

AND STILL SINGING!

BEL CANTO CHORUS

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Throughout Milwaukee during the 1930s, Thursday nights were filled with music as choral societies and singing clubs assembled to rehearse. This harmonious pastime traced its roots to the strong singing tradition that had flourished in 19th century Germany. It was a tradition that had been brought by immigrants to Milwaukee, a center of Teutonic culture so vibrant it was known as the “German Athens” of the Midwest.

“The German people came together to sing for entertainment,” said Richard Hynson, music director of Milwaukee’s Bel Canto Chorus. “Whether it was the simplest of barroom ballads that were sung with glasses held high, or the most serious art songs written by Schumann, Mendelssohn, or Brahms, people sang around the dinner table, after dinner in the parlor, and in public places. It was a strong part of their culture.”

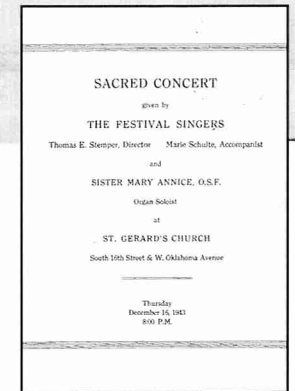
One of the groups rehearsing on Thursday nights in Milwaukee in 1931 — and in the process, celebrating that culture — was the Festival Singers of Milwaukee. It was a small *a cappella* chorus that, like many of the other groups in town, specialized in sacred music. Over the next 75 years, however, the Festival Singers would distinguish itself from all those other singing groups, evolving first into one of the country’s major oratorio choruses, and later into a highly skilled and versatile chorus specializing in 20th century choral music. It would travel the world and commission original works. It would stake a claim as the city’s oldest continuing performing arts organization. It would become Milwaukee’s famed Bel Canto Chorus.



Under the direction of Thomas H. Stemper, music teacher and owner of the Milwaukee Church Supply Co., the Festival Singers of Milwaukee presented its first concert on Easter Sunday 1931, in the chapel at St. Mary’s Hospital. Comprised of four men and four women, the group performed Hans Gruber’s *Festival Mass*, from which it took its name.



Over the next ten years, the Festival Singers grew to include 75 men and women. According to the *Catholic Herald Citizen*, they “ranged in age from bobby-soxers to grandmothers,” and included people from all walks of life. “There are students, and housewives and clerks; there is a traffic officer, a safety engineer, a freight clerk, a chemist, an insurance agent, and a carpenter. Others are in business for themselves; but none is a professional musician.”



HOLY HOUR

FOR THE WELFARE OF OUR COUNTRY
 under the sponsorship of
**MILWAUKEE ARCHDIOCESAN UNION,
 HOLY NAME SOCIETY**

Marquette University Stadium
 Milwaukee, Wisconsin Sunday, August 13, 1944
 7:45

HIS EXCELLENCY

The Most Rev. Moses E. Kiley, S.T.D.
 Archbishop of Milwaukee
 Celebrant and Speaker

Chaplain to Archbishop Kiley:
 The Reverend William J. Bronner
 The Reverend Peter K. Frisch
 Master of Ceremonies..... The Right Reverend Mgr. Roman B. Alibekki
 Deacon..... The Rev. Clement J. Zych
 Subdeacon..... The Rev. Gabriel W. Hatford
 Crossbearer..... The Rev. Raymond A. Witkowski
 Acolytes..... The Rev. Gilbert E. Corbin
 The Rev. Leonard Norobay
 Tawtler..... The Rev. Warren J. Schmitt
 Treasurers..... The Rev. Valentin J. Rykowski
 Secretaries..... The Rev. Philip Schwab
 The Rev. John D. Allemong

Intention:

The Spiritual and temporal welfare of our Country, and of our men and women Service.

Indulgences:

To the faithful who take part in this Holy Office is granted:

(a) FLEWRY INDULGENCE to those who Confession and Communion offer according to the intention of the Holy Father.
 (b) AN INDULGENCE OF TEN YEARS who participate with at least a contrite heart (Baccolle 1938).

PROCESSIONAL

Eccle, Sacerdos Magnus..... Festival Singers

Flag Raising Ceremony

George Washington Post No. 2
 American Legion Drill Team
 Albert Gulczynski, Captain

Stand and Sing

The Star Spangled Banner

Oh! say, can you see by the dawn's early light
 What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming?
 Whose broad stripes and bright stars, thru the perilous fight,
 O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
 And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
 Gave proof thru the night that our flag was still there,
 Oh, say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave,
 O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave?

Festival Singers Give Concert at Workhouse

The Festival Singers presented a 90 minute concert Sunday night to 280 inmates of the house of correction. The group, which consists of 75 mixed voices, had been invited to sing by Inspector Joseph Drewniak of the workhouse.

The program was concluded with "God Bless America," in which the inmates and the choir joined.

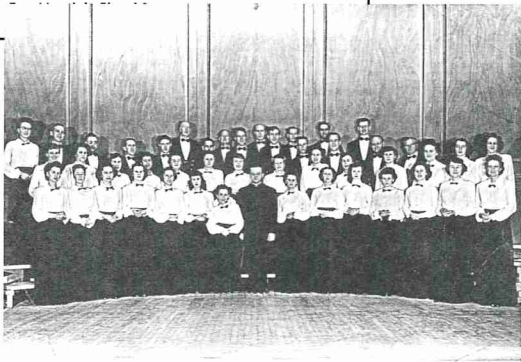
The 57 enemy aliens who are being held at the workhouse were not permitted to attend.

As the only one of the city's many choruses not affiliated with a particular church, the Festival Singers was extremely busy, performing before Holy Name Societies (Catholic men's groups), at conventions, dedications, and memorial services, and on local radio programs. One of its most memorable concerts took place at the city's House of Correction in 1941, where inmates joined the chorus in a rendition of "God Bless America." The Festival Singers also provided the music in August 1943, when 10,000 people gathered at Marquette University to pray for a "speedy Allied victory" at the Milwaukee Archdiocese's annual Holy Hour.

Reviews in the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel* of a 1945 concert at the Pabst Theater featuring mostly sacred music praised the Festival Singers for singing with "spirit and confidence" and "disciplined modulation and balance."

In 1947, Stemper resigned his post due to poor health, but within a year the choir was reorganized under Father Francis Drabinowicz, pastor of St. James Parish in Oak Creek and a former professor of music at St. Francis Seminary. Renamed the Bel Canto Choir, the group of 50 performed its first concert under Drabinowicz at the Pabst in April 1948. On the program: a mix of sacred music, such as Grieg's "Ave Maria," and popular tunes that included Jerome Kern's "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." A critic described the event as an "auspicious beginning" for the new group.

Drabinowicz led Bel Canto, which reviewers said, "more than lived up to its name, which meant 'good singing,'" until 1956, when he retired. By then the group was presenting, in addition to its many smaller performances, one concert a year at the Pabst, usually singing *a cappella* or with piano accompaniment.



THE KEELEY ERA

James Keeley was named to succeed Drabinowicz. A native of Oak Park, Illinois, Keeley came to Milwaukee in 1948 at the age of 19 to study for the priesthood at St. Francis Seminary. He later received a degree from Milwaukee State Teachers College, and taught Latin and Greek for several years at Marquette University High

School before deciding to pursue a career in music. When tapped to lead Bel Canto, he was also serving as organist and choir director at St. Patrick and St. Hedwig Catholic Churches in Milwaukee, and at Christ King Catholic Church in Wauwatosa.

Keeley, who as a boy had memorized Gilbert and Sullivan librettos, also helped launch Milwaukee's Skylight Theatre in 1960 with public relations executive Clair Richardson and Sprague Vonier, WTMJ-TV station manager. It was Keeley and his collaborator, Ray Smith, who starred in the group's first show, a two-man Gilbert and Sullivan revue.

In addition, Keeley coordinated the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra's appearances on WTMJ-TV, conducted the 1965 Lakeshore Arts Festival Orchestra, guest conducted the Milwaukee Civic and Waukesha Symphony Orchestras, and taught organ and harpsichord as a member of the faculty of the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music. In 1966, Keeley stated that his "main work" was directing the Christ King Choir, which at the time included 60 boys from the grade school and 20 men from the parish. The group went on to perform with Bel Canto numerous times over the next few years.

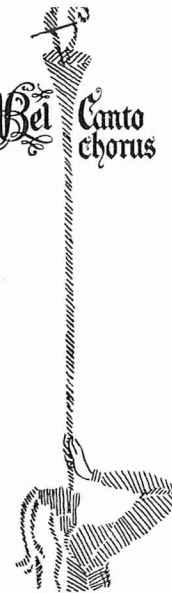
The *Milwaukee Sentinel* described Keeley as "a polished instrumental, vocal and orchestral musician... [who] has used church music as the center for his activities." When he wasn't doing something musical, Keeley loved to cook. He was also a licensed pilot, despite his far-from-perfect eyesight.

Keeley's first concert as director of Bel Canto was held on November 18, 1956, at Wauwatosa High School. The small *a cappella* ensemble featured just 39 volunteer singers. On the program: an eclectic mix of musical works that included both show tunes and Bach. Keeley doubled as harpsichordist for the program, which was described by a reviewer as "ambitious."

