

Choirs, directors at St. Mary in Annapolis devoted to ministry

By Elizabeth Lowe

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ANNAPOLIS – The sound coming from St. Mary's Traditional Choir during a Dec. 3 rehearsal was as serene as the starry night scene painted on the ceiling above them.

Nearly 30 choir members practiced music for the second Sunday of Advent, as well as upcoming Christmas Masses, under the direction of Harry M. Thompson Jr.

"Let's see what happens," Thompson said, before he played the first notes of Antonio Vivaldi's "Gloria" on the organ and the choir chimed in.

Listen to the choir sing by clicking below.

Thompson, the parish's Traditional Choir director for nearly 30 years, is St. Mary's organist and co-music director. He shares the position with Ceil Ambrosetti, director of the parish's Contemporary Choir for 22 years and music teacher for kindergarten through fifth grade at the parish elementary school.

Ambrosetti oversees the four children's choirs at the school, schedules cantors and handles wedding communication at the parish. Thompson is responsible for funeral communication.

The co-music directors, who devote countless hours to their ministry, began organizing Christmas music for their respective choirs in the late summer, well before the mercury dipped.

"We have a good base of music," Ambrosetti said, "so we can keep that base and interchange a few (songs) which makes it easier for planning and learning new pieces."

"I try to stay ahead of things," Thompson said. "You have to consider all those things (weather, sickness) when you meet weekly."

The role of co-music director is a paid, part-time job at the church, but Ambrosetti said she and Thompson devote a significant amount of time to the position.

"If you added up the hours," Ambrosetti said "it's like squeezing a full-time job into a part-time position."

"St. Mary's is amazingly blessed to have Ceil and Harry," said Anne Cecere, an alto and Contemporary Choir member for 22 years. "They bring so much and they're such talented people."

The Contemporary Choir rehearses for two and a half hours once a month. However, from October to December the 22-person choir rehearses twice a month and incorporates Christmas music into rehearsals.

Meanwhile, the nearly 50-person Traditional Choir rehearses weekly. The choir is scheduled to sing a 40-minute prelude before Midnight Mass Christmas Eve and at the 10:30 a.m. Mass Christmas Day, all at St. Mary.

The Contemporary Choir will sing at the 6 p.m. Mass Christmas Eve at St. John Neumann Mission Church in Annapolis, a mission of St. Mary. This choir only sings at St. John Neumann.

The Contemporary Choir's Christmas Eve song list includes "Gentle Mary," "Mary Did You Know," "Sleep my Child" and "Child of my Dreams."

The Traditional Choir's Christmas Eve repertoire includes "O Holy Night," "Ave Maria," "Silent Night" and "Joy to the World." Christmas Day hymns include "O Come All Ye Faithful" and Vivaldi's "Gloria."

"It's a real privilege to sing in this choir," said Vlasta Link, an alto and Traditional Choir member for 35 years. "It's always been a talented choir. It's very spiritually uplifting, especially at Christmas. It's so joyful."

In addition, both choirs will join cantors and liturgical dancers at the parish's Evensong Dec. 19 at St. John Neumann. Ambrosetti coordinates the event, an hour-long program that tells the Christmas story from Mary and Joseph's perspective. The parish tradition began in 1997.

"We couldn't have the beautiful music ministry without so many committed parish volunteers," Ambrosetti said. "Their opportunity to serve as a music minister is fulfilling when people are touched by the music."

Christmas Eve Mass schedule

St. Mary:

4 p.m., 6 p.m. and 9 p.m.: Cantor and accompanist

Midnight: Traditional Choir

St. John Neumann Mission Church:

4 p.m.: Cherub and Noel choirs

6 p.m.: Contemporary Choir with accompanist

8 p.m.: Hispanic Mass and music ministry

St. Mary's High School, Marian Hall

4:10 p.m.: Guitar Contemporary Ensemble

Christmas Day Mass schedule

St. Mary:

10:30 a.m.: Traditional Choir

12:30 p.m.: Cantor and accompanist

St. John Neumann Mission Church:

9 a.m.: Contemporary Ensemble

11 a.m.: Cantor and accompanist

1 p.m.: Hispanic Mass and music ministry

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