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Choral Arts Society of Davidson Celebrates Diamond Anniversary

By Jane Shoemaker

Barack Obama had won the Democratic nomination, China hosted the Olympics, and a sophomore named Stephen Curry was turning Davidson College basketball into the town's newest passion.

The year was 2007, and in the newly-redesigned Sloan Music Center on the Davidson College campus, Choral Director Ray Sprague was about to give the college's esteemed choral music program a whole new look. He swung the door wide open and invited experienced singers from the faculty and community to join students in the Concert Choir. The rehearsal room – and soon, the concert hall -- would become a colorful medley of ages, singing styles, and personalities.

Ten years later, the Choral Arts Society of Davidson is celebrating its diamond anniversary with a sparkling offering of music spanning four centuries. The name has changed, but the commitment to a town and gown partnership is stronger than ever.

"I couldn't ask for a better mixture," said Davidson Choral Director Chris Gilliam. "We have students, professors, church choristers, fine soloists. Everyone is up to the challenge of creating memorable music."

The 10th anniversary season will be memorable, indeed, featuring Franz Joseph Haydn's great *Lord Nelson Mass* in the fall and living composer Dan Forrest's newest major work, *Jubilate Deo*, in the spring. Between those two concerts are the twice-sold-out Holiday Gala and a *Messiah* sing-along open to all.

Forrest's work features seven languages and a wide spectrum of musical influences, and instrumentalists from the Charlotte Symphony will accompany.

"It is always a challenge for a choir to sing in multiple languages, especially when — as in the Forrest *Jubilate Deo* — they have to tackle so many different languages in one piece," said Dr. Gilliam. "It's not every day they have to learn to sing in Chinese, Zulu, Hebrew, and Arabic!"

Dr. Sprague, now Choral Director Emeritus and enjoying retirement in Colorado, inherited two student choral groups when he arrived at Davidson in 1999 -- the smaller, elite Chamber Singers (now the Chorale) and the larger Concert Choir. Chorale members were required to be part of the Concert Choir, which meant four rehearsals a week. Dr. Sprague recognized the challenge for asking for that level of commitment from busy students, so he invited faculty and alumni and reached out to area churches to recruit their choir members. It didn't take long to top the 100-member mark.

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Jane Cain, music director and organist at Davidson College Presbyterian Church, was at the front of the line, and she has been there for the entire decade.

“With Chris,” she said, “it’s like a voice lesson every week and has helped me be both a better singer and better choir director. Plus singing great music just feeds my soul.”

As the Choral Arts Society of Davidson has grown, the organizational structure has evolved, enhancing the marvelous partnership between the Davidson College student choirs and the community. “This collaboration enables all involved to experience a level of performance and artistry that’s otherwise only available in much larger cities,” Dr. Gilliam said. “We are so fortunate to be able to participate in – and even expand upon – the rich musical tradition of Davidson College.

For more information about the season or to schedule an audition, visit the Choral Arts Society web site www.casdavidson.org



Conductor Ray Sprague at rehearsal.



Conductor Chris Gilliam in performance.



Choral Arts Society of Davidson in concert in 2017.