Nevertheless, Keeley — at the urging of Richardson — decided his singers could do much more, and set out to turn Bel Canto into a distinguished oratorio chorus. (In fact, in 1964 the group began billing itself as the Bel Canto Chorus.) The core of its repertoire: the grand choral masterpieces and ambitious choral versions of major operatic works. Among



Bel Canto
chorus



4 Hurt as Stage Bleachers Collapse

Four members of the Bel Canto Chorus were injured Saturday night as a stage bleacher collapsed in the Oriental Theater minutes before the curtain was to rise for the production of Verdi's *Requiem*.

They were among some 40 singers who had already taken their positions on the five-step bleachers. Suddenly, the center support split and the entire unit "settled gently to the floor," in the words of one of those aboard. Most of the singers "just rode it down," said another.

Taken by police ambulance to County Emergency Hospital for treatment were: Mrs. Mary Lederer, 29, of 7418 W. Cameron Av., abrasions to both legs; Miss Lillie



Miss Gallagher Mrs. Lederer

Gallagher, 39, of 516 N. 32nd St., left ankle injury; Mrs. Audrey Richards, 29, of 2530B S. Brisbane Av., left leg injury, and James Lutz, 27, of 1165 (Please turn to Page 2, Col. 1)



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BLEACHER 'Are You All Right?' COLLAPSE

(Continued from Page 1)
W. Keefe Av., leg injury.

As soon as it was determined that none was seriously injured, the chorus decided "the show must go on." The stage was rapidly cleared and the curtain rose only 25 minutes late for what was billed as "the biggest indoor production in the history of Milwaukee music."

Minutes after the "crash landing," there was less confusion backstage than front-stage.

Impresario Clair Richardson stepped in front of the curtain and announced there would be a delay of about 20 minutes, explaining the collapse. However, he was speaking into a dead mike and the near-1,000 persons in the audience at the time were unable to hear.

Backstage, chorus members quietly stepped to the injured, awaiting arrival of ambulances. And asked, "How are you?" "Are you all right?" Assured by the replies, they headed toward their places.

Just after the last victim was carried by stretcher through an exit, the chorus was ready — without bleachers. Richardson returned to the spotlight and—with live mike—related the circumstances. His announcement that the chorus had agreed to carry on brought thunderous applause.

In a way, the accident was a blessing for some. By the time the performance got underway, the 2,000 seats were filled. Apparently about 1,000 of the music lovers were late.

(Phantom of the Opera' haunts Verdi Requiem at the Oriental. Story on Page 1B.)

them: Verdi's *Requiem* and *Otello*, Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, Haydn's *The Creation*, Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, Puccini's *Turandot*, Fauré's *Requiem*, and of course, Handel's *Messiah*, which Bel Canto performed under Keeley for the first time in 1959 and a total of 16 times over his 32-year tenure. Richard S. Davis, a *Milwaukee Journal* music critic, called Keeley's first *Messiah* the "signal achievement by Milwaukee and its suburbs in half a century."

By then, Bel Canto had grown to approximately 150 singers. Soon it was presenting two major concerts a year — early on in the Milwaukee Auditorium, and after 1968, in the Performing Arts Center's Uihlein Hall — usually with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and often with soloists of national repute.

A particularly memorable concert took place in March 1961 at the Oriental Theater, when Keeley and the chorus performed Verdi's *Requiem* for the first time. Keeley had painstakingly prepared for the event, consulting at length with Fritz Reiner, conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and a Verdi scholar. Keeley's goal, according to Bel Canto archivist and historian Mary Moscisker, was "to perform the work in a manner as faithful as possible to its premier 87 years earlier in Milan, Italy, under the direction of the composer."

But just five minutes before the curtain was to rise on the performance, a section of bleachers, on which about 40 of the 180 singers were standing, collapsed when a central support gave way. Four chorus members were hospitalized with minor injuries. "Phantom of the Opera Strikes Bel Canto," read the next day's front-page headline in the *Milwaukee Journal*.

Yet, *Journal* reviewer Walter Monfried wrote of the singers, "Shaken and shocked, they rapidly recovered their spirits and poise. They demanded that the performance go on — and go on it did, in exemplary fashion."

A 1962 concert featuring *Belshazzar's Feast* and a concert version of the Verdi opera *Otello* was an even grander production. According to Moscisker, the concert — performed before a crowd of 5,000 at the Milwaukee Auditorium — included 200 choristers, a 100-piece orchestra, two brass choirs, an ensemble of mandolin players, ballet dancers, and several local and nationally known soloists, including Metropolitan Opera baritone Robert Merrill.

Merrill actually helped fill the house. A former minor league baseball player, he attended a Milwaukee Brewers game the afternoon of the concert, and in a TV interview invited viewers to come hear him sing.

Bel Canto veterans remember the Keeley years, especially the earlier ones, as an exciting time for area artists. "All the big performing arts organizations — the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra (MSO), the Florentine, the Milwaukee Ballet, the Milwaukee Rep — got their start around then," says Louise Hedrick, who served as a Bel Canto board member from 1963 through the mid-1980s, and whose husband, Bob, sang in the chorus. "It was a very exciting time to be involved in music in Milwaukee."

As for Bel Canto, Hedrick says it was Keeley's ability to inspire and motivate his singers that enabled them to successfully pull off performance after performance of the major works in the choral repertoire. "He got everyone excited about undertaking things that might frighten the average singer," she said.

Thanks to Keeley, Bel Canto audiences got to hear world-renowned opera stars. David Tolan, a longtime Bel Canto board member, remembers Jan Peerce "blowing kisses to the altos," Claramae Turner "dragging her floor-length mink over the dusty backstage floor," and Robert Merrill — despite having sung the role of Iago at the Metropolitan Opera for two years — "coming onstage and asking where the prompter was."

A bit of history was made at a Verdi *Requiem* rehearsal in 1961 when Peerce asked bass soloist Ara Berberian why he had not ended the work's "Confutatis" segment with the requisite trill. "Jan, I don't know how to trill," Berberian, who was just beginning his career at the Metropolitan Opera, confessed to Peerce. "It's easy," replied Peerce. "I'll show you." And there, in front of 200 chorus members, he did.

But one of Bel Canto's most popular and prolific soloists was one of Milwaukee's own, soprano AnnDre House Hohenfeldt. According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, House, as she was known then, was "discovered" while performing with the Florentine Opera Company.



Practices and Studies 'Otello'
Score Along With Household Tasks

By Fran Bauer
A casual visitor at 3539 N. 25th St. will be struck by the busy life in the kitchen, with a lunch, musical notes at her side. "In case there's a chance to go over it some more."
The score is Verdi's "Otello" and the woman is Martha House, who will play and sing "Desdemona" in a performance of the opera, April 25 in the Milwaukee Auditorium.
Off stage, Mrs. House blends a professional singing career with domestic life. She has had three children: Philip, 12, Tracy, 10 and Amanda, 7. Her husband is Attorney Joseph House. Keeping up everyday chores smoothly is hard work. And one of the reasons she works at her craft every spare moment is because interruptions "hang over" her. One of those "things" is a case of German measles that Philip came down with last week.

Take time
This means a quick trip to the doctor for prophylactic shots. Mrs. House explained, "I could just go myself coming down with measles the night of the performance. However, I'd get right up there each day anyway."



The role of Desdemona is "just about the biggest one I have ever sung," Mrs. House said, she was familiar with some of the "Otello" music long before she was asked to sing in the April performance.
"Otello" has never been performed in Milwaukee before, she points out. The opera, frequently considered Verdi's greatest, will cost about \$12,000 to produce. This is the largest sum ever spent in Milwaukee for a single production. The play itself has never before been produced in the United States and because it has to be done here from Milan, Italy.
In addition, this performance will mark the first time that a 300 member cast has ever been assembled for a performance here.
Merrill is Tenor
This cast will include Metropolitan Opera Star Robert Merrill.

'Otello' Rehearsal
Bit of a Traffic Jam

By JOE BOTSFORD
A poet once described the world as "harmoniously confused," and it was an apt description Friday night for the rehearsal of Verdi's "Otello" in the Auditorium.
Starring Robert Merrill, baritone of the Metropolitan, the concert version of the Verdi masterpiece will be presented there Saturday night. The air of confusion hovering over the rehearsal was expected. Picture the scene:
Conductor James Keeley, though in shirt sleeves, sweats profusely at the podium. Immediately surrounding him are more than 100 musicians — the Milwaukee symphony augmented by a brass band and a mandolin ensemble.
A Chorus of 250
Behind the orchestra, to Keeley's left, is the 250 voice Bel Canto chorus. To the right is the 60 voice "boys' choir" of Christ King Catholic church of Wauwatosa. On stage, front and center, are the principal singers, including Merrill.
The task of welding this group was not easy, and Keeley silenced all several times with an anguished clapping of his hands.
"To follow me, you've got to look at me," he shouted to the boys' choir.
Getting the boys back on the beat, Keeley stared the musicians to a standstill moments later, saying, "You're behind me now."
A miniature cannon, located next to the choir, shook the singers when it first went off. It later was fired again and again, possibly to "immunize" everybody to the noise. But the barrage prompted players in the

brass section to whip off a couple of bars of their "1812 Overture," Keeley glared.
Like Traffic Jam
Even Merrill seemed puzzled. Wearing a checked sport coat with dark trousers, the baritone explained during a break, "I've never done a concert version before. It's unusual and it's difficult without the action."
Merrill meant he was used to singing to another performer in the opera rather than to the audience throughout the opera. But the role fitted him like a well tailored suit, and the choir climaxed one of his arias, with applause.
With such a large cast, plus assorted technicians, traffic on and off stage was congested during rehearsal breaks.
One woman tolled with Merrill and apologized sheepishly.
"I enjoyed it," he replied gallantly.

