

Westminster Choir, Princeton (Choir)

Founded: 1920 - Dayton, Ohio, USA, as Dayton Westminster Choir

Relocated: 1932 - Princeton, New Jersey, USA

The 40-voice Westminster Choir (= WCC), comprised of undergraduate and graduate students at Westminster College of Rider University in Princeton, N.J., the Westminster Choir regularly tours throughout the USA and in Europe.

The Westminster Choir was founded by John Finley Williamson in 1920 at the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Dayton, Ohio. Convinced that professionally trained musicians could best serve the church, he established the Westminster Choir School in September 1926 with sixty students and a faculty of ten instructors. As the Choir School and the Westminster Choir's reputation grew, the demand for the school's graduates increased. The graduates came to be known as "Minsters of Music," a term coined by John Finley Williamson and still being used today by many church music programs.

As early as 1922, the choir, then known as the Dayton Westminster Choir, began touring the USA annually and sang in such prominent places as Carnegie Hall (New York City), Symphony Hall (Boston), the Academy of Music (Philadelphia), Orchestra Hall (Chicago) and the White House for President Coolidge. Years later the Westminster Choir also sang for Presidents Roosevelt and Eisenhower. The Westminster Choir made its first commercial recording with RCA Victor in 1926. Subsequently the Choir recorded with major conductors and orchestras.

In 1928, the Westminster Choir and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Leopold Stokowski, made the nation's first coast-to-coast radio broadcast on Cincinnati station WLW. A few years later, because of the choir's growing reputation, it made a total of 60 half-hour broadcasts from NBC's New York facilities.

The first European tour took place in 1929 and was sponsored by Dayton philanthropist Katharine Hawk Talbott and endorsed by Walter Damrosch, conductor of the New York Symphony Orchestra. The tour included 26 concerts in major cities of Europe.

Originally a three year program, the Choir School moved to Ithaca College in New York State in 1929 and enlarged its curriculum to a four year program culminating in a Bachelor of Music degree. This move ultimately proved unsatisfactory.

In 1932, the Choir School relocated to Princeton, New Jersey which became its permanent home. Classes were held in the First Presbyterian Church and the Princeton Seminary until 1934 when the Choir School moved to its present campus. This was made possible by a large gift from the philanthropist Sophia Strong Taylor. The dedication of the new campus was marked by a performance of J.S. Bach's Mass in B Minor (BWV 232) at the nearby Princeton University Chapel with the Westminster Choir, soloists, and the Philadelphia Orchestra conducted by

Leopold Stokowski. Because of his high regard for the choir, the services of the soloists, orchestra, and conductor were a gift from Leopold Stokowski.

There was a second European tour in 1934, lasting nine weeks and highlighted by a rare live radio broadcast from the Soviet Union to the USA. In the 14 short years since its founding in 1920, the Choir already had two European tours, which earned it international acclaim, and a campus of its own. The State of New Jersey in 1939 granted the Choir School accreditation and the name Westminster Choir College was adopted.

In years to come, under John Finley Williamson's leadership, the Westminster Choir would begin having regular concerts with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the Philadelphia Orchestra. The Westminster Choir sang with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra for the first time in 1939 conducted by Sir John Barbirolli. Since that time the Choir has sung over three hundred performances with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, a record number for a single choir to perform with an orchestra. Later that year the choir sang with the NBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Arturo Toscanini. That same year the choir, directed by John Finley Williamson, sang at the dedication of the 1939 New York World's Fair which was broadcast to 53 countries.

In 1957, under the auspices of the U.S. State Department Cultural Exchange Program, the Westminster Choir undertook a five month world tour, concertizing in 22 countries, covering 64,000 km and appearing before approximately a quarter of a million people.

For 21 years the Westminster Choir was the chorus-in-residence for the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy. Since 1977 it has been the chorus-in-residence for the Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, S.C. In 1996 it made its debut at the Colmar Festival in Colmar, France.

As part of the Westminster Symphonic Choir of 175 voices, the Westminster Choir has performed with major orchestras under virtually every internationally known conductor of the last 70 years, including, Arturo Toscanini, Bruno Walter, Leopold Stokowski, Eugene Ormandy, Leonard Bernstein, Zubin Mehta, and Riccardo Muti. The Choir has sung over 300 performances with the New York Philharmonic alone, and has appeared frequently on public television's "Live from Lincoln Center." The Choir's conductor is Joseph Flummerfelt, artistic director and principal conductor at Westminster.

In recent seasons the Westminster Choir performed the complete choral works of Aaron Copland at Avery Fisher Hall in a concert presented by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The Choir performed L.v. Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with Kurt Masur conducting the New York Philharmonic Orchestra; Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 3 and Debussy's Nocturnes with Claudio Abbado conducting the Berlin Philharmonic; L.v. Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with Mark Laycock conducting the Princeton Chamber Symphony; Felix Mendelssohn's Elijah with Wolfgang Sawallisch conducting The Philadelphia Orchestra; and J.S. Bach's Missa Brevis No. 1 in F and O Jesu Christ, meins Lebens Licht with Joseph Flummerfelt conducting the New Jersey Symphony Chamber Orchestra. Recent performances have also included

Mussorgsky/Schebalin's Dream of the Peasant Grischko from The Fair of Sorotchinsky with Zdenek Macal conducting the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, Benjamin Britten's War Requiem, with Kurt Masur and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and Debussy's Le martyre de Saint Sebastien with Kurt Masur conducting the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

Joseph Flummerfelt and the Westminster Choir have made several recordings on the Gothic label including Christmas with the Westminster Choir; The Westminster Choir Sings Folk Songs; Favorite Hymns and Anthems and, most recently, Westminster Choir at Spoleto Festival USA. The Choir's most recent recordings include, O Magnum Mysterium and Like as a Hart on the Chesky label and Singing for Pleasure on the Delos label. Its newest recording, Twentieth-Century American Choral Classics, with members of the New York Philharmonic and Joseph Flummerfelt, will be released later this season.

As part of the larger Westminster Symphonic Choir, the Westminster Choir has made over 50 recordings on the Columbia, RCA, EMI, Deutsche Grammophon and Philips Classics labels.

Source: Rider University Website (February 2001); Liner notes to the CD 'Bach: The Motets' conducted by Wilhelm Ehmann (Gothic, 1978); John Finley Williamson bio page on the BCW Contributed by Aryeh Oron (August 2001, November 2010)

Joseph Flummerfelt: Short Biography | Westminster Choir | Westminster Symphonic Choir | Recordings of Vocal Works

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Recordings of Bach Cantatas & Other Vocal Works

Conductor

As

Works

Wilhelm Ehmann

Choir

BWV 225-230

Bruno Walter

Choir

BWV 244 (1st Part)

Links to other Sites

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The Unofficial Westminster Choir College Page

Westminster Choir College Of Rider University

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