

## **The Nashville Children's Choir Program**

In 1989, Dr. Jerry Warren, Dean of the Belmont University School of Music, accepted a proposal from Marilyn Shadinger and Frederica Braidfoot to begin the Nashville Children's Choir (NCC), a community based children's choir which would function in cooperation with Belmont University's School of Music. Since this founding, Belmont University has been home to NCC, providing rehearsal and performance venues, publicity and printing, and vital financial and leadership support for the choir's directors. From 1991-2017, Dr. Cynthia Curtis, the Dean of the School of Music and College of Visual and Performing Arts (CVPA), continued to be a strong advocate for the musical education of young singers through the NCC program, now an established ensemble of Belmont University as a part of Belmont Academy, the pre-college preparatory program of the School of Music. The current CVPA Dean, Dr. Stephen Eaves, joyfully maintains Belmont's long-term support of the NCC program.

The choir began with 33 charter members directed by co-founders, Marilyn and Frederica. In its second year, 66 NCC singers participated, Madeline Bridges became co-director with Marilyn Shadinger, and the group took the first NCC tour to Chattanooga, Tennessee, sleeping on the gym floor in a church and sight-seeing in the rain! Thomas Tours began coordinating Touring Choir trips in 1992, and Rob Hancock has been the Thomas Tours NCC escort for 27 years.

The Concert Choir began in 1992 with Linda Singleton as director. The Preparatory Choir was inaugurated in fall of 1993 under the direction of Roberta Rodgers, and Brenda Jewell became Concert Choir director. During the 90s the Touring Choir traveled to New York City, Biltmore House, Detroit/Toronto, St. Louis, San Antonio, Connecticut, and San Francisco. The Touring Choir began choosing yearly Honor Choristers in 1996 (Jaclyn Lisenby was the first Honor Chorister). That same year, Cela Scott served as the first Touring Choir Graduate Assistant. Other Touring Choir traditions, which began in the 90s and continue to the present time, include summer day camp, singing the National Anthem at a Nashville Sounds ballgame each summer, and the January Jubilee retreat with guest storyteller Susan Ramsay.

Changes in NCC leadership during the years since 1995 included the transition of Roberta Rodgers to lead the Concert Choir and the beginning of Elaine Bailey-Fryd's tenure as director of the Preparatory Choir. These choirs establish the foundations of choral singing and music reading in NCC's youngest singers, and perform as a part of end-of-semester concerts. Each spring the Prep Choir walks to Morningside at Belmont to present a short program for residents in this assisted living facility; the Concert Choir always looks forward to a spring performance off campus and an afternoon at the skating rink.

Nashville Youth Choir (NYC) began in 1995 as a separate choir organization under the direction of John Warren. Directors between 1995 and 2003 were Wayne Causey, Mark Acker, and Linda Yarnell. NYC began to function consistently as the most senior choir in the NCC Program when Robert King became director in 2003. NCC performances each semester are greatly enriched by the multiple choir levels.

In 2007 Marilyn Shadinger retired from her service as founding co-director of the NCC Choir Program. Brenda Jewell served as Touring Choir co-director until James Wells assumed this position in 2009. Josh Wright, who began his association with NCC in 2007 as Assistant Conductor currently serves with James and Madeline, forming a trio of Touring Choir Co-conductors.

The position of NCC Administrative Assistant was created in the late 90s when Markey Pace began to serve in this capacity. Other capable colleagues who filled this role include Debbie Jacobs, Gina Miller, Brandi Easley, and current interim Administrative Assistant Julie Lankford. Numerous wonderful accompanists and assistant conductors have been central to each choir's success, particularly long-time Touring Choir accompanists Carol Poston (1995-2007) and Kyle Hankins (2007-present). Other Assistant conductors and accompanists, past and present, include Tyler Merideth (NYC); David Guy, Elton Prince, Wydell Croom and Julie Kutosh (Concert Choir); and Alice Griffith and Michelle Carr (Preparatory Choir). These talented and supportive professionals increase each choir's ability to provide the best possible musical learning environment for young singers.

Since 2000, the Touring Choir has traveled to Chicago, Baltimore, New York, San Antonio, Washington D.C., Orlando, Philadelphia, Boston, St. Louis, New Orleans, Charleston, San Diego, Huntsville / Atlanta / Chattanooga, Jacksonville, Asheville, and Louisville. During almost every trip, the Touring Choir joins with a local church choir or community choir to present a joint concert and become acquainted with choristers in another community. Making music with other choirs has become a key feature of NCC concerts and tours. The 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary trip for the Touring Choir will occur in June, 2019. The choir will travel to Costa Rica, having been accepted to participate in ChoralFest Costa Rica, an international choral festival featuring choirs from many different countries. A group of 150 choristers, staff, parents and other family members will spend five days in Costa Rica, seeing the sights, performing two concerts in San Jose, and participating with other choristers from several different countries in a joint closing festival concert for peace.

The Touring Choir has been privileged to present numerous significant performances during its history, including concerts at Carnegie Hall Festival, Music Educators National Conference (with Bob McGrath of *Sesame Street*), National Conference of the American Orff Schulwerk Association, New Orleans Jazz Festival, Disney World Choral Festival, Tennessee Conference of American Choral Directors Association, Piccolo Spoleto Festival in Charleston, and several appearances on the nationally acclaimed performance and broadcast of *Christmas at Belmont*. The choir has also sung several times with the Nashville Ballet and Nashville Symphony during performances of *Carmina Burana* and *Midsummer Night's Dream* as well as with Nashville Opera, and Belmont University School of Music ensembles. Equally significant have been opportunities to sing in various churches and community concert series throughout Middle Tennessee and the United States. Ensembles from the Touring Choir have sung for weddings, local conventions, various audio and video recording projects (including an appearance with *Riders in the Sky* and Reba McEntire), and as a part of CMA Country Christmas (singing "back-up" for Michael W. Smith, Jennifer Nettles, Darius Rucker, and Lindsey Sterling).

A key component of the success and stability of NCC during its 30-year history has been the support of NCC parents. Through the years, parents have been willing to assume key supportive roles that allow the choir to thrive and flourish. The current parent volunteer coordinators are joined and preceded by a host of parents who have chaperoned trips, slept on the floor during January Jubilee retreats, organized and participated in fundraising projects, sent food for snacks, and (most importantly), made NCC a priority in their family schedules.

Throughout its history NCC has been dedicated to recruiting focused young singers who value (and whose parents value) participation in a quality choral organization. Choristers sing in multiple languages such as Latin, Zulu, French, German, and Spanish. Through their participation in diverse musical styles, they begin to value music from many different cultures and in many genres—from show tunes to African freedom songs; from folk songs to Gregorian chant; from newly composed music to music of the Baroque. NCC choristers at all levels work together in a disciplined environment to make beautiful music; commitment and responsibility are key components of the NCC experience. Directors lead choristers toward excellence in musicianship, music reading, joyful choral singing, and committed participation. It is with great joy that the NCC Program celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, welcoming choristers, parents, staff, and supporters who have been a part of NCC history—now and in the past. Joining together in joyful choral singing is a unique cooperative artistic experience, one which directors, choristers, and parents will value forever. Thank you for being a part of this meaningful tradition and for your presence at this event.