In the tempo "1812" Baritone Dale Mahoney, Verdi, Joseph De Franco, 1812, Wauwatosa, Wis., and conductor James Keeley. Members of the Milwaukee symphony orchestra as well as two brass bands, and a other orchestra will play. The performance will also include the 250 voice Bel Canto choir, a boys' choir from Christ King Catholic church and the Milwaukee mandolin ensemble. Mrs. House described her role as "the most beautiful ever written for a soprano." Her excitement over the role is obvious. Since Verdi based his opera on Shakespeare's play "Othello," she first turned to her well known study of Shakespearean plays. In addition she drew from her own knowledge of a trip to Italy. Her husband had visited the Italian palace in Venice which was also the scene of the opera.

Next she began to study, in Italian, just how "Verdi had built the characters into music." The last step, of course, has been absorbing and polishing the actual singing.
As all three of her children take music lessons, she says other members, the main "hard work

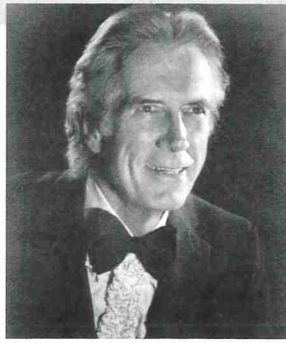
The wife of attorney Joseph House and the mother of three, House managed to blend her professional singing career with the day-to-day tasks of running a household. "It was a miracle I was able to do both," said House, who studied musical scores while cooking dinner. Among her most memorable roles: Desdemona to Merrill's Iago in *Otello*; Margherita and Helen of Troy with Jan Peerce singing the role of Faust in Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*; and the title role in Puccini's last opera, *Turandot*. According to the *Milwaukee Sentinel's* music critic Jay Joslyn, it was in that role that House "gave her finest performance, handling the powerful and difficult role brilliantly."

House, who had studied in Madison and New York and went on to sing with the Lyric Opera of Chicago, recalls her work under Keeley as the opportunity of a lifetime. "Bel Canto was really blazing a trail with these gorgeous operas," she recalled. "And to be able to sing these wonderful roles was a marvelous opportunity." Keeley, in turn, told the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1971 that the world-renowned singers with whom House regularly sang in Milwaukee "have assured me that she has the talent to become an artist of international stature."

As it had in the past, Bel Canto continued to attract a diverse group of singers. "Though occupations represented in the Bel Canto do not include candlestick maker or Indian chief, there are pursuits such as butchers, bakers, doctors and lawyers, nuns, college students and housewives," reported the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1966. It was also a sociable group that loved to party. "I'd say this sounds a

bit better than most parties when people start singing," one guest reportedly remarked as chorus members gathered around the piano at a post-*Messiah* event in 1964.

Chorus members regularly threw open their homes to entertain visiting soloists. Mary Pollock, who joined the group in the mid-1950s and served on its board, remembers one such party for Metropolitan Opera star Jerome Hines, in town to sing the title role in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* in 1970. "He ate dinner and signed all our scores, but because he didn't approve of alcohol, he disappeared upstairs, even though all these people wanted to talk to him," she said.



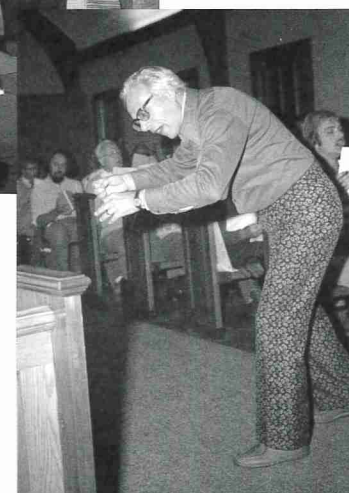
Pollock also remembers Bel Canto singers celebrating the 1967 opening of the Performing Arts Center, not by attending the official (and very expensive) gala, but with their own "poor man's opening night" party. "We had hobo stew and poverty rolls and red-checkered napkins wrapped around the silver," she recalled. In the midst of the party, Keeley called to say, "They're giving away tickets," so many of the singers ended up at the PAC after all. Fifteen years later, Pollock said, "Someone found a spoon wrapped in a red-checkered napkin in the pocket of his tuxedo."

Even rehearsals took on a festive air, particularly those held in an upstairs meeting room at Milwaukee's Forst-Keller Restaurant in the Pabst Brewery complex. "There would be beer at the break," recalled Kerry Saver, who joined the chorus in 1980 and still sings with the group today. "And there was a very different feel to the second half of the rehearsal. Alcohol on the vocal cords is not great."

Rehearsals were also peppered with Keeley's sometimes-caustic remarks. "He was a very charismatic man, and could encourage us so well," said Mary Bykowski, who sang with Bel Canto from 1977 to 2004. "But he did kind of make fun of us in practice, to make a point. He used to say the sopranos sounded like a bunch of cackling chickens."

Yet Keeley fostered loyalty and dedication. Singers rarely missed rehearsals. "If there's a 10-inch snowfall, we must contact every living soul," he told the *Milwaukee Sentinel's* Lawrence B. Johnson in 1986. "Otherwise some poor waif will fight his way through the blizzard and end up pounding on a locked (church) door."

Bel Canto was pretty much Keeley's show. "He made the big decisions," recalled Hedrick. "What to do, where to perform, who to hire. As board members, we were obligated to see that it happened." That turned out to be no small job. Without a paid staff, most of the day-to-day tasks of running the group and planning for the concerts fell to the board members. Hedrick remembers the time, for instance, when the chorus borrowed a samurai sword to use as a prop for the group's 1968 performance of *Turandot*. "But it was so sharp it slit open a chair at rehearsal," she recalled. Within 24 hours, her husband, Bob, arranged to have an exact, if duller, replica fashioned at Cutler-Hammer, one of the city's manufacturers of electrical products. "Even the owner didn't realize it was a copy," she said.



The Keeleys Are at Home With Amahl's Music



Rehearsals for "Amahl and the Night Visitors" take place Friday night and Saturday night. In a family affair at the James Keeley home, Jim Keeley, center, sings the role of Amahl and his mother has been a staunch supporter of the Greenfield Children's Society since 1946. Katie Keeley, mother of the children, Michael, center, and father, conductor of Bel Canto, provided accompaniment.

By PEAN OPERA
OF THE GREENFIELD CHILDREN'S SOCIETY

Anyone inclined to think of classical music as serious and therefore isn't keen on a visit to the James Keeley home. Whether it's an organ recital, a harp solo or a vocal soprano presenting the music for "Amahl and the Night Visitors," the tone is one of unending joy.

There's no question about it: Jim Keeley, 32, in the spot, is the musical director of the opera. Amahl, the role of Amahl, is sung by his 12-year-old son, Patrick, center stage. His mother, Katie, is the soprano. Michael, 10, is the conductor of the Bel Canto Chorus, which will present "Amahl" Friday and

Saturday nights at Ushers Hall in the Greenfield Children's Society.

Mr. Keeley sings in the choir and thinks "The only one who sang from when Jim Keeley was formed from a number of the old Greenfield Singers in 1946."

But at "Amahl's" 6:15 p.m. concert, it will be heard by thousands of people.

Patrick's interest in the opera, Amahl, the role of Amahl, is sung by his 12-year-old son, Patrick, center stage. His mother, Katie, is the soprano. Michael, 10, is the conductor of the Bel Canto Chorus, which will present "Amahl" Friday and

heard with the chorus, Patrick said.

"People were laughing and enjoying it made me feel happy."

"I'm, actually, 'I wasn't too happy — my dad had to play it for me and sing the music. It's a gift. But Keeley has served as a stand-in for Amahl's mother in the production. The part will be played by Greenfield Children, who arrived this week for their rehearsal."

"Patrick's interest in the opera, Amahl, the role of Amahl, is sung by his 12-year-old son, Patrick, center stage. His mother, Katie, is the soprano. Michael, 10, is the conductor of the Bel Canto Chorus, which will present "Amahl" Friday and

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The members of Keeley's own family also developed close ties to Bel Canto. "Whatever anyone's involved in becomes a family affair," Keeley's wife, Rosann, told the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1969, noting that the couple's three children regularly attended Bel Canto dress rehearsals "so they can see what Jim's been working on." The Keeleys met in 1950, when Jim Keeley became music director at St. Hedwig's, where Rosann sang in the choir.

It was the 1969 Bel Canto production of Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* that brought the Keeleys' second son, Patrick, center stage. Performing the title role, 12-year-old Patrick "added a clear piping voice to the ensemble and turned in a commendable acting job," wrote *Milwaukee Sentinel's* Jay Joslyn.

FINANCIAL STABILITY



Through the 1960s and most of the 1970s, Bel Canto enjoyed financial security, the result of relatively low expenses (Keeley being the only salaried employee) and strong ticket sales, a task that fell to the volunteer chorus members. "Can you imagine selling 5,000 tickets to an opera today?" asks Hedrick. Typically, season ticket drives were kicked off with teas or luncheons, often at the lavish Lake Drive mansions of some of Milwaukee's wealthiest residents. Top ticket-sellers were rewarded, with those selling the most tickets in 1969, for example, receiving pins or tie tacks featuring treble and bass clefs.

As one of seven founding members of the United Performing Arts Fund, which launched its first campaign in 1967, Bel Canto played an important role in boosting not only its own financial health, but also that of the Milwaukee arts community. By 1969, about \$20,000 of Bel Canto's \$50,000 annual budget came from UPAF.

