall after the Thanksgiving Parade and in Emerson Park at the Festival of Lights, and have sung while riding on a float for the County Centennial parade. Choir members sang in 1989 at the Ecumenical Service for the CANUS games in Auburn. They've celebrated various holidays at Willard Chapel and most recently sang for the dedication of the Mausoleum at St. Joseph's Cemetery. And twice, at the invitation of the Catholic Chaplain, they've sung at Mass for inmates in Auburn Correctional Facility. Many

members of the choir take part in annual Messiah concerts and Interfaith Choir Festivals, several of which have been held at St. Mary's. In 1999, the choir hosted a concert featuring the Auburn Chamber Orchestra and the combined choirs of Auburn churches performing Vivaldi's "Gloria," which was attended by nearly 700 people. In December 2002, the choir hosted the New York Baroque Orchestra in a performance of Handel's "Messiah." The piece was sung by members of the Marcellus Chorale joined by over 100 other local vocalists including St. Mary's Choir. The performance was a re-sounding sellout with standing room only-and over 100 people were turned away! On December 21, 2003, members of the choir joined other local artists onstage at Cayuga Community College in "Christmas in the Finger Lakes," a celebration of song and dance, produced locally by Sean McLeod of New York Institute of Dance. The choir participated in the 2008 Founders' Day Parade in Auburn and sing at the annual BID (Business Improvement District) Christmas Celebration in downtown Auburn. Several recordings of various concerts and holidays have been made over the years. These include record albums in 1977 and 1978 of the St. Cecilia's Concerts. In a 5-hour marathon session in the church on May 28, 1998, the most popular selections in the choir's repertoire were recorded for production of a CD titled "The Bells of St. Mary's." This recording was dedicated to Anita Gower and Jack Dalziel, choir members who had recently died. A follow-up album, "The Christmas Bells of St. Mary's," was produced the following year. Tapes and CDs of both are still available at the church office.