

# Hallelujah

Singing the praises of our maestro of heavenly music.



I am trying to picture Richard Coffey arriving in 1972 for his new job in “The Hardware City.” In his early 20s, a native of North Carolina and a recent graduate of Union Theological Seminary, Coffey walks New Britain’s Main Street in a state of awe.

He sees a thriving New England industrial city in which Stanley tools and other household staples are manufactured. He watches as shoppers crowd the sidewalks, carrying bags from D and L, Plimpton’s and Sears. Children run to Vincent Amato’s toy store. Families flock to see *The Godfather* at the Strand. Restaurant specials feature pierogi and kielbasa.

This lively setting is more than young Coffey had hoped for. His degree in sacred music and his passion to perform it qualifies him to take a full-time position as music director at South Church, at 90 Main Street—a historic building with a sanctuary to be filled with the sounds of healing and exultation. He can feel this music in his bones, always has. How else, back in Dixie, could a boy of 12 have earned a salary for playing a church organ? “I have always loved the sound of voices singing,” he will say to anyone who will listen.

Even so, the new job has its perils. The church choir consists of but nine members, and there is some sentiment that engaging

a full-time music director is a luxury the church cannot afford. Coffey, however, has big dreams. He hopes for a larger group, much larger, one that will tackle the most complex and powerful compositions—“music that would not otherwise be heard in our community.” He envisions a professional choir with paid members that can spread the gospel of heavenly harmony well beyond the city limits. This is long before “outreach” becomes a buzzword.

He wants to do this without tapping into congregational funds, and so must raise money. But the name chosen for the group, South Church Choral Society, gives the impression of amateurism. Prospective funders are hesitant to donate to an ensemble that has the word “church” in it. So a new-name campaign is launched. Someone suggests the Coffey Chorale. The conductor demurs: “It sounds like moseying up to the bar. Besides,

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I want this to outlast me.”

The winning suggestion is Connecticut Choral Artists, shortened to CONCORA. Accomplished singers from around the state are put through rigorous rehearsals and the group begins to be noticed.

After a 1985 concert, *Hartford Courant* music critic Steve Metcalf writes, “This is one of the most accomplished musical ensembles of any kind—vocal or instrumental, large or small, old or new—in the region.”

But there are still musical mountains to climb, masterpieces to try. In 1991, Coffey tries for a big one. He tells the CONCORA board he wants to do the Bach *Mass in B Minor* at Immanuel Congregational Church. He wants to do it with orchestral support—members of the Hartford Symphony. The budget is much larger than anything yet undertaken and board members are worried. But they are swept up in Coffey’s enthusiasm, and the sold-out concert affirms their faith. The same thing happens a few years later when during Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* people who can’t get a reserved seat are willing to stand for the three-hour performance.

Even so, the board is nervous when Coffey seems to go off the deep end to Manhattan. Yes, Ned Rorem won the Pulitzer Prize for composition in 1976 and had been called “the world’s greatest composer of art songs” by *Time* magazine, but Coffey needs \$10,000 to fund the trip to New York for the 32-member group to perform for Rorem’s 75th birthday. “I love Rorem’s music,” Coffey tells the board. “It’s so clean and powerful.” The board says, in effect, “Well, we don’t know Rorem, but we know you and we trust you.” The result is another boffo concert with the beaming composer in attendance.

Today notes from Rorem are among the scores of thanks and tributes that cover the walls of Coffey’s South Church office. It is from here (and from offices across the parking lot and in Hartford) that CONCORA’s ambitious programming is done. Coffey is still music director for the church. And though CONCORA is independent, the mutual support has been maintained even as Coffey’s work has gone well beyond its original boundaries; for the last few years he has also been director of the Hartford Chorale.

Still, South Church’s contribution to Connecticut culture is an untold story, lost amid the city’s current distress. We only wish that someone had not decided to run highways through the heart of downtown, truncating the streets. Or that manufacturing firms had not seen the need to close up shop, 104 ►

## Lary Bloom

◀8 leaving thousands out of work.

It's true that New Britain's recently expanded Museum of American Art draws audiences from afar, as does its jewel of a baseball stadium. But downtown is a ghost of itself, with many boarded-up storefronts. Exceptions include an arts alliance and South Church's proud and still growing legacy.

I have seen and felt this firsthand. Two years ago, CONCORA asked me to be one of the narrators for a concert at Center Church in Hartford featuring music related to the Holocaust. The centerpiece was the *Holocaust Cantata*, songs written under unspeakable conditions. Coffey recalled, "This concert is the one that broke my heart. But when you're on the podium you have to be sure it's the audience's heart that breaks, not your own."

An excerpt from a lyric (attributed to K. Zwulska):

*Already hearing the clatter taking her away.*

*Eyes last meet, gazing, hands gesture, waving.*

*Unspoken silent sorrow.*

*Running still beside the train in fool's futility.*

*Farewell my love! Remember me!*

*Goodbye to eyes that once caressed me.*

*Farewell to love that owned my heart.*

*The dark hour's on us, our fate is sealed.*

*I must forget you! Farewell my love!*

Near the end of that concert, Coffey told the audience he had wanted to finish with a song called "Ale Brider," which translates from the Yiddish into "We're All Brothers." But he wasn't sure it was appropriate after such a heavy program. He sought a cantor's advice, and she told him it was not only appropriate but necessary, to demonstrate that the human spirit has not been buried by inhumanity. As the concert ended, "Ale Brider" was performed to much hand clapping and foot stomping, then cheers and tears aplenty.

I have since thought about Richard Coffey's place in our cultural life. We have lost Connecticut Opera and the series that brought the world's greatest orchestras to The Bushnell in Hartford and masters of classical music to the Shubert in New Haven.

But after 35 years there is still CONCORA. We can hear it on CDs or, better yet, live as it celebrates its anniversary with a concert in November (see CONCORA.org). Then together, ensemble and audience, we can offer our own Hallelujah chorus.

*Editor's note: Lary Bloom's new book, The Test of Our Times, written with Tom Ridge, the first secretary of Homeland Security, has just been released by St. Martin's Press. ■*