That same year, the city's new Performing Arts Center opened, prompting Tolan, president of the Bel Canto board and a member of the UPAF board, to declare Milwaukee the site of a "cultural boom." He praised the community for having the foresight to develop both an audience and a financial base before building the PAC. He predicted, accurately it turned out, that Milwaukeeans would "come out of their homes and away from their TV sets to see good things, done well, in beautiful — sometimes opulent — surroundings."

Financial difficulties, however, forced the 40-voice Bel Canto Chorale, a group made up of the chorus's best singers, to cancel a special concert in the spring of 1971. Tolan said going ahead with the concert would have increased the group's \$8,000 deficit from the 1969–70 season. Friends of Bel Canto was formed in 1979 to support the chorus, working behind the scenes. Over the next 15 years, the group raised approximately \$50,000 for the organization.

One of the highlights of Keeley's career, and Bel Canto's history, was the commissioning in 1975 of Gian Carlo Menotti's *Landscapes and Remembrances*, a choral work written to commemorate the U.S. Bicentennial. It was a move that launched Bel Canto onto the international stage.

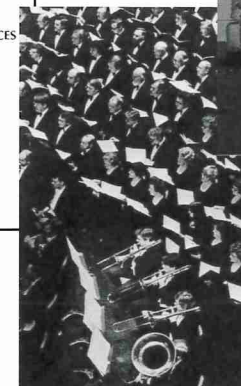
Menotti was born in Italy but immigrated to the U.S. when he was 17. He made his mark writing contemporary operas in English, the most popular of which was *Amahl*. His *Landscapes and Remembrances*, a 45-minute cantata for chorus, orchestra, and four vocal soloists, was billed as depicting "this nation as seen over the years through the eyes of an immigrant." Menotti wrote both the music and libretto for the largely autobiographical work. It was made up of nine movements that included *Arrival in New York by Sea*, *Parade in Texas*, and *An Imaginary Trip through Wisconsin*. John Atwood, a Wisconsin native who made his fortune in offshore oil drilling, underwrote Menotti's \$25,000 commission. Grants from the Mobil Corporation and the National Endowment for the Arts Fund covered the costs of the premiere.

The national publication *Musical America* cited the Menotti premiere as one of the nation's musical highlights for May 1976. Local critics hailed the work, which drew a 10-minute ovation, as a "delightful pastiche of enthusiastic music and poetry."



GIAN CARLO MENOTTI

Gian Carlo Menotti



ON THE ROAD



At Menotti's invitation, Bel Canto traveled two months later to Spoleto, Italy, to perform at the city's 19th annual Festival of Two Worlds. Menotti, who had come up with the idea for the festival in 1958, had originally requested that the group perform *Landscapes and Remembrances*, but later changed his mind, noting that his American works had not, in the past, played well to Italian audiences. Instead,

Bel Canto performed a program of 16th and 17th century church music. It also joined with the Westminster Choir to perform the Verdi *Requiem* before an audience of 6,000 people in the ancient Piazza del Duomo. In another memorable event, chorus members serenaded Menotti on his 65th birthday. In response, he spontaneously invited the entire group to join him at his villa, the Palazzo Camtello.

The trip also took Bel Canto, on July 4, 1976 — the U.S. Bicentennial — to the Vatican, where the group sang at St. Peter's Basilica and for Pope Paul VI in St. Peter's Square.

"Today for us you represent all the people of the United States of America," the Pope told the singers during his noon blessing to the crowds assembled in the square. "Through you we send our greetings and our blessing to your country." Concerts at Santa Croce in Florence and San Marco in Venice were also part of the European tour.

Bel Canto returned to Spoleto under Keeley in 1979 and 1983, and performed in 1980 and 1981 at the US Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. The group also traveled to Mexico in 1978. Chorus members, some of whom took second jobs or mortgaged their homes to travel with the chorus, look back on the experience fondly. Judy Looze-Ulrich told the *Houston Post*, which covered the event, that singing at the Vatican "gave me goose bumps all over." Robert Schaefer described the experience as "a once-in-a-lifetime chance."

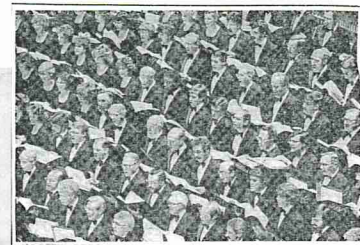
Keeley was once quoted as saying that when starting a community chorus, one should "go for quantity rather than quality." Continued Keeley, "You can scare people off by demanding so much from them." He said he was proud of the opportunity Bel Canto had given "thousands of people to sing great choral literature, a chance they would never have had if they'd had to audition and come up to professional standards."

There were times when local critics took Keeley and Bel Canto to task for not meeting such standards, particularly when it came to precision or subtlety. "Yuletide Gloria Not So Glorious," and "Bel Canto Chorus delivers dusty, shopworn *Messiah*," read headlines in 1977 and 1984. Yet Bel Canto received lots of press — much of it positive — under Keeley, especially during the early and middle years of his tenure. Critics described concerts as "thrilling," "sublime," and "stirring." The 1971 *Milwaukee Sentinel* headline, "Bel Canto Shines in Fauré *Requiem*," was typical.

When reviewers were less than complimentary, Bel Canto fans took issue. "Can more than 2,000 people be wrong?" asked one letter-to-the editor writer in response to a negative review *Milwaukee Journal* critic Louise Kennigott wrote of a 1978 performance of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. His letter went on to note the standing ovation and repeated curtain calls the chorus had received.

One thing Bel Canto didn't lack was publicity. Lengthy feature stories chronicled Keeley's association with Bel Canto, and dutifully marked his major anniversaries with the group. And when he returned to work three months after breaking his arm and wrist in a fall from the podium during a rehearsal, the *Milwaukee Journal* ran a three-photo montage of Keeley conducting with his left hand.

Mary Pollock looks back on the Keeley years in amazement at all the chorus accomplished. "We were singing all the big choral works with nationally famous stars," she said. "It really was spectacular. I don't know how we did it."



The 175-member Bel Canto Chorus sang Handel's "Messiah" Friday at the Performing Arts Center. The fourth annual Sing-It-Yourself "Messiah" at 7 p.m. Sunday in Uihlein Hall offers the public the chance to sing along with the choir.

'Messiah' is chorus' best
By Lawrence B. Johnson
Handel's "Messiah" surely must be as much beloved as it is loved.
This mighty composition of good tunes also happens to be one of the towering masterpieces of baroque contrapuntal style, and thus a vulnerable treasure easily crushed by the modern embrace of musical forces vaster than any Handel could have imagined.
The work — is difficult enough for most choirs — brings off with clarity and cohesion. So much the more remarkable, then, that the 175-voice Bel Canto Chorus should score an almost unblemished triumph with "Messiah" in Friday night's production at the Performing Arts Center.
Since its inception nearly three decades ago, Bel Canto and its founding director, James A. Keeley, have presented "Messiah" 11 times. This time, the director of the choir, Michael Sears, has provided a representative account I've heard in 15 seasons in Milwaukee.
And happily, it will be repeated, at 8 p.m. Sunday.
Despite its Victorian bulk, this "Messiah" possesses the agility, transparency and grace one expects from choirs of his size. Three solo voices. Moreover, Keeley maintains a lively, flexible interaction between his chorus and a modest instrumental ensemble drawn from the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra.
If one might regret a tempo here and there, notably in the choir's stately "Glory to God in the highest" for the most part, Keeley's interpretive choices make expressive sense as a logical, dramatic consequence. In the work's most intimate sections, the presence of baritone soloist virtuoso Martin Hogg becomes a vital asset.
Keeley has provided almost enough for all: five soloists — soprano Patricia M. and tenor Marc Emery — and two vocalists — mezzo-soprano Lorna Myers and soprano Jennifer Barron — who, in their own right, are among the best in the Midwest.
The Bel Canto Chorus has no making loud noise, and it put great glory into the "Dies irae." The chorus had no trouble giving a very quiet *piano* at the beginning of the piece.
What this chorus does not do very well is the range of dynamic between very loud and very soft. The vocal texture becomes grainy and toneless.
The Milwaukee Symphony delivers an unremarkable performance, but trumpets sounding from the balcony as well as the stage — Keeley had two trumpet players in the balcony — were effective in the "Dies irae" sequence.
Verdi's "Requiem" will be performed again tonight at 8 in Uihlein Hall.

