

A short history of A Festival of Lessons & Carols in Cumberland, MD

As I sit here this morning, reflecting on what should be a busy weekend of rehearsals ahead and contentedly peering out the window at several inches of fresh snow, I find myself humbled and grateful. Having a choral ensemble like the Scholars of Saint Cecilia in a small city like Cumberland is often an indescribable challenge, and given my extreme part-time status as a Maryland resident in recent years, it has been even more of a puzzle. I'm beyond blessed to have wonderful colleagues like Lyle Nordstrom and Mark Steiner who have graciously (and often thanklessly) taken this project on for most of the last few years. Despite many challenges, during this particular weekend each year, I'm reminded of why this one of the most important things we do for our community.

This was to be our 8th annual Festival of Lessons & Carols, I thought I'd take a few minutes to trace the evolution of this, dare I say, tradition in our area and how it "came to pass." In the winter of 2012, after Lyle and I had officially launched Mountainside Baroque's first season, I started brainstorming about a small chamber choir in Allegany County. After contacting a handful of people, and several really great auditions from community members, we had our first rehearsal as "The Scholars of Saint Cecilia." The goal: performing an hour-long thematic concert of standard choral repertory. After a rather successful completion of this concert, and some honest surprise at the level of music the group had performed, we decided to make the group Mountainside Baroque's resident chamber choir.

We quickly realized that the more ambitious our Mountainside programming became, the more demanding the rehearsal process would be for the group. As such, there was no time for the choir to prepare and present a stand-alone concert, yet wanting them to get to sing SOME repertory written after 1800, we needed to get creative. I have long thought that an area as tight-knit as Allegany County would be an ideal candidate for a community festival of lessons & carols that featured clergy from as many churches as possible and included readers that represented the community as well as our local elected officials. Given the service's English heritage, and its iconic stature in Cumberland's landscape, there was only one choice for a venue: Emmanuel Episcopal Church on Washington Street. We approached The Rev. Bo Chapman about proceeding, and (as they say), the rest is history. We are eternally grateful for our long-standing relationship with Emmanuel Parish which has continued through the interim tenure of the The Rt. Rev. Martin Townsend, and now The Rev. Martha Macgill who also ably serves as the President of Our Board of Directors.

People often ask me what our Festival of Lessons & Carols has to do with early music, and the answer is complicated. Through the years we've performed a variety of early music within the service, including some more extended works of Michael Praetorius and Charpentier with period and reproduction instruments. The festival in its current form features a variety of music from chant to living composers, with a couple of special early music selections (often with instruments) included for good measure. More than anything, this event has become our way to not only to say thanks to our patrons, but to help realize our organization's primary goal: to continue to build and strengthen the fabric of our community through music.

Lastly, I'm reminded that this event allows us to gather with many neighbors and friends who we may not normally see over the holidays. It also reminds me of the extended family Mountainside Baroque has gained over the years as current and former members of the

Scholars of Saint Cecilia: Debi Beachy, Samuel Bower, Julie Bosworth, Staci Calder, Janna Critz, Edie Elvee, Jacob Fader, Elizabeth Fisher, John Fisher, Laura Becker Groves, Grace Guiney, Alex Haines, Beau Hartman, Ben Hawker, Katie Hendrix, Alana James, Kyleigh Kutz, Stephanie Laut, Sarah Lynn, Catey Mayhew, Lane Conklin McCord, Hannah Miller, Angela Terhark Milton, Abbie Naze, Corbin Phillips, Brittany Poindexter, Adam Pomeroy, David Rankin, Tamela Rankin, Mark Rose, Jane Rossi, Jon Schadt, Tyler Shadle, Alex Strausbaugh, Mary Sullivan, Sophie Walters, Samuel Weaver, Katie Wilson, Seth Wilson, Brielle Windle, Susan Zoller.

A very special “shout-out” to those who have been with us since the very beginning: Bill Anderson, Jeff Avey, Sally Boniece, Rebecca Galliher, Don Robinson, and Mark Sagin. Sincere apologies if I missed anyone!

To those reading, I hope you’ll take an hour to watch the reprise of our 2018 Lessons & Carols beginning on Sunday, December 20 at 5 pm, and available through Saturday, January 2. Mercifully imperfect as it is, it is our way of trying to bring a sense of normalcy to the end of tumultuous year for all. Do plan to join us in person in 2021 (on the 4th Sunday of Advent) for this annual holiday tradition from Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Cumberland beginning at 5:00 pm.

Wishing you all good health, peace, and prosperity in the new year.

(Updated from a 2017 reflective of the 5th anniversary of the Service in Cumberland, December 2020)