Tales From The Choir Loft

May 2025

Creation of the Choir Database and Cleaning the Choir Room Floor

What does typing a huge amount of data into a computer have to do with scrubbing floors? I promise you there is a connection. Read on…

Genesis

One Sunday morning in March 2016, Ralph Williams, the choir director, was standing at the music cabinets looking for a particular anthem he wanted to pull out. The boxes of music were arranged by title, but all he could remember was the name of the composer. I was sitting nearby, and he turned to me and asked "What's the title of that song by Lena McLin?" Because I pay attention to the composers of our anthems (as each tends to have a particular style), I was able to tell him "Sanctus" (*which is a slightly strange title—yes, the text is derived from the Sanctus portion of the Latin mass, but the title is Latin and all of the lyrics are in English*). I was able to answer his question this time, but I might not always be so lucky. I thought that it might be useful to have a database, which didn't need to be any more cosmic than a simple spreadsheet, of all the choir library which could be searched to answer similar questions.

It would take a lot of hours to accumulate all of that data. In the best of military tradition, I realized that since it was my idea, I was immediately assigned as the Lead Project Officer. If it was ever going to happen, I would have to be the one to do it. There was no need for a committee to make decisions, as the execution would just be simple repetitive grunt work. The key to success was to figure out a way to make it happen while being enjoyable.

Pulling Together the Proposal

It was clear to me fairly early on that the data entry would have to be done in the choir room where the music was stored. I certainly wasn't going to cart many cubic feet of music boxes back and forth to some other location, and trying to collect data by photographs would significantly increase the workload for no gain in efficiency.

I didn't have a fancy laptop computer, but I did have an old netbook computer that was about six years old. It was painfully slow to boot up or load programs, but once it was up and running it could easily keep up with data entry.

So, I had a computer that I could take to the choir room, but how would I get into the building? Handbell and choir rehearsals filled up Thursday nights, and other events were held in there occasionally on other weeknights. I would need to have a key to get into the building and knowledge of how to disarm the alarm system if I was there when nobody else was. I wasn't sure how to convince the Pastor or the Board of Trustees that the risk of an additional key running around was worth the project that I was proposing.

Then it occurred to me that I was already in the building on Sunday mornings for choir rehearsal and the service. Since I was already in the building, I wouldn't need to have a key to get in. I could work for a few hours after the service, and then just leave using a crash bar door, understanding that I would not be able to reenter. The alarm was not set during the day, so that would not be a problem. It seemed like a perfect plan, but I would need to let someone know officially what I was up to and get official approval.

I pitched the idea to Ralph, along with my access plan. I remember he didn't seem extra excited about it (probably because he didn't want to do that much work himself (understandable) and he had survived in his post around 16 years without a database), but he was a smart man and could see the potential benefit. I made it clear that I could do all of this myself without involving him or anyone else. I made no promises about when it would be complete, figuring it would be done when it was done. I explained how I would work on Sunday afternoons after the service, so building access would not be an issue. Being smart enough not to turn down a willing volunteer, Ralph approved the project.

I created the following proposed fields for the database:

Title
Arranger/Composer
Other Authors
Scripture Reference
Hymn Tune Name
Vocal Parts (SATB, SAB, TTBB, etc)
Copyright Date
Publisher
Extra Instruments (besides Piano or Organ)
Season
Collection (for multiple works published in one volume)
Remarks

Some fields would not apply to some anthems, but all of them would be used at some point. I ran this list past Ralph, and he had no additions. Everything was set, and I had approval to proceed.

But Wait! There's More…

At some point I mentioned my proposed plan to my wife, Tuki. I had figured this would be another solo project for me. Much to my surprise, she was all excited and wanted to be a part of it. However, she had a completely different objective in mind.

The choir room was new construction and opened for business around October 2005. By 2016, the tile floor was 11 years old and had never been cleaned or waxed. She felt the floor was quite dirty and needed to be cleaned. Having this done professionally would cost money, money that was probably not in the Church budget, and money that she didn't have to donate. What she did have to donate was time and elbow grease. Tuki also enjoys cleaning things that are quite dirty, mostly for the immediate feedback of watching the color change from dirty to clean. Therefore, she suggested that we make it a family project—I would enter data into the computer and she would clean the floor. Figuring no one could argue with a clean floor, we didn't bother getting "permission" for this part of the plan. We thought it would be fun to see how long it would take for someone to notice that the floor was being cleaned. We didn't keep what we were doing a secret—we just didn't advertise it too loudly.