—Sponsored photo by Michael Sears

'Requiem' performed

By Roxane Orgill
Journal Music Critic
Using only one arm, James A. Keeley conducted the Bel Canto Chorus and the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra in a nice performance of Verdi's "Requiem" Friday evening at the Performing Arts Center.
Keeley's right arm, injured when he fell from the podium during a rehearsal last winter, remained still at his side.
Verdi wrote the "Requiem" in 1873 as a memorial mass for Alessandro Manzoni, senator, author of "I promessi sposi" and the composer's hero.
The 80-minute work is an extremely personalized treatment of the mass for the dead, deviating somewhere between the overture to some opera packed with love and adventure — and the singers had just finished pleading with the Lord to deliver the souls of the faithful!
The strength of this performance, for me, was in the two female soloists, soprano Jennifer Barron and mezzo-soprano Lorna Myers. Barron, with her light voice, and Myers, with her dark one, made a surprisingly complementary duo. Both women sang with technical ease and just the right amount of dramatic tension. Unfortunately, Barron did not reserve enough energy for her long solo at the end, "Libera Me," and her voice broke on the highest note.
The men — tenor Lando Bartolini and baritone William Duvall — were more forlorn.
Although Verdi's "Requiem" is a wonderful showcase for the four solo singers, the chorus has its share of the limelight, notably in the "Dies irae, dies illa" music, which occurs four times, was a thunderstorm breaking over the sky.
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Conductor hurt at rehearsal

James A. Keeley, conductor of the Bel Canto Chorus, broke his conducting arm and shattered the wrist on that arm Wednesday night when he fell off a platform during a rehearsal with the chorus at St. Paul Catholic School, 3945 S. Kansas Ave.
Keeley's wife, Rosann, said he was scheduled to undergo surgery on his right wrist Thursday afternoon at St. Luke's Hospital, where he was taken after the accident.
She said surgery would probably be performed on a break in the upper right arm next week. He will remain hospitalized until then, she said.
Mrs. Keeley said she had been notified of the accident about 9 p.m. Wednesday, apparently shortly after it occurred.
Since last September, when chorus rehearsals were moved to the St. Paul School auditorium from a church in Wauwatosa, Keeley has conducted rehearsals while sitting on a high stool atop a three-foot-high podium that was specially built for him by a member of the chorus, Mrs. Keeley said.
The rear of the podium has three stairs and is open at the top. A chain was strung across the other three sides as a barrier.
Keeley's stool slipped off the rear of the podium, according to Mrs. Keeley. He grabbed for the chains, but they pulled out, she said.
The accident occurred as the chorus was practicing a particularly animated portion of Verdi's "Requiem," which the chorus will perform May 7 and 8 at the Performing Arts Center. Keeley apparently began bouncing on the stool and it crept toward the edge of the podium, Mrs. Keeley said.
When asked if it appeared her husband would regain full use of the wrist, Mrs. Keeley said, "He felt he would be conducting by the May concert."



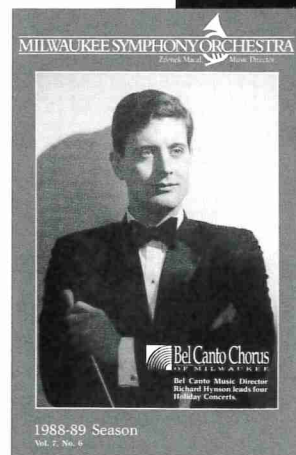
WORK GOES ON — James A. Keeley, conductor of the Bel Canto Chorus, wore a cast on his wrist during a rehearsal for the group's performances of Verdi's "Requiem" with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra. Keeley broke his wrist in February when he fell from a 3-foot-high podium during a rehearsal. Performances of "Requiem" will be at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Performing Arts Center.

Keeley's decision to retire led to a national search for his replacement. Winning the job over 51 other candidates was Richard Hynson, then 34, music director of the Cincinnati Choral Society and the Hamilton-Fairfield (Ohio) Symphony. As part of the application process, Hynson and several other finalists conducted a Bel Canto rehearsal, after which chorus members were asked to rate them. "Rick was far and away the best conductor," said Kerry Saver. "People liked him a lot, and it didn't hurt that the women thought he was incredibly good looking."

In addition to his good looks, Hynson also had impressive musical credentials: a bachelor's degree in vocal performance from De Pauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, a master's degree in choral conducting from Westminster Choir College in Princeton, N.J., and a doctorate in choral conducting from the University of Cincinnati's College – Conservatory of Music. Over the next 18 years, in addition to his work with Bel Canto, he served as director of the Waukegan Symphony Orchestra (1990–1998), performed with the MSO, the Skylight Opera Theatre, and the Waukesha Symphony Orchestra, and conducted choir clinics and master classes. He also composed and arranged music, much of which was performed by Bel Canto.

Hynson grew up in Washington, D.C., in the shadow of Washington National Cathedral, where he not only sang in the choir, but also worked as a stone mason's helper on the building's construction. His dream of becoming a star at the Metropolitan Opera, he told the *Milwaukee Journal* in 1993, ended when his voice changed from "a very pure and clear soprano" to "a puny, reedy, little tenor." He went on to take up choral conducting, studying with, among others, Robert Page, the famed director of the Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh and one of the most distinguished choral conductors in the world. In fact, it was Page, who, after guest-conducting Bel Canto in a 1987 performance of Fauré's *Requiem*, urged Hynson to apply for the music director's job.

NEW VISION



Chorus moves to wipe out deficit

By NANCY RAABE
Sentinel critic

Beaten by a deficit that has grown to \$20,000, the Bel Canto Chorus is taking urgent measures to keep the venerable institution afloat.

At an emergency board meeting Friday, director Richard Hynson put down \$1,000 of his own money and challenged his colleagues to do the same — a move that produced immediate donations of \$9,000, sources said.

Upon being informed of the 47-year-old volunteer chorus' financial straits at a rehearsal Saturday morning, members of the 34-member Bel Canto Choral Artists, a subgroup of chorus members who sometimes perform separately, immediately pledged an additional \$2,500.

There is some question among board members, sources said, whether the performances of Beethoven's "Missa Solenne" scheduled for May 14 and 15 can be held. And the entire 1993-'94 season — which is slated to include Brahms' "German Requiem" — is on hold.

Neither Hynson nor board president David Telan could be



Keeley, Director for 32 years
Hynson, Donates \$1,000

reached Sunday for comment. The deficit has been accumulating over several years, and it wasn't clear Sunday what might happen if it is not eliminated.

The chorus had planned to put on six concerts this season but was forced to cancel Paul McCartney's "Liverpool Oratorio," which had been set for Nov. 18 in the MECCA Arena.

The reclassification of Bel Canto's membership in the United Performing Arts Fund from the top tier to a newly created second tier (for organizations with budgets between \$200,000 to

\$800,000) is said to have contributed to the chorus' uncertain future, although it has reportedly been told that it will not suffer funding reductions for at least three years.

The Bel Canto's 1992-'93 budget is around \$200,000. The chorus has administrative and marketing costs, but much of its money goes to pay the Bel Canto Chamber Orchestra, a freelance orchestra that performs regularly with the chorus.

Under former director James Keeley, who led the group for 32 years until his retirement in 1988, the roster was at times nearly twice as large as Hynson's current list of 108-plus singers.

Keeley's tenure was marked by gala events with celebrity soloists on the order of Janet Baker, Jerome Hines, Maureen Forrester, Eleanor Steber and Eileen Farrell, and regular appearances with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra in the days before the founding of the Milwaukee Symphony Chorus.

Several positive developments have marked Hynson's five-year tenure. These include:

- The striking strengthening

and refinement of the group's vocal technique.

- The increased exploration of contemporary repertory, in judicious measure.

- The development of uncommonly intriguing programs. One of Hynson's finest was the spring 1991 concert featuring the liturgical "completion" of Mozart's unfinished C minor mass with Penderecki's gripping "Agnus Dei" and Vaughan Williams' glowing "Iona Nona Passim."

- The ascent of the Bel Canto Choral Artists as a major force on the local choral scene.

- A concerted drive toward community outreach and education. Its efforts include a partnership with Wisconsin Hills Elementary School in the Elmbrook School District, in which Bel Canto staffers work throughout the year with teachers and students, and a pilot educational project in the Milwaukee Public Schools pairing Bel Canto staffers with vocal teachers and their classes in two schools.

- The full chorus will present an all-Menotti program Friday and Saturday at the Pabst Theater.

Even before Hynson arrived in Milwaukee in 1988, Bel Canto subscriptions had fallen off, due in part to an increasing number of negative reviews. Membership in the chorus was down to 170 singers from a peak of 220 in 1975. "It had become apparent that we would have to go in a different direction to survive financially," said Tom Barnum, board president at the time. Barnum said Hynson, who convinced the board to make the music director's position full-time, brought with him a "marvelous vision" for Bel Canto that, over time, "drove the significant improvement of the chorus."

Part of that vision called for distinguishing Bel Canto from the Milwaukee Symphony Chorus, which had been founded in 1976 by Margaret Hawkins at the request of MSO Music Director Kenneth Schermerhorn. In the eyes of some, the Symphony Chorus had begun to outshine Bel Canto. And competition between the two groups, both to fill seats and bring in donations, was heating up.

Although Hynson envisioned opportunities for the two choruses to work together, he also went to work carving out a unique identity for Bel Canto. He saw the group as "being many choruses, ranging from 12 to 150 singers, going out into the community, singing in churches, singing in halls throughout Wisconsin, making an impact that is as varied as it is musically diverse." Years later, as Bel Canto struggled to overcome financial woes, he reiterated the need for the group to maintain its own identity. "If we don't distinguish ourselves," he said, "there's no reason or right for us to exist when there's such a fine symphony chorus in town."

Hynson made a number of changes very quickly. To save money, the chorus began performing with the Bel Canto Chamber Orchestra, made up of local freelance musicians, instead of the MSO. And he began using local soloists, winners of Bel Canto's new Regional Artist Competition, instead of the big-name operatic stars Keeley had favored.

He also convinced the board to move Bel Canto performances to the 1,288-seat Pabst Theater, which Hynson said represented more realistic expectations in terms of audience size than the 2,331-seat Uihlein Hall. Under Hynson, the chorus began to sing in a wide variety of



HIGHER STANDARDS

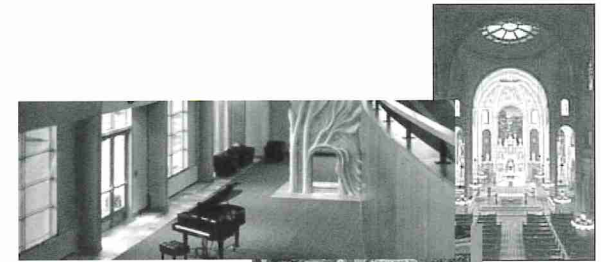
venues, such as the Basilica of St. Josaphat's, the St. Joseph Center Chapel, the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, the Alverno College Theater, and more recently, the Sharon Lynne Wilson Center for the Arts in Brookfield. "That's one of the things that's so exciting about Milwaukee," Hynson says. "It has spaces that are so glorious they rival anything in Europe."

