

With a song in their hearts

Princeton Girlchoir's Cantores has a new conductor

By Michael Redmond
Special Writer

There's a lot more to the Princeton Girlchoir than meets the ear.

Some girls, singing, right? Look again. The organization, which was founded by artistic director emeritus Jan Westrick in 1989 as an after-school activity for a small group, has grown into "a family of six choirs," involving more than 200 girls, ages 8 to 18, from throughout Central Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania.

Under the artistic direction of Lynnel Joy Jenkins, the PGC is welcoming a new associate director, Tom T. Shelton, who will conduct PGC's Cantores (Latin for "singers"), the choir for older girls, 10th through 12th graders. Mr. Shelton — a specialist in youth choirs and a composer — is coming to the Princeton area from his home town of Greensboro, N.C., to join the faculty of Rider University's Westminster Choir College as assistant professor of sacred music, with a focus on children's and youth music.

Active in the American Choral Directors Association, the winner of numerous awards and honors, he has conducted youth choirs in 14 states and abroad, including the New Jersey All-State Middle School Mixed Choir, in 2008.

According to Robert L. Annis, Westminster's dean and director, "We expect Tom Shelton's extensive experience working with youth choirs in church, school and community settings to enhance our sacred music program and to expand our collaborations with the area's youth choirs in the coming years."

Children's music is indeed a specialty, in a number of senses. It must be written or arranged to suit voices that are not fully developed, in much the same way that sports activities must conform to the level of a youngster's physical development to avoid injury. With singing, in particular, boys present a unique challenge, as the day inevitably comes when a boy's voice drops into a man's vocal range. But you have to take care with girls, too. In the opera world, Mr. Shelton notes, as a rule of thumb, a woman's voice is not considered fully mature until she's 30, a man's voice, 35.

"I taught middle school for 18 years," Mr. Shelton says. "With high-school age females, you're dealing with the development of breath support and listening skills, with the achievement of a good blend in the group's sound, and also with the control of vibrato" (pitch variation within a single note, which can be used for expressive purposes).

But at least as important as the technical stuff, he emphasizes, is that the girls establish a personal connection to whatever it is they're singing, and for that, he relies upon the sung material's text.

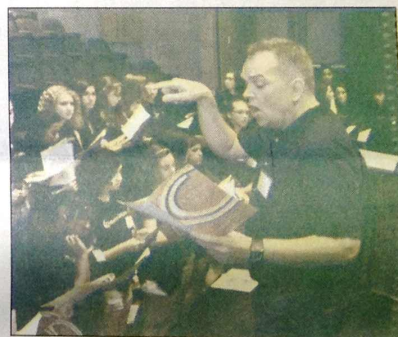
"It has to be appropriate to their age, and it has to mean something to them. There's nothing more meaningful than the sound of children singing — their voices are beautiful, the purity they have — but this sound and this beauty comes



Princeton Girlchoir Artistic Director Lynnel Joy Jenkins with the choir's new associate director, Tom T. Shelton, who will conduct PGC's Cantores.



Associate director Tom T. Shelton rehearses with the Princeton Girlchoir's Cantores.



alive to the fullest only when they feel whatever it is the text is communicating."

Mr. Shelton constantly is on the lookout for good pieces, and he also writes his own. His compositions have been published by Colla Voce Music, Heritage Music Press, Hinshaw Music Company, and Santa Barbara Music Press. He reads a lot of poetry: He has set Byron, Dickinson and Christina Rossetti, and a major work of his, a song cycle for soprano and keyboard titled "Remember Me as I Was Then," uses poems by American poet Sara Teasdale (1884-1933), a little-remembered but important figure in her time.

"I just hear things," Mr. Shelton says. "All my life I've played by ear; as a kid, I'd hear something on the radio and I'd try to play it. I always made up things. My favorite thing with youth choirs is to have a poetry contest and choose one or two of the kids' texts with the right feeling. It's very exciting to hear out loud what you hear in your head."

A native of Greensboro, he grew up "in a very musical family." His father was a police officer;

his mother made a home for five children. "We all sang. We all had piano lessons. We had a very strong music program at my church, with a huge youth choir." In high school, Mr. Shelton sang baritone, played trumpet in the band and piano in the jazz band. "Even so," he says, "it took me two years of college before I settled on a music major."

He is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with both a Bachelor of Music Education degree and Master of Music in Choral Conducting.

Whether girl or boy, young people benefit greatly from choral singing because "they're not in competition with others, they're involved in an exciting group-building activity that showcases their individual talent and passion. Singing provides them with a personal expression of who they are as well the opportunity to form a relationship with the texts they sing."

According to the PGC, "The Cantores was

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formed in 2004 as the 'Alumni Cantores,' providing an opportunity for singers graduating from the Concert Choir to continue with Princeton Girlchoir... In recent years the choir has grown to include 10th-12th graders who are new to Princeton Girlchoir, and has doubled its number of appearances each season. In addition to the regular performances with its sister choirs, the Cantores have added new

traditions, including collaborations with the region's boychoirs for 'In Mixed Company,' appearances with professional organizations, and touring engagements."

Ms. Jenkins and Mr. Shelton — they're friends as well as colleagues — are in the process of planning the PGC's 2012-2013 concert season, so stay tuned.

For more information, visit princetongirlchoir.org and tomsheltonmusic.com