

Your Choir, Your History: A Simple Guide to Documenting Your Experience

By Mary Jane Ballou



oday's church musicians work in "interesting times." Reports of the death of Gregorian chant turned out to be premature. The formerly undisputed hegemony of pop-style religious music is being effectively challenged in parishes throughout the United States. The work of the Church Music Association of America, both in training musicians in chant and polyphony and in supporting the work of composers and publishers of new music following that tradition, points to a new trajectory towards the restoration of liturgy on the parochial level. While we cannot know the outcome of all our work, future church music historians will examine this era of change, controversy and recovery in sacred music.

However, will they know what we really sang?

Who Cares?

Social historians use a variety of materials in their efforts to reconstruct and interpret the "grass-roots" experience of a particular event or era. However, there is more to history than back issues of *Pastoral Musician* and even *Sacred Music* and the *Musica Sacra* website, and that something more is *your* choir in *your* church in *your* town. We all know the chasm between the ideal reported and the reality achieved. Your work is the reality that tells the week-by-week struggle. You are making history.

Historians studying the social experience of music examine the fundamental pieces of a performing organization: membership, leadership, actual repertoire, level of organizational and community support, and impact on the life of the community. The focus is on the "do-ers" of music, especially amateurs.

First of all is the question of membership: how many members were there at a given moment? Is ethnic background discernible? How many men vs. women? What about children and youth? In one recent project, a 1950s choir concert program listed sixty singers and the names provided an instant snapshot of which families and groups were most involved in this parish's music at that time.

Those choir members have a leader hidden somewhere in their records. Can the historian find names of directors and other musicians along with some idea of their duration of service? Many Catholic choirs were directed by religious sisters or brothers associated with parish schools and their services were simply assumed. Biographical sketches are bonuses that popped up occasionally in local articles when a director began (or departed). Copy-hungry diocesan publications are often a good source of these. By the way, beware of false modesty in your own documentation. In the case of the concert program referenced above, the director left herself off the program!

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Photographs can be a historian's joy or frustration. A properly dated photograph with the names and location on the back can be a goldmine, revealing details of age and ethnicity. An undated and unidentified photograph can be worse than useless, serving only to taunt the researcher who wastes time analyzing hairstyles and tie widths to establish a chronological sequence. Make sure you label your photographs.

Separating appearance and reality is more difficult with repertoire. A list of the choir library's contents may be completely unrepresentative of the works actually programmed and sung by the choir from week to week. This library was often a "legacy" item. Think of your file cabinet of dittoed songs from *Joy is Like the Rain* or the twenty untouched copies of Brahms's *German Requiem*, not to mention the *People's Mass Book*, the *St. Gregory Hymnal*, and *Glory and Praise*. In some instances, they might tell a story if they're battered from use.

Beginning in the 1960s, some churches produced weekly bulletins with music either listed or included in them. Others relied on a hymn board or announcements from the loft, which of course left no trace. More recently, you might find a record on the music director's computer. But sometimes it seems to have resided only in his or her head. Choir concerts and Christmas Eve music usually did leave a paper trail and the selections

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there may provide hints of what went on from week to week. The choice of repertoire for these programs can also give some indication of the choir's size, even if there is no listing of singers.

Budgets, records of instrument acquisition and maintenance, and the tally of fund-raising appeals tell the historian about the relative importance of the music program in the life of a parish. While they lack the charm of anecdotes and photographs, they are hard evidence of whether money has followed grand ideas.

"Well and good," you say, "I won't throw out that old file cabinet full of junk, but my vocation is music, not piling up papers for future sleuths." And I agree. What a parish music program needs are a few practices that will capture its life without creating another set of bureaucratic obligations. Make sure you keep your church administration in the loop as you take these steps. Let them know that you think the history of the parish is important, and that your music is important. For independent scholas or ensembles, the process is similar, but you will need to find a home for your records.

An informal survey of choirs revealed recordkeeping that ranged from non-existent to obsessive. Here are a few suggestions to get you started on a via media.

The Past

First of all, see what you already have:

- a. Old worship handouts or bulletins
- b. Programs from special Masses and concerts
- c. Photographs of the choir
- d. Multi-year listings of choir members
- e. Lists of music used
- f. Choir scrapbooks

- g. Recordings
- h. A history of the parish that included something about the music

Secondly, determine if there are files kept on your parish in the local public library and/or historical society.