Significantly more demanding of his singers than Keeley had been, Hynson immediately instituted annual auditions for every chorus member. He gave those whose singing didn't meet his standards three months to improve. To help them, he offered intensive training programs — affectionately known as "voice camp" — each summer. The goal, Hynson says, was to improve artistic quality without damaging Bel Canto's extraordinary morale. "It was a very committed and tightly connected group," Hynson recalled.

The auditions were "scary, but objective," said Saver. "You'd get a score, and good feedback. You knew exactly what you needed to work on." Said Barnum, "As much as I'm terrified by auditioning, I welcome it. You want to make sure that you are contributing and pulling your weight."

Successfully making it through an audition is just the first step. Weekly rehearsals run two-and-a-half hours, with just a ten-minute break. "There's no messing around," says Barnum. That's because Hynson is no less intent on fostering artistic growth today than he was 18 years ago. "It's a slow, gradual process," Hynson says. "As the group reaches new artistic levels, there are those who feel they are being asked to work too hard or those for whom the experience loses its luster. They leave and new singers come in, and bring with them an influx of excellence. As a result, being a singer in Bel Canto has become more and more prestigious because expectations are higher. Being a member is not easy. You have to earn it and continue to earn it year in and year out."

Yet, from the beginning, Hynson's goals for the chorus encompassed more than just vocal technique. In an early interview, he said he wanted the group to develop "a sense of style — to figure out what the composer is trying to say and why he would bother trying to say it. I tell them what I want and I demonstrate, and I insist that it be there every time."



MAKING HIS MARK

Music A rejuvenated Bel Canto eyes the future

By TOM STRINI
Special to the Journal

THIS SUMMER, we're looking at the future," said Harry Hynson, president of the Bel Canto Chorus. "Last summer, we were just finding ways to exist."

Last summer, the 48-year-old

Bel Canto was struggling to pay off a \$125,000 debt. It was shrinking from 150 singers to fewer than 100, and it was coping off an artistically forgettable season.

This summer, the chorus has retired its debt and its roster has stabilized at 84 voices. The BCC ended its 1993-94 season with

its best concert in at least 10 years, a riveting performance of Brahms' "A German Requiem" at the Palast Theater on May 14. To a great degree, 1993-94 was a season of reevaluation," said Hynson, who became Bel Canto president last June. "It was a real get-your-house-in-order year. We did a lot of things that are helpful on the business side — adding board members, raising money, long-term financial planning. Now we're talking about all the musical things we can do, and it's a whole lot of fun."

BOARD — AND 'WONDERFUL: Music director Richard Hynson felt confident enough about the future to design a season that is unusual, to say the least. "This season is so beautiful — it's wonderful," Hynson said, saying the most.

The chorus and chamber orchestra will open the season with a Christmas concert, at 8 p.m. on Dec. 3 at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist. A concert version of Menotti's 1951 opera, "Amahl and the Night Visitors," will be paired with Respighi's "Laud to the Nativity."

Horatio Parker's rarely heard "Hera Novissima" (1893) will be paired with William Schuman's rarely heard "Casey at the Bat" (1976) at 8 p.m. Feb. 25 at the Alverno College Forum Theater, 3401 S. 39th St.

"Hera Novissima" was really the first American oratorio," Hynson said. "It was an immediate success and was performed all across Europe in the years after its premiere. It has a Venetian solo quartet with lots of big, emotional music to sing. It has very enriched harmony. Elgar-Mahler-Strauss kinds of sounds."

"Casey" is a cantata version of Schuman's 1953 opera about the mythical slayer. Hynson was a chorister at the premiere of the cantata in Washington, D.C.

The season will end with Ariel Ramirez's 1967 "Missa Criolla" and Luis Schifano's 1987 "Cantos Anticos," at 8 p.m. May 13 at the Palast Theater, 144 E. Welch St.

Ramirez's piece is a Catalian Spanish version of the Latin mass, tinted with Latin American folk instruments, rhythms and forms.

Schifano is best known for his film and TV music, most notably the theme from "Mission: Impossible."

"There is another side to his composition that is very progressive," Hynson said. "His piece is really cool, and no one around here has heard it. It was performed only at the Hollywood



Richard Hynson

Board, in New York and at the Teotihuacan ruins near Mexico City. The rest is in ancient America.

Ordering Information: Season subscriptions are \$50 and \$42. Single tickets are \$12 and \$18. Current subscribers will automatically be mailed season brochures and order forms. Others can receive brochures by calling the Bel Canto at 272-7950. Credit-card orders can also be placed at that number.

In addition to the Milwaukee season, the Bel Canto hopes to repeat each of those concerts out of town. Negotiations are under way with presiders in Great Bay and Madison, and Waukegan as a possibility.

CHORAL ARTISTS' SEASON
The Bel Canto Choral Artists, the BCC's elite vocal group, will be back next season, but not as part of the subscription series. The artists will open their season at 8 p.m. Nov. 19 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church and will sing a second concert at a date — probably in March — and location to be announced.

In the past, the Choral Artists have been drawn from the top 20 to 40 singers in the larger Bel Canto. Hynson and the board are considering making the group a permanent, all-professional ensemble of 16-20 voices. Such a group would be the only one of its kind in the area.

"One long-term goal is to professionalize the choral art," Hynson said. "It could happen with the Choral Artists in November. But if we do it, it will be in a fiscally responsible way that allows us to stay professional into the future."



Hynson's approach worked, and fairly quickly. His October 1988 inaugural concert included a performance of Haydn's *The Creation*, with the *Journal's* Tom Strini noting the "lustrous" and "remarkably precise" performance Hynson drew from the chorus. He added that the group was "more flexible, musical and alert" than in the recent past. "Vastly improved" was how Strini's colleague, Jim Auer, described a Bel Canto concert in December 1989. The chorus, he said, "is really making music now."

Some of Bel Canto's best reviews went to its chamber chorus, the Bel Canto Choral Artists. The group traced its origins to Keeley's Bel Canto Chorale, and before that, his Piccolo Bel Canto, an *a cappella* ensemble of approximately 20 singers drawn from the larger chorus to perform at community events.

But the reviews weren't always kind. Hynson admitted to being "devastated" by one that described his conducting of the Verdi *Requiem* as dispassionate. "I felt I had let Bel Canto down," he said. Hynson redoubled his efforts to improve his conducting style and interpretive abilities, attending intensive training workshops sponsored by the American Symphony Orchestra League, during which he studied with such conducting greats as Daniel Barenboim, Leonard Slatkin, and Günther Herbig. He sought out a variety of unusual resources as well, turning to other artists such as Isabelle Kralj, founding director of the Milwaukee Dance Theater, to help him improve his body awareness and balance. All of these many efforts began to pay off.

The following spring, Strini described Hynson's conducting of Brahms's *A German Requiem* as "inspired" and the chorus's singing as "instantly responsive to Hynson's subtlest shadings of dynamics and articulation." Wrote Strini, "Hynson gave the performance that I, for one, have awaited since he took over the Bel Canto six years ago."

Hynson considers that concert one of the “benchmarks” of his tenure with Bel Canto. “It clearly showed the group making huge artistic strides,” he says. He credits its success, in part, to a last-minute decision to place the chorus in front of, instead of behind, the orchestra. “It worked very well because the chorus didn’t have to sing as loud to project over the orchestra... and could concentrate on singing musically and beautifully.” Although such a setup is considered unusual today, Hynson said it was the custom up until the middle of the 19th century.

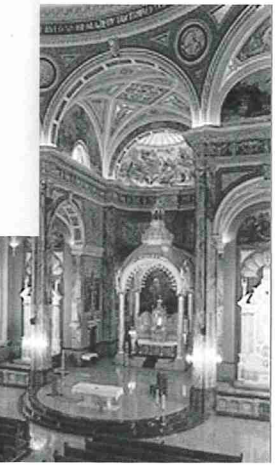
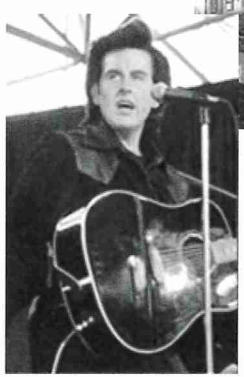
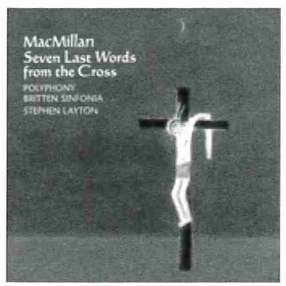
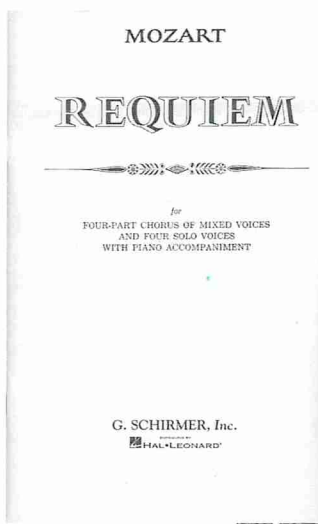
As Hynson took steps to present the classic choral works in new ways, he was even more determined that Bel Canto be on the cutting edge of the music scene. “We should be doing things off the beaten path — something fresh, new, slightly different from what everybody else is doing,” he told the *Milwaukee Sentinel* upon his arrival in Milwaukee.

