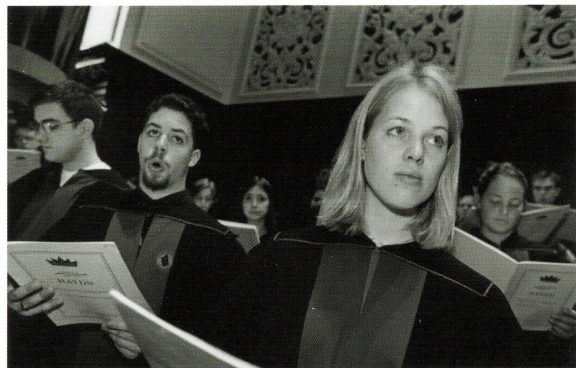


## Cantus in Choro

A GLOBAL VIEW OF CHORAL SINGING

# An uncommon leap of faith



A bold initiative renews and strengthens  
Harvard University's commitment to its historic choir.

*Barbara Sealock relates the events*

If, as the saying goes, the only form of immortality recognised at Harvard is the restricted endowment – famously quoted by the Reverend Professor Peter J Gomes of Harvard's Memorial Church – then the University Choir, at the centre of his church's liturgy, seems assured of everlasting continuity. Thanks largely to his efforts a \$1.5 million endowment was bestowed upon the position of organist/choirmaster last year. 'Now,' quips Gomes, only half in jest, 'some preacher after me can't mess it up.'

Unlike some other American institutions (notably Columbia, whose incoming chaplain two years ago abolished the organist/choirmaster job as irrelevant), Harvard is making a bold and renewed commitment to its historic choir and music. Gomes, a musician himself and one of

America's most distinguished preachers, considers it to be of equal importance to the power of the spoken word.

The gift, from Memorial Church supporters Ann and Graham Gund, secures the permanence of the position, now ably ministered by Dr Murray Forbes Somerville, Harvard's sixth Organist and Choirmaster, whose musical roots include his days as organ scholar at New College, Oxford, preceded by studies with Karl Richter in Munich. Such auspicious beginnings, as well as an SMM from Union Theological Seminary and a DMA from the New England Conservatory, combined with Somerville's direction and vision for the choir, are widely considered to be a richly endowed match for this abundant good fortune.

Supporting sacred music is an uncommon leap of faith these days. But with this commitment, Gomes and his church have not only recognised its essential purpose, but also spawned an innovative new Choral Fellows programme, now in its second year and the brainchild of Somerville, launched after eight years of preliminary planning and groundwork.



The flagship initiative, designed to support top-flight student choral singers, provides for a stipend and free vocal training, amounting to a significant investment in their development as musicians. The well-known Boston tenor, Dr Thomas Gregg is director of vocal studies. Funded initially by Harvard Business School alumnus Buzz McCoy, this is a pioneering venture for Harvard. 'One might look at this programme as the musical equivalent of an athletics programme where the best are rewarded for their excellence,' Somerville maintains.

The Choral Fellows programme is believed to be the first of its kind in America. Says Somerville, 'This is our way of supporting and nurturing the best and brightest vocal talent we have here among our students, as well as raising the flag that superb choral singing is taken seriously at Harvard.'

'All of this is in the context of a very rich musical life at Harvard, with our own resident Baroque Chamber Orchestra, directed by Robert Mealy, with bows provided by the Harvard Business School, five other campus orchestras, five other faculty-directed choirs, a gospel choir, several fine a cappella groups,

and a music faculty boasting such distinguished names as Robert Levin, Christoph Wolff and Thomas Kelly.'

Beyond Harvard Yard, the University Choir is hardly lacking in cachet as a musical entity in its own right. Under Somerville's direction, the singers have made successful European tours garnering praise: 'a demonstration of choral perfection,' wrote a German reviewer. Unsurprisingly, one former choir member is now a choral scholar at King's, Cambridge; the choir has appeared at Westminster Abbey, Notre Dame in Paris, the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, and with the Boston Camerata at Lincoln Center and Tanglewood. The choir's discography includes recordings on the Koch, Northeastern, Gothic, Pro Organo, and Centaur labels. Most recently the English ASV label released a CD featuring music by American composers Amy Beach and Randall Thompson, recorded in London's Temple Church [see p.82]. Says Somerville: 'This was a uniquely fortunate combination of recording location, production team, and repertoire.'

Somerville – at ease momentarily in his Harvard office lined with books, memorabilia from far-flung tours and special occasion appearances, with music arranged in neat piles pending further consideration – arrived at Harvard with impressive choral conducting credentials. Fresh from a five-year post directing the Bach Festival Choir in Winter Park, Florida, he had also led the choirs at the Cathedral Church of St Luke, Orlando, where he founded the Orlando Deanery Boychoir.