The Operations Plan

If we were both going to be in the choir room working on Sunday afternoons, we would need to figure out what to do with our daughter Emmy, who was about 1 year 3 months old at this time. She was starting to be mobile (pulling up, rolling) but wasn't walking yet. We couldn't just put her down and expect her to stay put, but she couldn't get very far very fast. By this point she was able to watch videos, and her favorite videos were of anything Peanuts with Charlie Brown and Snoopy. There was a large TV on the wall of the choir room, and I asked questions and figured out how to connect my iPad to the TV so that I could play movies on the iPad and show them on the TV.

On any Sunday morning, I would bring the computer and supplies with me to choir rehearsal and put them over to the side somewheres. About the time we were singing the final hymn of the service, Tuki would arrive with Emmy and all of the Emmy supplies. She would also bring a picnic lunch and a cooler of drinks. The lunch was ready to eat with no further preparation. After the service, Tuki would start putting down a blanket for Emmy to roll around on and get the lunch ready for serving. I would hook the iPad to the TV and get a Peanuts video going. By the time we started on lunch, the rest of the choir had put their stuff away and departed, so we weren't disturbing anyone else and had the place to ourselves.

The most effective place I had to place the computer was on the bell tables near the cabinets with the music. Because the bell tables were covered with thick foam pads, I brought in a piece of foam core board, left over from one of Tuki's school projects, to put under the computer for a more solid base. I used an extension cord to reach the nearest power outlet so I could use a power adapter to plug into the computer to make sure it would stay on. Rather than use the krappy keyboard on the netbook, I brought a full sized keyboard that I would plug into the computer. Rather than use the touchpad on the netbook, I plugged in a USB mouse. This was an optical mouse, and it didn't work well on the foam core board because the surface was blank white and glossy. The second week I grew tired of fighting with the mouse and taped that day's bulletin to the foam core board. The surface was sufficiently rougher that the mouse worked just fine.

With a viable plan, we started our project on 17 April 2016. According to an email I sent to Ralph, it took me about 3.5 hours to get through one cabinet of anthems. Thus, we usually started after the service around 1215 and worked until about 1600. There was no strict schedule, rather we worked until we got to a good stopping point. Working through one cabinet at a time made it easy to remember where to start the next time. This schedule would let us get through at least two complete Peanuts movies, such as *The Peanuts Movie* and *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*, plus possibly a little more.

Tuki started cleaning the floor at some random location, not in the corner of the room. Using typical household tools and products, she would clean the tile squares one tile at a time. It was sort of the inverse of coloring in boxes while staying inside the lines. She would do a strip of tiles in a session. One week she got extra cheeky and started cleaning alternate tiles, such that the floor started to look like a large checker board. Choir members started to notice the weird pattern on the floor and wondered what was going on. Many of them had never noticed how dirty the floor had become since it had happened so gradually. Now it was painfully obvious. Supposedly at some point the Pastor walked through the choir room and saw the floor, and thus realized how dirty it had become.

We couldn't work every Sunday afternoon, but we did on most of them. The music database initial entry was completed on 21 August 2016. Per an email sent to Ralph at the time, the floor cleaning wasn't quite done yet at that time. It probably only took one more session to complete the floor cleaning.

Observations

By the time I had finished entering all of the music into the database, I had looked at an example of every piece at least once. It is reasonable to conclude that at that moment I was more familiar with what was in the library than anyone else, probably including the director. Having been singing in church choirs for 43 years at that time (starting in 1973), I noticed a few things.

Some of the music, such as the cantatas, were multiple pieces bound in one volume. Other bound volumes were collections of similar music, such as a collection of responses. For each of these books, I entered each piece individually into the database.

