FROM THE ARCHIVES

Madrigal Singers



The GA Chorus (predecessor to the Madrigals) performing in the 1940s under the direction of Columbia University professor Lowell Beveridge

Whether they are performing on the international stage, singing "The Academy Song" at an all-school assembly, or leading the Lower School holiday sing-along, the Greenwich Academy Madrigal Singers have been the musical heart and soul of GA for more than seven decades.

Offstage, the Madrigals form a unique sisterhood, bonding generations of GA alumnae together through a love of music and countless hours spent honing their craft. Founded in the 1940s as the GA Chorus, the group was directed by well-respected Columbia University music professor and choral conductor Lowell Beveridge and GA music teacher Agnes McKinney. Every Wednesday, Beveridge would take the train from Manhattan to Greenwich to help GA students rehearse for concerts, which included joining the Greenwich Choral Society at the Second Congregational Church to sing the "Hallelujah Chorus" of Mozart's *Requiem* at Christmastime.

The GA Chorus continued to grow in popularity, both with students and as a performing group, throughout the '50s and '60s, under supervision of choral director Louis L. White. Pat Don Van Heel '57, an involved singer during her time at GA who spent a year away at boarding school, recalled sharing with Ms. McKinney that boarding schools would host tea dances, where the girls would perform a concert with some groups from the boys' schools, and afterward there would be a dance. Ms. McKinney took the idea and ran with it, allowing the singers to enjoy performing concerts and socializing with students from Loomis Chaffee and Taft.

It was 1967 when the Madrigals as we know them today were established. John Zavitz, choral director and husband of GA alumna and pianist Patricia Collyer Zavitz '56, coined the name, envisioning it being pronounced as Madri-GALS. The Madrigals gave Friday afternoon concerts with Hotchkiss, Taft,

Kent, and other area schools, and also regularly appeared at nursing homes and churches throughout Fairfield County. The Zavitzses were extremely dedicated to their students and developed quite a following. Mary Wallace Strizek '78 recalls the impact that the musical couple had on her. "Pat and John Zavitz traveled up to Smith College to attend my senior vocal recital," she recalled. "Post-college, I sang with the Zavitzses in the Master Singers of Greater Stamford, and years later, when I found myself on a business trip to Atlanta, I stayed at their home and sang in Mr. Z's choir on Sunday morning."

The first Madrigals tour to Europe was the brainchild of the Zavitzses, and the inaugural trip during spring break of 1977 included visits to Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. The father of Madrigal singer Nina Hasner Yoder '78, who was Norwegian, helped to organize the tour. Nina recalled, "It was an intense 17-day trip and we gave 17 concerts. We gave two or three performances a day! We sang at churches, schools, nursing homes, and museums." Upon their return to the States, they performed a standing-room-only concert for the GA community—one of the largest Madrigal concerts to date.

Mr. Zavitz remained at GA until the spring of 1978, when Judith Hanson Schwab took the Madrigal reins, a post she held until the arrival of Debbie Eickstaedt O'Brien in 1983. Mrs. O'Brien is credited with growing the program, by further developing the international tour program and also by taking the group to many private events and even to their first visit to the White House. In her first year, Mrs. O'Brien organized a performance for President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan, and in 1995, she took the Madrigals back to perform two Christmas concerts at the White House: one for military officials and the other for the Secret Service. Known for her firm but gentle way with the Madrigals, Mrs. O'Brien's students were devoted to their music and to her. It was under Mrs. O'Brien that the Madrigals became a competitive advanced vocal training program. Liz Brooks Wentworth '95, now a professional singer at the Metropolitan Opera, said of her time as a Madrigal, "Being involved in the Madrigals was, by far, the best preparation for a professional career in music. The sheer amount of memorized music alone was difficult enough. But there was also learning how to sing in a group and blend with the other singers. Being able to hold your own part was important as well. There is so much involved with choral singing; it isn't as easy as it seems."

When Mrs. O'Brien fell ill in 1997, the role of Madrigal director was taken over by Beth Raaen, who had joined GA in 1994. "Through the Madrigal experience," said Mrs. Raaen, "girls find great joy in the accomplishment of a shared goal. That goal requires self-discipline and a true passion for music." Under Mrs. Raaen, who celebrates 21 years as director this fall, the Madrigals have sung at Radio City Music Hall, Citi Field, the New York Botanical Garden, in New York City's Veterans Day Parade, and for more than 100 private parties, weddings, and memorial services. They also sang at the White House for special guests in 1999 and again in 2004 for Laura Bush. And, much like her predecessors, Raaen has had a deep impact on her students. Betsy Sykes McIntyre '99, a devoted Madrigal, said of Raaen, "She leads the Mads with both warmth and strength. She motivated us and expected us to perform at our best, and celebrated with us when we had particularly inspired performances."

When asked about what the future holds for the Madrigal program, Raaen said, "We'll continue to look for ways to reach out in community service with our music. We'll study a new repertoire that encompasses classical style and popular favorites. And we'll continue to uplift Greenwich Academy as 'we link the strength of all thy past with glorious future days.'" ■





Top: GA Chorus in the 1960s Bottom: The Madrigals at the White House with First Lady of the United States Laura Bush in 2004