

PROFILE

Composing a musical livelihood

Pax Christi Chorale artistic director is also a church musician, music history prof, private music teacher and composer

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The Oct. 26 Fanfare of Canadian Hymns by Pax Christi Chorale: Toronto's Mennonite Choir featured hymns by Leonard Enns, Harris Loewen and Stephanie Martin, the choir's artistic director. Howard Dyck, recently of CBC, told stories about the hymns during the performance and the audience was invited to participate in the singing.

One of the hymns, James Montgomery's "Prayer is the Soul's Sincere Desire" (No. 572 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*), is set to Martin's hymn tune "Dorking."

"I wrote the music for that hymn at my parents' farm," she says. "The drive up there from school meant going through that charming hamlet [Dorking, Ont.], and it's a hymn-writing tradition to name tunes after towns. The original Dorking in England is where [British composer] Vaughan Williams grew up."

Music came naturally to Martin. Her father, Abner Martin, founded the Menno Singers in Kitchener in 1955, she says, "with an aim to providing Mennonite choristers opportunities to study and perform sacred choral music." Martin graduated from Wilfrid Laurier University's music program and later received her master's degree from the University of Toronto.

During her university years, Martin and her friend Chris Culp would sing through all the parts of hymns at Listowel (Ont.) Mennonite Church, each taking a different part on each verse until they had sung all four parts.

"We were learning harmonic theory, all you would learn in university about foundations, harmony and cadences," she remembers now.

Like many artists, Martin has composed a livelihood in music—assistant professor of music history, harpsichordist and organist at York University, private

studio teacher, music director at St. Mary Magdalene Anglican Church (an Anglo-Catholic congregation), and artistic director of Pax Christi Chorale.

The choir was founded in 1987, inspired by the success of an ad hoc choir assembled for the Toronto celebration of the 1986 bicentennial of Mennonites in Canada. Over the years, the choir has grown from about 35 members to 80, including both Mennonites and singers from various faith traditions and cultures.

Musing about music and spirituality, Martin notes that music varies from denomination to denomination, and she appreciates the variety. "Mennonite spirituality is tied up with our community," and is focused on the intellect as expressed in the sermon. At St. Mary Magdalene she revels in the liturgical tradition, with its mystery and aesthetic experience—the smell of incense, the taste of bread and wine, the colours that change throughout the church year. Denominations "retain

distinct community, heritage and, at the same time, we need to not allow distinctiveness to keep us apart from so many wonderful things," she says.

At St. Mary Magdalene, Martin oversees the musical content of four services per week, and more during feast days like All Souls and All Saints. As a church musician, her "spiritual ears are more open to diversity," she says. As a professor of music history, much of which is tied to the church, she is aware of the diversity in her classes—Muslims, atheists and many denominations of Christianity

The Pax Christi Chorale sings two oratorios a year, besides other programs. Martin hopes to continue to "explore the great literature" of spiritual choral music. Her goal, she says, is to "experience what the writer wanted in spiritual experience. First-time audience members say, 'Singers have something extra beyond more polished groups. They've invested a lot in learning the music. You can see it on their faces.'" This is made possible, in part, by 14 weeks of practice as a choir before the orchestra is added to the musical mix for each performance, which, Martin says, she expects to be "polished."

This season the Pax Christi Chorale will perform Haydn's *Creation* on Dec. 6 and 7, and Bach's *B Minor Mass* on April 25 and 26, 2009. All concerts take place at Grace Church on-the-Hill, 300 Lonsdale Rd., Toronto. ❧

PHOTO BY BETSY MOSS



Stephanie Martin, standing right, directs the Pax Christi Chorale and the Christ Church Deer Park Junior Choir.