If you find materials that are deteriorating because of age, you need to consider conservation and preservation. Photocopies from the early days of xerography fade badly, as do mimeographs and "dittos." Early-twentieth-century printed materials may have become fragile because of high acid content in the paper; clippings are the worst offenders. There are simple steps you can take to ensure continued survival, including photocopying onto acid-free paper and encapsulation.

Set up a system to carry your choir's history forward.

This last term is "archival overkill" language for simply putting something in a protective sleeve. At the end of this article are some resources for preservation information.

Occasionally, there are no records to be found. Disgruntled former music directors have been known to clean out the file cabinets and wipe their computers clean. In the enthusiasms of the Sixties and Seventies, choir documentation and music went out the back door along with the vestments. If you find nothing at the church, ask if there are any remnants out with long-time choir members or at your local historical society or library. Resolve to preserve your efforts from a similar fate.

The Present

After you know what has already been preserved, set up a system to carry your choir's history forward. This is less onerous than it might sound and there may be someone in your organization who would like to be your "archivist." Engage your choir members in this process, thereby helping them see their place in the work of the Universal Church. They are not just members of the 11 o'clock choir at St. Hroswitha's.

This checklist will ensure that your choir's history is there when someone comes looking in 2108.

1. Special Mass and Concert Programs
 - a. Make sure these are dated and include the year.
 - b. List all your choir members and instrumentalists by name. Don't forget your own name!
 - c. Save these in a folder or digitize or both.
2. Annual Choir Photograph
 - a. Take a picture of the assembled choir. Put everyone's name on the back of an enlarged printout. If you have multiple choirs, take multiple photos.
 - b. Print the photos out. Digital storage sites can disappear and take your photos with them. It happened when the dot-com bubble burst and it will probably happen again.
3. CDs, Videos and mp3s
 - a. Obviously, new sound (and video) recordings should be saved.
 - b. Recordings on older media such as phonograph records and magnetic tape should be transferred, if possible.

4. Press Releases

- a. Harness the power of the "Fourth Estate" by sending succinct announcements of your special events before the fact. Follow up with a short article reporting on the concert. Use your diocesan and general circulation papers equally. While there may be a crush of material coming in to the big city papers, smaller localities are often looking for copy. News of good singing and new scholas may call back people who left the church years ago. Let them know things are changing for the better. Remember this is also a form of evangelization to potential choir members.
 - b. If you have choir members who have sung with the group for decades, send in an article about them on a special anniversary.
 - c. If you're not quick at writing articles and press releases, find someone who is and be willing to relinquish some control while retaining editorial oversight.
 - d. Save the press releases for your files as well. Please date them.
5. Local History Files. If there is a local history institution (library or society) that will keep a vertical file on your church or organization, calendar a visit at least once a year to deposit your programs, photos, and press releases.

Conclusion

What's the least you can do? The programs and the choir photographs. Music directors are often overwhelmed in the quotidian swamp of planning and rehearsing. Taking an hour every three months or so to record your activities will also give you a chance to review and appreciate your accomplishments, to see where you have been, and to make sure you are still going where you planned. You can share this progress with your choirs to build a sense of direction right now. When the day comes to write about our "interesting times," your records will contribute to the picture.

Preserve what you have and leave some footprints of your own. Historians yet unborn will praise your name.

Additional Resources on Archival Organization and Preservation

Start locally. Ask your diocesan archivist if there is a program to help churches in your area with records organization. Consult the special collections and archives librarians at a near-by Catholic college. While these individuals will not do the work for you, they may be willing to provide advice and suggestions about best practices and sources of preservation materials (acid-free paper, archival boxes, etc.).

Conservation Online <<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/>> Based at Stanford University, this is the all-purpose resource for information on preserving just about anything: paper, sound recordings, photographs and moving image media.

Brodart Library Supplies & Furnishings <http://www.shopbrodart.com/site_pages/h2guides/> This supplier offers very useful how-to-articles on its web site.

Sandra Florand Young, *Don't Throw It Away! Documenting and Preserving Organization History* <<http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/pdf/DTIA.pdf>> Originally designed to aid social service organizations in Chicago, Illinois in preserving their history, this booklet is a whirlwind tour of archival practices. You might not need this for your church, but what about that community chorus you direct?

Society of American Archivists <<http://www.archivists.org>> More oriented to the professionals in the field of archives with sections for diocesan archivists and archivists of religious congregations. 