I saw a lot of anthems that I had never seen before, and I could understand why I had never seen them before. I started my choir journey in the 70s, and remember fondly many anthems from that era. However, I found many pieces that were written about that long ago that I had never seen before. When I looked through them, they were very dated. They certainly would have been contemporary at the time, but some of the themes or the musical style did not age well. They were interesting from a historical perspective, but I don't expect to see them on the upcoming anthem table anytime in the future. And that's okay—time marches on.

Much to my surprise, I never found any copies of *My Eternal King* by Jane Marshall. This is one of my all time favorite anthems, and I expected to find it, because the choir had done it with Ruth Jones back between 1989 and 1992. I remember Bev Gibbs being flummoxed that I was singing this anthem that she had never seen before without even looking at the music, but that is a story for another article. This left me wondering where Ruth had procured the music. Perhaps she borrowed it from the Adventist Church where her husband was pastor. Realizing that we didn't have the music, I asked Ralph to buy a set of music for the choir and sweetened the deal by telling him I would pay for it. We were able to sing it in church two or three times before the pandemic changed everything about the way the choir worked.

And Then for Afters…

Tuki finished cleaning the floor, and we declared the project complete. The good news was that the floor was clean. The bad news was that we did not have the equipment to wax and buff the floor so that the newly cleaned floor would be protected.

A few weeks later, the choir met on a Saturday to rehearse for the upcoming Christmas choir concert. Oddly, Ralph told us that we would be rehearsing in the Fireside Room, something that we hadn't done since the new choir room opened in 2005. When we went in to the choir room to get our folders, we were surprised to find all of the furniture had been pulled out of the choir room and the floor was recently waxed. Apparently, somebody with the appropriate authority had decided that since Tuki had spent all of that effort to clean the floor, it was worth it to spend some of the budget to have a professional come in and lay down a protective wax layer.

As for the music database, now that we had it, Ralph was committed to keeping it maintained. As he would buy new music, he made sure that he got a copy of it to me first thing to enter it into the database, even if he didn't plan to rehearse it for a while. Since the scope of the maintenance effort was much, much smaller than the initial effort, I found that I could just take a picture of the cover and the first page and have all the information that I needed. I would take the pictures in the choir room, then do the data entry on my computer after I got home.

Choir Archive

In 2005, after the Consecration Celebration service to commemorate the opening of the remodeled sanctuary, I kept the bulletin in my choir folder because it contained information about all of the symbols and stained glass windows around the sanctuary. I also kept the program from the patriotic choir concert that we did that afternoon so that I could remember all of the fun songs that we had sung that day. In 2006 I kept the bulletin from Pastor Jim Ledgerwood's memorial service in my folder because I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. I would continue to do this with documents from significant events outside of normal Sunday morning services. Eventually, this collection grew to be about an inch or more thick and was getting quite heavy to hold while singing. I knew I needed a better plan.

I brought all of these documents home and scanned them so we would have an accessible record on the computer. I got a three ring binder, put a title page on the front and the spine, then loaded all of the paper documents into document protectors and placed them in the binder. I found a spot in the music cabinets where it would fit, and then told Ralph of its existence.

I envisioned it would be useful for seeing what had been performed at past concerts while planning for future concerts. As it turned out, it was also useful as a record for finding former choir members who had since passed away.

The New Administration

At the end of June 2024, Ralph Williams retired as our choir director after almost 25 years. In his place, freshly ordained Deacon Heather Kinkinnon took over as our choir director.

Shortly after she had started, it occurred to me that she might not be aware of all of the documentation efforts that had taken place. Thus, on 14 July 2024, I emailed her a copy of the current music database, with a simple message saying

> As our new director, I wanted to make sure that you had the Choir Music Database readily available. See attached.
>
> Also, I want to make sure you are aware of the Choir Archive, a binder in one of the cabinets in the choir room that contains programs from many different special activities that the choir has participated in over the years.

She responded back the next day

> Thank you, Russ! I didn't know this existed, so it's one thing off my plate. (next step is to inventory copies, etc) Who complied this?
> FYI, I have moved it to the church's One Drive.
>
> I also didn't know about the folder. Thanks for the heads up.

Clearly, she had it in her mind that one of the tasks she needed to do was to create a database record of all the music in the library, only to have it dropped in her lap as a *fait accompli*.

- **Russ Erb**