Hynson didn’t abandon the traditional repertoire. Although he called *Messiah* a “wonderful piece that probably is done way too much,” Bel Canto did perform excerpts from the work, as well as two other traditional choral favorites — the Verdi *Requiem* and Orff’s *Carmina Burana* — during the 1988–89 season. Yet, as early as his second season, Hynson began offering decidedly less well-known works, such as Brahms’s *Song of Destiny* and Benjamin Britten’s *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*. By 1991, he was programming Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Requiem* and Francis Poulenc’s *Gloria*, works Hynson said would “resonate with people who are not regular attendees of choral concerts.”

Over time, some critics would describe Hynson’s approach to programming as “progressive,” “thoughtful,” and “inspired,” while others would accuse him of showcasing music they described as “unusual” and “bizarre.” Tolan, who once said he learned more about his voice in five years under Hynson than he had in the previous 50 years, has nothing but praise for Bel Canto’s current repertoire. “We’re performing quality music, which would not be heard if we were not performing it,” he says.

THE REPERTOIRE





Other artistic benchmarks in Hynson's tenure include a 1997 performance of Rachmaninoff's *Vespers*, Bel Canto's first major unaccompanied work and an experience Hynson recalls as "transcendent." In 2001, another memorable program paired James MacMillan's *Seven Last Words from the Cross* — a relentlessly demanding piece featuring harsh dissonances and craggy vocal lines — with the melodic and lush *Lux Aeterna* by Morten Lauridsen. "I was really proud of the audience," said Hynson. "The MacMillan is not easy listening at all, but the chorus captured the essence of the piece and conveyed it in such a compelling way that the audience got it."

In 2002, Bel Canto spearheaded Milwaukee's participation in the "Rolling Requiem Project," a worldwide choral commemoration of the first anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. Over 200 choirs in 28 countries on all seven continents performed Mozart's *Requiem* to honor those lost and those left behind. With choirs performing around the world at 8:46 a.m. local time, the music continued for 24 hours.

Hynson conducted the program, which was performed at the Basilica of St. Josaphat's by more than 230 singers from the Bel Canto, Florentine Opera, Milwaukee Symphony and Skylight Opera Theatre choruses, the Milwaukee Choristers, and the Waukesha Choral Union. He called the performance, which drew an audience of over 1,000, "one of the most moving performances of my life" and an important moment for Bel Canto. Said Hynson, "We proved again that we are the community's chorus."

There were lighter moments, too, such as a 1992 Christmas concert featuring Tom Green, a Bel Canto tenor and the city's premier Elvis Presley impersonator, which drew an audience of 1,200. Bel Canto drew one of its smallest audiences at Beloit College early in Hynson's tenure. Despite the effects of a virus that swept through the chorus, 150 singers showed up for the performance only to discover that college administrators had neglected to publicize the event. "No one was there when we arrived," recalled Hynson. "The door was not even open." Yet, "In sickness and in health" — and with 25 people in the audience — "we gave the entire concert."

In 1998, Bel Canto members were hired to perform as the back-up chorus for famed tenor Luciano Pavarotti. Two years later, Bel Canto was hired to sing with Sarah Brightman. They also sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Milwaukee Brewers, Bucks, and Wave games. For three years in a row, beginning in 1988, they performed Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* with the MSO Chorus at Germanfest. And after Keeley's death in 1998 at the age of 70, a group of Bel Canto singers sang at his funeral.



In 1991, Michelle Williams, who had been singing with Bel Canto for two years, was named the group's assistant conductor. Williams, who has perfect pitch, had been working in Milwaukee since 1981 as a soprano soloist, pianist, church musician, and voice teacher. "As I discovered all her talents," said Hynson, "I'd give her more and more to do. I made her a section leader, hired her to be our accompanist, and then decided she should be my assistant conductor." In 1993, Hynson invited Williams to play Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* with the Waukegan Symphony. He also asked her to marry him.

MADAME MAESTRA

These days the Hynsons, described by chorus members as "a marvelous team," share the responsibilities of running the chorus. Both of them audition singers and each composes and arranges music for the group. They also share rehearsal duties, with Michelle working on the North Shore while Richard travels to Kenosha. They run rehearsals at Mount Mary College, on the city's west side, together.

Hynson said he and his wife, who together are raising five children from previous marriages, see Bel Canto as their second family. "It can be quarrelsome at times," he said, "but this group behaves like a real family that pulls together when things need to be done." Hynson said he and Michelle have tried to provide a supportive and encouraging environment in which Bel Canto singers can continue to learn and grow, both musically and personally. "Like any family, there are expectations and standards," he said. "We don't mollycoddle anyone. And while people may not be treated equally, they are treated fairly." Barnum describes the atmosphere in the chorus, which in 2006 includes about 100 singers, as "cooperative, not competitive," adding, "You can't have stars."





As it has since it began, Bel Canto continues to draw its members from all walks of life. Says Barnum, "You have doctors, lawyers, teachers, and students, yet everyone is the same when we get up on the risers." One difference: the group is considerably younger than ever before, a fact that inspired Michelle Hynson to base part of a concert last spring on the Brahms "Lullaby." "We had 16 'Bel Canto babies' born that year," Richard recalled. Yet, according to Barnum, age differences don't matter either. "The guy standing next to me is a senior at Marquette University," he relates. "Though there's quite an age difference between us, we communicate through music."

When they aren't singing, many chorus members are working behind the scenes in support of Bel Canto. The Chorus Cabinet, an advisory group of chorus members, has been promoting communication between chorus and board members and supporting the work of the managing director since late 1986. Members of the Chorus Cabinet take on various internal leadership roles, serving as the music librarian, head of the membership and fundraiser committees, and as rehearsal site coordinators. The cabinet is chaired by its chorus representative, who also serves as a voting member of the Bel Canto Board of Directors. Hynson is grateful for the work chorus members perform, but hopes that over time Bel Canto can reduce its reliance on their efforts.

Chorus members also find time to have fun at annual picnics, spring fundraising galas, and at post-rehearsal gatherings. "It's a very social group," says Barnum. "When you get sick, you get 50 get-well cards." Members sing at each other's weddings and funerals. One group serenaded Tom and Sue Connor, both Bel Canto singers, in the hospital in 2000 as the couple awaited the birth of their triplets.

The Bel Canto family was put to what was perhaps its biggest test in the spring of 1993. With Hynson still struggling to turn his vision for the chorus into reality, financial disaster struck. Plunging ticket sales found the chorus facing a projected deficit of \$70,000. Compounded by an additional \$35,000 of existing debt, the situation jeopardized not only

BUDGET WOES

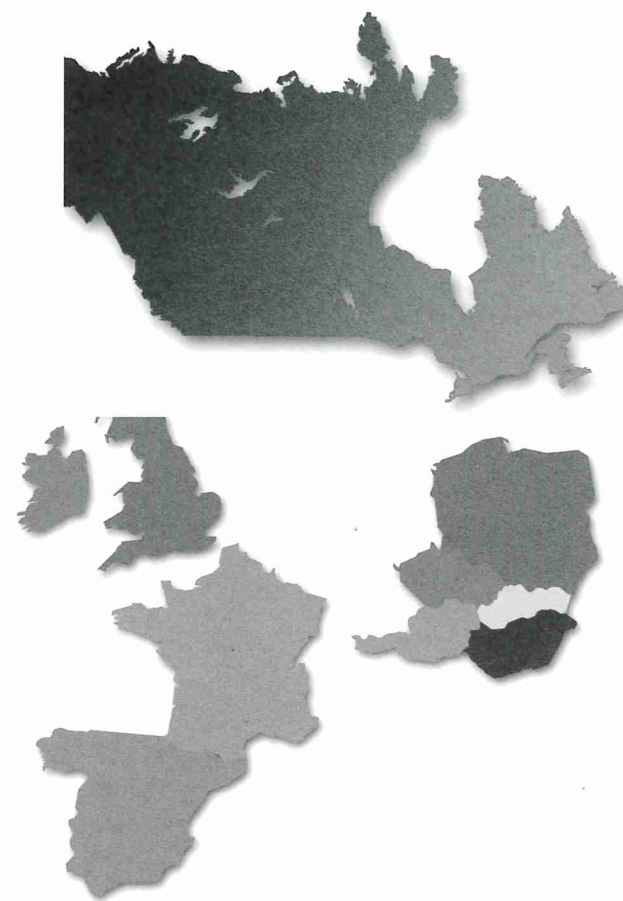
the group's May performance of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, but also its entire 1993–94 season. At the time, the group's annual budget stood at about \$270,000 a year, with \$96,000 coming from the United Performing Arts Fund.

Tolan traced the roots of the problem to increasing expenses and flat revenues. The group's biggest expense: the Bel Canto Chamber Orchestra, which was now playing for five concerts a year — up from two under Keeley. The chorus was also employing an office manager to oversee the group's day-to-day operation and handle marketing and fundraising, a clerical assistant, and ten section leaders responsible for supporting and leading the chorus.