Somerville has brought many to collaborate at Harvard. Guest conductors such as Christopher Hogwood, with whom the choir and the Harvard Baroque Orchestra performed the première of the newly discovered C P E Bach *St Matthew Passion* last spring; Sir David Willcocks, Martin Neary,

*opposite* the University Choir sings evensong in Appleton Chapel, *left* the Festival Choir and Sunday Choir perform music by John Knowles Paine at Riverside Church, New York City with the Harvard Mozart Society Orchestra, *above* in concert at Southwark Cathedral, London (2001)





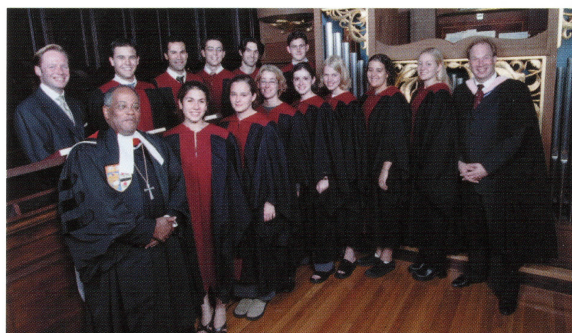
Isaiah Jackson, who conducted the choir's joint appearance with the Kuumba Singers last year; and appearances with The Boston Camerata under Joel Cohen, have drawn a wider audience and made important cross-cultural connections.

As an official entity, the University Choir dates back to 1834, the year of its first Constitution. In 1862, its first university organist and choirmaster, John Knowles Paine, composer and subject of Somerville's doctoral dissertation, was appointed. Subsequent directors have included the legendary Archibald T Davison, Professor G Wallace Woodworth, and John Ferris, under whom it became co-educational. With the institution of

voluntary Morning Prayers in 1886, the role of the choir was expanded to include the daily morning service at Appleton Chapel. Other occasions and demands for its services have been added over the years, including a monthly candlelight Compline and America's oldest annual Christmas carol service.

None of this, of course, happened without financial support. 'When I came to Memorial Church in 1970,' says Peter Gomes, 'the music had been in very fine order under my colleague, John Ferris. But as the decades proceeded, it became clear that in order to guarantee the quality of music for our successors, we had to do more than just appropriate annual funding. And so I determined a long time ago that one of the goals would be to secure an endowment for the choir and for the position that leads the choir.'

'So it was not a hard decision on my part to decide that that would be at the centre of our campaign (carried out with the able assistance of Memorial Church's Director of Development, Dan Sanks), because I felt very strongly that the quality of the musical life is essential to maintaining a lively and vital chapel such as we have.'



According to Somerville, 'We now have the core of the choir, the 12 Choral Fellows singing for daily Morning Prayers; we have a 40-voice concert choir-sized group for Sundays; and with our volunteer festival choir members we have the oratorio-sized choir for big events. We've got the resources and the financial underpinning to do whatever we want. Our task now is to define a tradition with a repertoire for the 21st century in America. It's got to suit our time and our place.'

Suitable to both time, and especially place, is the music of his predecessor and American composer, John Knowles Paine, whose *Mass in D* Somerville conducted in 2000 at Harvard and later at the Riverside Church in New York City; he also recorded Paine's organ works on the Raven label.





He has championed American composers including Ned Rorem, Charles Callahan, Adolphus Hailstork (an African-American composer on the faculty of Virginia State University who writes 'wonderful choral music;') and Carson Cooman, a gifted Harvard undergraduate, who has already written several pieces for the choir, some on commission and one which opened the choir's London concert in 2001 – to name a few. Conducting an RSCM course choir at the national convention of the American Guild of Organists last summer, Somerville showcased an all-American repertoire



B Minor Mass. As he points out: 'We do Bach, English cathedral repertoire, renaissance music regularly.' But his commitment to American music is now seminal to the choir's repertoire and development.

With all this good news, a special celebration, including an anthem commissioned by Peter Gomes in 1982 from William Mathias and a concert of Handel, is taking place at Harvard this November to mark this musical endowment milestone. 'It's been a long-term project,' says Gomes, 'but it was

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including the première of *Love Poem to God* by Douglas Major

'We must encourage different idioms,' Somerville asserts. 'We mustn't let ourselves be hamstrung by outdated notions of what constitutes good taste. The more I study post-modern musicologists like Lawrence Kramer and Susan McCrary, the more I realise we're in a different age. Taste is seen increasingly as a political concept.'

And, as Peter Gomes makes clear, 'Although Harvard College and our chapel have a great affection for things English, we are robustly American, so we do not try to imitate the English way of doing things.'

Somerville is not adverse to traditional repertoire, however. This year he will conduct Bach's *St John Passion*; in 1997 the choir gave the première of Christoph Wolff's new edition of the

a part of the \$8m new endowment campaign for Memorial Church as part of Harvard's multi-billion dollar campaign, so yes, we're pleased to celebrate the fact that it's all done.'

There is further significance for our times in Harvard's commitment to choral music. 'I hope people will see that worship and liturgy are not just a matter of words,' Gomes says. 'It is a total aesthetic, as well as a theological experience, and it requires money. You have to invest in it – you have to invest in the fabric, you have to invest in the personnel and in the vision if you're going to keep it going.'

'Endowing music was as adventurous an investment as it would be if we were building a new building. Essentially, it is about trusting the music, ultimately, to do the right thing. And if you support that over the long haul, then great things can happen.' ■

*opposite, top left the choir in rehearsal, opposite, bottom left singing compline in the Memorial Room at the close of the annual carol service, opposite, centre the inaugural class of Choral Fellows, with Daniel Sanks (Director of Development), Prof Gomes and Dr Somerville in Appleton Chapel, left Choral Fellows prepare to sing the National Anthem at Fenway Park for the Boston Red Sox baseball team, above guest conductor Christopher Hogwood takes a rehearsal*

Photos courtesy of Harvard University