

# Choir School Recollections 1958-1974

Richard Wyton - Cathedral School '70

## Cathedral Choir School

### *Early Childhood*

In 1953 Alec Wyton was brought to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine as its third Organist and Master of the Choristers. The following year, Dean James Pike appointed him to replace the embattled Headmaster of the Cathedral Choir School. This appointment was in addition to his full calendar running the Cathedral's music program, which included training and directing a choir of forty boys and twenty men. There were 11 rehearsals and no fewer than 10 choral services every week. In addition to all this, he was suddenly responsible for staffing and overseeing the upkeep of a boarding school. Quite literally, his purview extended from Thomas Tallis to toilet tissues. I don't really know how he managed it, but dad was a gifted administrator who knew how to delegate authority and use a Dictaphone. (He also had as many as three secretaries in his offices.)

Our family lived in the headmaster's apartment from 1954 – 1962. The apartment occupied an area on the second and third floors of the school. It had three bedrooms, two baths, a kitchen and a dining room. We almost always took our meals with the students and faculty (who also lived in the school). This was the only time in the school week my parents, two brothers and I could be together as a family.

The choristers, faculty and housekeeping staff were very much part of our family, and I was well taken care of. Early memories include turning four and standing in front of the dining room head table in my blue blazer while I was sung "Happy Birthday". Especially enjoyable was speeding through the (uncarpeted) first floor hall on my tricycle. In retrospect, the classroom doors that quietly closed during these excursions indicated I was capable of being a pest. We seemed to have lots of snow in the winter and would make long trains with our Flexible Flyer sleds, snaking down the driveway in front of the school.



Of course, I attended many services in the Cathedral. There was ample opportunity for this. In addition to Sunday Eucharist and Tuesday – Sunday Evensong, the choristers sang at Morning Prayer several days during the week. It was so ordinary to me, I thought the high altar was the "Bishop's Kitchen". Bishop Horace Donegan (C.B.E.) lived in the house that is now the Dean's residence, and presided over daily services when he was on the close. We saw the Bishop almost every day, and he ate dinner with the school family on a fairly regular basis.

In the summer of 1962, dad's headmaster days came to a close as the process of repurposing the school as a day-program began. The five of us moved from living in a "fish-bowl", to a more anonymous - and typical - New York City life in an upper west side high-rise apartment.

# Cathedral School

## *Chorister Years*

In 1962, my family moved from the cathedral close to Lincoln Towers at 70th and West End Avenue. I attended Trinity School until 1964, when I transferred to the Cathedral School. It was now a day school with about a dozen non-chorister “regular” students in addition to the forty choristers. We had 11 rehearsals every week and sang seven services: Sunday Eucharist and Evensong Sunday - Friday. Of course, Feast Day Eucharist services were in addition to this schedule. Each service included choral settings of the appointed psalm (Anglican chant M,W,F;



Plainsong T,TH), canticles (usually Magnificat & Nunc Dimittis) and an anthem. Altogether we rehearsed and performed no fewer than twenty separate pieces each week. This was a real job. It was demanding, and we had a wonderful time. In return for our work, we received a scholarship that paid about ½ our tuition at school. We had to maintain an academic average of at least “B” to stay in the choir, and several choristers became regular students.

Singing under my father was a remarkable experience. He had a well-practiced and good-humored rehearsal technique, and was a firm, but fair, disciplinarian. I made it a point not to be a “goody two-shoes”. If unfortunate enough to be caught misbehaving by him, my punishment (usually in the form of “writing lines”) was double that for any other chorister. In this way, any appearance of favoritism for me was minimized. Naturally, I became very good at not being caught out.

Dad wasn't always around to supervise us. For example, there was the organ prelude to be played before every service. At these times we were often without adult supervision in the robing room. In his absence, there were four “prefects” – lead choristers who would mark demerits for disciplinary infractions on their list of choristers. Every other Friday, my father would “tot up” our demerits at the beginning of afternoon rehearsal. We would be demoted one seat for every two marks. Over the next two weeks we would be promoted on the basis of musical excellence. I fondly remember my friend Owen Burdick ('68) in this circumstance. He was absolutely the best musician among us, but had a tendency to be caught breaking the rules. Every two weeks, he'd be demoted to the bottom of the first row. Over the next fortnight he would earn his way right



back up to row four. It happened as surely as the sun sets and rises. Our most important lesson was that tenure in this profession was not institutional; we earned it every day.

While we worked hard, we had great fun – often doing things no longer possible. The building was not as secure in those days. In the correct hands a pocket knife was as good as a key, and we could scamper like rats through the upper reaches of the cathedral. The State Trumpet gallery, clerestory passages and roof were pretty regular destinations. I discovered for myself that at least one of the highest windows in the Great Choir is illuminated from behind by spotlights.

There were also “extra-curricular” opportunities. In 1966 a small group of us had a studio recording gig with a folk singer, Tom Lazer, for the movie soundtrack for “Namu the Killer Whale”. I also had sang a role in Britten’s “Curlew River” with the New York City Opera, under Julius Rudel in 1969.

As the Cathedral School grew, the choir became smaller. There were about twenty boys singing when I was in eighth grade. After graduating from Cathedral School, I attended the High School of Music and Art (now LaGuardia). It was a welcome opportunity to continue singing as a Gentleman of the Choir during my four years in High School.

In my Cathedral years, many remarkable things happened among the commonplace. Highlights for me included Duke Ellington’s “Second Sacred Concert” in 1968, being conducted by Leopold Stokowski in 1969, a Sunday afternoon Eucharist in 1971 singing with the cast of “Hair” in celebration of the production’s third anniversary, and Duke Ellington’s funeral service in 1974. Ellington’s funeral, burnished with performances by jazz greats including Ella Fitzgerald, Mary Lou Williams and Billy Taylor, was about my last time singing in this remarkable time and space. (A rough calculation indicates I sang nearly 1,300 services in nine years as a chorister.) I think it represented a fitting conclusion to a rather unique childhood in the shadows of a great cathedral.



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## Captions

### *opposite:*

Receiving my psalter from Bishop Donegan at choir investiture, Thanksgiving, 1965. Canon Herald Landon looks on. **Choir stalls, botton row:** Scott Wilson, Robert Lowe, Tom Sundquist, Carl Thomson. **Top row:** Teddy Lee, Owen Burdick.

Rehearsal in the school choir room. 1966 (from the hymnals one can see this is Advent/ Christmas.) Richard is second row left. Owen Burdick is seated bottom row left, indicating this was taken on a Friday afternoon! Alec’s associate, Eugene Hancock is seated in the back row. Jay Seffern is seated next to Burdick.

### *this page, from top:*

Owen, Alec and Richard June 1968