Contributions of \$20,000 from chorus and board members, and another \$20,000 from outside donors saved the May concert; ultimately, the group raised \$125,000 and saved the 1993–94 season as well. Several cost-cutting measures, such as temporarily eliminating the manager's position, were put in place. Another decision: to put on only one performance of each concert at the costly and hard-to-fill Pabst Theater and move the second to an alternate venue, such as Elmbrook Church in Brookfield. And while Hynson continued to program musical works that would challenge his singers, he did so with marketing in mind. One example: a performance of jazzman Dave Brubeck's oratorio, *The Light in the Wilderness*, during the 1993–94 season.

The financial reprieve was to be brief. Two years later, Bel Canto cancelled a concert in order to avoid what would have been a season-ending deficit of more than \$60,000. And in the spring of 1998, board members decided to scale back the cost of the upcoming season by programming *a cappella* pieces or works that required only piano or small ensemble accompaniment.

Even during the financially difficult years, Bel Canto continued to travel abroad, with the group making trips every other summer. Their destinations: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, and Poland in 1993; Spain and the Mediterranean in 1995; a return to Spoleto in 1997; France in 1999; the United Kingdom in 2001; and Canada in 2003. Bel Canto also performed at Carnegie Hall in 2000. Next on the itinerary: Ireland in 2006. For Saver, the most memorable trip





was the one to Spoleto, where she met Menotti. "I'll never forget it. We were treated like stars," she said. "At one point, we had to walk single file through the crowded streets of Spoleto in our white shirts and black pants and skirts. We looked like little penguins. But as we went by, people pointed and applauded, calling out, "Il coro!" Hynson's most vivid memory of that trip is the group's final concert, which took place in the city's small medieval town square. "We had joined a professional chorus in residence there in what was a transcendental experience," he said. "The sun was setting, the birds were singing. This is why people sing, for these kinds of memories."

Under Hynson, Bel Canto reached out closer to home as well, establishing a partnership in 1990 with Wisconsin Hills Elementary School in Brookfield. There, 400 students and their teachers worked with members of the Bel Canto Choral Artists to improve music education. The following year, under a partnership with Milwaukee Public Schools, choral teachers received conducting help and professional assessments of their skills. Bel Canto's Young Choral Artists Festival Program, which began in 1999 and ran for five years, gave members of Milwaukee area high school choirs a chance to improve their vocal technique and to be exposed to a body of choral literature that is typically inaccessible to high school students. Under the program, up to three high school choirs came together each year to rehearse and perform a choral masterpiece with the Bel Canto Choral Artists and Bel Canto Chamber Orchestra under Hynson's direction.

Scheduled to begin in fall 2006 is Bel Canto's Senior Singers Program. The goal of the program is to engage senior citizens in choral music as a way of improving not only the quality of their lives, but also their health. Plans call for Bel Canto chorus members to establish ad hoc choral groups at several Milwaukee-area retirement centers. The choruses will spend up to 12 weeks studying music appreciation, music history, and vocal technique. The experience will culminate in a choral performance.

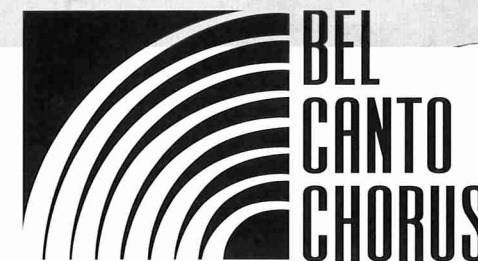
As Bel Canto turns 75 years old this spring, it looks back on its long history poised to continue moving forward. One of the people credited with making that happen is Sally D. Hoyt, who joined the chorus in 1995. "It was at a point in the history of the chorus where board members were asking whether or not the group could survive," recalled Hoyt. An operations manager at GE Healthcare, Hoyt helped Bel Canto assess its strengths and weaknesses and developed a plan to upgrade the business side of the operation.

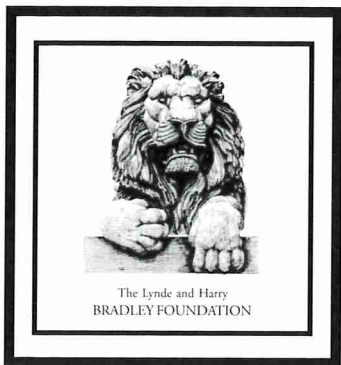
Hoyt joined the board in the spring of 1999, and the following season became its president, a position she continues to hold today. Her focus for the last seven years: "Improving the way we operate by putting the right policies, the right processes, and the right people in place." Hoyt sees her role and that of her fellow board members as one that complements Hynson's. "What Rick brings to the party is an intense focus on artistic excellence. My focus is on organizational excellence."

Directing Bel Canto's day-to-day operations are co-managing directors Sarah Schwab and Rebecca Whitney, who work out of an office in the Marian Center for Non-Profits on Milwaukee's south side. Schwab was hired in 2002, and Whitney in 2006. Bel Canto's first professional manager, Joan Lounsbery, joined the group in 1986. Head of her own local arts management firm, Lounsbery was a former assistant to the executive director of New York City's Carnegie Hall. She worked for Bel Canto until 1990 on a part-time basis. One major project: facilitating the national search for Keeley's replacement. Lounsbery was succeeded by Kathleen Asta, Bel Canto's first full-time manager. Asta, who earned music degrees from Vassar and Yale, held the post until mid-1993.

Although the position periodically remained unfilled due to tight budgets, five general managers came and went over the next nine years: Chris Segedy, Karen Mezich, Jane LeCapitaine, Deborah Rakestraw, and Marcia Schwager. Like Schwab and Whitney, they worked quietly behind the scenes helping Bel Canto succeed while the musicians onstage received the applause. "It can be a thankless job, but a lot of Bel Canto's progress and stability is due to the work these people

IN PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE





have done," says Schwab, a former administrator of study abroad programs for college students who also occasionally sings with the chorus. "It's a job that, if done right, is hardly noticeable — things just go according to plan. But when something goes wrong, you are the first to hear about it," she says.

Hynson credits Hoyt, Schwab, and Susan Connor — who has served as Bel Canto treasurer since 1999 — with keeping the organization administratively sound and financially viable. "Their work has enabled us to grow while other arts organizations have had to pull back," he said. Annual grants each of the last four years from the city's Non-Profit Management Fund have helped as well, funding development, marketing, and technology initiatives.



THE UNITED PERFORMING ARTS FUND



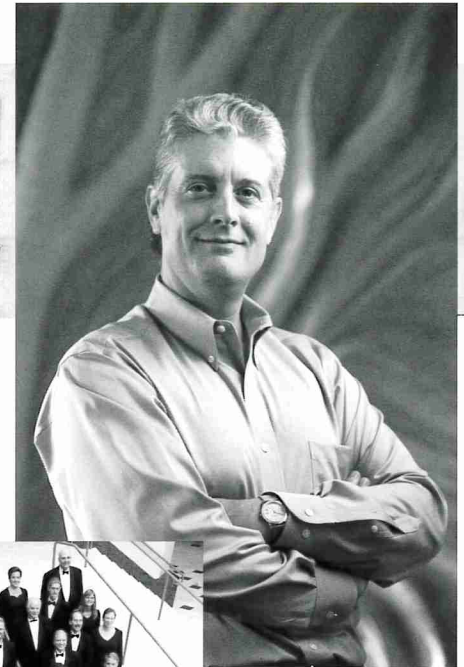
Financially, Bel Canto is secure and in the black. Revenues in the form of annual grants of roughly \$60,000 from UPAF and \$25,000 from the Bradley Foundation, local grants from the Wisconsin Arts Board and Milwaukee County that together average \$15,000 a year, annual ticket sales totaling approximately \$40,000, contributions from Bel Canto members and other individual donors, and proceeds from fundraising activities such as the chorus's annual gala (which this year raised \$78,000) and its fruit sale, help balance Bel Canto's annual budget of about \$350,000. Meanwhile, a two-year endowment campaign launched in 2001 raised \$300,000. Steps are currently being taken to further develop the Friends of Bel Canto, a volunteer organization designed to support the chorus and its work.

Schwab is encouraged by the fact that Bel Canto audiences continue to grow, which she attributes in part to better marketing and box office practices. She hopes to build even greater visibility for the group, which ranks in the second tier of U.S. choruses based on its annual budget. "Music folks in Milwaukee know of Bel Canto, but lots of others don't," she said. "We want to spread the word about the people of Bel Canto — about Rick and Michelle and David and Sally and the 100 volunteer singers who give of their time and talent to perform beautiful music."

When asked about his future, Hynson says that as far as he's concerned, "I'm here for the long haul." His ultimate goal: "maintaining a financially secure organization that is performing at a very high artistic level, and working toward a vision that contributes both to the group and to the greater community." Meanwhile, Hynson has planned a 75th anniversary concert, "Together with One Voice," that celebrates Bel Canto's roots.

On the program: the great choruses from Mozart's *Requiem*, Bach's *Mass in B Minor*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Brahms's *Requiem*, and Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*.

Tolan, on the other hand, plans to leave Bel Canto's board of directors this spring. "I think I've been doing this quite long enough," he says. How would he describe Bel Canto's legacy? "As a highly credible group that has sung exceptionally well for a very loyal audience for a very long time. We've established ourselves not only in Milwaukee, but also worldwide, singing high masses at Notre Dame in Paris and St. Peter's in the Vatican. We were the first Milwaukee arts group ever to commission a major musical work. And after 75 years, we're operating in the black, with an endowment and no debt. Bel Canto has indeed lived up to its name, with a long, honorable history full of beautiful singing — a history that we can look back on with pride."





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