

## Stairwell Carollers deliver a cappella harmony

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The Stairwell Carollers a cappella vocal group took its audience to the top of the stairs musically at its concert “Dormi Jesu” at St. Thomas Anglican Church in Stittsville last Friday evening.

They accomplished this using just their voices, proving that the human voice is by far the world’s greatest musical instrument. The only exception was the use by the group’s director and founder Pierre Massie of a tuning fork which he used before each piece to give himself the proper pitch which he then passed on to the group at large.

It works as the 28-voice choir (15 women and 13 men), dressed in black capes for the men and green capes for the women and all adorned with a red scarf, delivered a program that was enchantingly melodic and varied.

The Stairwell Carollers broke up the program into an introductory and a concluding song in each half, with the other 12 songs in each half delivered in four-song segments. The first of these four-song segments included “Good King Wencelas” with an arrangement by the late British choral conductor and composer Sir

David Willocks adapted by Pierre Massie; “Allons, bergers, partons tous,” a 17th century French song about presenting gifts to the Christ Child; “I Saw Three Ships,” a traditional song with a 20th century arrangement; and “Alleluya, A New Work is Come,” a joyous contemporary carol.

The second four-song segment focused on the mystery and excitement of the birth of the Saviour and so the audience, which filled the church, heard the French traditional song “Quittez pasteurs” about the angels inviting shepherds to the Saviour’s birth; Pierre Massie’s composition “O magnum mysterium”; “The First Nowell,” a familiar traditional carol about the first Christmas presented in an arrangement by Pierre Massie; and “In dulci jubilo,” an old German carol evoking the jubilation that is the essence of the holidays.

The final four-song segment in the first half featured “What Child is This?”, a traditional Victorian song expressing wonder at the newborn Christ Child; “Dans cette etable,” a traditional French Canadian song announcing the arrival of the Saviour; “El Rorro,” a Mexican carol that has been added to the group’s repertoire; and “Nouvelle agreable,” a traditional French carol telling about the good news of Christmas.

These three four-song segments were launched with the choir’s opening number, “O Come All Ye Faithful/Peuples fideles” and were concluded with “Somerset Wassail,” an English traditional song that was

fun and rollicking.

The intermission was followed by a similar 14-song program, beginning with an opening song, in this case, the “Wassail Song,” and ending with the program’s final scheduled carol, “O Holy Night/Minuit Chretiens,” a dramatic song that has become a staple of the tenor repertoire in choirs and which is traditionally sung at midnight masses in French communities and which featured an extended solo by Pierre Massie.

The first four-song segment of the second half began with the world premiere of a new Pierre Massie composition, “Verbum Patris umanatur,” telling about the miracle of the conception and birth of Christ. This was followed by Iesus Ahatonnia,” better known as the Huron Carol, which is Canada’s oldest Christmas carol, written by Canadian martyr Jean de Brebeuf. The other two songs in this four-song segment were “The Shepherd’s

Carol” and “Il est ne le divin enfant,” a classic French carol traditional sung at midnight masses.

The second four-song segment of the second half featured the enthusiastic “Ding Dong Merrily on High,” “The Stairwell Carol,” a piece composed by Pierre Massie in the form of a lullaby using both official languages, “Dormi Jesu,” a Latin lullaby; and “Ave Maria,” a choir favourite which saw Pierre Massie and others sing solo parts.

The third and final four-song segment in the concert featured “Noel nouvelet,” a medieval carol announcing the news of Christmas; “Carol of the Bells,” a perennial favourite; “Ubi Caritas,” a slow song which the Stairwell Carollers use as the background music on its website’s home page; and “En El Portal de Belen,” an energetic traditional song from Puerto Rico.

See ‘HAPPY BIRTHDAY,’ page 35



JOHN CURRY/METROLAND

Members of the Stairwell Carollers a cappella choir of Ottawa sing during the choir’s concert “Dormi Jesu” at St. Thomas Anglican Church at the corner of Stittsville Main Street and Carleton Cathcart Street in Stittsville last Friday evening.

# 'Happy Birthday' sang for choir founder Pierre Massie

*Continued from page 33*

But the concert did not end with its final scheduled song "O Holy Night/Minuit Chrétiens" as following a standing ovation, the choir launched into a couple of encore songs including a sing along version of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," a traditional carol from the 18th century. The choir ended up with "We Wish You A Merry Christmas."

One unscheduled but very popular song during the program was when the choir, assisted by some in the audience, sang "Happy Birthday" to choir director and founder Pierre Massie.

In his introductory remarks, Pat McNally of St. Thomas Anglican Church noted that this concert by the Stairwell Carollers was the kickoff event for the church's anniversary celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of the parish as well as the 25th anniversary of the construction of the present church.

In his concluding remarks, he announced a reception in the church's downstairs hall, advising audience members that they could take a lift to get downstairs or also go via "the stairwell," a remark which elicited laughter from the audience.

This year the Stairwell Carollers are marking their 38th season singing in the area.

Since 1987, the choir has raised over \$124,000 for local charities and for its scholarship program.

Among the charities supported have been the Ottawa Immigrant Services, Ottawa Mission, the Youville Centre, Harmony House,

the Alzheimer Society of Ottawa and Renfrew, the Shepherds of Good Hope, Bruce House, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, Ronald McDonald House, and the Breast Cancer Unit of the Ottawa Civic Hospital.

Seventeen music students have been provided with scholarships since the Stairwell Carollers began their scholarship program in 1997.

The Stairwell Carollers placed first in the 2013 Ontario Music Festival provincial competition.

The new CD "O magnum mysterium" is the group's fifth Christmas CD.

Pierre Massie's composition "Mourning Dove" has been performed on the Peace Tower carillon numerous times along with his arrangements of "Wassail Song" and "Caherbes, assemblons-nous."

The Stairwell Carollers, an a cappella choir, was formed in 1977 by director Pierre Massie. The choir's repertoire includes sacred and secular songs from all eras as well as unique interpretations of traditional Christmas carols in many languages.

Diane Fraser is the current president of the steering committee of the Stairwell Carollers. Morgan Hassell is the vice-president while Andrea Walton serves as secretary and Susan Pullan is the treasurer.

Members of the Stairwell Carollers include: Sopranos – Diana Brushey, Nicole Farris-Manning, Elise Gagnier, Denyse Mageau, Patty Morrison, Margaret-Anne Park, Rae Payette and Andrea Walton; ten-

ors – Khalil Daibes, Morgan Hassell, Andrew Jones, She-Yang Lau-Chapdelaine, Pierre Massie (who is also the director), Graham McElligott and David Rain; altos – Diane Fraser, Kelly Hislop, Manon Kapeller,

Helen Lucker, Holly Massie, Martha Patterson, Susan Pullan and Josee Roy; and basses – David Ayer, John Hancock, Ben Maclean-Max, Zach Nevin, David Smithson, Rene Voyer and Brett Weddle.