

Sing we now of Christmas

By Rosanne McDowell

“I will sing unto the LORD as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being” (Psalm 104:33).

A flash of red satin, a glimpse of a cape and top hat, a gleam of red-berried holly, all of it strolling at 19th-century pace down the halls of Columbiana Centre. Christmas eye candy courtesy of the Carillon Carolers, costumed in Victorian splendor and celebrating their 24th year of making holiday music for Midlands music lovers. In lush four-part harmony, Dana Fore, soprano; Chan Shealy, tenor; Hal McIntosh, bass; and I — Rosanne McDowell, alto and manager — sing the glories of the Savior’s birth to diverse audiences of every level of belief and unbelief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. No matter their faith, our listeners all seem to enjoy it.

We feel the reason we can please so many different kinds of people is simple. The holiday favorites we sing span generational and cultural divides, thereby opening possibly closed hearts to the timeless message of God’s salvation in Christ. We are “evangelists of good cheer,” as carolers sometimes are called, sowing gospel seeds encased in beautiful musical and visual wrappings.

Taking the idea from a similar quartet I had seen in Macy’s in New York City, I founded the Carillon Carolers in 1988 with just four singers. Over the years our numbers have increased to about a dozen musicians. Some of us sing regularly as part of the quartet, while others perform from time to time.

“It’s fun to mix and match ourselves on occasion with different combinations of singers,” says Dana, who works in the guidance



From left: Rosanne McDowell, alto; and Hal McIntosh, bass, singing on the grounds of the Governor’s Mansion. Photo by Bob Carroll.

department at Lexington Middle School. “Ordinarily, there’s only one of us on each part, but we have sung with double that number at one time.”

Our colorful Dickens-era costumes — mixable and matchable like our voices and made primarily of rustling taffetas and satins — are half the fun. With a delicious new costume of red velveteen, Christmas taffeta and leg o’ mutton sleeves just stitched by Columbian Sally Aldridge, I’m enjoying an extra dimension of pleasure in this year’s performances.

As for our name, before our first season and after much discussion we borrowed “Carillon,” that is, “a tower of bells,” from the Carolina Carillon Holiday Parade in Columbia. On the several occasions we have sung for the parade, either on the street or from the reviewing stand, the greatest charm for us has been the children who request that we sing a song just for them. Sometimes they ask to have their pictures made with us. We are happy to oblige.

Singing to the praise and glory of God is our joy, but performing enduringly beautiful music while working with other top-notch artists definitely multiplies the pleasure. All of us hold music degrees, some of them advanced; all of us have extensive performing credits acquired in such varied settings as church choir lofts and European opera houses. Musically accomplished singers are necessary because the quartet performs its 50-carol repertoire *a cappella*, or unaccompanied. We occasionally enlarge that repertoire to keep it fresh. New this year: a lovely arrangement of “Go, Tell It on the Mountain,” added at the request of a client.

Our song books, however, were not always as full as they are now. In the early days, we sang only traditional hymnbook carols because



Left to right, Dana Fore, soprano, and Chan Shealy, tenor. Taken on the front porch of the Caldwell-Boylston House on the grounds of the Governor's Mansion. Photo by Bob Carroll.



Far left: Dan Cole at the Governor's Mansion, 2007. Photo by Bob Carroll. Center (l to r): Dave Sennema, tenor; Dana Fore, soprano; the author; Marc Rattray, bass. Photo by Bob Carroll. Above: Rosanne McDowell, alto, and small caroler fan Olivia Allen, at the Carolina Carillon Holiday Parade, 2008. Photo by Beverly Allen.

other suitable *a cappella* Christmas arrangements, especially for lighter holiday numbers, were difficult to find for just four singers. So bass Robert Neese began to arrange contemporary Christmas songs for us, including “Silver Bells” and “Frosty the Snowman.” We remain grateful for his fine work — and thankful he still has not made good on his annual threat to arrange “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.”

From a spiritual, mental and emotional point of view, it's impossible to perform our Christmas songs, be they hymnbook carols or Robert's arrangements, without feeling uplifted. Tenor Chan Shealy, IT director with BDI Pharma, maintains that singing carols “gives us a positive attitude, puts us in the Christmas mood and lifts our spirits.” As Christians, we are not surprised by this payoff. Carols run through our heads continually, musical thought-shapers right in tune with the wisdom in Philippians 4:8: “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, . . . whatsoever things are lovely, . . . think on these things.”

While we can be seen all over town, our main stage is Columbiana Centre's expansive shopping halls, where we relish the faces of marveling small fry and smiling parents who pause to hear our music. It's also a pleasure to see teens listening to us with evident enjoyment and even occasionally flashing us a thumbs-up and a grin. Babies dressed with traditional Southern Christmas élan in candy-striped rompers and miniature Santa caps, or toddlers in red velvet dresses with matching socks, shoes and sashes wave back to us as we sing, some perched on daddy's shoulders, some bouncing on granny's lap, others in strollers. We love interacting with them. As experienced performers, we've mastered our repertoire and so can do a little impromptu choreography or plop a top hat on a small head.

Years ago when our repertoire was less extensive, audience interaction gave us one of our most requested songs. Between numbers, a little girl scampered up to our bass, flung her arms around his legs and begged, “Will you sing ‘Jingle Bells’ for me?” He looked at the rest of us and asked, “Do you think we can wing it?” We did, on the spot and in four parts, and it's been a staple ever

since. The little moppet who made that request thanked us after we'd finished and gave that delighted bass a kiss on the cheek.

Since those days, our expanded repertoire has ranged from “Angels We Have Heard on High” to “White Christmas” and our venues from the Governor's Mansion to a local church's barbecue Christmas dinner. Equally comfortable performing on a stage, by a door, near a cozy fireplace or strolling throughout a gathering or venue, we evoke the memory of yesteryear at retail stores, civic clubs, December weddings, lobbies and retirement homes, as well as office and home parties. When Christmas is past, we lay aside our carols for an *a cappella* program of old love songs — “Peg o' My Heart,” “Embraceable You” and other golden oldies — which we sing for luncheons and Valentine's Day parties, Mother's Day and wedding events, dressed like characters straight out of *The Music Man*.

What, more specifically, underlies the perennial holiday appeal of the Carillon Carolers? “It's the emotional connections caroling brings to people,” reflects bass Hal McIntosh, director of music for Saxe Gotha Presbyterian Church and the Lexington County Choral Society. “It stirs up memories of happy childhood holidays and lets them imagine, just for a time, the ideal Christmas. With our traditional sound, we help them picture that ideal Christmas.”

Nothing creates the enchantment of Christmas like elegantly costumed carolers, and God can use all that eye candy and heart-tugging holiday music to draw people to the Savior. The Carillon Carolers treasure being the Lord's instruments (in more ways than one) at this magical time of year. **ROC**

For further information about the Carillon Carolers, contact Rosanne McDowell at 765-1764 in Columbia, or visit www.carilloncarolers.com. Two caroling demos are available, one of which can be heard on the Bible Broadcasting Network.

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